

14 April 2025

## **Submission to Greater Geelong Council- Draft Domestic Animal Management Plan 2025-2029**

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>.

### **Executive summary**

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) advocates for a paradigm shift in domestic animal management, emphasizing proactive, evidence-based strategies over traditional punitive measures. Central to this approach is the implementation of Community Cat Programs (CCPs), which have demonstrated significant success in humanely reducing stray cat populations. By collaborating with local communities, councils, and shelters, CCPs focus on desexing, microchipping, resulting in a 30-50% reduction in cat impoundments over one to three years.

APWF's research underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of pet overpopulation through supportive interventions. Legislative reforms should facilitate free or subsidized desexing programs, particularly in disadvantaged areas, and promote responsible pet ownership education. By shifting from enforcement-centric models to community-supported initiatives, councils can achieve sustainable reductions in stray animal populations, enhance animal welfare, and alleviate the burden on shelters and pounds.

## **Evaluation of animal control services provided by the Council**

While the guiding principles of the DAMP are commendable, there are several areas where the plan lacks clarity or presents challenges. Notably, the plan does not provide sufficient detail on how key services and initiatives will be measured or evaluated. Without clear metrics or mechanisms for assessing effectiveness, such as tracking reductions in nuisance complaints, increases in desexing or registration rates, or improvements in animal welfare outcomes, it is difficult to determine whether the plan's objectives are being met or whether adjustments are needed over time.

Additionally, while the emphasis on partnership and proactive education is positive, the plan does not fully address how support will be provided to vulnerable pet owners, such as those in low-income or marginalised communities, who may face barriers to compliance. Nor does it outline how council will manage semi-owned or unowned cats, an increasingly significant issue in both urban, peri-urban and rural areas. Greater attention to equitable service delivery, community engagement in high-need areas, and evaluation frameworks would strengthen the plan and ensure its long-term success.

## **Training of authorised officers**

The 2021–2025 Domestic Animal Management Plan outlines several new initiatives aimed at addressing key operational challenges, particularly around visibility, resourcing, and professional development. These include developing a business case to support additional staffing, reviewing internal processes to align with best-practice standards, exploring the feasibility of proactive weekend patrols, and increasing professional development for animal management officers in areas such as livestock handling, investigations, and animal behaviour.

It is understandable that resources may be constrained, especially given the volume of complaints handled, as reported in the plan. However, a significant shortfall is the absence of clear timelines or target dates for the completion of these initiatives. Without specific milestones or deadlines, it becomes difficult to assess progress or hold the responsible parties accountable for delivering improvements. This lack of temporal structure undermines the plan's effectiveness and may contribute to ongoing gaps in service, particularly in relation to public visibility and community confidence. It is really commendable you ask about officer interactions in your survey, this is a great initiative, understanding most of the job is dealing with complaintrts.

To enhance transparency and ensure meaningful outcomes, future iterations of the plan should include defined timeframes, measurable indicators of success, and regular public reporting on the implementation status of each new action.

## **Programs to promote and encourage responsible ownership of dogs and cats**

While the City of Greater Geelong has committed to increased patrols and enforcement, it is essential that a proactive assistance and support as a first approach is prioritised in non-serious cases before any formal enforcement action is taken. Many pet owners may be unaware of their obligations, such as the meaning of "effective control" or the need to pick up faeces after their dog, rather than deliberately non-compliant. Providing clear, accessible information, and engaging directly with residents at community events or via targeted campaigns, will foster greater understanding and voluntary compliance. Enforcement should remain a tool for serious or repeated breaches, but a strong, supportive education framework will be more effective in building a culture of responsible pet ownership and long-term behaviour change.

The Dogs in Public Places section of the Domestic Animal Management Plan (2021–2025) highlights the challenge of enforcing leash laws across a large municipality and outlines several actions intended to improve compliance and community safety.

A key initiative included the installation and maintenance of dog order signage in over 360 reserves to help the community understand local rules around dog control. This represents a significant financial and logistical investment, yet the plan does not specify whether this action has been fully implemented or evaluated for effectiveness. In the absence of reporting on whether the 360 signs were actually installed and maintained, it is difficult to assess whether this costly initiative has delivered the intended benefits in promoting responsible pet behaviour and reducing conflict in public spaces.

Community feedback from prior consultation suggests that dog owners are only complying with on-leash requirements about 50% of the time, and that signage, while adequate in some areas, remains insufficient in key high-use locations such as beaches, the Barwon River, the Waterfront, and new housing estates. This disconnect between planned actions and observed outcomes indicates that simply installing signs—without strategic placement, enforcement, or community education—may not be enough to drive behaviour change. Recognising the community's call for more off-leash areas, the council responded by implementing the *Dogs in Public Places Policy* in 2018, which allowed for the use of grassed public sporting reserves as off-leash spaces when not in use for organised sport. This practical solution led to the creation of 21 new off-leash areas, addressing some of the pressures faced by dog owners in high-density suburbs.

The ongoing openness to reviewing dog order statuses across reserves suggests a continued commitment to balancing the needs of pet owners with broader community use of public space. Furthermore, despite the plan outlining several supportive education and engagement strategies (e.g. campaigns, school programs, open days), no clear timeline or accountability measures have been included to track their rollout or success, it can only be assumed there will be evaluation in the 2026-2029 plan. Future planning

must include transparent reporting on the implementation and impact of high-cost actions such as signage and ensure that investment in infrastructure is matched by adequate community engagement, evaluation, and follow-through.

## **To ensure that people comply with this Act, the regulations and any related legislation**

The 2021-2025 plan recognises that trespassing cats and barking dogs are the most common sources of nuisance complaints from the community. While the council is committed to investigating all such reports and promoting constructive outcomes, the complexity of these issues often presents significant challenges. The current approach includes subsidised desexing, trap loans, education on responsible cat ownership, and support for cat confinement, but these efforts appear to be reactive rather than part of a structured, long-term strategy. Notably, the plan does not provide any statistics on the volume, nature, or resolution of nuisance complaints, making it difficult to assess the scale of the problem or evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions.

Recognising, barking complaints are another ongoing source of frustration for both residents and officers. While the plan includes investigation protocols and education for dog owners, community feedback indicates dissatisfaction with the current complaint process. In response, new actions such as reviewing barking dog investigation procedures, exploring technology to support these investigations, and partnering with the Department of Justice to implement alternative dispute resolution mechanisms are welcome steps forward. However, these initiatives would benefit from clearer timelines, performance indicators, and public reporting. Implementing the actions outlined in the 2021–2025 DAMP should be in animal management best practices and community outcomes, providing a strong foundation for continued progress and reported on in the 2026-2029 DAMP.

## **Cat Definitions**

The APWF recognizes and supports the definitions of cats as delineated in the findings and recommendations from the RSPCA Australia's 2018 report, "Identifying best practice domestic cat management in Australia." These definitions categorize cats as Feral and Domestic (owned, semi-owned, unowned).

## **Domestic cats**

Domestic cats live around where people live and frequent. Cat management strategies should recognise three subcategories of domestic cats, as recommended by RSPCA (2018 report) including:

➤ **Owned cats** – these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable, although sociability varies. These cats are also called pet cats.

➤ **Semi-owned cats** – these cats are directly dependent on humans and are intentionally fed by people who do not consider they own them. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.

➤ **Unowned cats** – these cats are indirectly dependent on humans and receive food from people unintentionally, such as via food waste bins. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.

### **Feral Cats**

- **Feral cats-** Feral cats have no relationship with or dependence on humans (neither direct nor indirect), survive by hunting or scavenging for food, and live and reproduce in the wild (e.g., forests, woodlands, grasslands, deserts). Feral cats do not live in the vicinity of where people live and they do not receive food from humans intentionally (direct feeding) or unintentionally (e.g. via food waste bins). Feral cats are completely unsocialised to humans and have none of their needs fulfilled by humans. Feral cats are not found or trapped in the vicinity of where people live, are not the subject of nuisance complaints and do not enter Australian council pounds or animal shelters.

Failure to recognize and apply these definitions in cat management programs can have severe consequences, leading to ineffective strategies and unnecessary euthanasia. When semi-owned and unowned domestic cats are misclassified as feral, they are often subjected to lethal control measures rather than being included in community-based desexing and rehoming programs. This misclassification undermines the effectiveness of proactive, humane solutions such as targeted desexing, which have been shown to stabilize and reduce free-roaming cat populations over time. Additionally, conflating domestic cats with genuinely feral cats can result in misguided policies that penalize community members who provide informal care to semi-owned cats, discouraging public participation in effective management strategies. Without clear distinctions, councils may rely on reactive, punitive measures rather than investing in sustainable, evidence-based programs that reduce intake at shelters, improve animal welfare, and ultimately decrease the number of free-roaming cats in the long term.

Recognising these definitions is essential to ensuring that cat management policies are humane, effective, and aligned with best practices in animal welfare. Research demonstrates that pet cats can respond with more aggressive behaviours to humans when highly stressed than genuinely feral cats. It is critical that before a decision that a cat is euthanised on behaviour, it is given sufficient time to adapt to a stressful environment. Outcome decisions relating to euthanasia based on behavioural characteristics must be deferred to allow the cat sufficient time to habituate to the unfamiliar environment (e.g., shelter or pound), given the likelihood that these cats will

experience high levels of fear in a trap cage or unfamiliar environment. By not allowing a stressed cat to settle into the environment, this may result in the cat exhibiting signs of being unsocial and ultimately lead to higher euthanasia.

It is noted that part of the Geelong's action plan is to provide residents and businesses with the use of cat traps to reduce stray and feral cat populations, therefore more cats will be impounded, needing rehousing or will be euthanised. The reliance on euthanasia for cats that could be supported through alternative means suggests **a gap in Geelong's capacity or willingness to pursue innovative life-saving options**, contrary to contemporary welfare models that prioritise "live outcomes."

## Community Cat Programs

The APWF supports the expansion of innovative desexing initiatives such as that implemented in the City of Banyule (Cotterell 2024). These programs must include clearly defined, measurable objectives over 3–5 years and be targeted to suburbs with high shelter intakes or cat-related complaints. Within these areas, microtargeting specific streets or neighbourhoods where cats are most at risk of impoundment or surrender ensures greater impact. Effective programs also require sufficient intensity, desexing 30 cats per 1,000 residents annually in targeted suburbs or 10 per 1,000 with microtargeting, otherwise objectives are unlikely to be achieved.

Strong local partnerships are essential for success. Collaborating with veterinarians and welfare agencies can expand low-cost or free desexing, particularly for people who cannot access or afford private clinics. Programs should be adapted to local needs and barriers. A limiting factor is veterinary capacity, which constrains broader rollout. High-volume clinics offering early-age desexing should be supported, and animal welfare agencies encouraged—potentially funded—to develop such facilities for public access. Effective cat management requires coordinated community-wide efforts and cannot rely on a single agency.

Cat impoundments are highest in low-income regional areas (Chua 2023, Albertson 2016), where veterinary services may be inaccessible. These regions need affordable desexing options. Mobile clinics could service towns without a vet, including farming communities. Alternatively, transporting cats up to two hours to a clinic is safe and commonly practised in remote areas of the USA. Desexing and transport services should be supported by partnerships with local veterinary practices.

To reduce unwanted cats, economic barriers to desexing must be addressed, particularly for low-income households or to assist residents with financial stress. This requires affordable programs and grants targeted to vulnerable Victorians. Success depends on microtargeting based on data from cat-related calls and impoundments. Positive, assistive AMO engagement with people who own undesexed cats, especially those experiencing disadvantage, is essential. The Banyule model (Cotterell 2024,

Cotterell 2025) demonstrates how such engagement in disadvantaged areas can reduce shelter intake and euthanasia.

Many cat carers struggle, especially during the current cost-of-living crisis, cannot afford desexing, especially when managing multiple cats. These individuals require fully subsidised or very low-cost services. Council grants available through Animal Welfare Victoria, to enable AMOs to facilitate desexing for such cases would be highly effective. Transport assistance may also be required, and using AMOs to support transport to surgery is a more constructive use of their time than impoundment.

While general desexing promotion is helpful, programs not targeted to those most in need may have limited impact (Frank 2007), often substituting the source for those who would have desexed their pets anyway. It is essential that programs are place-based, microtargeted to areas of need (those who will never desex), and free from access barriers such as requiring pension or concession cards. Vouchers for local clinics may not be effective due to vet shortages and rising service costs. Based on RSPCA NSW experience (Ma 2023), only half of participants in microtargeted programs held benefits cards, highlighting that many who need help fall outside traditional criteria.

Addressing cat overpopulation effectively requires community partnerships and tailored, microtargeted responses. **The APWF strongly supports place-based desexing programs that combine suburb-level targeting based on nuisance cat reports and impoundments, with local outreach by program staff.** This dual approach, targeting where the problem is greatest and providing direct support to residents, offers the best chance for lasting, measurable impact on cat overpopulation and welfare.

## **To minimise the risk of attacks by dogs on people and animals**

The information provided in the 2021-2025 DAMP clearly highlights the significant personal, legal, and financial impacts of dog attacks and reinforces that with proper education and management, many of these incidents are preventable. While the City of Greater Geelong responds promptly to dog attack reports and maintains a database to track incidents, there is a critical opportunity to strengthen early intervention through proactive community outreach. Many residents are unaware they should report dog-related incidents or do not understand what information is needed to initiate an investigation. This gap in public knowledge delays preventative action and may allow recurring issues, such as inadequate fencing or poor supervision, to escalate into serious attacks.

To prevent escalation, council officers should implement a standardised practice of conducting property visits after reports of dogs at large or nuisance behaviour. These visits offer an opportunity to ask owners how the dog got out and collaboratively develop a management plan to rectify the issue, such as repairing

fencing, adjusting routines, or providing behavioural support. Offering advice and resources early, before an attack occurs, helps build trust and encourages responsible pet ownership. This community-first approach not only reduces the likelihood of repeat incidents but also shifts the focus from punitive responses to proactive prevention, improving safety outcomes for both the community and the dogs involved. Incorporating annual reporting of key statistics into the plan would improve transparency and accountability, enabling both government and the public to assess the effectiveness of council interventions in reducing incidents over time.

### **To address any over-population and high euthanasia rates for dogs and cats**

To effectively address overpopulation and reduce high euthanasia rates for dogs and cats, a shift from enforcement to support-based strategies is essential. One of the key barriers to reclaiming or taking ownership of a cat is the high upfront cost, which may include microchipping, desexing, registration, and impound fees. These costs are often prohibitive for lower-income households and semi-owners who care for unowned cats out of compassion. Research consistently shows that **mandatory desexing without financial assistance leads to low compliance**, particularly among semi-owned and unowned cats, which remain the primary contributors to cat overpopulation. While containment measures such as cat curfews may reduce nuisance complaints and help protect wildlife, they are not effective in lowering euthanasia rates unless coupled with targeted, high-intensity free desexing programs.

Best-practice evidence supports the use of fully subsidised desexing, microchipping, and registration, especially in high-risk communities and for carers of semi-owned cats. Most semi-owners are willing to take full responsibility for the cats they care for when these services are made free. According to Rand 2024 (Dutton-Register 2024), the top five reasons carers chose to take ownership included: free desexing, avoiding kittens, preventing nuisance behaviours, concern for the cat's wellbeing, and a desire to do the right thing. The barrier is not a lack of education but a lack of resources. Notably, mandatory containment laws and two-cat limits often discourage semi-owners from taking formal ownership, undermining council efforts to reduce impoundments and euthanasia.

To maximise impact, the City of Greater Geelong should expand Community Cat Programs using a microtargeted approach, such as the "red flag cat model," which identifies hotspots based on complaints or sightings of free-roaming cats. These areas often signal the presence of multiple unowned or semi-owned cats and should be prioritised for proactive outreach and support by Animal Management Officers (Spehar & Wolf 2019). This approach is more humane, cost-effective, and sustainable than enforcement alone, and it builds stronger relationships between council and the community while delivering tangible reductions in shelter intake and euthanasia.

### **Promote pet registration**

Although annual registration and microchipping are legal requirements for cats and dogs in Victoria, registration rates in Greater Geelong do not reflect the apparent increase in pet ownership seen during recent years. The number of unpaid registrations doubled between 2019 and 2020, suggesting a large number of domestic animals remain unregistered. This presents a challenge for councils aiming to reunite lost pets with their owners and reduce impoundments. To address this, a shift towards proactive engagement strategies is needed, moving beyond compliance checks to community support initiatives that increase registration uptake and strengthen responsible pet ownership.

The City of Greater Geelong should consider implementing a suite of proactive programs to incentivise registration and support vulnerable pet owners. These could include offering free registration in the first year for adopted animals, discounted registration for recognised foster carers, and expanded access to free or low-cost microchipping events. By removing financial and logistical barriers, such initiatives encourage early compliance, improve the chances of lost pets being returned home, and reduce pressure on pound services. Paired with education campaigns focused on the importance of keeping contact details up to date, these initiatives will build trust and foster a more cooperative relationship between council and the community, ultimately improving animal welfare outcomes across the municipality.

### **To minimise the potential for dogs and cats to create a nuisance**

The 2021-2025 plan recognises that trespassing cats and barking dogs are the most common sources of nuisance complaints from the community. While the council is committed to investigating all such reports and promoting constructive outcomes, the complexity of these issues often presents significant challenges. The current approach includes subsidised desexing, trap loans, education on responsible cat ownership, and support for cat confinement, but these efforts appear to be reactive rather than part of a structured, long-term strategy. Notably, the plan does not provide any statistics on the volume, nature, or resolution of nuisance complaints, making it difficult to assess the scale of the problem or evaluate the effectiveness of current interventions.

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## **Other matters**

The City of Greater Geelong faces a range of unique challenges in managing companion animals, due to both its size and rapid population growth. As one of Victoria’s largest municipalities in terms of both land area and registered pet numbers, Geelong must oversee animal management across a diverse 1,250 square kilometre area that includes urban, rural, and coastal communities. As of 2021, there were over 37,852 registered dogs and cats in the municipality, a number that is expected to grow significantly in line with the city’s projected population increase to more than 330,000 residents by 2031. This growth will inevitably lead to higher rates of pet ownership, increasing demand for animal management services, infrastructure, and proactive community engagement.

The complexity of managing animal welfare and public safety is further underscored by the high number of reported dog attacks—618 incidents over a three-year period, and the doubling of unpaid animal registrations from 2019 to 2020, likely linked to financial stress and administrative disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic. These trends highlight the strain on council resources and the importance of implementing efficient, accessible systems for registration, enforcement, and education. With 50 domestic animal businesses operating locally, coordination between council, community, and industry stakeholders is critical. Addressing these challenges will require a proactive, well-resourced approach to ensure the safety, wellbeing, and harmonious integration of animals and residents across the municipality.

Thank you for allowing us to provide feedback, if there is any further information you would like please get in touch at [info@petwelfare.org.au](mailto:info@petwelfare.org.au)

Best wishes,

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