

Care and Management of Free Living Cats

It is emphasised that the views expressed in this document are those of members of the Companion Animals Advisory Board and should not be regarded as constituting legal advice. Councils and members of the public should seek their own legal advice if requiring clarification or interpretation of the law.

Councils may be confronted with the issue of numbers of cats living in well-defined areas. These cats may not appear to have an owner and may be the subject of a complaint by residents of the area. While each situation will be different and should be treated on its merits, some general considerations to such situations will apply. Councils need to determine how best to respond to such complaints and it is recommended that councils determine their likely response as part of the development of their Companion Animal Management Plan.

All cats deserve responsible carers

Ideally, all domestic cats would have permanent homes with loving, responsible carers, but for many cats this is not the case. The future for many unwanted, dumped cats and kittens is death from starvation, disease, motor vehicle accidents, abuse, or from attacks by other animals. However, some of these cats do survive to reproduce and establish colonies of free-living cats

These cat 'colonies' can be found behind shopping areas or businesses, in alleys, parks, abandoned buildings, and rural areas. The factor controlling the size of the colony is the availability of food - so the colony is not independent of humans. The cats are generally elusive and do not trust humans. They are not "feral cats" which are, by definition, cats that have minimal or no reliance on humans.

Local residents or business owners sometimes complain about the presence of these colonies because of concerns over noise, faeces and disease potential.

At least four options are available to council to address the reason for the complaint:

- do nothing and hope the cause of the complaint will disappear;
- try to control the amount of food the cats are receiving to discourage their presence;
- try to remove the cats by trapping; and
- trap the cats, desex the healthy ones and return them to the site to stop the number of cats increasing.

In the longer term, council may reduce the numbers of unwanted cats by the introduction of education programs aimed at ensuring that all cats are desexed except for those kept specifically for breeding.

Trapping and killing the cats may provide a short-term improvement in the situation for the residents but is not likely to provide a long-term solution. Almost inevitably, not all the cats can be caught and numbers build up again as long as a food source remains. Thus a cycle of reducing, build up of numbers and further trapping may develop. All food sources must be removed if establishment of a new colony is to be prevented.

Studies in the UK, US and Australia have indicated that trapping desexing and returning the cats to where they were trapped is a successful method of stabilising and maintaining healthy free-living cat colonies at a relatively low cost to local governments and residents, while providing a reasonable quality of life for the animals themselves. There may be ongoing complaints from residents if this approach is taken.

In determining the approach to be adopted councils should take the following factors into account:-

- what is the nature of the complaint?
- are the cats healthy?
- is there someone who will be prepared to care for the cats if they are desexed and returned to the site?
- is the site in an environmentally sensitive area or near busy roadways or schools or shopping centres?
- is there community support for the cats to remain if measures are taken to address the complaints?
- what are the likely benefits to the cats and the community of the alternative approaches?
- what are the likely costs to the cats and the community of the alternative approaches?

Trapping of cats

The trapping of cats, whether as part of management of a colony, or of stray cats for rehoming or euthanasia must be undertaken in a humane manner. Guidelines for such trapping should be provided to all those undertaking such work.

Issues to be considered regarding trapping:-

- what justification is there for trapping the cat(s)?
- who should be allowed to trap?
- should traps be available for hiring - if so what conditions should be placed on the hirer?
- what are the legal implications of trapping and/or hiring of traps?
- need to advise neighbours if trapping is to occur to avoid trapping owned cats
- trapping of females with dependent young must be avoided
- need to develop a protocol of best practice for the trapping of cats to ensure their welfare is not compromised - protocol to cover siting of traps, frequency of inspection, methods of trapping, handling of trapped cats, checking of identification, fate of trapped cats).

Trap, desex and release

If a decision is made to trap, desex and return a colony, then for it to be successfully managed, the caliber of the caretaker is critical. Colony caretakers must be committed to long-term care. If more than one person is providing care for a colony, it is essential to coordinate efforts so that ongoing care will be available should one caretaker go on vacation, become sick or move from the area. Daily food and water should be provided

It should be noted that the trap-desex-release approach is not a practice that is generally endorsed by the major groups involved with cats because of concerns about the long-term well being of the cats.

Advantages of trap-desex-release schemes:

- stabilises the population at manageable levels
- eliminates annoying behaviours associated with mating
- is humane to the animals and fosters compassion in the neighbourhoods
- may be more effective and less costly than repeated attempts at extermination --- costs for repeatedly trapping and killing of cats in colonies are far higher than promoting stable, non-breeding colonies in the same location.

Disadvantages associated with trap-desex-release schemes:

- health of cats is difficult to maintain - cats that have already been trapped become shy of traps and are difficult to trap again for treatment
- colonies can be a harbor for disease
- the existence of colonies can encourage people to dump more cats and kittens at that site
- the colony must have the support of all neighbours otherwise complaints will arise
- long-term carers must be available - many cats in stabilised colonies will live for 10 years or longer.
- if carers become ill or die the welfare of the cats is compromised and neighbours may become impatient
- colonies can be the object of abuse of "cat hating" people
- predation of wildlife may continue
- not consistent with the Companion Animals Act and the requirement for identification and registration of cats.

The issues raised above can provide guidance in helping councils prepare their Companion Animal Management Plans.