

The management of cats by local governments in Australia: summary of national survey results

In brief

Local governments have a central role in cat management in Australia, holding a primary responsibility for managing the estimated 4.9 million pet and also the 0.7 million feral cats living in and around human settlements. Cat management is a complex and ongoing issue for local governments. We surveyed local governments to gain an improved understanding of what cat management practices they use, how these are monitored, and what information and actions could support improvements.

Local governments reported that they face major challenges and constraints to managing cats effectively and emphasised that pet and feral cat management practices are closely connected.

Based on the survey results, our recommendations include:

- Strong, enabling legislation for pet cat management set at the state/territory level, harmonised across jurisdictions;
- Community awareness and education programs that promote responsible pet ownership, suited to linguistically and culturally diverse communities;
- Coordinated incentive programs to encourage uptake of responsible pet cat ownership;
- Enhanced monitoring, and coordinated collating and reporting of cat management activity information, and
- Enhanced monitoring of outcomes of cat management actions and also the consequences for local wildlife, and cat welfare and health.

Background

Cats are the second most popular pet in Australia, with around 27% of Australian households having pet cats. The most recent estimate for the pet cat population is 4.9 million cats¹, with pet cat numbers in Australia broadly increasing in line with population growth². Pet cats are managed through companion animal legislation set at the state and territory level, by local governments.

There are also an estimated 0.7 million feral (sometimes called stray) cats³ in towns and city areas of Australia. Local governments may carry out management for feral cats in these urban areas; some may also manage feral cats in the bush, in line with state/territory legislative frameworks.

While local governments have a central role in both pet and feral cat management in Australia, prior to this study, there has been no national assessment of how local governments manage cats and the specific challenges they face on the ground.



Stray cat at a rubbish dump. Image: Alex Dudley

Research aims

We aimed to gain an improved understanding of how pet and feral cats are managed, how management activities are monitored, and what actions or other initiatives could support improved cat management practices by local governments around Australia. We also examined whether the remoteness or socio-economic status of local government areas (LGA) influenced cat management practices, as this might flag regional variation in the measures needed to support better cat management.

What we did

We designed a comprehensive survey of cat management by local governments, with input and refinement from a range of stakeholders. The survey comprised of 56 questions, in sections for pet and feral cats.

Since the legislative and policy settings vary among states and territories, the surveys were adjusted slightly for each jurisdiction (Figure 1). Surveys were circulated to each jurisdiction between December 2019 and May 2020, through the Qualtrics survey platform.

We gathered information on three factors that could affect cat management activities:

- Jurisdiction: if there was relevant legislation at the state/territory level to mandate a particular management approach.
- Remoteness: whether an LGA covers a city, inner or outer regional, remote or very remote area may affect access to key services such as veterinarians or local pound facilities, and thus the way cats are managed.
- Socioeconomic context of the LGA, using a general socio-economic index⁴, as some cat management actions, such as desexing and registration, incur costs to pet cat owners.

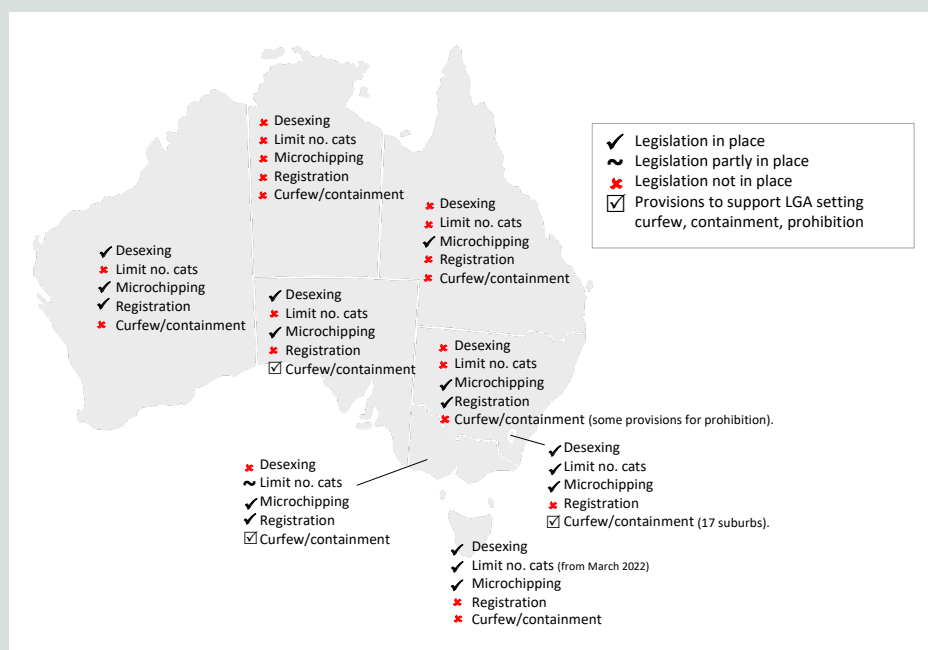


Figure 1: Summary of state/territory legislation for pet cats in Australia (as of December 2021). Note that in jurisdictions where provisions for setting cat restrictions (curfew, containment, prohibition) exist, local governments must still go through a process of developing and implementing regulations. (Source: Elizabeth Lindsay).

We summarised (i) the actions and monitoring in place, (ii) annual expenditure and (iii) what works well, what are the challenges and needs that would lead to improved cat management. For pet cats, we also summarised incentive mechanisms in place to encourage pet owners to comply with cat management requirements. We analysed the survey responses using generalised linear modelling.

RIGHT: Cats in a remote community.
Image: Ian Morris



Key findings

We received survey responses from 240 LGAs about pet cats, and 238 LGAs about feral cats (a response rate of 44% of all Australian LGAs). For pets, this comprised 235 councils, three external territories (Norfolk Island, Christmas Island, Cocos-Keeling Islands), one unincorporated area (French Island), and the ACT. For feral cats, this comprised 223 councils, and the same external territories, French Island and the ACT.

Pet cats

Local governments use five key actions to manage pet cats: registration, identification (i.e., microchipping), desexing, limits on the number of cats per household, and restrictions on cat presence/movements (i.e., curfews, containment and cat-free zones) (summarised in Figure 2). We found that these actions are used to different degrees and in different combinations across local governments. This has created a patchwork of approaches that is often ineffective, confusing to the public, and hampers efforts to ensure and monitor compliance, and constrains coordination (e.g., of monitoring) across LGAs.

Identification is required by nearly all local governments, followed by registration, desexing, and limits on the number of cats per household. Requiring cats to be kept contained, or prohibited from designated suburbs, is used by nearly one third of local governments.

Registration allows for accurate data collection and generation of revenue. Although it was required in two-thirds of local governments, based on the number of registered cats reported, we estimated that

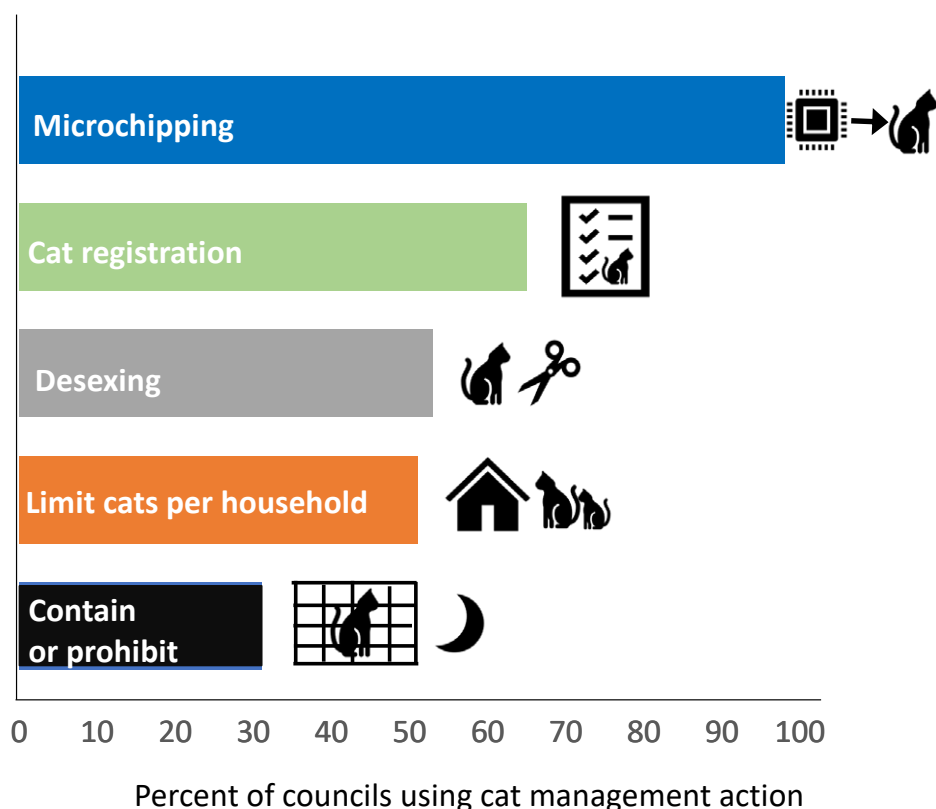


Figure 2. The percentage of local governments that use each of the cat management actions.

only a third of pet cats in these areas were registered.

Desexing of pet cats is required by just over half of local governments. In LGAs where desexing of pet cats was mandatory, there was a higher proportion of desexed cats in the pet cat population. Local governments in more remote areas, and with lower socioeconomic scores, were less likely to mandate desexing. However, the overall estimates for the proportion of pet cats that are desexed appeared low: 53% of local governments estimated that <75% of pet cats were desexed; 22% of local governments estimated that <25% of pet cats in their area were desexed. The proportion of cats that are desexed was lower in remote and disadvantaged local government areas.

Limits on the number of pet cats per household is required by just over half of local governments. Limit size ranged from 2 to 6; with a mode of 2 and an average of 2.4 for houses in residential areas; and a mode of 4 with an average of 3.9 for farmhouses.

Cat curfews, containment, or cat-free zones were especially common in the ACT, Victoria and SA. This measure is more common in cities, and on islands with long-term plans to eradicate feral cats. Cat restrictions are increasing in frequency. In some jurisdictions, cat containment is a consequence of requiring cats to be contained to the owners' property, or under the control of the owner (e.g., on a leash) when outside the property, in the same manner that is required for dogs. Other jurisdictions do not



Key findings (continued)

legislate against 'roaming cats', (e.g., NSW) making it harder to enact and police local cat containment bylaws. If general requirements for cats were brought into line with those which exist for dogs (i.e., contained, or under effective control), then cat containment would no longer be an action that local governments needed to legislate or regulate for.

A key determinant of whether a particular cat management action is used is whether state/territory legislation requires them, or facilitates the setting of local regulations to enact them. Without this enabling context, LGAs are less likely to enact their own bylaws or regulations to require the action.

Our survey results indicated that 57% of local governments operate their own pound. These pounds each handled up to 2660 cats during the 2018-19 financial year (average 262,

median 120). There are no collated national data on the numbers of cats that pass through local government pounds and animal shelters, but given the numbers of impounded cats reported by groups such as the RSPCA, the cumulative total is very large.

Monitoring

Most local governments undertake some form of monitoring for compliance with their local requirements; rates of monitoring varied for different requirements. Most monitoring is *administrative*, by cross-checking between registration records and permits for desexing exemptions. Local governments also used reactive approaches, such as responding to complaints about excess cats on a property. Proactive monitoring of compliance, via doorknocks or patrols, was the least common approach. Tweed Shire Council in NSW is the

only LGA example we are aware of with systematic monitoring for the outcomes of their pet cat management measures on local wildlife (see Box 1).

Incentives

Our survey results suggest that the use of incentives to encourage compliance with local requirements amongst pet cat owners are moderately common.

- 29% of local governments that require registration offered incentives, such as reduced fees for short periods, or reduced fees for lower income earners, or for people adopting cats from shelters.
- 52% of local governments that require desexing offer incentives, usually reduced registration costs (which averaged less than a third for desexed cats compared to entire cats), but also subsidised or even free desexing.

Box 1

Case Study: Love Cats, Love Wildlife, by Tweed Shire Council

Tweed Shire Council on the northern coast of NSW has been actively promoting responsible cat ownership, including through a three year "Love Cats Love Wildlife" program. Community events and comprehensive online and printed resources have aimed to encourage responsible cat ownership practices (particularly containment).

Tweed Shire Council adopted a Wildlife Protection Area Policy in 2017. A Wildlife Protection Area is public land that is reserved for the protection of native animals and their habitats. There are three bushland reserves (Koala Beach, Pottsville Environment Park and Pottsville Wetland) designated as wildlife protection areas, and cats are prohibited from two suburbs adjacent to these wildlife protection areas. Tweed Shire Council also have night curfews in place for four suburbs and containment in one location.

The council staff run a 'cats on camera' monitoring program (<https://www.tweed.nsw.gov.au/CatsOnCamera>), in which remote cameras are used to assess whether the cat prohibition zones and night curfews are working to exclude cats from adjacent bushland areas. Several individual pet cats have been identified. For example, one cat dubbed "Ginger" roams over an area of 417 ha.

The council has used camera trap arrays in bushland areas next to the suburbs with varying cat restrictions, to measure outcomes. This monitoring shows that cat prohibition is more effective than containment or curfews at reducing the presence of pet cats into bushland.



Tweed Shire Council has also tried to change pet cat owner behaviour by summarising and communicating the roaming behaviour of individual pet cats, what wildlife occurs in the same area, and the threats to the cats (crossing roads, foxes). Despite this education effort, the roaming of pet cats in the region continues to be an ongoing challenge, in part because the NSW state legislation does not enable a strong response to roaming cats.



Figure 2: A composite of images from Tweed Shire Council's 'cats on camera' program. "Ginger", a pet cat (top right) has been detected roaming in the Pottsville wildlife protection area, where he encounters wildlife, as well as threats to his own safety. Source: Tweed Shire Council





Key findings (continued)

Feral cats

The majority (87%) of local governments reported that stray/feral cats are a problem in their jurisdiction. In some areas, the problem is significant, with frequent complaints from residents, and high impoundment and euthanasia rates. Some local governments reported they experience particular problems in areas where people feed feral (stray) cats.

- Two-thirds of local governments have some feral cat management in place, mostly trapping, carried out about equally by local

government staff and community residents.

- Local governments reported removing an average of 153 feral cats in one year from their area.
- Trap-Neuter-Release programs occur at a low rate across local governments, mostly illegally or without local government support.
- Only half the local governments that manage feral cats undertake any monitoring, and mostly this focuses on keeping records of management activity. Less than 20 local governments survey

the feral cat population regularly to see if it is decreasing in response to management; less than five monitor the effect of that management on wildlife. Monitoring the outcomes of feral cat management on the size of the feral cat population is rare. Some LGAs use capture success from regular trapping efforts to gauge whether the feral cat population is changing; if done rigorously, this is a useful approach. For example, Brisbane City Council has such a program in place (see Box 2).

Box 2

Case study: feral cat management by Brisbane City Council

Brisbane City Council has dedicated resourcing for the management of feral (stray) cats, which have been a regular and high-volume source of complaints to the council; some people feed feral cats in business/commercial areas.

Community members had expressed concerns about the impact of cats on native wildlife, including ground-nesting birds (bush stone curlews), bandicoots and brush-tailed phascogales. In response to this, Brisbane City Council made a decision to transfer the management of feral cats to the pest animal section as feral cats are a biosecurity matter in Queensland legislation. Where captured, feral cats cannot be rehomed, and are euthanised.

The council sets targets for trapping of feral cats. Council staff also discourage the feeding of feral cats by community members, and in some cases, apply enforcement actions against ongoing feeders of feral cats. Any cats with microchips or thought to be pet cats are directed to the animal rehoming centre. With dedicated efforts and daily trapping of feral cats, there has been a corresponding decrease in feral cat numbers over time.

Brisbane City Council appears to be one of the few local governments which utilises the state biosecurity legislation for the management of feral cats. Other LGAs reported that they assess whether feral cats have suitable social temperaments and attempt to rehome them. Other local governments in Queensland noted an interest in adopting the approach to feral cat management being applied by Brisbane City Council.

How much do local governments spend on managing cats?

Based on the survey results, most local governments have a budget of less than \$20,000 annually for managing pet cats, and a budget of less than \$20,000 annually to manage feral cats. Overall, we estimate that local governments across Australia spend \$76 million annually on pet and feral cat management, excluding large budget island eradication programs.



Recommendations

In law and policy, pet and feral cats are treated as distinct groups. In practice, there is no neat distinction between pet and feral, and individual cats can even transfer between these categories. Local governments have direct experience of this continuum, when they encounter pet cats and kittens that have been dumped or abandoned, entire (non-desexed) pet cats roaming at large and breeding, backyard breeding and cat hoarding, and feral cats being fed and sustained at high density by members of the public.

The density of feral and free-roaming pet cats in urban and peri-urban areas should be reduced in order to reduce the impacts of pet and feral cats on urban and peri-urban wildlife, to enhance welfare outcomes for cats, and to reduce transmission rates of cat-borne pathogens that can affect people, livestock and wildlife. The survey showed that local governments overwhelmingly want to achieve this goal by improving cat management.

Based on the responses to the survey, we make the following recommendations:

1. Strong, enabling legislation for pet cat management set at the state/territory level, that is harmonised across jurisdictions for all of Australia. The legislative frameworks should include:

- **Mandatory registration of pet cats**, to allow accurate data on pet cat populations and provide revenue (paid by owners for registration) that can be used for compliance monitoring, enforcement, education; and so that incentives for other actions can be offered.
- **Mandatory identification of pet cats**, to facilitate other requirements, allow for compliance monitoring and

provide the mechanism to contact owners of impounded cats).

- **Mandatory desexing of pet cats**, ideally by 4-5 months of age, with limited exceptions for licenced breeders, to reduce the incidence of unwanted cats, impoundment rates, and nuisance issues.
- **Mandatory caps on the number of cats per household**, to reduce cat hoarding, and nuisance issues.
- **Mandatory requirement to keep cats contained** to the owner's property, or under equivalent control (e.g., on a leash, or in a cat box) when off-property. This would bring expectations about cat management in line with those for dogs and would reduce the incidence of free-roaming cats.
- Provisions to enable local governments to designate residential areas as **mandatory cat prohibition zones**, to reduce the risk of cat impacts in areas of high conservation value.

2. The legislative reform should be accompanied by **community awareness and education programs**, suited to linguistically and culturally diverse communities, that promote responsible pet ownership, and explain the conservation, welfare and disease impacts of free-roaming cats, and the benefits of enhanced management.

3. Coordinated **incentive programs** could also encourage uptake of responsible pet cat ownership. For example, registering a cat could open up access to subsidised desexing, or subsidised costs of cat containment (e.g., catio) materials to make backyards secure.

4. Enhanced monitoring, and coordinated **collating and reporting of activity information**, including key data on registrations, desexing

statistics, identification details, impoundments, and numbers of feral cats killed. This information should be rolled up to state/territory and national level.

5. Enhanced **monitoring of outcomes**, especially the number of free-roaming cats (i.e., both pet and feral), and also the consequences for local wildlife. This information is essential for guiding further LGA investment.

Additional recommendations include

- Amendments to pest/biosecurity legislation to recognise all unowned, **feral cats as a pest species in all jurisdictions**, in line with an agreement between all environment ministers from the Commonwealth, and all states and territories in 2015⁵;
- Education and clear messaging about not feeding stray cats, and that Trap-Neuter-Release (and its variants) is not an ethical, effective or humane method of managing stray cats in Australia⁶⁻⁸ and ban their use nationally.
- Reduce the feral cat carrying capacity around towns and cities by excluding cats (with fencing) from rubbish dumps and intensive farm sites⁹.

Local governments of remote and very remote areas face some unique challenges. In these situations, organisations such as Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities (AMRRIC)¹⁰ already have an important role in companion animal management. Local support mechanisms for this organisation could be further enhanced, for example by funding positions for vets and community animal health workers within local government structures.

Further Information

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More information

A wide range of resources is available at: <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/projects/cat-impacts-and-management-knowledge-exchange-for-stakeholders>

Factsheets

The impact of cats in Australia - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/the-impact-of-cats-in-australia>

The impact of pet cats on Australian wildlife - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/the-impact-of-pet-cats-on-australian-wildlife>

The hidden costs of cats in Australia: cat dependent diseases and human health - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/the-hidden-costs-of-cats-in-australia-cat-dependent-diseases-and-human-health>

The toll of cat-dependent diseases on Australian agriculture - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/the-toll-of-cat-dependent-diseases-on-australian-agriculture>

Responsible cat ownership - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/responsible-cat-ownership-in-australia>

Videos

The impact of pet cats on Australian wildlife - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/video-gallery/the-impact-of-roaming-pet-cats-on-australian-wildlife>

Cat-borne diseases and their impacts on human health - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/video-gallery/cat-borne-diseases-and-their-impacts-on-human-health>

Cat-borne diseases and their impacts on agriculture and livestock in Australia - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/video-gallery/cat-borne-diseases-and-their-impacts-on-agriculture-and-livestock-in-australia>

Caring for country: managing cats animation - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/video-gallery/caring-for-country-managing-cats>

Posters

The impact of feral cats in Australia - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/cat-impacts-in-australia>

The impact of urban cats in Australia - <https://www.nespthreatenedspecies.edu.au/publications-and-tools/cats-in-urban-australia>



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