AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ANIMAL MANAGEMENT SUBMISSION

INQUIRY INTO THE PROBLEM OF FERAL AND DOMESTIC CATS IN AUSTRALIA

The Australian Institute of Animal Management (AIAM) is the national peak body representing Local Government Animal Management Officers. The AIAM Committee consists of a wide range of professionals engaged in the various aspects of animal management.

AIAM seeks to support those engaged in the business of animal management, and the function itself, by providing training and information, opportunities for networking and collaboration and by encouraging the use of best practice policy and practices. AIAM understands the significant pressures placed on Local Government and not for profit rescue and rehoming service providers when working in the companion animal management space.

AIAM promotes consistency of legislation, consultation in the creation of legislation and workplace processes and healthy relationships with external stakeholders and the community. AIAM supports cross sector collaboration and co-design of projects and initiatives. The AIAM Committee welcome the opportunity to engage at any level on the topic of cat management, and on the topic of companion animal management as a whole.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 1: Revise definitions of domestic cats to be consistent across local, state and federal governments to include owned, semi-owned and unowned cats in urban and suburban environments and living within several kilometres of rural properties. This is to enable legislation and policy for these domestic cats to be separate from feral cats.

Recommendation 2: Address those cats defined as “feral” separately to those defined as “domestic” cats (as per the RSPCA Australia Summary of Findings and Recommendations: Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia report and the AIAM endorsed Getting to Zero Australian Cat Action Plan). These two distinct populations of cats require different approaches to their management.

Recommendation 3: Utilise a combination of technical and social, evidence based, approaches to manage the cat population effectively, using evidence-based strategies. Prioritise community engagement and support strategies that are humane and do not cause or prolong suffering of the animal.

Recommendation 4: Further research is needed to establish the current prevalence of feral, owned, semi-owned and unowned cats in urban, peri-urban and rural areas of Australia.

Recommendation 5: Federal and State Governments to support local governments in a coordinated effort to prevent the unplanned breeding of cats.

Recommendation 6: Identify sensitive environmental areas within communities and involve all stakeholders to effectively address impacts on native wildlife.

Recommendation 7: Federal, state and local governments to utilise evidence-based strategies for the management of cats.

Recommendation 8: Government desexing subsidy programs to be accessible to the community.

Recommendation 9: Review barriers to community members taking responsibility for cats they are caring for in some capacity i.e. registration and permit fees, impound and reclaim fees etc.

Recommendation 10: Provide support for community members to contain cats with access to low-cost mesh or netting fence additions or deck enclosures. Consider introduction of building regulations to require appropriate fencing and enclosures in new estates for cat owners and carers.

Recommendation 11: Empower communities with knowledge of how to search for lost cats, and how to find carers of found cats by utilising the AIAM and G2Z lost and found cat brochures (see attached).

Recommendation 12: Provide adequate funding to ensure the One Health approach can be implemented in remote communities to prevent negative health impacts on people, cats and dogs, and wildlife.

Recommendation 13: Further research into new methods of management of cats in urban areas is urgently needed. The current legislative and regulatory approaches for managing cats in urban areas, primarily using a trap-and-kill approach, has not been effective thus far. Furthermore, statistical modelling and cost analyses have shown that this approach is not viable for governments or local councils.

Recommendation 14: Utilise the AIAM endorsed G2Z Australian Cat Action Plan and the RSPCA Identifying Best Practice Cat Management in Australia 2018 which complement each other and are based on wide consultation and negotiation between stakeholders for best strategies to manage domestic cat populations.

This submission largely relates to the management of domestic cats as a separate issue to the management of feral cats.

Cats are intelligent sentient beings who have had, and continue to have, a significant role, in Australian society. Cats have formed a bond with many people, providing companionship and enjoyment. Studies have shown that relationships with animals are positive and important to many people, contributing to health and well-being (Erickson DL, 2012).

Domestic cats include owned, semi-owned and unowned cats living in urban and suburban areas or on rural properties. They need to be defined separately from feral cats (who are unowned, unsocialised cats who have no relationship with or dependence on humans, and live and reproduce in the wild (e.g. in forests, grasslands, deserts).

The importance of this distinction is because unowned cats who are accessible to humans and veterinary resources can and should be managed more ethically and effectively with other methods than those being used currently for feral cats i.e. baiting, shooting. There is also growing community expectation and pressure being placed on Local Government, not for profit and community-based animal rescue and welfare organisations to do so.

RESPONSES TO THE TERMS OF REFERENCE:

1. the prevalence of feral and domestic cats in Australia

The actual prevalence of both feral and unowned domestic cats in Australia is difficult to determine. (Legge *et al*. 2018) estimated fluctuations between 1.4 and 5.6 million in natural environments, depending on rainfall, and estimated 0.7 million unowned cats in urban areas, rubbish dumps and on intensive farms.

We know that 27% of households own at least one cat, and there are many unwanted cats being born and abandoned or surrendered in communities across Australia, shown in intake and euthanasia statistics of pounds and shelters. In 2016/17, the RSPCA reported taking in 53,912 cats nationally, with 27% of these euthanized. In 2016/17, a mean of 48% of cat intake was euthanized in Victorian Council pounds and shelters. (Rand *et al*. 2018)

These figures are considerably less than the actual number of abandoned animals, as they do not include those (unowned and semi-owned) cats who do not come to the pound or shelter and live in people's back yards, parks, around factories, schools and other areas of public and private land. A significant proportion of compassionate people are feeding these cats, with one study reporting a quarter of cat owners surrendering to a shelter and a half of non-owners had fed at least one cat they didn't own in the previous 5 years. (Zito, S. et al. 2016)

Semi-owned cats (fed by people who don't claim ownership) may be:

- owned by someone else but wandering between homes for food, companionship or mating, or
- unowned having been abandoned or lost or born to an abandoned or un/semi-owned cat or its progeny.

The prevalence of unowned domestic cats has largely been ignored by all levels of governments. Little work has been put into assessing how many cats there are and ways to prevent this population of cats which can

contribute to predation and the breeding of unwanted cats. The likelihood of this population feeding the feral cat population is considerable too, so the effective management of urban cats is likely to positively affect the management of feral cats.

Concerned members of the community have been left to feed and manage these cats and are often ineffective in reducing their numbers due to limited resources. However, evidence suggests numbers of unowned cats can be reduced if assisted with desexing and monitoring for any further undesexed cat immigration. (Swarbrick H, Rand J. 2018). Because community efforts are often discouraged by Council, these individuals will not report the location of these cats. According to a Brisbane survey, most people prefer non-lethal management of stray cats by desexing, than by killing, or leaving the cats as they are. (Rand, J. et al. 2018)

Further research is needed to establish the current prevalence of feral, owned, semi-owned and unowned cats in urban, peri-urban and rural areas of Australia.

2. the impact of feral and domestic cats including on native wildlife and habitats

AIAM recognise that feral cats are having a negative impact of wildlife and biodiversity.

Given the increasing lack of acceptance, by the community, of current management methods of owned, semi-owned and unowned cats it is clear that different areas of landscape will require different approaches and that in urban areas compromises may need to be made with the type of management and control methods applied such as eradication vs. trial of community cat management programs. Eradication from urban areas is not realistic and management programs that utilise killing of cats as their primary strategy are putting enormous amounts of pressure on Local Government animal management departments and workers.

The level of interest present at the moment in the community and across the country has resulted in the presentation of never before seen opportunities for research and trial of alternative cat management strategies. Resource allocation to the stakeholders involved is of paramount importance to ensure the research and programs recommended by AIAM in this document are allowed to occur.

3. the effectiveness of current legislative and regulatory approaches

Current legislative and regulatory approaches to cat management by federal, state and local governments have been largely reactive rather than preventative as well as not adequately resourced. In some states, local government has ignored cat management while not-for-profit organisations manage an overload of unwanted cats. In other states local government are using enforcement-based control strategies that appear to be largely unsuccessful.

A cultural shift from a reactive local government mindset is starting to occur. Some local governments are now providing desexing subsidies to enable the community to prevent unwanted animals. They are recognising that it is cheaper and more effective for Governments to subsidise cat desexing than to respond to nuisance complaints, collect, kill or rehome cats after they are born (which costs on average $220 - $620 per cat).

In the National Desexing Network Cooperative Desexing Program which NDN runs free of charge for Councils across Australia, Councils pay just $45 - $85 for desexing subsidies for low income residents. Low income

residents contribute an affordable $55 - $65, and vets reduce their prices to a set fee of $100 - $150 to help share the costs of preventing unwanted animals. Some Councils are offering free desexing by paying $100 - $150 to desex cats for owners and semi-owners, which is still cheaper than impounding, killing or rehoming abandoned cats, less stressful on both staff and the animals and appreciated by the community.

However, the adoption of such effective desexing subsidy support programs has been slow. Often the desexing programs that Councils have offered have been too expensive, not promoted sufficiently or not continued long enough to have a significant impact.

Strategies used to control dogs in urban areas such as Council registration and impounding have been applied unsuccessfully to cats due to differences in breeding rates and behaviours of cats.

4. the effectiveness of Commonwealth action and cooperation with states and territories on this issue, including progress made under the Threat Abatement Plan, national framework and national declaration relating to feral and domestic cats in Australia;

As the Industry body for Local Government Animal Management Officers, we feel that this action has had little to no impact in the area of urban/peri-urban (unowned, semi-owned and owned) domestic cats. What is required is for domestic cats to be classified uniformly in Federal and State legislation, and to recognise owned, semi-owned and unowned cats as three distinct groups that will require differing management strategies to be most effective.

5. the efficacy (in terms of reducing the impact of cats), cost effectiveness and use of current and emerging methods and tools for controlling feral cats, including baiting, the establishment of feral cat-free areas using conservation fencing, gene drive technology;

When considering the impact of domestic cats in Australia we need to be open to a range of alternative control methods. The methods mentioned for tackling feral cats within the landscape are not suitable in urban environments where cats are co-existing in proximity with humans.

There are few, if any (with Gold Coast City Council being a notable exception) municipalities doing cat management well. Effective management may need to compromise the objective from eradication/elimination of cats to a reduction in cat numbers.

We believe there is a large opportunity to have a significant impact on domestic cat numbers in these areas. Feedback received from our membership base indicates that there is significant appetite for effective, proactive and community accepted cat management strategies. Attendees to our annual Workshop event request cat management content and the sessions are always very well attended. We are regularly contacted by Local Government staff for information on this particular topic. There is an understanding in the sector that the management and control measures have not made progress despite the resources that have been expended in the process.

Evidence based strategies that are experiment based rather than computer modelling based are required. The conservation sector needs to be involved in exploring the opportunities presented by a pilot program such as

the Australian Community Cat Program proposed by the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation. The increasing community expectation that animal management should be ethical, humane and effective are further driving the need for research in this area. These expectations are also placing considerable burden on those individuals and agencies that are engaged in this work.

6. the efficacy of import controls for high risk domestic cat varieties to prevent the impacts of feral and domestic cats, including on native wildlife and habitats;

AIAM supports effective import controls on introducing high risk domestic cat varieties into Australia.

7. public awareness and education in relation to the feral and domestic cat problem; and

AIAM supports a push for increased transparency in regard to intake and outcome data from all agencies who deal with all categories of cats in Australia.

Currently it is difficult for a researcher or member of the public to get accurate information on what the situation is with cats and their management in their community as the data is either not collected or not made available to the public.

8. the interaction between domestic cat ownership and the feral cat problem, and best practice approaches to the keeping of domestic cats in this regard.

AIAM reiterates the distinction between feral cats and owned, semi-owned and unowned cats, each of which require tailored management approaches and not a one size fits all approach. The best practice approach to managing domestic cats is to increase the proportion that are responsibly owned and desexed. There is a wealth of internationally published research demonstrating that non-lethal management approaches based on desexing, adoption of socialised cats, and leaving unsocialised desexed strays in their home location, have led to significant reductions in urban stray cat populations, as demonstrated by international research (Levy et al. 2014; Nutter 2005; Spehar & Wolf 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Zito et al. 2018), and small pilot studies in Australia (Swarbrick & Rand 2018; Tan et al. 2017). Leaving cats in their home location helps stabilise the social structure of the stray cats in that location, preventing immigration of stray cats from surrounding areas. When a large enough proportion (about 54%) of the stray cat population is desexed, and when immigrant cats are promptly managed through adoption or desexing and return to the colony, stray cat numbers decrease by 30% over 2 years and 50% over 5 years (Swarbrick & Rand 2018; Tan et al. 2017).

The development of a significant scale pilot program such as the Australian Community Cat Program proposed by the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation provides an excellent opportunity for partnership with the conservation sector to truly monitor and evaluate the outcomes. While we recognise that this approach will not eliminate the impact of cats on wildlife and requires compromise on expectations from the conservation sector, the growing community expectations for not killing urban cats etc means we have to consider reductions rather than complete elimination.

Recommendation 1: **Revise definitions of domestic cats to be consistent across local, state and federal governments to include owned, semi-owned and unowned cats in urban and suburban environments and living within several kilometres of rural properties.**

Definitions need to be accurate before effective policy can be developed. The policy relating to the management of the different populations of cats in Australia needs to be quite separate as different strategies are required to be implemented.

The RSPCA has previously highlighted that using only the terms "feral" and "domestic" is insufficient. As defined in the RSPCA's 2018 Identifying Best Practice in Cat Management in Australia, cats can be categorised as owned cats (identified with and cared for by a specific person; directly dependent on humans; usually socialised); semi-owned cats (fed or provided with some other care by people who do not consider they own them; of varying sociability; many socialised to humans; may be associated with one or more households); and unowned cats (indirectly dependent on humans; may have casual and temporary interactions with humans; of varying sociability, including some who are unsocialised to humans; often live in groups or colonies in urban environments; common aggregation sites include industrial sites, rubbish tips, food outlets, and fishing harbours). Feral cats are unowned, unsocialised, have no relationship with or dependence on humans, and reproduce in the wild. For practical purposes of definition, there is a high probability that a cat found 2-3 km or more from the nearest human habitation is a feral cat, based on Cat Tracker- South Australia data (Roetman et al., 2017).

Recommendation 2: **Address those cats defined as "feral" separately to those defined as "domestic" cats (as per the RSPCA Australia Summary of Findings and Recommendations: Identifying Best Practice Domestic Cat Management in Australia report and the AIAM endorsed Getting to Zero Australian Cat Action Plan). These two distinct populations of cats require different approaches to their management.**

The distinction has been acknowledged by the Commonwealth Dept of the Environment: "Feral cats are cats that live in the wild and survive without the intentional assistance of humans. Feral cats are distinguished from stray cats, which live in populated areas and may depend on some assistance from humans." (Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Background Document for the Threat Abatement Plan for Predation by Feral Cats. 2015)

Recommendation 3: **Utilise a combination of technical and social, evidence based, approaches to manage the cat population effectively, using evidence-based strategies. Prioritise community engagement and support strategies that are humane and do not cause or prolong suffering of the animal.**

An example of a program such as this is a small-scale trial based on desexing that has already been piloted in the city of Banyule, Victoria. This program offers free desexing, microchipping, and registration for all non-desexed cats in the targeted suburbs. Those who accept the offer to enrol the cat they are caring for complete paperwork for the microchip database and register the cat in their name with the local government. Of those who enrol a cat, approximately 70% are semi-owners and 30% are owners. This strategy has reduced council impoundments from 1,004 cats in 2010-11 (8 cats/1,000 residents) to 141 in 2018-19 (1 cat/1,000 residents), and euthanasia from 578 to 41 cats/year (from 5 to 0.3 cats/1,000 residents). Between 2017 and 2020, the council used a targeted approach for the desexing strategy and over that 3-year period, impoundments decreased by 67% and euthanasia by 76%. It has also reduced cat-related complaints. Target areas were selected using existing information held by the council, which was used to identify cat hotspots in the local area

using the addresses from which most cats surrendered to the shelter originated, and the areas where residents had expressed concerns about stray cats.

It should be noted that the implementation of mandatory desexing or mandatory confinement for cats is not an effective method to manage cats in urban areas, as it does not address the underlying problem. High numbers of semi-owned and unowned cats are typically a problem in low socioeconomic areas where residents cannot afford the costs associated with desexing. When surveyed, many residents enrolling a cat in the Banyule program stated that they had been caring for and interacting with the cat on a daily basis, often multiple times each day. They described themselves as being very attached to the cat that they care for, that it gave them a reason to get up in the morning, and that it helped them through the tough times. Most residents reported that the primary reason they had not already had the cat desexed was because it was unaffordable. When they were offered desexing, microchipping, vaccination and registration were offered free of charge, they supported it and took on official ownership of the cat.

Appropriate resource allocation is a vital component for this recommendation.

Recommendation 4: **Further research is needed to establish the current prevalence of feral, owned, semi-owned and unowned cats in urban, peri-urban and rural areas of Australia.**

The location of the cats as well as a rating of risk to environment are important factors to include in the research project. The factors affecting density of population in different areas are also important to explore.

Appropriate resource allocation is a vital component for this recommendation.

Recommendation 5: **Federal and State Governments should support local governments in a coordinated effort to prevent the breeding of unwanted cats.**

Domestic cat management generally falls under the jurisdiction of local governments. However local governments often lack resources to implement prevention and support strategies. Federal and state governments can help by supporting Councils to implement community engagement and support programs such as desexing subsidy programs by contributing funds and other necessary resources.

Appropriate resource allocation is a vital component for this recommendation.

Recommendation 6: **Identify sensitive environmental areas within communities and involve all stakeholders to effectively address impacts on native wildlife.**

Programs need to be co-developed with the community to ensure ownership, engagement and buy-in. Adopting a community-based approach involving the various stakeholders is more likely to achieve cultural and social acceptance resulting in the ability to affect long term change.

Appropriate resource allocation is a vital component for this recommendation.

Recommendation7: **Federal, state and local governments to utilise evidence-based strategies for the management of cats.**

There is a widespread assumption that removing cats from the environment reduces their associated risks. This assumption is not based on scientific evidence. Not a single published study is known to have demonstrated that the long-standing municipal practice of trapping and killing unowned cats in urban areas has reduced the size of any community's unowned cat population. Many believe it is a matter of common sense that removing cats lowers their associated risks, but this is not supported by scientific evidence in urban areas. There are many reasons why so-called "trap and kill" programs are failures. Chief among them is that cats are prolific breeders and it would literally cost millions of dollars to remove enough of them quickly enough in a large urban area to get ahead of their reproductive curve.

In urban and suburban animal management programs, one of the key strategies for managing cats is to respond to nuisance complaints by impounding and holding of stray cats and dogs depending on state and local government legislation which varies from 3 – 14 days. This acknowledges that stray animals may indeed be owned. However, while most dogs are reclaimed, cats are rarely reclaimed (less than 10%). Cats behave differently and are less visible when they wander, and owners generally have different expectations of them. Evidence also shows that cats behave differently to dogs when impounded and need at least 3 days in an appropriate environment to demonstrate their sociability. Therefore, more effective strategies are needed for managing cats based on the causes of cats becoming lost or abandoned.

Traditional cat management strategies have a negative impact on animal management and care staff as well as the community members who run shelters and rescue groups. Many unwanted cats come from low socio-economic areas (Zito, S. et al. 2016) (who are less able to afford to desex their cats so that the problem of abandoned and wandering cats becomes increasingly reactive and difficult to manage).

The assumption that all stray/wandering cats are unowned or not supported in any way, has resulted in ineffective policy and strategy for managing cats. Many owned cats do wander as containing a cat is quite different to containing a dog. Owners and carers often assume their cats will come home themselves. When they do realise they are not coming home, searching for their lost animals can be very complex, particularly if they lack time or knowledge that some Councils share impounding facilities and animals can be impounded a long way from where they live.

Recommendation 8: **Government desexing subsidy programs to be accessible to the community.**

Ensuring that the most effective tool to population management is accessible to everyone in the community is essential. At a glance, it can currently cost cat carers and owners anywhere between $180 and $350 to have a female cat desexed. Clearly this is out of reach for much of the community and when compared to other pressing economic needs may well not be a priority.

Results from the Gold Coast and Bathurst regions in Australia demonstrate that subsidised (low and/or no cost) desexing programs are successful in reducing animal intake, reducing costs to Council (shelter, staff, prosecution etc.), reducing euthanasia of homeless pets, reducing animal nuisance and dog attack complaints and reducing traffic accidents involving stray companion animals. In addition, these programmes have been shown to improve public education and awareness on animal safety and ownership issues, improve animal health, decrease Council staff exposure to stress and improve community perception of Council.

Appropriate resource allocation is a vital component for this recommendation.

Recommendation 9: **Review barriers to community members taking responsibility for cats they are caring for in some capacity i.e. registration and permit fees, impound and reclaim fees etc.**

There are many barriers to cat carers and owners reclaiming their cats from the impounding facility. These range from not having transport to get to and from the facility, not having the appropriate equipment to carry a cat in, not having the language skills necessary to complete the transaction, not having the knowledge and skills to find that the cat has been impounded at the facility and the list goes on. Finances are also a significant barrier to reclaim, whether it be the funds required for the reclaim/release fee, the registration and/or desexing required to comply with any relevant legislation or the funds needed to pay any fines that may be associated with the impound.

Appropriate resource allocation is a vital component for this recommendation.

Recommendation 10: **Provide support for community members to contain cats with access to low-cost mesh or netting fence additions or deck enclosures. Consider introduction of building regulations to require appropriate fencing and enclosures in new estates for cat carers.**

Both these initiatives will help create a cultural change to prevent wandering, predation and unwanted cats. In many urban areas, the culture has changed regarding keeping dogs safely enclosed and walked for daily exercise rather than running the streets. Similarly, cultural change is needed regarding cat ownership with encouragement of owners to provide play and company.

Appropriate resource allocation is a vital component for this recommendation.

Recommendation 11: **Empower communities with knowledge of how to search for lost cats, and how to find carers of found cats by utilising the dual branded AIAM and G2Z lost and found cat brochures.**

Stray cats make up 81% of the total cat intake in some jurisdictions with than 1% being reclaimed. (Marston et al. 2009). There is little knowledge in the community of how to effectively recover a lost cat, and a significant amount of misinformation. If cat owners and carers were able to recover their cats effectively it would decrease the numbers of wandering cats as well as reducing intake to pounds and shelters.

Recommendation 12: **Provide adequate funding to ensure the One Health approach can be implemented in remote communities to prevent negative health impacts on people, cats and dogs, and wildlife.**

In remote communities where there are no permanent veterinary clinics, coordinated funding by Commonwealth, state and local governments is needed to provide vet services and subsidies for ongoing health and prevention of oversupply of cats and dogs.

Appropriate resource allocation is a vital component for this recommendation.

Recommendation 13: **Further research into new methods of management of cats in urban areas is urgently needed. The current legislative and regulatory approaches for managing cats in urban areas, primarily using a trap-and-kill approach, has not been effective thus far. Furthermore, statistical modelling and cost analyses have shown that this approach is not viable for governments or local councils.**

The best practice approach to managing domestic cats is to increase the proportion that are responsibly owned and desexed. There is a wealth of published research demonstrating that non-lethal management approaches based on desexing, adoption of socialised cats, and leaving unsocialised desexed strays in their home location, have led to significant reductions in urban stray cat populations, as demonstrated by international research (Levy et al. 2014; Nutter 2005; Spehar & Wolf 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Zito et al. 2018), and pilot studies in Australia (Swarbrick & Rand 2018; Tan et al. 2017). Leaving cats in their home location helps stabilise the social structure of the stray cats in that location, preventing immigration of stray cats from surrounding areas. When a large enough proportion (about 54%) of the stray cat population is desexed, and when immigrant cats are promptly managed through adoption or desexing and return to the colony, stray cat numbers decrease by 30% over 2 years and 50% over 5 years (Swarbrick & Rand 2018; Tan et al. 2017).

Additional research from overseas has demonstrated that targeted desexing of unowned urban cats results in a substantial reduction in the intake of cats and kittens to local shelters, and reduced calls to local government relating to dead cats on streets, strongly suggesting the approach also results in a smaller unowned cat population in the community at large (Levy et al 2014, Spehar & Wolf 2018 & 2019). This approach often referred to as a Community Cat Program, is widely used by local authorities in the USA and Europe where it is often regarded as best practice, and typically receives strong community support. For example, in a Florida study where 60 cats/1,000 residents were desexed (about 54% of the stray cat population), cat admissions to the local shelter decreased from 13 to 4 cats/1,000 residents, and euthanasia decreased from 8 to 0.4 cats/1,000 residents. Other studies from the USA have reported euthanasia rates for cats dropping from over 70% to 2-5% in shelters that have implemented such programs. Many of these shelters are now well below their carrying capacity for cats, with cat housing being reallocated for other activities, and the change is affecting the design of new shelter buildings. There is growing support for large-scale trials to confirm the efficacy of such programs in an Australian context (Wolf et al 2019).

A small-scale trial based on desexing has already been piloted in the city of Banyule, Victoria. This program offers free desexing, microchipping, and registration for all non-desexed cats in the targeted suburbs. Those who accept the offer to enrol the cat they are caring for complete paperwork for the microchip database and register the cat in their name with the local government. Of those who enrol a cat, 70% are semi-owners and 30% are owners. This strategy has reduced council impoundments from 1,004 cats in 2010-11 (8 cats/1,000 residents) to 141 in 2018-19 (1 cat/1,000 residents), and euthanasia from 578 to 41 cats/year (from 5 to 0.3 cats/1,000 residents). Between 2017 and 2019, the council used a targeted approach for the desexing strategy and over that 2 year period, impoundments decreased by 71% and euthanasia by 60%. It has also reduced cat-related complaints. Target areas were selected using existing information held by the council, which was used to identify cat hotspots in the local area using the addresses from which most cats surrendered to the shelter originated, and the areas where residents had expressed concerns about stray cats.

It should be noted that the implementation of mandatory desexing or mandatory confinement for cats is not an effective method to manage cats in urban areas as it does not address the underlying problem. High numbers of semi-owned and unowned cats are typically a problem in low socioeconomic areas where residents cannot afford the costs associated with desexing. When surveyed, many residents enrolling a cat in the Banyule program stated that they had been caring for and interacting with the cat on a daily basis, often multiple times each day. They described themselves as being very attached to the cat that they care for and that it gave them a reason to get up in the morning. Most residents reported that the primary reason they had not already had

the cat desexed was because it was unaffordable. When they were offered desexing, microchipping, vaccination and registration were offered free of charge, they supported it and took on official ownership of the cat.

Appropriate resource allocation is a vital component for this recommendation.

Recommendation 14: **Utilise the AIAM endorsed G2Z Australian Cat Action Plan and the RSPCA Identifying Best Practice Cat Management in Australia 2018 which complement each other and are based on wide consultation and negotiation between stakeholders for best strategies to manage domestic cat populations.**