

28 April 2025

Submission to the City of Melbourne Domestic Animal Management Plan 2026-2029

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) is a peak research body and advocate for pet welfare in Australia. As a not-for-profit organisation, APWF uses science-based research to enhance community well-being and improve the health and welfare of animals and people. APWF specialises in evidence-based solutions to prevent euthanasia of healthy and treatable companion animals in shelters and pounds and the associated mental health damage to staff and community residents. We share research knowledge with the community, shelters and pounds, state and local governments and veterinarians to create change and save animal and human lives. APWF is led by Chief Scientist Dr. Jacquie Rand, Emeritus Professor of Companion Animal Health at The University of Queensland (UQ) and a registered specialist veterinarian in small animal internal medicine. She has worked extensively in shelter research over the last 17 years, including collaborative studies with the RSPCA, Animal Welfare League and local governments. While at UQ Dr Rand taught Urban Animal Management and since 2013 has co-authored over 30 peer-reviewed articles on urban animal management including management of semi-owned and unowned cats. Dr Rand is an AVA member.

You can read more about us and our vision on our website: <https://petwelfare.org.au>.

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) would like to thank the City of Melbourne for releasing its Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP) 2026–2029 discussion paper and inviting community input. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the development of a forward-looking plan that improves outcomes for both animals and the broader community. As outlined, the DAMP plays a crucial role in ensuring compliance with the Domestic Animals Act 1994, supporting responsible pet ownership, and promoting practices that reduce shelter intake and euthanasia rates. APWF particularly supports the city’s focus on increasing reunification rates and enhancing liveability by addressing nuisance issues. We encourage a data-driven and evidence-based approach to policy development that prioritises animal welfare, community education, and collaborative partnerships in line with “One Welfare” to deliver the best outcomes for pets, people, and the environment (Pinillos 2016).

What other measures could the City of Melbourne take to identify any unregistered animals

The City of Melbourne has seen a steady increase in pet registrations over the past five years, with cat registrations rising from 2,377 in 2020 to 3,784 in 2024, a significant 59% increase. Dog registrations have also grown, increasing from 3,618 in



2020 to 4,280 in 2024. Higher registration rates improve the chances of lost pets being reunited with their owners, support better animal welfare outcomes, and enable council to deliver more effective animal management services across the municipality. This trend reflects strong progress in community engagement and education effort.

We acknowledge the significant population growth and diversity within the municipality, including the large international student population and those experiencing homelessness, two groups for whom pet ownership brings vital emotional support but can also present challenges in navigating legal responsibilities such as registration. Identifying and supporting unregistered pet owners, particularly in transient and vulnerable populations, is essential to improving animal welfare outcomes and ensuring safe, inclusive public spaces.

APWF recommends that Council continue to expand its efforts to identify unregistered animals through targeted, community-centred initiatives. This could include outreach programs in collaboration with universities and student services, providing multilingual education on registration and microchipping requirements. Additionally, expanding access to low-cost or subsidised registration programs, especially for individuals experiencing financial hardship or homelessness, help reduce barriers to compliance. Park patrols and follow-up on unregistered animals when dealing with complaints are important tools, but a broader preventative approach focused on assistive and supportive programs, such as free registration for anyone participating in a desexing program, along with accessibility, and community partnership will be key to long-term improvements in compliance and the well-being of pets and their owners/ carers.

Secondly, increasing community assistive and supportive programs tailored to diverse populations, especially renters, international students, and residents in high-density housing, can improve understanding of cat ownership responsibilities, including registration, desexing, and containment. Materials should be accessible, culturally appropriate, and multilingual where possible. Strengthening education efforts will help residents make informed decisions and increase compliance through encouragement rather than punitive measures.

Cat Management- can you suggest any ideas we should adopt to further improve our management of cats?

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) appreciates the opportunity to provide further input into the City of Melbourne's Domestic Animal Management Plan. In **our previous submission dated 26 August 2024**, APWF outlined evidence-based strategies to improve outcomes for both cats and the community, **with a focus on addressing the complex challenges presented by semi-owned and unowned cats**. We support the city's ongoing efforts to protect the welfare of animals while balancing

environmental and community needs, and we are pleased to contribute additional recommendations based on our research.

APWF continues to strongly support the use of accurate and consistent **definitions of cats, distinguishing between owned, semi-owned, and unowned cats, as recommended by RSPCA Australia (RSPCA Australia 2018)**. This is critical to informing policy decisions and ensuring that interventions are appropriately targeted. We reiterate our recommendation that the term “feral” be removed from impoundment and euthanasia records, as most cats entering shelters do not meet the criteria of true feral cats. Labelling fearful or stressed domestic cats as “feral” can lead to premature euthanasia and undermine efforts to improve rehoming and welfare outcomes.

The expansion of targeted Community Cat Programs (CCPs) **not mandating cat desexing**, remains the key pillar of effective cat management. APWF advocates for microtargeted desexing programs in high-risk suburbs such as North Melbourne, Kensington, and West Melbourne. These programs must be **high intensity** and tailored to communities with the highest rates of cat-related complaints and impoundments. Community Cat Programs, when combined with proactive outreach by Animal Management Officers (AMO), **empower semi-owners to take full responsibility** for cats in their care, reducing the number of unwanted litters and improving registration compliance. These strategies have proven effective in multiple jurisdictions and are more equitable and humane than punitive approaches (Cotterell 2025b).

Lastly, **APWF urges Council not to pursue mandated 24/7 cat containment**. As detailed in our prior submission, evidence shows such policies are ineffective at reducing roaming cat populations and instead lead to increased impoundments, complaints, and euthanasia, particularly in disadvantaged areas. **Containment mandates are unenforceable and impose unrealistic burdens** on residents who lack the financial or physical means to comply, and does not apply to semi-owned or unowned cats, as there is no owner to enforce this law on ([APWF- Position Statement on Cat Containment](#)). Instead, we recommend the promotion of low-cost, voluntary strategies such as night-time feeding routines and affordable enclosure support schemes. A collaborative, welfare-based approach, grounded in education, support, and evidence, is the most effective path forward for sustainable cat management in the city of Melbourne.

Do you think that having timed off-leash areas is an appropriate way of ensuring equitable use of our parks?

While the concept of timed off-leash areas may seem like a compromise to ensure equitable use of parks, in practice, it often creates more confusion and conflict than it resolves. The fluctuating rules can be difficult for both dog owners and other park users to track and understand, particularly in a municipality like the City of Melbourne with a

transient population and high visitor numbers. This confusion can lead to non-compliance, frustration among users, and increased enforcement challenges for Council officers. As the city has already identified, lack of knowledge about leashing rules and the location of off-leash areas is a significant issue, and adding time-based variables only complicates the situation further.

Timed off-leash areas may also unintentionally reduce accessibility and enjoyment for dog owners who are unable to visit parks within the designated hours, such as shift workers, people with mobility challenges, or those relying on off-peak visits to avoid crowded conditions. This may increase the likelihood of non-compliance and place additional strain on enforcement resources. The city's data shows a high number of complaints relating to leashing and control of dogs, which suggests that clarity and consistency in regulations is more important than variable access.

Equitable use of park spaces is better supported through clearly designated, permanent off-leash zones, such as the renewed Eades Park, with appropriate fencing, amenities, and signage to reduce conflict and enhance safety. This provides dog owners with reliable access while allowing other park users to choose spaces free from off-leash dogs. Rather than adding complexity through timed restrictions, a focus on infrastructure, education, and clear boundaries is a more effective and inclusive approach for managing shared public spaces.

Do you have any suggestions about how Council could further balance the needs of pet owners and non-pet-owners in public places?

To further balance the needs of pet owners and non-pet owners in public places, the City of Melbourne could prioritise clear, consistent, and accessible communication around pet-related rules. As noted, confusion around leashing requirements and off-leash area locations remains a challenge. Improving signage in parks, with visual cues, multiple languages, and QR codes linking to up-to-date maps, would help all users better understand where and when dogs are permitted off-leash. Increased visibility of these guidelines would support responsible behaviour and reduce unintentional conflicts between different park users.

Council could also invest in more purpose-built, fully fenced dog parks with seating, shade, and water access, particularly in areas of high density. These spaces provide safe environments for dogs to exercise off-leash while giving non-pet owners the option to enjoy other parts of the park without concern. Expanding designated pet-friendly zones in combination with pet-free zones supports choice and comfort for all residents. Additionally, continuing to support and assist community campaigns on responsible pet ownership, especially around leashing, waste disposal, and dog behaviour in public spaces, will encourage a shared sense of responsibility and mutual respect among park users.

Finally, engaging with community through regular interactions with AMOs, community advisory groups, and feedback loops can help council understand how shared spaces are being used and adapt policies accordingly. A collaborative and data-informed approach will help ensure Melbourne's public spaces remain inclusive, safe, and enjoyable for everyone.

What more can the Council do to reduce the number of unowned dogs and cats?

Cats

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) notes with concern the continued high number of cats being impounded in the City of Melbourne, with 369 cats impounded in 2024 compared to 340 in 2020. While the increase in cat impoundments may be attributed to intensified trapping efforts targeting semi-owned and unowned cats, it is important to recognise that such reactive strategies alone are not sustainable and will not lead to long-term reductions in stray populations. Despite strong efforts in rehoming and rehabilitation through The Lost Dogs Home, the cat euthanasia rate remains high at nearly 30%, indicating a need for a shift toward more preventative, community-based approaches.

Mandatory Containment

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) supports responsible pet ownership and encourages containment where feasible. But **we strongly oppose mandatory curfews or 24/7 confinement**. Instead, APWF recommends compassionate, community-driven solutions. Bedtime feeding is one proven, no-cost strategy that reduces roaming and protects wildlife. **Case studies show containment laws fail**, like in Yarra Ranges, where a 24/7 curfew led to a 143% rise in complaints and a 68% increase in impoundments. Other councils are already recognising the truth: these laws don't work. Hume City Council, Hobsons Bay, Bayside Council, and City of Greater Geelong (Hume Council 2018, Hobsons Bay 2014, Bayside Council 2024, Van Oorschoot 2024), have all rejected further mandates, understanding they are unenforceable, ineffective, and place unnecessary strain on the community. We urge this council to follow their lead and focus on what actually delivers results, **microtargeted desexing and voluntary, community-led strategies** that build trust, reduce suffering, and address the root of the problem.

Mandatory containment laws not only fail to reduce the number of unowned and semi-owned cats, but they also **make things worse**. They drive up complaints, impoundments, and euthanasia rates, all while **blowing out council budgets** (Cotterell

2024). There is zero evidence that cat curfews reduce stray populations. What they do **cause is real harm, forcing families to choose between containing their cat and putting food on the table.** These laws punish the people trying to do the right thing, while the real problem goes untouched.

Mandatory desexing

Mandated desexing sounds like a solution, but in reality, it fails on every level. It's rarely enforceable and ignores the real barrier to desexing: money, not motivation. **Research shows the strongest predictor of whether a cat is desexed isn't attitude—it's household income.** For families already struggling with rent, food, or healthcare, desexing a cat simply isn't affordable. **Mandates just add another burden, often leading to surrender or abandonment, and more cats entering a system already stretched to its limits.**

Cats reproduce rapidly, one female can have up to three litters a year, and kittens can fall pregnant by four months old. Without desexing, populations explode, leading to suffering from disease, starvation, and injury. It's shelter staff who bear the emotional toll, forced to euthanise healthy animals because resources are exhausted. Desexing is the most effective, humane tool we have to stop this cycle, but only if it's accessible.

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) backs proven, compassionate solutions. **Community desexing programs like Banyule, city of Ipswich, QLD and RSPCA NSW (Cotterell 2024, Rand 2024, RSPCA NSW Report 2023) work because they're built on collaboration, trust, and practical support.** In contrast to mandates, they work - **reducing cat impoundments, euthanasia, nuisance calls, and associated costs. By engaging those already feeding and caring for unowned cats and providing council-backed resources, these programs turn carers into empowered owners, reducing intake, euthanasia, and complaints (Ma 2023).** This is how real change happens: not through punishment, but through partnership.

City of Melbourne data tells a clear story: 4,000 cats are registered, 97% already desexed, 74% live in contained apartments. Meanwhile, the 103 complaints received are reported by animal management officers as mostly linked to unowned or semi-owned cats, cats that sterilisation mandates won't even touch. So why introduce laws that ignore the very population driving the problem? (Cotterell 2025a)

Dogs

While the data shows an overall decrease in dog impoundments from 174 in 2020 to 114 in 2024, challenges remain, particularly around compliance with leash laws and shared use of public spaces. Complaints related to leashing remain high,

indicating an opportunity for the city to further invest in education and infrastructure to support harmonious interactions between dog owners and other park users.

APWF recommends expanding community education initiatives that clearly communicate leashing requirements, effective dog control, and the responsibilities of dog ownership in public areas. These efforts should be tailored to Melbourne's diverse and transient population, using multilingual materials, clear signage, and visual aids. Targeted outreach campaigns can also promote understanding of dog behaviour, proper socialisation, and the safe use of off-leash areas, helping to reduce conflict and improve compliance.

Investment in well-designed, fully fenced dog parks is another important step toward balancing the needs of all park users. Facilities like the upgraded Eades Park set a strong example, and additional dog-friendly spaces across the municipality, equipped with waste stations, shade, water, and seating, would provide safe environments for dogs to exercise off-leash while offering non-pet owners clear pet-free areas. Expanding these amenities helps ease pressure on shared public spaces and fosters responsible, stress-free use by all residents.

Finally, APWF encourages the city to explore programs that support vulnerable dog owners. Offering subsidised registration, microchipping, and basic veterinary care for low-income households can reduce the likelihood of dogs entering the pound system, increase return-to-owner rates, and strengthen community welfare overall. Partnerships with local trainers, shelters, and social services can provide additional support, particularly for residents experiencing housing instability or behavioural issues with their pets. These proactive, welfare-focused strategies will help ensure that Melbourne remains a pet-inclusive city while maintaining safety and accessibility for all.

What other measures could the Council use to address barking dog complaints?

To address the rising number of barking dog complaints, up 38% since 2020, the city of Melbourne could consider expanding its response beyond traditional education and mediation by implementing more targeted, preventative strategies. One effective approach could be the introduction of subsidised or low-cost dog training programs focused on addressing separation anxiety and excessive barking, which are common behavioural issues, particularly in high-density housing. Partnering with local trainers or veterinary behaviourists to deliver these programs would give owners access to expert guidance and practical solutions, especially valuable for first-time or inexperienced dog owners.

In addition, the Council could explore implementing a Barking Dog Assistance Program, where Animal Management Officers or trained community outreach staff provide in-home support or personalised action plans for pet owners receiving complaints. This could include noise-reducing tips, enrichment ideas, and guidance on managing barking triggers. For persistent issues, offering access to loan programs for tools such as bark-activated cameras or calming devices may also be helpful. These proactive, supportive measures would not only reduce the incidence of nuisance barking but also help strengthen the human–animal bond and support better outcomes for both pets and neighbours.

What other measures could the City of Melbourne use to reduce the number of dog attacks/rushes?

To further reduce dog attacks and promote community safety, the city of Melbourne could implement several additional proactive measures that complement existing enforcement and education strategies. One effective approach would be to introduce targeted property visits by Animal Management Officers, particularly in response to at-large or menacing complaints or in high-density housing settings where incidents have occurred. During these visits, officers could assess fencing and containment, offer tailored advice on preventing escape or unsupervised access to shared spaces, and provide guidance on managing behavioural issues that may increase the risk of aggression. These visits could also serve as an opportunity to connect owners with local training resources and support services.

Increased access to subsidised behaviour training and socialisation programs, especially for dogs adopted during or just after the COVID-19 lockdowns, would also help address lingering behavioural challenges. Programs focused on reactivity, anxiety, and impulse control would equip owners with the tools to manage their dogs more confidently and reduce the risk of incidents occurring in public or communal spaces. Special outreach could also be directed at residents living in high-density environments, where confined spaces like lifts and hallways can intensify stress or defensive behaviours in dogs.

Importantly, APWF also highlights the welfare of dogs placed on court-ordered holds. These dogs may be confined for extended periods in kennels while legal proceedings unfold, which can significantly impact their mental health and exacerbate behavioural issues. Council should explore measures to support the welfare of these dogs, including regular enrichment, behavioural assessments, and, where appropriate, the use of foster care or alternative housing arrangements under controlled conditions.

Ensuring the wellbeing of animals in these situations not only reflects best practice but also aligns with Council's commitment to humane and balanced animal management, especially if allowed to return home.

Are there any other initiatives that you believe Council should undertake in relation to Domestic Animal Businesses?

To support best practice and enhance compliance among domestic animal businesses, the city of Melbourne could implement a range of proactive measures. One such approach is the introduction of an education and support program for proprietors, particularly for new applicants or businesses undergoing significant changes in operation. This could include tailored guidance on meeting and exceeding Code of Practice standards, templates for daily care logs, and access to free or low-cost animal business training resources. By investing in owner education and providing clear expectations from the outset, Council can foster a culture of compliance that prioritises animal welfare and reduces the likelihood of future breaches.

Additionally, the city could consider implementing a proactive inspection schedule that includes unannounced interim visits in addition to the annual audit. These spot checks would serve as both a deterrent to non-compliance and a valuable opportunity to identify and address welfare concerns before they escalate. Council could also pilot a voluntary “best practice” accreditation scheme, recognising businesses that exceed minimum standards. This would not only incentivise high performance but also provide transparency for the public and promote confidence in Melbourne’s domestic animal care industry. Through these proactive steps, the city can further its commitment to ensuring that all animals in commercial care receive the highest standard of treatment.

What education priorities do you think the City of Melbourne should focus on? · Do you have any suggestions on programs or services that the City of Melbourne should consider

Given that responsible pet ownership education has been a long-standing focus for councils across Victoria, including the city of Melbourne, it may be time to critically reflect on how education is being delivered and whether current approaches are truly reaching and influencing behaviour in the intended way. Despite decades of effort, key issues such as low cat registration, nuisance complaints, and preventable dog attacks persist. This suggests that while education is vital, the format, targeting, and delivery of messages may need to evolve. Rather than relying heavily on written materials and online content, which may not engage all demographics, particularly those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, transient populations, or people experiencing disadvantage, more tailored and accessible outreach methods are needed.

Education priorities should focus on real-time, community-based engagement that is relevant to the lived experiences of pet owners in the municipality. For example,

pet ownership in high-density housing presents unique challenges, such as limited outdoor access, behavioural issues like barking, and navigating shared spaces. Education campaigns specifically designed for apartment living, delivered through body corporates, property managers, and pop-up events in high-rise complexes, could be more impactful than generic resources. Similarly, multilingual materials, culturally sensitive messaging, and visual formats like short videos or illustrated guides could better serve Melbourne's diverse population.

In terms of new programs, APWF recommends the expansion of initiatives like "Pets in the Park" to include **regular mobile pop-ups in underserved areas and greater partnerships with local schools, community centres, and housing providers**. Peer-led education, where trained community members or pet ambassadors engage directly with residents, could also increase trust and effectiveness. Finally, incorporating interactive and rewarding tools, such as digital quizzes with practical incentives, and harnessing platforms like WhatsApp or community Facebook groups, may improve engagement. **Education should not just be about awareness but about enabling behaviour change**, and that requires adapting how and where we communicate.

When developing animal management strategies, councils must take into account the devastating psychological toll that euthanasia has on AMOs, shelter staff, animal care workers, volunteers and veterinarians. Repeated exposure to euthanising healthy but homeless animals lead to what is known as "moral injury", a profound emotional distress caused by acting against one's deeply held values. This has been linked to high rates of compassion fatigue, burnout, and mental health crises within the sector (Scotney 2017, Rohlf 2005, Rollin 2011, Paul 2023, AVA 2023). Proactively addressing the well-being of these critical workers is not just an ethical responsibility, but essential to maintaining a resilient, compassionate animal care workforce.

To prevent unnecessary euthanasia and reduce the mental health burden on animal care professionals, councils should prioritise proactive support and assistance programs such as *Pets for Life* and *Humane World for Animals (HWFA 2025)*. These initiatives are specifically designed to keep people and pets together by providing free or low-cost desexing, veterinary care, behavioural support, and help for pet owners facing hardship. By investing in these programs, councils can significantly decrease shelter intake, keep more animals in loving homes, and create a more humane and sustainable model for animal management, one that protects both animal and human wellbeing.

If you require any further information, please contact info@petwelfare.org.au

Best wishes,

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