



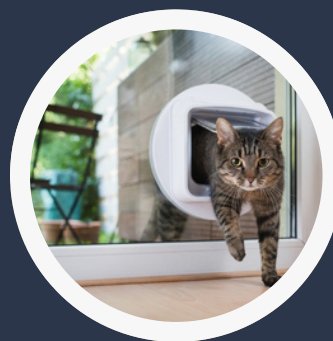
Australian
Pet Welfare
Foundation

Submission

Review of the Western Australian Cat Act 2011

Australian Pet Welfare Foundation
31 August 2026

A humane, practical and evidence-based framework that improves identification, early sterilization, community support, council outcomes and transparent public reporting.



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About APWF

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation (APWF) is a peak research body and advocate for pet welfare in Australia. As a not-for-profit organization, APWF uses science-based evidence to enhance community well-being and improve the health and welfare of animals and people. APWF specializes in evidence-based solutions to prevent euthanasia of healthy and treatable dogs and cats 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 20 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 40 peer-reviewed articles on urban animal management including management of semi-owned and unowned cats. Dr Rand is an AVA member.

Website: <https://petwelfare.org.au>

Executive summary

APWF recommends that the *Western Australian Cat Act 2011* be modernised as a practical prevention and support framework, rather than relying primarily on punitive compliance mechanisms.

Definition of domestic and feral cats

A central problem in cat management is that legislation and enforcement often fail to distinguish clearly between domestic and feral cat populations.

APWF recommends that the Act adopt definitions consistent with the RSPCA's 2018 Best Practice Domestic Cat Management framework (RSPCA Australia 2018) to distinguish between **domestic cats and feral cats**. For the purposes of this submission:

Domestic cats: cats live in areas where people live or frequent and rely on humans directly or indirectly for food. If a cat is trapped within 1-2 km from human habitation there is a high probability it is domestic.

Feral cats live and reproduce in areas remote from humans and do not depend on humans for food. Their nutritional needs are met by hunting and scavenging. Cats trapped more than 2kms from human habitation have a high probability of being feral. **Because feral cats do not live around where people live or frequent, they are not a source of complaints to local government relating to nuisance behaviours.**

This distinction is critical. Domestic cats living in human environments require management approaches that are supportive and assistive, and enhance human and animal wellbeing. These management approaches are focused on community-based interventions including sterilisation, microchipping, caregiver engagement, reuniting lost cats with their owners, and adoption of cats by caregivers

Feral cats require separate science-based management to protect vulnerable wildlife.

RSPCA subclassifies domestic cats as owned, semi-owned (intentionally fed or cared for by people who do not consider themselves the legal owner), and unowned cats (obtain food inadvertently from people, for example, by scavenging in waste bins)

Under the current WA Cat Act both owned and semi-owned cats would be considered to have an owner.

Management of Domestic Cats: Require an assistive approach before enforcement to facilitate compliance

The most important reform is to shift administration of the Act toward an assistance-first approach to encourage voluntary compliance. This is particularly important because cat-related complaints, intake and euthanasia are greatest in disadvantaged communities, where enforcement-only approaches are difficult to implement, inequitable and less effective. Western Australia's fines system already recognises hardship, such as financial hardship, family violence, mental illness, disability, homelessness, or alcohol and other drug use problems, by allowing time to pay plans.

A modernised Cat Act should therefore align with these principles by ensuring that cat management does not disproportionately impact people experiencing hardship. In practice, this means infringement notices and penalties should be used only after reasonable support options have been offered, including access to free and low-cost sterilisation, microchipping, registration assistance and community-based support.

An assistive approach involves funding targeted support in areas of high cat impoundments, surrendered litters of kittens and/or complaints. This support includes free and affordable sterilisation and microchipping, low-cost lifetime registration if retained (note, we do not recommend registration), and amnesty pathways. Increased return of lost cats to owners should also be prioritised by funding microchipping programs, requiring standardised scanning of lost and impounded cats, and facilitating updating of owner contact details through SMS and email reminders.

Community Cat Programs

The modernised Cat Act should support Community Cat Programs as a core management strategy. These programs are evidence-based and combine targeted, high-intensity sterilisation with accessible veterinary services, engagement of cat owners and caregivers, and assistance-first responses to cat-related complaints.

Evidence from Australian local governments shows that for domestic cats, targeted, high-intensity sterilisation programs in areas with high cat-related complaints and numbers of free-roaming cats effectively reduce cat intake, euthanasia, complaints, costs and roaming cat numbers.

- They are aligned with a **One Welfare approach** and improve outcomes for animals, residents, councils, animal management personnel and veterinary teams.
- **Wildlife is also better protected** because firstly, cats that are sterilised and fed to meet their nutritional needs, hunt significantly less, secondly, over time the proportion of young cats decreases, which is the age group that are the most active hunters, thirdly, fewer young cats means less risk to wildlife from toxoplasmosis oocysts, and fourthly, the number of free-roaming cats decreases over time.

Effective implementation requires data-led targeting, sufficient program intensity and duration, strong veterinary partnerships, and the removal of financial and administrative barriers that prevent community participation.

They are most successful when combined with practical support for owners defined under the WA Cat Act (owners and caregivers).

Western Australia should fund a Community Cat Program model with annual public reporting by all local governments and shelters of cat intake and outcomes to transparently measure outcomes and expenditure.

Key suggestions to improve the Cat Act and its administration

- **Adopt scientifically defensible cat categories.** The Act should distinguish between domestic cats that depend directly or indirectly on people, and genuinely feral cats that live and reproduce

independently of humans in wild environments. **Classification should be based on how and where a cat lives, not the absence of identification or fearful behaviour after capture.**

- Clear definitions would improve legal certainty, enforcement consistency and welfare outcomes, and prevent domestic cats being managed inappropriately as feral cats, damaging the wellbeing of veterinary teams performing unnecessary euthanasia (Crawford et al., 2023; Rand et al., 2024b; DePonti et al, 2023; Scotney et al, 2015; AVA 2023).
- **Require an assistance-first approach to make compliance achievable.** Before issuing penalties, council staff should be required to offer practical **support**, including information and assistance to achieve compliance, access to affordable sterilisation, microchipping, and registration (if retained) and amnesty periods.
- Enforcement should be reserved for repeated and deliberate non-compliance where an owner is identifiable, has the capacity to comply and has been given a reasonable opportunity to comply. **Research involving animal control officers shows that practical assistance, relationship-building and time to comply are more effective engagement strategies than enforcement alone** (Moss et al., 2023; Cotterell et al., 2025b).
- **Enable and fund targeted Community Cat Programs.** The Western Australian Government should establish ongoing funding for local governments to identify suburbs, streets and properties generating high numbers of complaints, impoundments and/or unwanted litters of kittens. Programs should provide free sterilisation and microchipping, transport to veterinary services, registration assistance (if retained), engagement with cat caregivers and rehoming pathways for kittens and socialised cats.
 - Multiple Australian programs have achieved compelling reductions in cat intake, euthanasia, numbers of free-roaming cats and cat-related complaints, while reducing council costs (Cotterell et al., 2024; Rand et al., 2024a, Ma et al, 2026).
- **Optimize microchipping for return of lost cats to owners.** i. Mandate microchipping by 4 months of age, ii. Fund microchipping as part of Community Cat Programs iii. Require databases registering cats from WA to send out email and/or SMS reminders to update contact details every 3 to 6 months and iv. Require routine scanning for microchips of all cats coming into pounds, shelters and rescue groups using best practice to identify a chip.
 - Encourage a physical tag but the cease legal requirement.
- **Abolish cat registration.** i. It is an added financial barrier for low-income cat owners and cat carers, which limits their capacity to afford microchipping and sterilisation, ii. it adds no benefit above microchipping for return of lost cats to owners, iii. registration is administratively time consuming for local governments, iv. it has very low compliance, and v. cat owners do not benefit from amenities like those provided for dog owners.
- **Require standardised public reporting and evaluation.** Consistent reporting supports evidence-based resource allocation.
 - The revised Act should **mandate that all local governments and shelters are required to report annually to the WA state government on cat-related complaints, cat intake and outcomes.** These should be reported as absolute numbers and numbers per 1,000 residents to support meaningful comparison between local government areas. Both collated statewide data and individual local government data should be made available in a timely way on a publicly accessible government website.
 - The Act should require all **local governments to publish a Domestic Animal Management Plan, with annual review and public reporting.** Plans should outline preventive cat management programs, expenditure, community engagement, and key indicators including registration, microchipping, complaints, impoundments, outcomes and

infringements. This would improve transparency and show whether strategies are reducing overpopulation, nuisance complaints, pound intake and euthanasia.

Without consistent data and definitions, it is not possible to determine whether the Act is reducing cat intake, nuisance, euthanasia or costs (Chua et al., 2023; Cotterell et al., 2025b).

- **Do not implement mandated cat containment** but encourage containment where possible, with information on low-cost and practical containment methods. **Paradoxically, mandated containment it is a barrier to reducing the number of free-roaming cats, is a social justice issue, does not decrease cat-related complaints or impoundments and is rarely enforced.**
- **Mandated cat containment is a social justice for low-income cat owners**, particularly those in rental properties that are unsuitable for secure containment of a cat inside or on the property. Disadvantaged cat owners may have no capacity to pay \$700 to more than \$2,000 for a cat containment system, and it may not even be allowed by the landlord. Enforcement of cat containment for these cat owners may **lead them to surrendering their cat with ensuing negative impacts on their well-being, both mental and physical.**
- **Mandated containment is a barrier to semi-owners taking ownership of the cats they feeding** and having them sterilised and microchipped, because in disadvantaged areas many cat carers are in housing which is structurally inadequate to contain a cat. By taking ownership they are in breach of the law. (Cotterell et al., 2025a, 2025b).
- **Most free-roaming cats in urban areas have no identifiable owner**, which is supported by data showing that return to owner rates of impounded cats is only 3%.
 - Free-roaming cats are most numerous in financially disadvantaged locations and consist mostly of stray cats being fed by people (semi-owners), and some are unidentified and unsterilised, owned cats.
- **Importantly, there were no benefits to local governments in reducing complaints, impoundments or euthanasia from containment mandates, either 12- or 24-hour mandates.**
 - A study of all 79 Victorian local government areas found that 70% of councils had introduced some form of cat containment requirement. All the **differences between local governments were explained by socioeconomic conditions** with a minor component of whether the council was a metropolitan city or rural city (Cotterell et al 2026 unpublished data).
 - **Notably, successful enforcement of containment mandates was rare, because it is largely unenforceable – most free-roaming cats have no identifiable owner.** Trapping cats is time-consuming and costly for local councils.
- Where **locations of threatened and endangered species in urban areas exist**, these are a WA state asset, and individuals with these species on, or close to, their property should not be expected to pay for expensive containment fencing, when these species are of value to the whole community. In these situations, **effective fencing or containment or other protective measures should be provided free of cost for those residents.**
- **Match legislative responsibilities with adequate funding.** Local governments should not be expected to implement the Act without dedicated funding for veterinary partnerships, transport, humane trapping, data systems, community engagement and targeted sterilisation programs.
 - Unfunded enforcement shifts costs into the pound and shelter system and risks increasing impoundment and euthanasia without reducing reproduction in the source population. **Preventive programs address the problem before cats enter council facilities and have demonstrated a substantially stronger return on investment** (Cotterell et al., 2024; Rand et al., 2024a; Cotterell et al., 2025b).

In summary, APWF recommends that the WA Cat Act be administered as a prevention and support framework, not simply an enforcement framework. The priority should be to reduce breeding, improve identification, support owners and carers, reduce shelter intake, increase reclaim rates and prevent unnecessary euthanasia and the adverse flow-on effects on job satisfaction and mental health of veterinary teams.

Core recommendations:

- Use the Cat Act to make responsible cat management achievable. Clearly distinguish between domestic and feral cats. For domestic cats, fund the services and data systems to support voluntary compliance, and reserve punitive action for repeated, deliberate and serious non-compliance.
- APWF recommends mandatory Domestic Animal Management Plans for all Western Australian local governments, modelled on Victoria's approach, so effectiveness of cat management programs can be measured over time.
- The revised Act should also mandate that all local governments and shelters report annually to the WA state government on cat-related complaints, cat intake and outcomes. Collated state data, as well as individual entity data, should be publicly available on a government website.

Summary of recommendations

Area	APWF position	Recommended change
Adopt definitions of cats based on RSPCA recommendations	• Adopt evidence-based definitions of cats, consistent with RSPCA Australia recommendations, clearly distinguishing domestic and feral cats	• Amend the WA Cat Act 2011 to reflect these definitions and clearly define feral cats based on where they live, that is, remote from where humans live or work.
Registration, microchipping and identification	• Retain mandatory microchipping but reduce age to 4 months and optimize it for reunification. • Require microchip databases registering cats from WA to send out email and/or SMS reminders to update owner contact details every 3 to 6 months. • Abolish cat registration.	• Mandate microchipping by 4 months • Databases registering cats from WA to send out email and/or SMS reminders to update contact details every 3 to 6 months. • Require routine scanning for microchips of all cats coming into pounds, shelters & rescue groups using best practice to identify a chip • Encourage but cease requirement for a physical tag • Abolish cat registration.
Sterilisation	• Support sterilisation and facilitate sterilisation by 4 months of age but remove the punitive legislation because it is ineffective and does not recognise that the main reason for not sterilising a cat is not lack of motivation but lack of money.	• Prioritise early-age (by 4 months of age) sterilisation (combined with microchipping), through free and low-cost cat sterilisation and microchipping programs targeted to disadvantaged areas and households. • Remove mandated sterilisation.
Breeding	• Retain approval for intentional, repeated and commercial breeding for sale.	• Strengthen traceability and welfare standards while creating non-punitive pathways for accidental litters.
Enforcement	• Replace complaint-led "catch and punish" approaches with an assistance-first model involving provision of	• Reserve penalties for repeated and deliberate non-compliance; fund training for AMOs to solve problems, rather than issuing infringements notices as a first response.

	information and support because this is more effective at achieving compliance.	
Data and evaluation	Make outcomes measurable and transparent.	- Mandate annual reporting on intake (source, age, sterilisation & microchip status) and outcomes (reclaimed, rehomed, transferred, euthanized) by local governments and animal welfare organisations. - Require Domestic Animal Management Plans by all local governments that are modelled on the Victorian approach and facilitate evaluation of progress in cat (and dog) management.
Successful models	Adopt practical, evidence-based programs rather than relying on ineffective legal mandates.	Implement Community Cat Programs funded by state and local governments and resourced by AMOs that are modelled on programs such as Banyule (Victoria), NSW's Keeping Cats Safe at Home and APWF's program in Ipswich (Queensland) which involve partnerships between local government, veterinary clinics, animal welfare organisations and rescue groups.

Detailed response to consultation questions

The following section responds directly to the consultation questions. Each response is structured around APWF position, the evidence basis and recommended changes.

Registration, microchipping and identification

APWF position: i. Retain mandatory microchipping and reduce age limit for compliance to 4 months. ii. Fund targeted microchipping programs, and include microchipping in sterilisation programs. iii. Require microchip databases to send regular SMS and/or email reminders to update owner contact details. iv. Require systematic scanning of all impounded and surrendered cats and updating owner contact details prior to exit from the facility. v. Refine microchipping as a reunification, population management and community support tool. vi. Abolish cat registration requirements

Under the Cat Act 2011 (the Cat Act), a cat that is six months of age or older must be microchipped, registered with the local government in whose district the cat ordinarily lives, and the owner of the cat must ensure their cat is wearing a registration tag in public places.

1. Under the Cat Act Regulations 2012, a person can register their cat for either one year, three years or for the cat's lifetime.

2. Should any of these requirements change? If yes, what changes would you suggest and why?

The APWF supports microchipping, not registration, as important components of good cat caring behaviour. However, this requirement should be refined so it functions primarily as an effective tool for reunification, population management and community support, rather than as a punitive compliance mechanism.

The Act should therefore require systematic scanning of all impounded and surrendered cats to shelters, council pounds, veterinarians and rescue groups, and require owner contact details to be checked and updated if incorrect, including when cats are reclaimed or adopted

Microchipping should remain mandatory because it provides permanent identification and substantially increases the likelihood that a lost cat can be reunited with its owner. This decreases the length of stay of cats in shelters and pounds, which decreases costs and reduces the number of healthy and treatable cats being euthanised.

However, microchipping is only effective when owner contact details are accurate and accessible:

Research has shown that microchipping substantially improves the likelihood that stray cats will be reunited with their owners.

- An Australian study found that of cats entering RSPCA Queensland, **61% of microchipped cats were reclaimed, compared with only 5% of non-microchipped cats** (Lancaster et al., 2015).
 - In the Queensland study, **37% of microchipped animals had incorrect or out-of-date data** for owners, and cats with correct microchip data were much more likely (61%) to be reclaimed than cats with incorrect data (33%) (Lancaster et al., 2015).
 - Research using a large Australian microchip database found that prompting owners to update their details through regular email-reminders significantly increased the frequency they were updated, supporting the need for active systems to keep microchip information current (Goodwin et al., 2018).
- Similarly, in a large USA shelter study of 7,704 microchipped animals entering 53 shelters, reclaim rates for microchipped cats were approximately 20 times higher than the overall cat shelter reclaim rate (39% compared with 2%) (Lord et al., 2009).

Mandate consistent microchip scanning and record management. All stray, found, impounded or surrendered cats presented to councils, pounds, shelters, veterinary clinics or rescue groups should be scanned at first contact and again before rehoming or euthanasia. Microchip details should be checked to ensure correct ownership contact details and, where necessary, updated at reclaim and adoption.

- Implantation records should be entered within 7 days, in accordance with the Act, and owners should receive regular reminders to update their contact details.
- **Inaccurate microchip records substantially reduce owner contact and return-to-owner outcomes, while automated reminders increase the frequency with which owners update their records** (Lancaster et al., 2015; Goodwin et al., 2018).

Registration should be abolished for cats because i. it is a financial barrier to more effective cat caring behaviours, that is, cat sterilisation and microchipping ii. the administration is costly, iii. the majority of pet cats are not registered (data from Victoria show 74% of pet cats are not registered), iv. it can be a barrier to microchipping (microchip databases can be searched to identify owners who have not paid registration fees), and v. cat owners do not benefit from services like dog parks.

- **Registration requirements are only effective if people can and do comply.**
 - Animal Welfare Victoria's Cat Management Strategy states that Victoria has approximately 227,000 registered cats, compared with an estimated 914,000 pet cats, meaning most (74%) pet cats are not registered (Agriculture Victoria 2025).
- **Differences in the number and proportion of impounded cats returned to their owners were associated with socioeconomic and geographic differences (metro or rural cities) between council areas** (Cotterell 2026 unpublished).
- Microchip registries can be searched by local government officers to identify cat owners who have not paid registration fees, thereby creating a financial disincentive to microchip their pets.
 - In NSW, registration fees (lifetime registration fee is \$74) present significant financial barriers to cats being microchipped. The state microchip register can be used to identify cat owners who have not paid registration fees, thereby creating a financial disincentive to microchip their pets and only 3% of cats were returned to owners in NSW. (Chua 2023).
- Return to owner rates in WA were also low for cats (3%) compared to dogs at 48% (Chua et al, 2017) and were lower than Victoria and Queensland (7%). (Chua et al, 2017; 2023),

Costs versus benefits of cat registration.

- In NSW it was estimated that, **excluding the administration costs to councils for managing cat registration, council costs for managing cats was estimated to be 7 to 10 times greater than the revenue generated from registration fees** (The Centre for International Economics 2022).
- **Local Governments also face further costs related to administrative tasks** associated with the enforcement of registration, including issuing demand letters, preparing summonses, providing legal representation for magistrate court appearances, and allocating officer time for testimony. These cumulative expenses can total A\$1500 to A\$3000 or more to initially recover a penalty of approximately A\$350, with costs rising significantly if the accused contests the original fine (Cotterell et al, 2025 b).
 - Moreover, this enforcement process may fail to ensure registration, with continued non-compliance likely leading to further fines, exacerbating the issue, and may lead to relinquishment of the cat, further increasing council costs (Cotterell et al, 2025 b; McDowall et al, 2024; Moss et al, 2023)
- **In Queensland, the mandatory registration of cats was repealed** in 2013 because this was “considered to deliver the greatest net benefit to stakeholders, as it **yields the greatest potential red tape reduction, and cost savings to local governments and cat owners, without compromising reunification outcomes and euthanasia rates**” (Atfield 2013; Rand et al, 2024 a).
- **Imposing financial barriers which discourage owners from microchipping is fiscally inefficient and undermines return-to-owner rates.** A more effective approach would involve abolishing mandatory cat registration and focusing on making microchipping more accessible, ideally through integration with free and low-cost sterilisation services. The utility of microchips in reuniting cats with their owners would be enhanced through regular reminders via SMS or email, prompting owners to update their contact information when needed (Goodwin et al, 2018).

If registration requirements are maintained, they should be simplified and made more accessible.

- **A single lifetime registration model** for sterilised and microchipped cats would reduce administrative burden on owners and local governments, improve compliance, and better align registration with the long-term nature of cat ownership. However, **it reduces its effectiveness for tracing lost and wandering cats because owner contact details are more likely to be out of date.**
- One-year and three-year registration periods can create **unnecessary renewal barriers**, particularly for low-income owners, elderly people and people informally caring for semi-owned cats but **improves the recency of owner contact details.**
- The current Cat Act already allows registration for one year, three years or life; the legislation should preference lifetime registration and enable councils to offer free or very low-cost registration when cats are sterilised and microchipped through approved community programs.

The requirement for cats to wear a registration tag as an offence should be abolished. Absence of a collar is common in owned cats and is affected by safety-collar design, cat behaviour, owner concerns about safety and collar loss (Calver et al, 2013; Lord 2010).

- While visible identification should be encouraged and can assist in rapid return of lost and wandering cats, collars and tags are not reliable as the primary indicator of ownership because they can be lost, removed or absent for welfare and safety reasons. **Microchipping should be treated as the primary form of identification.**
- Only 53% of 300 cat owners interviewed in Western Australian reported using collars for their cats (Calver et al, 2013).
- Owners commonly stop using collars because **cats remove them (22%) or collars are lost (21%)** (Lord et al, 2010).

- Studies of lost and found cats report that many missing cats were not wearing collars at the time they went missing; owners reported that lost cats were wearing collars in only 31% and 22% of cases in two studies, and only 17% of found cats in one study were wearing collars (Lord 2007; Weiss 2012).
- Failure to wear a tag should not, by itself, result in a cat being treated as unowned, feral, or eligible for punitive action where the cat is otherwise microchipped, known to a caregiver, or able to be returned home.

Summary

In summary, the requirements should change by; a. retaining mandatory microchipping but reducing the age to 4 months, b. funding targeted microchipping programs to areas of most need and incorporate microchipping in sterilisation programs, c. strengthening scanning and database-update obligations, d. removing registration requirements, e. encouraging, but not mandating physical tags and f. embedding into the administration of the Act an assistance-first approach with provision of information and support to gain voluntary compliance, with enforcement reserved for situations where support fails.

These changes would better achieve the objectives of increasing compliance, reducing shelter intake, increasing reclaim rates, reducing euthanasia, reducing council costs, and improving outcomes for cats, carers, local governments and the broader community.

Sterilisation

APWF position: Support sterilisation but replace mandated sterilisation as the primary mechanism with early-age, accessible and targeted sterilisation programs.

Under the Cat Act, cats must be sterilised by six months of age unless exempt.

3. Should the sterilisation requirements change? If yes, what changes would you suggest and why?

APWF supports sterilisation as a core cat population management tool. This is highlighted by data which shows **most cats entering shelters and pounds were born in the last 12 months and more than half were born in the last six months** (Alberthsen et al., 2016; Chua et al., 2023). However, **APWF does not support mandatory sterilisation** of cats because it is **not lack of motivation but lack of money why cats are not sterilised**.

- **Household income is the strongest predictor of whether a cat is sterilised or not** (Chu et al., 2009)

The Cat Act should **shift from a punitive model to an assistive model that facilitates compliance** and makes sterilisation accessible, affordable and targeted to where it is most needed.

Why change is needed

1. **Mandatory sterilisation does not address the main barrier.** Non-compliance is usually driven by cost and access to veterinary care, rather than lack of motivation. Household income is the strongest demographic predictor of whether a cat is sterilised and even reduced-cost services may remain unaffordable for disadvantaged households (Chu et al., 2009; Benka & McCobb, 2016; Rand et al., 2024a).
2. **Mandates have not been shown to reduce shelter and pound intake.** All the states that required cats to be sterilised before sale or transfer (Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania) had **higher per-capita cat admission rates than states without this mandate** (Chua

et al., 2023). This does not establish that mandates caused higher intake, but it demonstrates that this legislation has not resolved free-roaming cat populations, cat impoundments or shelter intake or demands on staff (Cotterell et al., 2025).

3. **Sterilisation mandates have not produced higher compliance.** National RSPCA admission data found no clear evidence that jurisdictions with mandatory sterilisation had higher proportions of sterilised cats than jurisdictions without mandates (Alberthsen et al., 2016). The ACT was the only jurisdiction requiring sterilisation by six months during the study period, and the proportion of unsterilised cats under six months admitted to RSPCA facilities was the second highest nationally (Alberthsen et al., 2016).
4. **The ACT experience provides no evidence of reduced intake.** Mandatory cat sterilisation commenced in the ACT in 2001. Cat intake at the RSPCA ACT shelter was 7.69 cats per 1,000 residents in 2000 and 8.02 per 1,000 in 2006, indicating no reduction in the 5 years following implementation (Hayward, 2017). **This is consistent with legislation failing to address affordability, accessibility and the large number of unidentified owned, semi-owned and unowned cats entering shelters.**
5. **Early and accessible sterilisation is the key to preventing unwanted litters. Policy should prioritise affordable, early-age sterilisation rather than penalties after non-compliance has occurred** (Mazeau et al., 2021).
 - a) A Western Australian study of pet cats presented for a free microchipping program found that younger cats were less likely to be sterilised – **an average of 95% of cats aged ≥2 years were sterilised compared with an average of 39% of cats less than 2 years old** (Johnson & Calver 2014).
 - b) A Vet Compass Australia study of 52,941 cats found that 84% were sterilised, but only 22% of sterilised female cats had undergone the procedure by four months and 60% by six months. **Many cats may therefore reach reproductive maturity (4 - 6 months) before surgery.**
6. **Enforcement does not reach the cats most likely to produce unwanted litters.** Cats recorded as stray include unidentified owned cats, semi-owned cats cared for by people who do not consider themselves owners, and unowned domestic cats living around people (Alberthsen et al., 2016; Zito et al., 2015; Chua et al., 2023; Crawford et al., 2023).
 - a) A national study of 195,387 admissions to RSPCA shelters found that **47% of all cat admissions were strays presented by members of the public, 32% were owner-surrenders, and a further 13% were admitted via municipal councils** (Alberthsen et al., 2016). However, RSPCA shelters directly accept owner surrenders and therefore have a different intake profile from many local-government pounds, where intake is more heavily dominated by stray and impounded cats, many of which cannot be linked to an owner (Alberthsen et al., 2016).
 - b) Local government facilities typically receive a higher proportion of intake as strays (80% to nearly 100%) and the remaining intake is owner surrender cats (Rand et al, 2018; Kerr et al, 2018).
7. **Enforcement is difficult, costly and inequitable.** Sterilisation status cannot usually be determined by visual inspection and may require capture, handling and veterinary assessment. Enforcement therefore depends on identifying both the cat and a legally responsible owner, conditions often absent for free-roaming cats. Expanding enforcement without providing affordable services risks increasing council expenditure while disproportionately affecting communities with the least access to veterinary care.
8. **Punitive approaches can discourage the people best placed to help.** Cat carers (semi-owners) are often strongly attached to the cats they feed but do not identify as their legal owners (Zito et al.,

2015). Free cat sterilisation, microchipping and veterinary support can enable these carers to assume formal ownership, prevent further litters and improve cat welfare. Penalising them may instead discourage engagement and leave cats unidentified and reproductively active (Cotterell et al., 2024; Rand et al., 2024a, 2024b).

The following **peer-reviewed** publications of case studies demonstrate the value of replacing enforcement with support for free, accessible and community-based assistance focused on cat sterilisation and microchipping:

- **In the city of Ipswich, Queensland**, APWF targeted Community Cat Program in collaboration with RSPCA Qld and AWLQ provided free sterilisation, microchipping and preventive care. By the third year, cat intake had decreased by 60%, euthanasia by 85%, and cat-related calls to council by 39% (Rand et al., 2024 a).
- **In city of Banyule, Victoria**, a council-funded free cat sterilisation, microchipping and registration program targeted low-socioeconomic suburbs and complaint hotspots. Over eight years, city-wide cat impoundments decreased by 66%, euthanasia by 82%, and cat-related calls city-wide by 36% and 51% in targeted areas, with council savings exceeding program costs (Cotterell et al. 2024).
- **RSPCA's Keeping Cats Safe at Home program in Greater Sydney** sterilised 1,225 free-roaming and community cats through partnerships involving councils, animal welfare organisations and local veterinarians. Following implementation, council pound intake declined by 49–73% across the four participating local government areas, equivalent to a 61% reduction overall, with concurrent reductions in euthanasia. Cat-related complaints also declined substantially in three of the four areas (Ma et al., 2026). Practical information on containment was also provided.

The evidence supports shifting from sterilisation mandates to targeted, early-age (by 4 months of age) and barrier-free sterilisation programs, supported by microchipping, transport assistance, community engagement and practical assistance.

Summary

APWF recommends replacing punitive mandatory sterilisation with an accessible, targeted and measurable framework that makes compliance achievable and delivers better outcomes for cats, communities, local governments, veterinary teams and wildlife.

Breeding

APWF position: Retain breeder approval for intentional, repeated and commercial breeding while creating non-punitive pathways for accidental litters and semi-owners.

Under the Cat Act, any person who wishes to breed cats must apply for and obtain approval to breed. Only approved cat breeders are permitted to breed cats.

4. Should any aspects of the breeding approval requirements under the Cat Act change? If yes, what changes would you suggest and why?

Yes.

Breeder approval should be retained, but redesigned to be risk-based, enforceable and welfare-focused. However, cats advertised as free or give-away (to good home) that are the result of accidental litters should not be included in breeder approval requirements.

APWF supports regulation of intentional cat breeding where it:

- improves animal welfare;
- prevents commercial overbreeding;
- ensures cats and kittens have permanent identification at sale;

Note that regulation of intentional breeding is unlikely to measurably reduce the number of unwanted kittens entering pounds, shelters and rescue groups because purebred cats only constituted 6% of RSPCA admissions (Alberthsen et al, 2013). **Regulation of unintentional and accidental breeding is not achievable.**

The Cat Act should not treat accidental litters, cat carers (semi-owners) and community carers the same as deliberate or commercial breeders.

Why change is needed

- **Blanket breeder regulation targets the wrong issue.** Breeder approval should apply to intentional, repeated or commercial breeding and require record-keeping, identification, welfare compliance and traceable advertising. Unannounced inspections to ensure welfare standards are being met should occur for breeders selling more than a certain number of litters per year (number to be determined in consultation with registered breeders).
- **People seeking assistance for an accidental litter should not be treated as commercial breeders.** They should have access to a non-punitive “last litter” pathway ensuring the mother cat and kittens are sterilised, microchipped and responsibly rehomed. Australian research confirms that accidental litters continue to be distributed informally through family, friends and online channels (Rand et al., 2024b; Ma et al. 2023).
- **Reactive cat management is delivering poor outcomes.** In 2018–2019, an estimated 179,615 stray and owner-relinquished cats entered Australian pounds, shelters and rescue groups. Only 5% were reclaimed and 28% were euthanised. Western Australia recorded an estimated 23,001 admissions, with only 3% returned to owners and 34% euthanised. **These outcomes demonstrate the limitations of responding after cats and kittens have entered the shelter and pound system** (Chua et al., 2023).
- **Non-compliance is frequently a capacity problem—not a motivation problem.** Household income is the strongest demographic predictor of whether a cat is sterilised (Chu et al., 2009). In a disadvantaged, high-intake Queensland community, 54% of cats had been found or acquired from family or friends, bypassing the veterinary care and identification commonly provided through formal adoption channels. **Financial and access barriers can then allow further unwanted litters to occur** (Rand et al., 2024b).
- **Punitive approaches can undermine voluntary compliance.** Financial constraints, including the inability to afford sterilisation, registration, reclaim fees and veterinary care, are significantly more common reasons for relinquishment in lower-socioeconomic communities (McDowall et al., 2024).
- **Semi-owned cats must be brought into the system, not driven away.** People already feeding stray cats provide an important pathway to sterilisation, identification and ownership. Legislation should enable cat carers (semi-owners) and approved organisations to sterilise and microchip these cats without automatically being classified as breeders or offenders. **Enforcement should be reserved for deliberate or repeated non-compliance after practical assistance has been offered** (Rand et al., 2024b; Cotterell et al., 2025).
- **Targeted prevention has demonstrated measurable results.**
 - In the city of Banyule, Victoria, local government offered a free, targeted sterilisation, microchipping and registration program. Over eight years, it was associated (2013-2021)

with a 66% reduction in cat intake, an 82% reduction in euthanasia and a 36% reduction in cat-related calls. Council saved an estimated \$440,660 from an investment of \$77,490. Additional cost savings were realised by the contracted shelter associated with fewer cat admissions from Banyule, which was estimated to be approximately \$303,490 (Cotterell et al., 2024).

- In the city of Ipswich, Queensland, targeted free sterilisation, microchipping and preventive care were associated by the third year with a 60% reduction in intake, an 85% reduction in euthanasia and 39% fewer cat-related council calls (Rand et al., 2024a).
- In Greater Sydney, New South Wales, a two-year free targeted sterilisation and microchipping program was associated with a 49–73% decline in shelter intake in the three target areas and a 47–64% decline in cat-related complaints in two target areas (Ma et al, 2026).

Breeder approval and traceability

The Act should:

- Retain breeder approval requirements for cats and kittens advertised for sale, that is, associated with intentional, repeated or commercial breeding;
- Clearly define a breeder so that regulatory requirements apply to deliberate breeding activity for sale, rather than a accidental litters where cost is a barrier to sterilisation;
- Require the cat's microchip number and the breeder's approval number to be included in all advertisements of cats and kittens for sale and provided at the point of transfer; and
- Require online sales platforms for cats or kittens intended for sale to include mandatory breeder-approval and microchip-number fields before an advertisement can be published. Advertisements must clearly state if cats are listed for sale or free, and ads such as "enquire within", should be prohibited.
- Random inspections of premises with high-volume of sales to ensure appropriate welfare and socialisation practices.

Breeder Welfare Standards

Approved breeders should be required to meet enforceable minimum standards covering:

- Limits on breeding frequency and the number of litters;
- Appropriate housing and environmental conditions;
- Timely veterinary and preventive health care;
- Accurate breeding, health and transfer records;
- Appropriate kitten handling and socialisation; and
- Transparent records identifying the destination of every cat or kitten transferred.

Breeder approval should be refused, suspended or revoked where there is evidence of animal cruelty, poor welfare, overbreeding, inadequate veterinary care, false or incomplete records, or repeated non-compliance.

Accidental Litters

The Act should create a separate, non-punitive pathway for accidental litters, including kittens advertised as free or give away. Where a person approaches a council or approved organisation, arranges for the kittens to be microchipped, seeks appropriate rehoming assistance and agrees to have the mother cat sterilised (for no cost), the primary response should be practical assistance rather than prosecution.

Breeder approval fees should not apply to accidental litters managed through an approved sterilisation and rehoming pathway or advertised for free or give-away. Such fees may discourage people from sterilising and microchipping kittens, seeking assistance or engaging with councils, undermining opportunities to prevent further litters.

APWF Position

APWF supports strong regulation of intentional and commercial breeding. Poor welfare, overbreeding and untraceable kitten sales should be addressed directly.

However, accidental litters and community carers should not be treated as deliberate breeders. The most effective model is a traceability-based system that:

- Regulates sales and advertising of cats and kittens for sale or intended for sale;
- Strengthens breeder welfare standards;
- Removes barriers for people seeking help for accidental litters and advertising them for free/giveaway
- Supports accidental litter pathways with “last litter sterilisation programs” where the mother cat is sterilised (and microchipped) at low or no cost;
- Distinguishes breeder controls from programs that support disadvantaged cat owners and carers to access free or low-cost sterilisation, microchipping and Community Cat Programs.

Registration of intentional breeders is primarily for welfare reasons and to identify large breeders with poor welfare (kitten farms) and would not be expected to reduce free-roaming cat numbers or numbers of impounded or surrendered cats and kittens because very few are purebred or designer-breed cats.

By excluding accidental litters not being sold, this approach is more likely to reduce unwanted kittens, improve traceability, support councils, and reduce intake and euthanasia than a broad punitive model. APWF recommends that the *Cat Act* establish a clear, proportionate and enforceable framework that regulates deliberate breeding while supporting people to address accidental litters responsibly.

Enforcement

APWF position: Replace the traditional complaint-led enforcement model (“catch and punish”) with an assistance-first, community-based approach that improves compliance while reducing costs

5. Do you have any suggestions to improve cat owners’ compliance and local governments’ enforcement of the Cat Act? If so, what are they?

Yes.

From “catch and punish” to “support and solve”

APWF recommends that traditional methods of compliance and enforcement under the Cat Act be redesigned around an assistance-first, targeted and data-driven compliance model.

The current model relies too heavily on a reactive response to complaints resulting in trapping and impounding nuisance cats, and if an owner can be identified, imposing penalties. This approach is costly, difficult to enforce, and often fails to reach the cats most responsible for intake, breeding and nuisance complaints: unidentified and unsterilised cats in low socioeconomic areas including owned, semi-owned and unowned cats.

Capacity to Comply: the influence of socioeconomic disadvantage

Multiple Australian studies have identified that the **highest numbers of free roaming cats are in the most socio-economically disadvantaged suburbs**. These areas have higher rates of cat-related complaints per capita and higher levels of cat impoundments and humane killing of healthy and treatable cats in shelters, pounds and veterinary clinics with local government contracts.

Recently analyzed data from local government areas in Victoria demonstrate that **differences in the SEIFA Index of Advantage and Disadvantage explains virtually all the differences in cat-related complaints, cat impoundments and euthanasia** across the 79 local government areas (Cotterell, 2026, unpublished data).

Compliance-based approaches target those most unable to comply: low-income residents living in rental properties where cat containment is difficult, if not impossible because of housing limitations. In this demographic many cat owners have passively acquired the cat they are caring for and lack the resources to have it sterilised or construct cat containment enclosures (Ma et al, 2023; 2025; Cotterell et al, 2025; Dutton-Regester et al, 2024; Booth & Otter 2022).

Western Australia already mandates cat registration and sterilisation and is now considering mandatory containment. Evidence from other states indicates that these **compliance-based measures have not reduced free-roaming cat populations, complaints, impoundments or the euthanasia of healthy and treatable cats**. These mandates do not address the principal sources of free-roaming cats in urban areas; therefore, they are also **unlikely to deliver measurable population-level benefits for wildlife**.

However, **evidence-based approaches based on targeted high-intensity sterilisation and support for cat owners and semi-owners, decrease free-roaming cats and therefore risk to wildlife**, and consistently decrease complaints, impoundments and euthanasia. This approach achieves the intended policy objectives that compliance-based measures have failed to deliver.

Legal duties are difficult to enforce when ownership is unclear

Enforcement depends on identifying a legally responsible owner. A free-roaming cat without a microchip or collar cannot reliably be classified as owned, lost, semi-owned or unowned, and behaviour, appearance and body condition are not valid evidence of ownership. As a result, laws designed for identifiable pet owners cannot be effectively applied to semi-owners, informal carers or cats without an identifiable owner (Cotterell et al., 2025b).

This matters because enforcement against “owners” cannot work where no owner can be identified. Enforcement measures designed for identified pet cat owners cannot be effectively applied to semi-owners or caregivers of stray cats (Cotterell et al., 2025b).

Evidence on Cat Sterilisation Laws (See detailed response Page 12, Sterilisation)

Affordability, not willingness, is the primary constraint on sterilisation. Household income is the strongest predictor of whether cats are sterilised, yet such legislative approaches emphasise compulsion rather than access (Chu 2009).

Enforcement is impractical, costly and overlooks that most people want to do the right thing but in disadvantaged households the practicality of prioritizing food, electricity, rent payments and transport is a barrier to compliance.

In states with mandated sterilisation (by 4 or 6 months of age), per-capita cat intakes/1000 residents were higher than states without mandates (Chua et al., 2023).

In a study of 190,000 cats admitted to RSPCA facilities, there were no differences in the proportion of sterilised cats between states with and without mandatory sterilisation (Alberthsen et al., 2016).

Shelter intake increased (per 1000 residents) after ACT introduced mandated sterilisation by 6 months (Cotterell et al., 2025).

Punishing people whose cats have had an accidental litter or because they couldn't afford sterilisation for the cat they are caring for is counterproductive. It breaches community trust, is costly and is ineffective in the long term.

APWF recommends a shift from compliance and punishment of cat sterilisation mandates and accidental litters to targeted, early and barrier-free sterilisation programs, supported by microchipping, transport to veterinary services, community engagement and practical assistance to achieve the desired compliance outcomes.

Evidence on Cat Registration and Microchipping Laws (See detailed response Page 12, registration, microchipping and identification).

The Act should be amended to require microchipping by 4 months of age. Registration adds an unnecessary additional cost, has no to limited additional benefit for reuniting lost cats with owners, and is an added financial barrier to achieving basic good cat caring behaviour (sterilisation, microchipping and meeting the cat's nutritional needs).

Evidence from Victoria shows that 74% pet cats are not registered, and in NSW, cats are sometimes not microchipped to avoid detection by local governments who can cross-check microchip records to identify owners who have not paid registration fees (Cotterell et al, 2025b; Ma et al, 2026).

Fix Identification at Every Contact Point

Improved identification is essential because low reclaim rates increase pressure on shelter staff to rehome cats and increase euthanasia.

- Only 3% of cat admissions to Western Australian pounds and shelters were reclaimed (Chua 2023).
- The reclaim rate for Victoria was 7%, and **some Victorian local governments are achieving 30% or more reclaim rates** (Rand et al, 2018).
- Among stray adult cats entering RSPCA Queensland shelters, only **9% were microchipped**. Of those with a microchip, **37% had problems with the registered details**, and cats with inaccurate or outdated information were less likely to be reclaimed (**33%**) than cats with correct microchip details (**61%**) (Lancaster et al., 2015).

The Cat Act should require consistent microchip scanning and data updating. All councils, pounds, shelters, veterinary clinics, rescue groups and authorised facilities should be required to:

- Scan cats at first contact;
- Scan again before euthanasia, transfer or rehoming;
- Check and update owner contact details on the microchip database before release;
- Ensure every reclaimed, adopted, transferred or community-program cat leaves with current identification details.
- Mandate that microchip databases registering cats from WA be required to send out 3 or 6 monthly SMS and/or email reminders to update owner contact details.

We recommend the following: a. retaining mandatory microchipping but reducing the age to 4 months, b. strengthening scanning and database-update obligations, c. removing registration requirements, d. encouraging, but not mandating physical tags and e. embedding dedicated funding and support for targeted, evidence-based programs into the administration of the Act.

Evidence on Cat Limits Laws

Currently, Western Australia does not have state-based limits on the number of cats allowed to be owned, but most local governments have bylaws restricting the number without a permit, typically to between two and four cats.

We do not recommend that cat limits be introduced at the state government level. **Household cat limits are an arbitrary and poorly targeted management tool.** There is no established evidence that the number of cats kept by a household is, by itself, associated with greater nuisance, public health or welfare risks. A responsible household with several well-cared-for cats may create no impacts, while a single poorly managed cat may generate repeated complaints.

Cat limits and costly excess-animal permits may also discourage residents from formally adopting, sterilising or microchipping stray and semi-owned cats, particularly where they already own companion animals. This can undermine efforts to reduce free-roaming cat populations.

Policy should instead focus on demonstrated impacts. Existing nuisance, public health and animal welfare laws can be applied where cats are causing harm, nuisance complaints or are inadequately cared for. Where multiple cats are present, councils should prioritise assistance, including affordable sterilisation, microchipping and support for caregivers to formalise ownership of cats and adopting kittens and friendly adults, where possible. This approach is more proportionate, practical and likely to achieve sustainable compliance than cat limits.

Evidence on Cat Containment Laws

It is strongly recommended that mandated cat containment is NOT enacted. i. It is a **barrier to reducing the number of free-roaming cats** because it **criminalizes cat ownership for semi-owners** taking ownership of the cats, if they cannot immediately contain the cat; ii. **it is a social justice issue** because **low-income cat owners**, particularly in rental properties, are often unable to secure the cat on the property nor afford the **costs for cat containment systems**; iii. research shows that there are no benefits in reducing cat-related complaints, impoundments or euthanasia; iv. **enforcement is difficult and rarely successful**, because most free roaming cats in urban areas have no identifiable owner, and v. based on contemporary Australian data, most owned cats are being contained.

- **Mandated containment is a social justice issue.** Disadvantaged residents often live in housing which is unsuitable for secure cat containment. Boundary fencing is almost never suitable for containment, and many properties, particularly rental properties, do not have intact screens on windows and often have no air-conditioning or it is unaffordable to use, precluding secure indoor containment.
 - Cat containment systems typically \$700 to more than \$2000.
 - Approximately 20% of households across Western Australia, consisting of an average of 2.4 people, live on less than \$800 a week, with the proportion higher in the most disadvantaged areas.
 - On average, 30.6% of Australians live in rental accommodation but in disadvantaged suburbs of WA, such as Balga, this is as high as 46%. Landlords may not allow property modifications to allow secure containment of a cat.
 - **Enforcement of containment laws can result in disadvantaged cat owners having to surrender their cat.** Many pensioners and older Australians are socially isolated and rely on their cat for companionship, and pet ownership has been shown to improve physical and mental health in Australians.
 - Two Victorian councils recently rescinded motions for 24-h cat curfews (Bayside City Council 2024; Van Oorscot 2024), with the reasons given being related to the impact on disadvantaged residents and tenants. For example, one councillor stated that **“the financial cost burden the policy would have imposed upon residents on low, fixed incomes may have required them to give up their cat, which in many cases may be their only companion. That’s not something I could support, particularly in a cost-of-living crisis”**.
- **Mandated containment is a barrier to reducing the number of free-roaming cats. If semi-owners take ownership of the cats they are feeding and have them sterilised and microchipped,** it would reduce the number of kittens being born to become stray. However, in disadvantaged areas, many cat carers are in housing which is structurally inadequate to contain a cat, which would **result in them immediately breaking the law** if they took ownership of the cat.

- **Mandated containment is rarely enforced, because it is largely unenforceable.**
 - Most free-roaming cats in urban areas have no identifiable owner, which is supported by data showing that return to owner rates of impounded cats is only 3% in WA. Free-roaming cats are most numerous in financially disadvantaged locations and consist mostly of stray cats being fed by people (semi-owners), and some are unidentified and unsterilised, owned cats.
- **Contemporary Australian data show most cat owners who can contain their cats are containing them.**
 - In a NSW study with data collected in 2021-22, 65% of cat owners kept their cat(s) fully contained on their property, either indoors all the time, or with restricted outdoor access using a cat enclosure or on a lead (Ma 2023). A further 24% of cat owners kept their cat(s) indoors during the night, when vulnerable species most susceptible to cat predation, and cats, are most active.
 - In a Queensland study with data from 2022-2025 of 2400 people enrolling a cat in a free-sterilisation program, **66% were contained inside, 22% were contained in the yard or an enclosure and less than 13% could leave the property.** (Rand 2026 unpublished).
- **Even well-intentioned owners may be unable to prevent cats escaping** through doors, windows or garages. Mandated containment should not be assumed to eliminate roaming or prevent cat-related impacts.
 - This is particularly relevant because studies have found that a substantial proportion of lost cats had been kept indoors: **41% of lost cats in one study were described by their owners as indoor-only** but had escaped through an open window, door or garage (Lord 2007)
 - Another study found that among cats missing after having been indoor-only for the previous six months, 22% had escaped at least once before they went missing (Huang 2018).
 - Similarly, a recent Australian study reported that **5% of cats kept contained on the owner's property at all times had accidentally escaped within the previous two weeks** (Rand 2024b).
- **Mandated containment is not beneficial in reducing cat-related complaints or impoundments in the medium or long term.**
- A study examined **all 79 Victorian local government areas** to assess whether cat-containment laws achieved their intended outcomes (Cotterell et al. (2026, unpublished). **Preliminary findings did not show that containment reduced complaints, impoundments or euthanasia.**
 - **Containment laws were widespread.** Of the 79 councils, 70% had introduced containment requirements: 25% required 24-hour containment and 44% imposed night-time curfews.
 - **Socioeconomic disadvantage was the strongest and most consistent predictor of poor outcomes.** Medium- and higher-socioeconomic areas (indicated by SEIFA index) recorded lower cat-related complaints, impoundment and euthanasia rates than more disadvantaged areas, with some additional impact of whether the local government area was a metropolitan or rural city. **There was no additional benefit from cat containment mandates.**
- **In some cases, complaints, impoundments and euthanasia increased and did not decrease in the medium or long-term after implementation.**
 - For example, the Shire of Yarra Ranges mandated a 24/7 cat curfew in 2014; three years later, **cat-related nuisance calls had increased by 143%, cat intake was 68% higher**, and the number of cats euthanised was 18% higher than at baseline (2014), even though the human population had only increased by 2% in that time (Cotterell, 2025b).
 - The city of Casey's council introduced a 24/7 mandatory cat curfew in 1998. However, 20 years later, cat intake was still 680% higher than at baseline, while the human population had only increased by 160% (Cotterell, 2025b).

- **Victorian councils acknowledge that mandating confinement is largely unenforceable**, with minimal income being generated from fines associated with curfew breaches (Hobsons Bay Council 2014; Hume City Council 2018).
- In Akron, Ohio, USA, a city with a population of over 200,000 residents, cat containment measures were introduced together with increased funding for trapping free-roaming cats. Although cat trapping markedly increased, it did not reduce complaint levels. Over two years the **policy contributed substantially to increased costs, shelter overcrowding and greatly increased numbers of cats being euthanised**, as well as public opposition and legal disputes. **The approach was subsequently recognised as ineffective and discontinued** (Huss 2007; Newton 2012, unpublished).
- **Wildlife protection was the main stated rationale for mandated containment.** It was cited by 78% of councils with containment laws, followed by cat welfare (45%) and nuisance reduction (44%).
 - This justification for mandated containment is based on the purported impacts of pet cats on wildlife. These are usually based on the **widely-quoted predation rate that pet cats kill 61 million birds a year** (Woinarski 2017). This is despite this estimate **being based on modelling of outdated and poorly described baseline datasets (only 1 of the 3 were peer-reviewed), and multiplication factors used for the proportion of prey observed by owners which was based solely on data from USA**, mostly of pet cats in **rural areas**, and collected **up to 50 years ago**. A second study reported that **pet cats kill 118 million birds annually** (Legge 2020).
 - In contrast, modelling using contemporary Australian data suggests **these published estimates for birds are 161 to 310 times higher than reality** (Woinarski 2017; Legge 2020, Dutton-Regester 2026, unpublished data). **Contemporary data indicate cat predation of birds is approximately 0.38 million annually** (Dutton-Regester 2026, unpublished data).
 - These published estimates of 61-118 million birds predated annually by pet cats are also **more than double, to as much as 10 times higher, than the estimated number of birds living in urban areas of Australia (11.6 to 25 million)** (Possingham 2022, Luck 2013).
 - The total urban bird population is based on the **average abundance of 9.3 birds to 20 birds per hectare in urban areas of Australia** across all species, with passerines (such as magpies, ravens, miners, wrens, honeyeaters, and swallows) representing over 60% of that total (Possingham 2022, Luck 2013).
 - **The published estimates of pet cat predation are far greater than the estimated annual turnover of birds in urban Australia.**
 - **Of the estimated 11.6 to 25 million birds living in urban areas of Australia**, it is reported that 25% to 50% of the total bird population die annually from a multitude of causes including viral, bacterial and parasitic diseases, trauma, and loss of habitat, **based on average longevity of 2 to 4 years of banded birds** (Department of Environment and Energy, Australian Government 2017).
 - Based on these estimates, it would be expected that **3 to 6 million** (of a total population of 11.6 million birds), or **6 to 12 million birds** (from a population of 25 million birds) **die annually from a variety of causes and are replaced by annual reproduction. This suggests the published estimates of pet cat predation are implausibly high.**
 - Studies of bird mortality from Europe found that **birds killed by cats were significantly less healthy than those killed by other forms of trauma.**
 - A study in the city of Bristol, UK, for example, found fat and pectoral muscle mass were both lower in birds killed by pet cats compared with birds killed through collisions with windows or cars (Baker, 2008).

- Another study that examined dead passerine birds found by members of the public, determined that spleen size was significantly smaller in birds caught by cats than those that died from collisions with windows or cars, which is consistent with lower immunocompetence, given the reported association between spleen size and both humoral and cell-mediated immune responses (Møller 2000).
- The inference is that **cat-killed birds were, on average, in significantly poorer condition than those killed following collisions**, leading the authors to conclude that **predation by cats represents a compensatory rather than an additive form of mortality**.
- Consistent with these findings, **population studies of birds and mammals in Perth found no evidence of a population impact by pet cats**.
 - At 57 sites across **suburban Perth**, **pet-cat density was not significantly associated with passerine bird species density or diversity** (Grayson et al. 2007).
 - **Bird species richness was instead negatively associated with increasing housing density, distance from remnant bushland and decreasing size of the nearby bushland**.
- Similarly, **for small and medium-sized mammals no significant differences in mammal diversity or abundance** were found among remnant bushland sites in Perth that were subject to **three different management methods for approximately 10 years** prior to the study: **strict prohibition of cat ownership; nighttime curfews with a requirement to wear a collar with a bell; and no cat restrictions**(Lilith et al. 2010).
 - Brushtail possums and southern brown bandicoots were the most abundant medium-sized mammals present and occurred at similar levels across the sites.
 - **Total mammals at the unregulated cat sites exceeded those at the two sites with cat restrictions**, but these unregulated sites also had denser vegetation.
 - The smaller **mardo (Antechinus flavipes)**, which the authors regarded as the most **susceptible to cat predation** of all the native species because of its size, was **mostly found at an unregulated cat site**. However, these sites also had denser vegetation, and vegetation density was positively associated with mammal captures
 - This indicates **that vegetation characteristics were more influential than cat restrictions in explaining differences among these sites**.
- Similarly in Melbourne, pet cats were not associated with lower bandicoot numbers in urban areas (Maclagan 2018). In fact, the **abundance of southern brown bandicoots in Melbourne was significantly higher at the sites with greatest level of urbanisation (and cat densities)** and lowest in natural reserves with few cats Maclagan et al. (2018).
- Collectively, these studies indicate that urban wildlife occurrence and abundance reflect interacting influences including **vegetation structure, habitat size and quality, connectivity, surrounding land use and urban landscape management**, as well as predation (Grayson et al., 2007; Lilith et al., 2010; Aronson et al., 2017; Maclagan et al., 2018).
- **Most mammals caught by pet cats (97% to 98%) are introduced rats, mice and rabbits** (Barratt 1997; Franklin 2023).
- It is highly recommended that funding be used to **identify where threatened and endangered species are located in urban areas**. If they are susceptible to cat (or dog) attacks, **protective fencing or other measures should be publicly funded** rather than imposed as a private cost, because **these species are a state (and national) asset**.

No publicly available council or independent scientific evaluation has demonstrated that cat containment improves key outcomes, including cat-related complaints, cat intake, euthanasia or other pound or shelter outcomes.

These findings indicate that containment policies have often been introduced **without clear baseline data, defined performance indicators or formal post-implementation evaluation.**

Importantly, Victorian councils acknowledge that **mandating confinement is unenforceable, with minimal income being generated from fines associated with curfew breaches** (Hobsons Bay Council 2014; Hume City Council 2018).

Mandated containment unfairly targets those least able to comply – disadvantaged cat owners, particularly those living in low-cost rental accommodation - and is a social justice issue.

- **Access to services is more beneficial than legal mandates.** Key factors in the ability to comply include access to affordable veterinary care for sterilisation and microchipping, and housing which allows pets inside and has intact screens on windows and doors. In addition, willingness and financial capacity for local government to support disadvantaged residents, provide microchipping programs and fund programs aimed at achieving high return to owner rates likely play a greater role in determining outcomes.

Policy implications

In summary, these findings have important implications for government policy:

- **Containment laws are a social justice issue for low-income cat owners especially renters** who often live in properties that are unsuitable to contain a cat and containment systems are unaffordable and may not be allowed. Enforcement may result in them giving up their companion impacting their mental and physical health.
- **Containment laws primarily reach identifiable owned cats.** They rely on an owner being located and held responsible, and therefore have limited application to unidentified owned, semi-owned and unowned cats (Cotterell et al., 2025a, 2025b).
- **Containment does not address the main drivers of free-roaming cat populations.** Roaming and reproduction among unidentified and semi-owned cats are closely associated with barriers to affordable sterilisation, microchipping, contained and veterinary care (Zito et al., 2015, 2016; Rand et al., 2024b; McDowall et al., 2024).
- **Containment should not be treated as an effective population-management measure or effective for protecting wildlife.** Based on contemporary data, introducing a curfew will not reduce council complaints, pound intake or euthanasia, and in some cases, has led to an increase in numbers. (Crawford et al., 2023; Cotterell et al., 2025a, 2025b).
- **Mandatory containment requirements place the greatest burden on people with the fewest resources to comply, including disadvantaged cat owners and those in low-cost rental housing. This makes containment not only an animal management issue, but also an equity and social justice concern.**

The Victorian study indicates that cat-management outcomes are shaped by the interaction of **socioeconomic conditions, council resources, service availability and shelter capacity.**

Policy should therefore prioritise practical interventions that prevent roaming, breeding, abandonment and admission to pounds and shelters, rather than expecting additional legal restrictions to have any measurable benefit (Cotterell et al., 2026, unpublished data; Alberthsen et al., 2016; Chua et al., 2023; Rand et al., 2024b; McDowall et al., 2024).

Where threatened or endangered species occur in urban areas, their protection should be treated as a public conservation responsibility, not as a private financial burden for individual residents.

These species are a valuable Western Australian asset, and their protection delivers benefits for the whole community.

- Residents who have threatened species on or near their properties **should therefore not be expected to personally fund costly containment fencing**, exclusion measures or other protective infrastructure.
- In these circumstances, **government should provide appropriate fencing, containment or alternative protective measures at no cost to affected landholders**, particularly where such measures are required or encouraged to achieve broader conservation outcomes.

APWF recommended amendments: make compliance easy

APWF recommends that the Cat Act be amended to establish a **practical, assistance-first compliance framework with key components that:**

- **Support compliance before imposing penalties** by requiring councils to offer practical assistance and support to help residents meet their obligations.
- **Fund targeted support** through free and low-cost sterilisation, microchipping and registration (if retained) in areas with high cat intake and complaint rates.
- **Create amnesty pathways** so owners and semi-owners can bring cats forward for identification, sterilisation and registration (if retained) without immediate fear of penalty.
- **Strengthen identification practices** by requiring standardised microchip scanning at first contact and again before euthanasia, transfer or rehoming.
- **Remove barriers to updating owner contact records** by requiring microchip databases to regularly send email and/or SMS messages to encourage owners to correct outdated contact details linked to the microchip.
- **Abolish cat registration** – it is an added cost barrier for low-income cat owners and semi-owners, has low compliance rates based on data from other states, and administratively is expensive to obtain compliance. Alternatively, if it is retained, provide free or low-cost lifetime registration for sterilised and microchipped cats.
- **Support Animal Management Officers as problem-solvers**, with officer training in community engagement and assistance, provision of resources to support community engagement and provision of practical assistance. This may also include referral where appropriate to other community support services. Enforcement should be only implemented when an assistive approach has failed.
 - An example of assistance with practical information that is highly effective for many owners to achieve night-time containment is advice on **bedtime feeding**.
 - Cats are fed 2 to 3 times a day in portions that can be eaten in about 20 to 30 minutes and uneaten food is removed. The last feed is not given until just before bed and after closing windows and doors. See APWF Position Statement on Cat Containment- [Bedtime feeding of cats is recommended](#).
- **Reserve fines and prosecution** for repeated, deliberate and serious non-compliance after reasonable assistance has been offered.
- **Require annual public reporting** by local governments and shelters to the state government and made publicly available as both collated data at the state level and for each entity, as is occurring in Victoria. Recommended data to be collected include cat intake (including source, age, sterilisation and microchipping status) and outcomes (reclaim, rehomed, transferred, euthanised (and reasons

for euthanasia, for example, disease or injury, behaviour, in excess of rehoming capacity, too young, too old) and other welfare outcomes such as died in care, and number in foster care.

- Require every local government to **develop and publish a Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP), with annual public reporting on progress and outcomes**. This would allow councils and the community to assess whether cat management strategies are producing measurable improvements in animal welfare, staff wellbeing, community outcomes and protecting wildlife.
 - The plan should set out **proactive programs to reduce cat overpopulation**, intake and euthanasia, including initiatives such as accessible sterilisation, microchipping and registration, community education and engagement, and targeted support in areas of greatest need.
 - Councils should report **annually on expenditure and participation in preventive programs**, together with measurable indicators including registration and microchipping rates, complaints, impoundments and owner-surrenders, and outcomes (reclaimed, rehomed, euthanised, deaths in care), and relevant compliance and enforcement activity.
- **Wildlife benefit from fewer free-roaming cats and fewer cats under 1-2 years of age which are more likely to hunt and shed toxoplasmosis oocysts.**

APWF position

APWF supports clear and enforceable cat management laws. However, enforcement must be **practical, humane and supported by evidence of their effectiveness, and only occur after an assistive and supportive approach has failed**.

Legal requirements alone do not ensure compliance. Victoria provides a clear example: although many councils have introduced containment laws, effective enforcement rarely occurs because it is difficult, rarely achievable and consumes resources. Many cats cannot be reliably identified, ownership is difficult to establish, and affordable pathways to compliance are often unavailable. **The problem is not simply unwillingness to comply.**

Summary:

APWF recommends an approach that:

- **removes financial and practical barriers to compliance;**
- **improves identification at every contact point;**
- **supports owners and carers to sterilise and microchip their cats, and where possible, contain them;**
- **funds targeted Community Cat Programs in areas of greatest need;**
- **reserves penalties for repeated and wilful non-compliance; and**
- **requires transparent public reporting of outcomes.**

This assistance-first model is more likely than punitive, complaint-driven enforcement to reduce cat intake, euthanasia, nuisance complaints and local government costs, as well as protect wildlife.

Additional suggestions

APWF position: Administer the Cat Act as a prevention and support framework with clear cat definitions, funded Community Cat Programs, scanning requirements and public reporting.

6. Do you have any additional suggestions to improve the Cat Act or its administration? YES

1. Assistive-first model of cat management

APWF recommends shifting administration of the Cat Act from a primarily punitive, complaint-driven model to one based on **supported compliance, prevention and evidence-based population management**.

Findings from WA and other states demonstrate that cat **legislation does not achieve high compliance**. Compliance more likely to be achieved when it is affordable, accessible and supported by practical assistance, effective identification systems and clear pathways for owners and carers to comply.

2. Cat definitions

Correctly differentiating domestic from feral cats is important for effective management. The current definition of a cat owner in WA Cat Act is conducive for effective management. However, feral cats also need to be very clearly defined.

APWF recommends that the Act adopt definitions consistent with the RSPCA's 2018 Best-Practice Domestic Cat Management framework (RSPCA Australia 2018), distinguishing between **domestic cats and feral cats**.

Domestic cats: cats live in areas where people live or frequent and rely on humans directly or indirectly for food. If a cat is trapped within 1-2 km from human habitation there is a high probability it is domestic. This includes cats in urban and peri-urban areas, around farm buildings, mining sites and indigenous communities.

Feral cats live and reproduce in areas remote from humans and do not depend on humans for food. Their nutritional needs are met by hunting and scavenging. Cats trapped more than 2kms from human habitation have a high probability of being feral. **Because feral cats do not live around where people live or frequent, they are not a source of complaints to local government relating to nuisance behaviours.**

Differentiating domestic from feral cats is critical. Domestic cats living in human environments require management approaches based on One Welfare principles, recognising the interconnectedness of humans and cats. Key management strategies include accessible sterilisation and microchipping, caregiver engagement, reuniting lost cats with their carers, formal adoption of semi-owned cats by carers and community-based interventions to support voluntary compliance.

Feral cats require separate science-based management to protect vulnerable wildlife.

RSPCA subclassifies domestic cats as owned, semi-owned, and unowned cats. However, if a domestic cat is free-roaming and unidentified with a microchip or ID tag, unless there is an accurate history of who is providing care for the cat, distinguishing which subcategory a domestic cat belongs to may not be possible.

Owned cats are cared for by a person who identifies the cat as their property

Semi-owned cats are cats who are intentionally fed or cared for by people who do not consider themselves the legal owner. They are also called stray cats.

Unowned cats are domestic cats living around people and human infrastructure but without an identified owner or regular caregiver. They obtain food inadvertently from people, for example, by scavenging in waste bins. These cats are uncommon because once they frequent an area, a compassionate person may feed them. They are also called stray cats.

Under the current WA Cat Act both owned and semi-owned cats would be considered to have an owner.

We support the current definition of a cat owner under the WA Cat Act, which recognises a person who is “ordinarily keeping and caring for” a cat as its owner. This enables cats to be enrolled in Community Cat Programs for sterilisation, microchipping and registration where an individual, rescue organisation, shelter or community carer has taken responsibility for the cat’s ongoing care, including in the case of semi-owned cats.

WA Cat Act 2011 states:

A cat **Owner**: in relation to a cat, means any of these persons —

- a. in the case of a cat that is registered, the registered owner of the cat; or
- b. in the case of a cat that is not registered, a person who, or an owner of a business or organisation that, ordinarily keeps and cares for the cat; or
- c. if a person referred to in paragraph (b) is a child under 18 years of age, that child’s parent or guardian.

In the case of a cat that is not registered, but is microchipped, a person whose name is recorded as the owner of the cat in a microchip database is to be taken,

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, to be a person who ordinarily keeps and cares for the cat.

The definitions in the Federal Threat Abatement Plan (TAP) for Feral Cats (2025) and definitions and management of urban cats promoted by the WA Feral Cat Working Group (WAFCWG):

1. **Are not workable**: in an urban area an unidentified owned cat cannot be reliably differentiation from an unowned (feral) cat,
2. **Do not protective of wildlife**: they do not reduce numbers of free-roaming cats or increase the proportion of sterilised cats being cared for.
3. **Are not aligned with One Welfare**: they do not support strategies shown to reduce numbers of free-roaming cats. Instead, they result in veterinary teams being tasked with humanely killing large numbers of unwanted kittens and cats which negatively impacts their job satisfaction and their wellbeing.

The TAP and WAFCWG definitions fail to recognize that free-roaming and unsterilised cats is a socioeconomic issue.

TAP and WAFCWG definitions:

Feral cats: cats that are not formally owned by people. Typically, they survive by hunting or scavenging for themselves and live in diverse habitats. Most feral cats live in natural environments and have no or few interactions with people. **A subset of feral cats is found in and around cities, towns and rural properties; these cats may rely on resources that are indirectly (e.g. rubbish tips or abundant rodent populations), or deliberately and periodically, provided by people (e.g. placing food out for cats). These cats are sometimes called ‘stray cats’.**

Pet cats: cats owned by a person or people and their needs (food, shelter, veterinary care) may be wholly supplied by their owners. Some pet cats are contained indoors, but others roam.

Definitions that classify every cat without a formally identifiable owner as feral are problematic for both animal management and enforcement because ownership cannot be reliably determined from a cat’s appearance, behaviour or identification status at a single point in time.

Owned and unowned cats may both lack collars, registration or microchips; appear unkempt, underweight, ill or parasitised, be unsterilised, or display fearful and defensive behaviour when trapped, transported or approached by unfamiliar people.

Conversely, cats without a formally recognised owner may be regularly fed, sheltered and monitored by one or more residents and remain substantially dependent on people.

A clearer and more enforceable approach would distinguish cats according to their ecological relationship with people: domestic cats live within or near human settlements and depend directly or indirectly on human-associated food and resources, whereas genuinely feral cats live and reproduce independently of people in remote or wild environments. Behaviour, appearance and body condition are not reliable indicators of ownership (Slater et al. 2010; Slater et al. 2013).

The misuse of the label feral for timid and shy cats in urban settings obscures the reality that most of these cats are regularly fed by carers who frequently form strong bonds with them (Neal & Wolf 2023; Scotney et al., 2023). It is our recommendation that cats be classified as either domestic or feral according to the RSPCA definitions.

Importantly, using these definitions means **identification and social behaviour towards humans is not a valid distinguisher between domestic and feral cats** and the **primary distinguisher should be location. Behaviour towards unfamiliar people should never be used to differentiate between domestic and feral cats.**

Summary of cat definitions

Feral and domestic cats require different management responses to effectively decrease numbers and the associated issues. A cat living near people, being fed by residents or relying on human-associated food sources should not be classified as feral simply because it lacks a microchip or collar or based on behaviour in an unfamiliar environment with unfamiliar people.

3. Measure what matters

The Cat Act should require transparent annual public reporting by local governments and animal welfare agencies, with both individual and collated data made publicly available on a government website.

At a minimum, all local governments and shelters should report:

- Cat intake numbers (and for local governments, rates per 1,000 residents), including source of admission (e.g. impounded, stray presented by a member of the public, owner surrendered);
- Key characteristics of incoming cats, including age, sterilisation and microchipping status; and
- Outcomes, reported as both numbers and proportions of intake, including reclaimed, rehomed, transferred, died in care, escaped and euthanised, with reasons for euthanasia.

Local governments should separately report in their Domestic Animal Management Plans on preventive cat management programs, including:

- Sterilisation, microchipping and other support delivered;
- Community education and engagement activities;
- Program expenditure and participation; and
- Measurable changes in indicators such as cat intake, euthanasia, complaints and registrations, where applicable.

Compliance and enforcement activity should also be reported separately, including:

- Notices issued;
- Infringements issued; and
- Prosecutions.

Where possible, councils should also report the costs and savings associated with changes in cat intake, complaints and other animal management activity.

Without these data, governments cannot determine whether cat management approaches are reducing nuisance, overpopulation and euthanasia, improving animal welfare, or simply shifting costs to councils, shelters and residents. Nor can they assess the effectiveness and cost-efficiency of preventive programs compared with enforcement-based approaches or whether wildlife are being protected.

Successful initiatives from other jurisdictions

APWF position: Adopt targeted, adequately funded Community Cat Programs modelled on Victoria, NSW and Queensland, supported by local government, veterinary and welfare partnerships.

Are there initiatives in other jurisdictions that have been successful in cat management that could be considered in WA?

1. Community Cat Programs

High-intensity and targeted sterilisation is the cornerstone of Community Cat Programs, but they are most effective when other supportive measures are incorporated. Key components are the following:

1. **Sterilisation: High-intensity and targeted sterilisation** to areas with highest cat and kitten intake or cat-related calls to municipal authorities.
 - i. Prioritise sterilising **owned** cats with outdoor access to prevent unwanted litters that might contribute to stray populations or be relinquished to shelters.
 - ii. Assist cat caregivers (**semi-owners**) to get their cats sterilised, microchipped, and cared for.
 - iii. Where feasible, encourage caregivers (semi-owners) to take formal ownership, especially when only 1 to 3 cats are being cared for.
 - iv. **Multi-cat** (colony) sites are managed through high intensity sterilisation, microchipping (to carer, organization or business), and provision of cat food that meets their nutritional requirements. Early sterilisation and microchipping of any immigrant cats is vital.
 - v. **Adoptable kittens are rehomed** after sterilisation and microchipping through rescue groups or by the carer. Similarly, after sterilisation, sociable adults can also be rehomed.
 - vi. **Unowned** domestic cats scavenging for food should be sterilised and microchipped and a carer identified to provide daily.
2. **Retention:** Assisting and supporting cat owners and carers to care for their cats. This includes pet retention programs (Pets for Life) to keep cats with their owners and carers (Humane World for Animals 2026).
3. **Supportive resolution of complaints:** An assistive and supportive approach first from animal management rather than a default enforcement and punishment response to nuisance cat complaints. This prioritises resolving cat-related nuisance issues through mediation and practical support.
4. **Protecting human and animal lives** through **Working Cat Programs** for healthy, unadoptable cats that are rehomed to factories, businesses, wineries, horse properties and farms provided they are sterilised, microchipped to an owner or business, and are fed adequately to provide their nutritional needs.
 - o Also legislate that a cat can be returned to its home location if, a. the location where it was found is known, b. threatened and endangered wildlife are not in the vicinity, c. the cat has not been reclaimed, d. it is healthy but unadoptable, and e. euthanasia is the only other option.
 - o This is called **Return to field (RTF)** and is based on the premise that if the cat is healthy, someone is caring for it. **RTF has huge benefits for job satisfaction and mental wellbeing of staff** who have been caring for a cat and attempting to socialize it sufficiently for adoption. Without RTF, cats that cannot be socialised and adopted in the time available are humanely

euthanized. After staff have invested, often days or weeks in developing trust with the cat, only for it to be deemed not readily adoptable, it is very damaging for their mental health, and even more so, if they are requested to assist in its humane killing.

By decreasing free roaming cat numbers, it helps to protect wildlife. Importantly sterilising and feeding cats adequately to meet their nutritional needs has by isotope testing of hair samples, shown their diet changes from being prey-based to one compatible with indoor cats (Martinoia et al, 2025)

To be most effective at reducing shelter intake, CCPs should be implemented in urban and peri-urban locations with disproportionately high cat impoundments, kitten admissions and/or cat-related complaints (Spehar & Wolf 2019; Levy et al. 2014; Cotterell et al. 2024; Rand et al. 2024a). This typically occurs in socioeconomically disadvantaged suburbs where the cost of sterilisation is often unaffordable (Ly 2021).

Programs should first identify priority suburbs using intake, complaint rates per 1,000 residents and/or unwanted litters of kittens, then micro-target individual streets and multi-cat sites.

- Indicative evidence suggests that broadly targeted programs may need to sterilise approximately **30 cats per 1,000 residents annually to produce substantial results within three to four years** (Rand et al. 2024).
- In contrast, programs **microtargeted to sites that cats are most likely to be impounded from or litters of kittens surrendered, can be effective when 5-10 cats/1000 residents are sterilised**. The higher the sterilisation rate, the quicker complaints, impoundments and euthanasia decreases.

Evaluation of program effectiveness should compare a baseline period with annual and three-to-five-year and 10 year results. Reporting both absolute numbers and per-capita rates is essential to account for population growth and differences between local government areas. Core measures should include:

- Cats sterilised and microchipped per 1,000 residents each year;
- Total cat and kitten admissions, expressed as numbers and rates per 1,000 residents;
- Numbers and percentages reclaimed, rehomed, and euthanised;
- Cat-related complaints per 1,000

Other useful metrics to guide optimisation of return on investment from supportive programs include:

- Repeat complaint locations;
- Program expenditure compared with impoundment, sheltering and euthanasia costs;
- If possible, changes in free-roaming cat detections or estimated abundance using walking or driving transects or using camera traps;
- Participation, return to owner rates, adoption, pet-retention and caregiver-engagement outcomes; and
- Staff wellbeing and exposure to euthanasia of healthy and treatable animals.

Western Australia should adopt targeted, low-barrier Community Cat Programs that have demonstrated reductions in cat intake, euthanasia, complaints and numbers of free-roaming cats in other Australian jurisdictions.

Unlike compliance-based approaches, Community Cat Programs focus on **addressing the underlying drivers of free-roaming cat populations through intensive, targeted sterilisation, accessible services**, caregiver participation, and practical assistance rather than enforcement. **In target locations, access should not be restricted by barriers such as pension or health-care card requirements or limits on the number of cats assisted per household.**

- Effective implementation relies on **data-informed targeting**, adequate program intensity and duration, collaboration with veterinary providers, and minimising barriers that prevent community participation.

- Well-designed programs have consistently reduced shelter intake, euthanasia, and nuisance complaints while improving outcomes for animals, communities, and those working in animal management, as well as veterinary teams in shelters, pounds and veterinary practices with council contracts.
- **These programs more effectively protect wildlife than the traditional, *status quo* programs that trap nuisance cats.** This is because insufficient numbers (5%–10% per year) are trapped to result in a sustainable decrease in numbers of free-roaming cats overtime. To trap and remove effective numbers of cats is too costly for local governments and is not acceptable to the community (30% to 50% of the population needs to be removed every 6 months, Miller et al., 2014). However, non-lethal programs typically attract funding from welfare agencies and assistance from the community, so sufficient numbers are sterilized to decrease the number of free-roaming cats over time, decrease the proportion of younger cats that are the most prolific hunters and reduce disease risk to wildlife.

Evidence from Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia indicates that this assistance-first approach is more effective than relying on the decades-old approach of trapping, impoundment and punitive enforcement.

2. Evidence from Australian Programs

City of Banyule, Victoria

Banyule City Council funded a free sterilisation, microchipping and registration program targeting socioeconomically disadvantaged suburbs and areas with high complaint rates (2013-2021).

Over eight years:

- **cat intake decreased by 66%;**
- **euthanasia decreased by 82%;**
- **cat-related calls decreased by 36% city-wide and 51% in targeted areas;** and
- **estimated council savings were \$440,660**, compared with program costs of \$77,490. (Cotterell et al., 2024). Additional cost savings to the contracted shelter associated with fewer cats entering from Banyule was estimated to be approximately **\$303,490**

This program demonstrates that targeted preventive investment can deliver substantial animal welfare, community and financial benefits.

City of Ipswich, Queensland

The Australian Pet Welfare Foundation's Community Cat Program in the city of Ipswich provided free sterilisation, microchipping and preventive veterinary care for owned and semi-owned

The initial pilot was implemented in a rural town of 3,000 residents with high cat impoundments (over 20 cats/1000 residents compared to 7 cats/1000 residents for Queensland). It incorporated a targeted but not microtargeted approach and sterilised 28 cats per 1,000 residents per year over 3.4 years (total of 308 cats). Outcomes were the following:

- **cat intake decreased by 60%;**
- **euthanasia decreased by 85%;** and
- **cat-related council calls decreased by 39%** (Rand et al., 2024a).
- **free-roaming cats** decreased by **33%** in 4 years as measured by motion-detecting cameras

Over 5000 cats have been now sterilised in the city of Ipswich in collaboration with the RSPCA Qld and AWLQ. The program shows that removing financial barriers and actively engaging residents can prevent breeding, improve identification and reduce demand on council services.

StrayCare Metro, New South Wales

The Keeping Cats Safe at Home program operated by RSPCA NSW provided free, accessible sterilisation for free-roaming and community cats through partnerships between councils, rescue groups, animal welfare organisations and local veterinarians. A grant of **\$2.5 million** in 2021 was provided by the NSW Environmental Trust, which is administered by the Department of Climate Change, Energy, Environment and Water to RSPCA who partnered with councils to deliver sterilisation and education through the Keeping Cats Safe at Home program.

The initial program sterilised **1,225 cats** and following implementation:

- council pound intake decreased by an average of **61% across four participating local government areas**;
- **euthanasia** decreased an **average of 75%**;
- **cat-related complaints decreased 47–64%** in three of the four council areas
- **decreased free roaming cat numbers by 35% - 51% based on transects counting (Ma et al., 2026).**

These findings demonstrate that practical assistance and trusted community engagement can reach cats and caregivers who may not engage with conventional compliance-based approaches.

Note additional funding (**\$6 million in 2025**) was provided by the New South Wales state government to **expand this to 30 councils and over 9,000 cats have been sterilised in just one year**. Similar outcomes have been achieved across these council areas. Additional grants for sterilisation programs were awarded, for example, \$1.5 million to the NSW Cat Protection Society, to deliver a two-year sterilisation program in targeted local government areas.

City of Salisbury, South Australia

The City of Salisbury's targeted community cat program is delivered in partnership with the Cat Adoption Foundation and a local veterinary group. The program has sterilised approximately **800 owned and semi-owned cats within the community**.

Around **45% of participating cats have been rehomed directly by the Cat Adoption Foundation without entering the council pound**. The Cat Adoption Foundation is a volunteer-run foster-care network that rescues, rehabilitates and rehomes cats and kittens.

Sites are identified through council data and community complaints, enabling sterilisation and rehoming resources to be directed to areas of greatest need. These early operational outcomes demonstrate the potential of a collaborative, site-based model to:

- prevent further breeding;
- assist residents and cat carers (semi-owners);
- divert cats from municipal impoundment;
- support safe rehoming; and
- reduce pressure on councils, pounds and rescue organisations.

3. Reporting and Evaluation

Reporting and transparency are critical to improving outcomes and are essential for measuring impact of any legislation or by-law, and determining if there is a cost-benefit. **Victoria has two reporting systems, which provide a template for Western Australia.** This would improve transparency and allow both councils and the community to assess whether cat management strategies are reducing overpopulation, nuisance, pound intake and euthanasia over time.

Firstly, **under Victoria's *Domestic Animals Act 1994*, each local government must prepare a Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP)** setting out its animal management programs, services and strategies, how these will be evaluated, and the training provided to authorised officers. The plan must be reviewed annually, with an evaluation of its implementation published in the council's annual report.

For **cats**, the DAMP must include programs, services and strategies to:

- promote and encourage responsible cat ownership;
- address **cat overpopulation and high euthanasia rates**;
- encourage the **registration and identification** of cats;
- minimise the **potential for cats to create a nuisance**;
- support compliance with the Act, regulations and related legislation;
- review relevant local laws and orders applying to cat management; and
- periodically evaluate the effectiveness of the programs and strategies included in the plan.

For **authorised officers**, the DAMP must:

- outline the council's **training programs for authorised officers**; and
- ensure that officers are capable of properly administering and enforcing the *Domestic Animals Act 1994* within the municipality.

Secondly, **Victoria is the first state to require annual reporting from all local governments and shelters, and this is publicly provided as state-level data and data for individual entities.** The data are available on Animal Welfare Victoria government website. Categories required include intake numbers and outcomes (reclaimed, rehomed, transferred, euthanised), as well as reasons for euthanasia. Cat and dog statistics must be reported separately (Agriculture Victoria 2026).

It is highly recommended that Western Australia adopt and strengthen these requirements. In addition to the Victorian approach, WA should require more detailed and standardised annual reporting, including the characteristics of incoming cats, such as source of admission (owner surrender, stray presented by a member of the public, or impounded by a council officer), age, microchip status and sterilisation status.

Councils should also report expenditure, community engagement activities, registration and microchipping rates, complaints, impoundments, outcomes and compliance activity so that the effectiveness and cost of different cat management approaches can be assessed over time.

APWF recommendations

APWF recommends that Western Australia adopt:

- **Targeted Community Cat Programs** modelled on successful initiatives in Victoria, Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia.
- **Free and affordable subsidised sterilisation and microchipping** in areas with high cat intake, kitten admissions, complaints and socioeconomic disadvantage.
- **Low-barrier eligibility**, with no pension-card requirement or arbitrary limit on the number of cats assisted per household.

- **Council, veterinary, animal welfare and rescue group partnerships** to deliver accessible and coordinated services.
- **Amnesty-based compliance pathways** so owners and carers (semi-owners) can seek assistance without immediate risk of penalty.
- **Council-supported rehoming pathways** for kittens and socialised adult cats identified through community programs, for example, on council websites and community social media sites.
- **Consistent annual reporting** of complaints, intake, reclaim, rehoming and euthanasia by the state government for both state-level data and individual entity data. Data for each local government should be included in their Domestic Animal Management plans which should also include programs, costs, outcomes and savings and available on their website with annual updates.
- **A One Welfare approach** recognising the interconnected effects of cat management on animal welfare, human wellbeing, community, veterinary teams, local government resources and environmental outcomes.

APWF position: The most successful initiatives are not those that increase legal obligations. They are programs that make compliance achievable and directly reduce the number of unsterilised, unidentified cats in the community. WA should adopt a targeted, adequately funded Community Cat Program model as a core part of the Cat Act administration.

Questions are welcome.

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