

21 April 2025

Submission to Hobsons Bay Council- Domestic Animal Management Plan 2025-2029

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

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

Evaluation of animal control services provided by the Council

While domestic animal management services appear to be operating at an adequate level, there is an opportunity to enhance transparency and community engagement by publishing more detailed and regularly updated statistics. Information on complaint types, such as barking, roaming, or aggressive behaviour, as well as intake numbers and outcomes for impounded animals, would offer valuable insights into emerging trends and areas for improvement. Making this data publicly available not only builds trust with the community but also helps guide evidence-based planning and policy development, ensuring services continue to meet the needs of both residents and animals.

Training of authorised officers

The Animal Management Unit demonstrates a strong commitment to community service, operating seven days a week from 8am to 7pm, with two dedicated Animal

Management Officers available during these hours. This consistent availability ensures residents can access support when needed, including weekends, a key factor in community confidence and rapid incident response.

The use of strategic rostering is another notable strength, helping to maintain consistent service delivery aligned with community expectations. The unit's recognition of the need for additional resources during peak periods, such as summer daylight savings, shows proactive planning and responsiveness to seasonal demands.

This emphasis on **training and professionalisation** enhances the unit's capacity to respond effectively, ethically, and in line with best practice. Overall, the Animal Management Unit's operating hours, structured staffing, breadth of responsibilities, and robust training program position it as a valuable asset in supporting public safety and promoting animal welfare in the community.

While the Animal Management Unit demonstrates strong commitment through daily service from 8am to 7pm and a broad scope of responsibilities, several challenges may limit its effectiveness. The unit operates with just 2.5 Animal Management Officers, which may be insufficient to cover a full week of services, particularly during peak periods or when staff are on leave. Although after-hours emergencies are listed as a responsibility, it is unclear how these are managed outside of standard operating hours. This lack of clarity, combined with acknowledged resourcing constraints during summer months, suggests that the unit may already be operating at or near capacity. The shared structure with Parking and Local Laws Officers may also dilute specialist focus on animal-specific issues, such as complex welfare cases or aggressive dog incidents.

Additionally, while the unit invests in professional development, some important training areas, such as interview and statement-taking and restricted breed identification, remain incomplete for several staff members. This could limit the unit's capacity to enforce legislation or investigate incidents effectively. Furthermore, although community education is a stated responsibility, there is no data provided on outreach outcomes or the effectiveness of public engagement strategies. Addressing these gaps, through increased staffing, full training coverage, and clearer performance indicators, would strengthen the unit's ability to meet growing community expectations and enhance animal welfare outcomes.

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

The 2021–2025 plan by Hobsons Bay City Council outlines a comprehensive approach to reducing the risk of dog attacks on people and animals in line with legislative requirements. Animal Management Officers (AMOs) are tasked with investigating all reported dog attacks, often involving complex and time-consuming procedures requiring the cooperation of multiple parties. The council's immediate focus is community safety between 2016–17 and 2020–21,

there was a 38% increase in reported dog attacks (from 79 to 109), attributed to both a growing dog population and increased use of public spaces during lockdowns.

However, there are limitations in the current approach. Enforcement is primarily reactive, often occurring only after an attack or complaint, with limited mention of preventative or educational interventions, especially for dogs found repeatedly wandering at large. While owners involved in serious incidents are advised of outcomes and legal implications, there is

little evidence of structured conversations with dog owners aimed at preventing future incidents through improved containment, training, or behaviour management.

More could be done to promote early socialisation, obedience training, and responsible pet behaviour across the broader community. Furthermore, given that many attacks are linked to dogs not under effective control or inadequately confined, a stronger emphasis on proactive engagement in hotspot areas, as well as early intervention with at-risk owners, could help prevent attacks before they happen.

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

Congratulations to Hobsons Bay City Council on the outstanding progress made in humane cat management over the 2017–2021 period to current. Your commitment to practical, community-driven strategies, especially the expansion of trap loan programs, subsidised desexing initiatives, and the development of the kitten diversion program, has delivered impressive results. A 54% reduction in cat euthanasia and a 321% increase in kitten rehoming are not only remarkable achievements but a testament to the power of prevention, care, and community collaboration. The program's ability to save lives while also delivering over \$45,000 in cost savings in a single year highlights its value from both a welfare and economic perspective.

The strong local support and clear planning for future program expansion are commendable. It's clear Hobsons Bay is leading the way with a compassionate, evidence-based approach to animal management. With 72% of registered cats now desexed and a well-functioning return-to-owner program for dogs, the council is setting a high standard for municipalities across Australia. Well done on creating a safer, more humane future for both animals and the people who care for them.

The focus on rehoming, fostering partnerships with local rescues, and supporting foster carers ensures that kittens are given the best chance at finding loving homes. Expanding the capacity of this program, along with public support campaigns and targeted discounted or free desexing events, reflects a multi-faceted strategy to manage the kitten population more humanely and sustainably.

However, while rehoming remains an essential response to the immediate need, long-term success in reducing kitten numbers hinges on addressing the root cause, uncontrolled breeding. It is promising to see that the Council is also working to prevent unwanted litters by offering discount desexing vouchers, hosting subsidised desexing events, and encouraging registration of desexed pets. These initiatives need to be further scaled and targeted, particularly in areas identified as having high numbers of stray or semi-owned cats or where hoarding may be an issue. Assist and support campaigns that clearly communicate the importance of early-age desexing, coupled with proactive community outreach-style programs, will be critical in reducing the number of kittens being born in the first place, ultimately lowering the need for rehoming services and contributing to lasting population management success.

Subsidised desexing programs, while helpful, often primarily attract pet owners who were already planning to desex their animals, acting more as a cost-saving substitution rather than shifting behaviour. These programs tend to reach those who are proactive about pet care but are simply seeking a more affordable option. In contrast, free desexing programs combined with targeted community outreach have proven far more effective at reaching individuals who would not otherwise desex their pets at all. By removing financial and logistical barriers and engaging directly with communities, particularly in disadvantaged areas, these initiatives capture a harder-to-reach group, including owners of semi-owned or unowned animals. This approach results in a much greater overall impact on reducing unwanted litters and managing free-roaming cat populations, which reduce intake.

Community Cat Programs play a vital role in humane, effective urban cat management by focusing on the real source of cat-related issues, domestic cats that are owned, semi-owned, or unowned, rather than truly feral animals. Best practice recognises that nearly all cats found in urban areas fall within the Domestic category, even if they are frightened or unsocialised when impounded. Misclassifying these cats as "feral" risks unnecessary euthanasia and undermines the potential for rehabilitation, fostering, and rehoming. By accurately identifying cats and directing targeted desexing and outreach efforts, particularly in areas with high complaint rates or economic disadvantage, Community Cat Programs can dramatically reduce shelter intake, euthanasia, and nuisance complaints. Evidence from successful initiatives like Banyule, RSPCA NSW, and APWF microtargeted program shows that with the right approach, councils can achieve substantial welfare gains and cost savings without resorting to enforcement or containment laws.

Definitions of Cats

The APWF supports the use of clear and evidence-based definitions for cats, as outlined in the RSPCA Australia's 2018 report *"Identifying best practice domestic cat management in Australia."* These definitions categorise cats as either:

- **Domestic** (owned, semi-owned, or unowned)
 - **owned**, live in a domestic household, are usually named, have a form of identification, and depend on humans for their food.
 - **semi-owned**, are directly dependent on humans and are intentionally fed by people who do not consider they own them. These cats are more abundant in disadvantaged areas and where food resources are available. They are sometimes called stray cats. Recent research documented strong emotional bonds of semi-owners with the cats they care for, and almost identical to the bonds reported by cat owners with their pet cats. These cats are also frequently named:
 - **unowned**, are indirectly dependent on humans and receive food from people unintentionally, such as via food waste bins. They are more abundant in areas where food resources are available. These cats are of varying sociability and are sometimes called stray cats.
- **Feral**. Under these definitions, feral cats are entirely unconnected to humans, living and reproducing in remote environments such as forests, grasslands, or bushland, without receiving any intentional or unintentional food from people. In contrast, all cats encountered in urban environments, including those picked up by Hobson’s Bay animal management team or brought to shelters, within the Domestic category.

It is important to note that the use of the term “**feral**” in council impound records or as a justification for euthanasia is misleading and inconsistent with best practice. True feral cats, by definition, are not found in urban areas and are not the subject of community complaints or shelter impoundments. This approach aligns with current practices at RSPCA Australia, which has removed the use of “feral” from their intake and euthanasia categories in recognition of the fact that shelters and councils generally do not encounter true feral cats (RSPCA Australia Report 2018). Instead, cases previously categorised as feral are now classified under “behaviour,” acknowledging that many cats react defensively when stressed and confined, even if they are not truly unsocialised.

For Hobson’s Bay Council, failing to adopt and apply these accurate definitions could hinder the success of proactive animal management strategies. Mislabelling frightened or stressed cats as feral can lead to unnecessary and premature euthanasia, undermining efforts to reduce euthanasia rates and build trust with the community. It can also obscure the real source of impoundments, which are semi-owned or unowned domestic cats. These are the very populations that should be included in proactive targeted desexing and community outreach programs. Recognising all impounded cats as Domestic (whether owned, semi-owned, or unowned) allows for more humane, targeted, and effective interventions such as fostering, rehabilitation, or inclusion in Community Cat Programs.

Community Cat Programs

The APWF strongly supports the expansion of microtargeted desexing programs like the one implemented in the city of Banyule (Cotterell et al., 2024). This evidence-based initiative demonstrates that meaningful reductions in cat impoundments, euthanasia, and nuisance complaints can be achieved without introducing additional containment laws.

Banyule's program (Cotterell 2024, Cotterell 2025) was targeted at disadvantaged suburbs with high cat-related complaints and impoundments, and microtargeted within those areas to hotspot streets and properties. Over eight years, 33 cats per 1,000 residents were desexed in target suburbs, reducing cat impoundments city-wide by 66%, euthanasia by 82%, and cat-related calls by 36%. Notably, this was achieved without any additional containment mandates.

Crucially, this program was also cost-effective. For a modest investment of \$77,490, Banyule Council saved \$440,660—including \$137,170 from reduced cat-related calls and \$303,490 in lower shelter costs. This clearly shows that investment in proactive desexing, rather than enforcement, delivers significant returns while improving animal and community welfare.

For success, these programs must be of adequate intensity—ideally desexing 30 cats per 1,000 residents in problem suburbs, or 10 per 1,000 if supported by intensive microtargeting. They must also be tailored to the specific needs of each area, especially where economic or housing barriers prevent compliance with containment. Building strong partnerships with local vets and welfare agencies is essential to expand access to free or low-cost desexing. Where local capacity is limited, councils should support high-volume desexing clinics and mobile vet services or fund transportation to clinics. For many low-income residents, especially those caring for multiple cats, even low-cost options remain unaffordable, and subsidised services are critical.

Programs must remove barriers such as requiring concession cards, as many in need fall outside eligibility. Vouchers alone are often ineffective if no affordable vet care is available. Importantly, untargeted desexing campaigns may offer discounts to people who would have desexed their pets anyway, reducing overall impact. To maximise effectiveness, programs should prioritise microtargeting based on council data and include positive, assistive engagement by AMOs. Community Cat Programs prove that smart, community-driven desexing can transform outcomes, reducing costs, euthanasia, and complaints without the need for punitive laws.

To encourage the registration and identification of dogs and cats

Hobsons Bay Council has made strong progress in animal registration and community engagement, with dog registrations increasing from 9,050 to 11,154 and cat registrations from 3,387 to 4,257 reported previously. The registration system enables quicker reunification of lost pets with their owners, improving welfare outcomes and reducing shelter pressure. This council employs a multi-channel approach to promote registration awareness, including SMS reminders, social media, school outreach, and door-knocking campaigns. Clear operational objectives, such as increasing registration and return-to-owner rates, are supported by a robust framework of ongoing activities, and staff are equipped with mobile access to registration databases to enhance field efficiency.

It's fantastic to see that pet registration is now available online, well done on making this accessible and convenient for most residents. However, some challenges remain. Cat registration continues to lag behind that of dogs, which may point to a gap in public awareness or the need for stronger enforcement. One practical solution could be offering a heavily discounted cat registration fee, perhaps as low as \$5, to help cover basic costs to Animal Welfare Victoria while removing financial barriers for residents for anyone participating in a subsidised desexing scheme. This small fee could encourage greater compliance without placing undue burden on pet owners, especially in lower-income areas, and would support better tracking of cat populations across the municipality.

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

The Hobsons Bay Community Local Law 2015 establishes clear expectations for pet ownership, including limits on the number of cats and dogs per property, leash requirements, noise control, dog litter responsibilities, and seasonal regulations for beach access. These laws are complemented by well-structured objectives and ongoing activities aimed at reducing nuisance complaints, promoting responsible pet ownership, and ensuring compliance with both local laws and the Domestic Animals Act 1994. Positive initiatives include educational campaigns through social media, collaboration with conservation teams, targeted summer patrols on beaches, and practical support like desexing events with local vets.

Encouraging dispute resolution through the Dispute Settlement Centre Victoria (DSCV) also reflects a thoughtful approach to community-based conflict management. However, some challenges persist. Strict pet ownership limits, particularly the restriction of one pet for flats or units, may not reflect the needs of responsible pet owners living in higher-density housing and could be seen as overly restrictive. While many activities are ongoing, the effectiveness of these strategies relies heavily on community engagement, and there is limited detail on measurable outcomes beyond a general aim to reduce complaints.

To effectively identify all dangerous dogs, menacing dogs and restricted breed dogs in that district and to ensure that those dogs are kept in compliance with this Act and the regulations

Hobsons Bay Council has implemented a structured and responsive approach to managing dangerous, menacing, and restricted breed dogs, as required under Section 68A(2)(c)(vii) of the Domestic Animals Act. All reports of such dogs are followed up promptly, with **annual inspections** conducted for all declared dogs to ensure continued compliance with legislation. However, there are some limitations to this approach. Breed identification, even with training, can be **subjective and controversial**, particularly when dealing with crossbreeds or dogs of mixed appearance. This may lead to disputes or community distrust in some cases. Furthermore, while the current strategy is effective in managing declared dogs already in the system, there is limited mention of **community education or prevention-focused strategies** to reduce dog aggression or encourage early behavioural interventions. A more balanced approach that includes education on responsible dog handling and behaviour, in addition to enforcement, may help reduce the number of dogs being declared as dangerous or menacing in the first place.

Domestic Animal Businesses

Hobsons Bay City Council effectively meets its legislative obligations in regulating Domestic Animal Businesses (DABs) by maintaining a clear and proactive compliance framework. All DABs are required to register and renew their registration annually each April, alongside general pet registrations. The Council ensures compliance through regular audits conducted by authorised officers, verifying adherence to the relevant codes of practice, the Domestic Animals Act, and the Community Local Law 2015. For new applications, the process includes consultation with Town Planning to assess site suitability, followed by a full inspection before a permit to trade is issued. Council's collaborative approach supports DABs in maintaining standards, offering guidance to rectify minor issues while taking enforcement action in response to serious breaches. This structured, transparent process reflects the Council's strong commitment to upholding animal welfare and public confidence in the operation of local animal-related businesses.

Other matters

Hobsons Bay City Council recognises the importance of reviewing and continuously improving all aspects of domestic animal management, including its pound arrangements, in line with the Act. Currently, all stray or wandering animals that are not able to be returned directly to their owners or rehomed through proactive programs, such as the highly successful kitten diversion program, are impounded at The Lost Dogs' Home in North Melbourne. While this arrangement may have served the municipality, the associated costs are significant and represent a large portion of the animal management unit's budget. Additionally, the use of an external contractor introduces ongoing risks related to cost fluctuation and long-term service reliability.



Acknowledging these challenges, the Council seems committed to exploring and implementing future proactive strategies aimed at keeping both dogs and cats out of the pound system altogether. This includes expanding initiatives that promote early intervention, such as return-to-owner programs, subsidised or free desexing, and proactive and supportive changes on responsible pet ownership. By investing in community-based support systems and continuing to strengthen local partnerships, Hobsons Bay is positioning itself to reduce reliance on pound services, minimise stress on animals, and further enhance both financial sustainability and animal welfare outcomes across the municipality.

Well done again to Hobsons Bay City Council, for your exceptional achievements in humane cat management reported in the 2021-2025 DAMP. The outcomes you've delivered, from a 54% drop in cat euthanasia to a 321% increase in kitten rehoming, are truly impressive and reflect your genuine commitment to prevention, and community collaboration. The kitten diversion initiative shows how effective practical solutions can be when paired with community engagement. The fact that these efforts also resulted in over \$45,000 in cost savings in a single year highlights the dual benefit of welfare and efficiency. With 72% of registered cats now desexed and a strong return-to-owner program for dogs, Hobsons Bay is setting a gold standard in domestic animal management. Congratulations again on this fantastic progress, please continue your commitment to compassionate, evidence-based strategies.

Best wishes,

Jacquie

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