

Benchmarking Victoria - an all Council view & comparison

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Introduction

The Victorian Bureau of Animal Welfare and the Domestic Animal Management Implementation Committee (DAMIC) recently undertook a survey of animal management services provided by Local Government throughout the 79 Victorian Councils. This report will summarise the background, aim, methodology and key findings of the benchmarking exercise and how the information is to be used for the future.

Background

The Bureau of Animal Welfare is the Victorian Government Department responsible for the development of the *Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals 1994* (the Act) and Government Policy. For a number of years local government expressed concerns about the variance and general lack of resources and representation available to Animal Control Officers throughout Victoria to assist them in administering the Act. Consequently, the Domestic Animal Management Implementation Committee (DAMIC) was formed as a Departmental advisory committee comprising members from Industry, Local Government, Welfare and pet owners to discuss and advise the Department on matters relating to the management of domestic animals in Victoria and the implementation of the Act.

As part of DAMIC's initial strategic planning and developmental stage it was identified that a number of issues requiring its consideration involved local government administration of the Act and that the issues raised were based on industry or public perceptions rather than actual fact. This lack of validated information made both the Bureau and DAMIC's task of assessing and assisting council implementation of the Act difficult, consequently it was agreed that statistical information was needed to assist both local government, DAMIC and the Bureau in their deliberations.

The benchmarking exercise was developed by a working group of DAMIC. It involved identifying animal management industry standards for Victoria by regularly surveying all councils in the State. Specifically the aim of the exercise was to:

- Determine what the Victorian animal management industry standard or "best practice" is;
- Review council implementation of the Domestic (Feral & Nuisance) Animals Act 1994;
- Determine the effectiveness and/or deficiencies of the current legalisation;
- Identify how services might be improved at both a local and state level;
- Identify emerging trends, along with areas requiring future funding, research, programs or training;
- Compare individual councils performance with that of like or similar councils;
- Help with identifying council processes and service needs;
- Assist with the establishment of realistic goals;
- Create a competitive environment for "like or similar" councils providing an incentive to improve and develop professional pride.

Methodology

The benchmarking process is a technique that identifies the performance of organisations whilst promoting and enabling continuous improvement by identifying both industry leaders and the average against which individual councils are able to assess their programs.

In June 2003 a questionnaire comprising 75 questions (100 including sub-questions) was sent to the Chief Executive Officer of each council requesting information on their council's animal control services for the 2001/02 financial year. Questions included information on the demographics of the municipality, registration fees and rates, officer numbers and training, impounding statistics, enforcement activities and results together with public education activities etc.

Of the 79 councils in Victoria, 77 participated in and completed the survey, however it should be noted that some councils were not able to provide all the data requested due to the limitations in their current record systems.

To enable meaningful comparisons Councils were divided into like groups based on population, size and type ie; metropolitan, outer metropolitan, large provincial, rural 1, and rural 2 (these categories were originally created by the Victorian Department of Infrastructure). Additionally, to enable meaningful comparison of the data many of the charts were based on generic scales such as 'per 1,000 households' etc.

The database developed specifically to analyse the information provided and produce generic reports has been formulated to enable similar comparisons to occur in future years. The ongoing collection and evaluation of data will assist with the monitoring of the effectiveness of services and the resources provided by both local and state government against the objectives of the Act and the future of domestic animal management in Victoria.

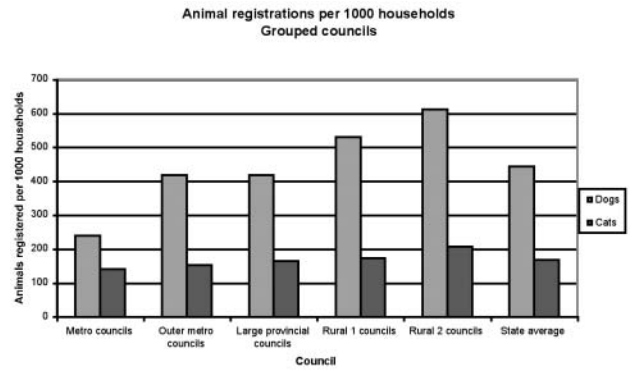
Results

Whilst the Benchmarking exercise produced a plethora of statical data which has been broken down to individual council comparisons it is impractical to discuss each of the findings in this paper. Therefore for the purpose of this paper the information and discussion has been limited to a summary of the key findings based on the like council groupings and the Victorian state average. Additionally it should be noted that the comments concerning the benchmarking findings are based on discussions with local government and knowledge of the industry.

A summary of the major results of the benchmarking survey for the financial year 2001/2002 is as follows:

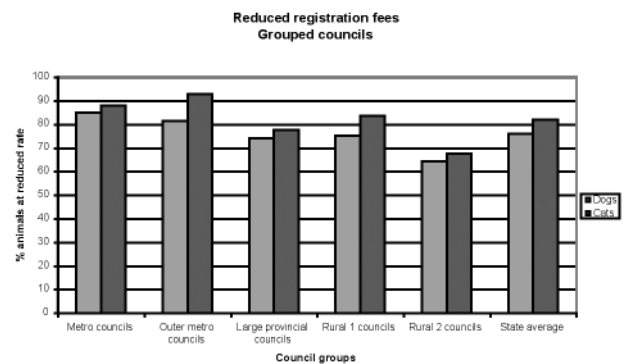
Registration

During the 2001/02 financial year a total of 586,815 dogs and 253,261 cats were registered in Victoria. Based on research previously conducted by BIS Shrapnel (2003) it is estimated that Victoria has an estimated total of 913,000 dogs and 616,000 cats. Consequently based on the findings of the research it is estimated that around 64% of the total dog population and 41% of the total cat population are currently registered with councils.



As depicted in this chart there is a significant variance in the number of dogs registered (more) in rural areas as opposed to metropolitan based residency. However in comparison the registration of cats is generally similar across all the council groupings and is significantly less than dogs.

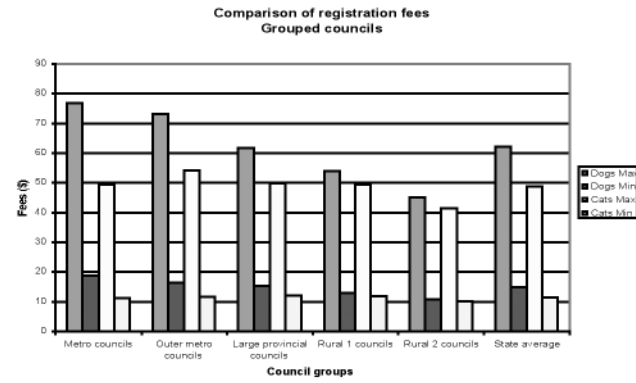
The lower registration rate for cats is likely to be due to a combination of reasons including the existence of a 'semi-owned' cat population, differences between cat and dog owners in relation to the value placed on pets, the lesser likelihood of cat owners being caught for having an unregistered animal and differing levels of council services provided for cat compared to dog registration fees. Whereas rural councils had a higher average number of dogs registered per 1,000 households than did wider metropolitan or large provincial council groups, the latter finding may be because rural councils have more households with dogs (eg working dogs, large property sizes etc).



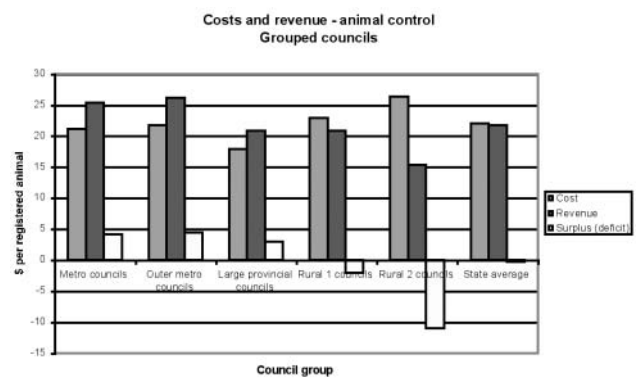
On average in Victoria, 81.89% of registered cats and 76% of registered dogs were registered for the reduced fee. Reduced fee in Victoria is available to owners of cats and dogs when they are desexed, microchipped, registered with an applicable organisation etc. The fact that a higher proportion of cats compared to dogs are registered for the reduced fee could be due to the tendency of entire cats to cause more nuisance problems for owners (eg spraying, unwanted breeding etc).

Registration Fee

Compared to rural councils, wider metropolitan councils had a higher proportion of pets registered for the reduced fee, possibly because they had a greater difference between their maximum and minimum dog registration fees. Subsequently, the incentive for metropolitan owners who desex or microchip their dogs is that they can save more money on registration than would rural pet owners undertaking the same activities.



Additionally dog registration fees (both minimum and maximum) were significantly higher than cat registration fees. This reflects the reduced levels of animal control services some councils provide for cat compared to dog owners, or the belief that cat owners would not be willing to pay higher fees. Whilst all council groups charged similar minimum and maximum cat registration fees, there were some differences between the council groups in relation to dog registration fees; wider metropolitan councils charged more for these than did rural councils, reflecting full cost recovery.

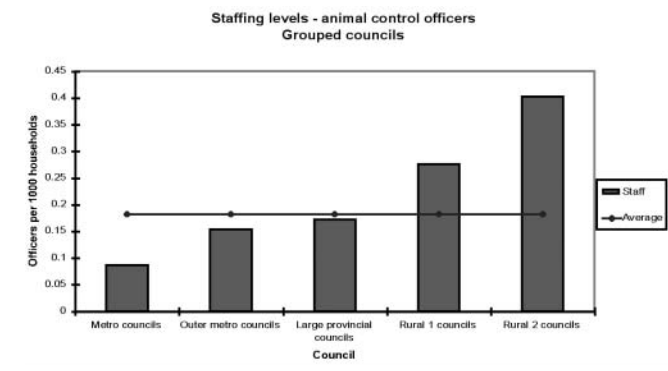


On average across the state, animal control cost \$22.08 per dog/cat, with an average revenue of \$21.74, and deficit of \$0.27. While wider metropolitan (this includes metropolitan and outer metropolitan councils) and large provincial councils generally operated with a surplus, most rural councils had higher costs, lower registration fees, less revenue and subsequently ran at a deficit.

Staffing Issues

Whilst on average each council employs 0.2 of an Officer per 1000 households, surprisingly the benchmarking exercise showed that rural councils had a significantly higher ratio of officers per household than did the other council groups. The main reason for this is probably travel time, because rural officers have to cover such large areas when investigating complaints or impounding animals. Metropolitan councils due to their shorter travel distance and dense living environment obtain what is termed an economy of scale resulting in the ability to employ less officers to perform similar duties. Additionally there may be some data accuracy problems relating to the incorrect allocation and proportionment of multi-skilled staff time.

On average, each animal control officer in the state received only 25.22 hours of training per year. Outer metropolitan councils provided their officers with significantly more training than did the other, particularly rural, council groups.

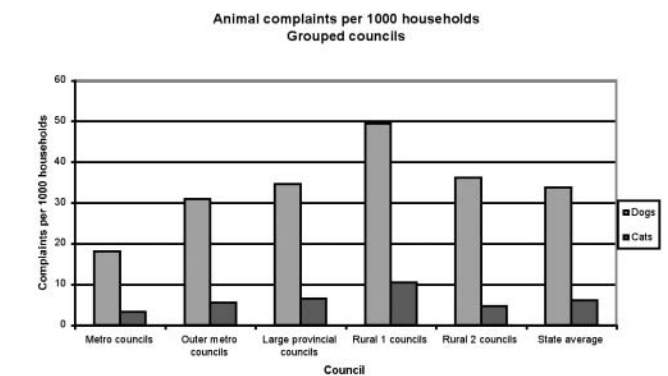


It may be difficult for rural officers to travel long distances for courses, or for rural councils to cover costs of on-site training.

Correlations revealed that the more training hours provided by councils, the more community education activities were also undertaken. In addition, there seemed to be a relationship between officer training and prosecution success rates.

Complaints

On average across the state, there were significantly more complaints about dogs (33.80 per 1,000 households) compared to complaints about cats (6.11 per 1,000 households). This is not surprising given that the legislation provides many more ways to complain about dogs than cats; that provisions relating to cat trespass on private property can be difficult to administer; and that there are additional safety (ie attack) concerns relating to dogs.

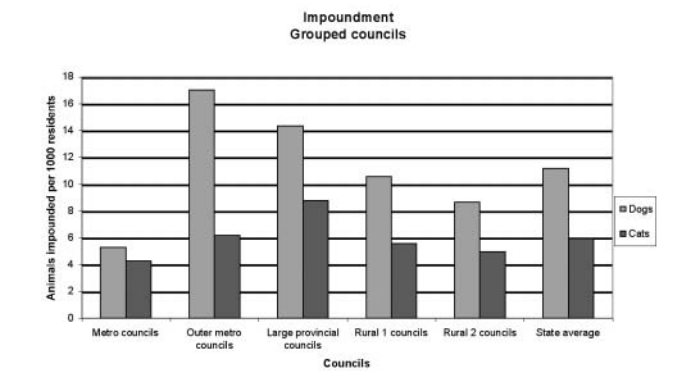


In contrast to the general assumption that higher density metropolitan areas would have more animal complaints, benchmarking charts show that rural 1 councils had more animal complaints per 1,000 households than did the other council groups. It is unclear why this is the case; possible factors include rural areas having more households with dogs, or rural residents having a different attitude towards the control of pets.

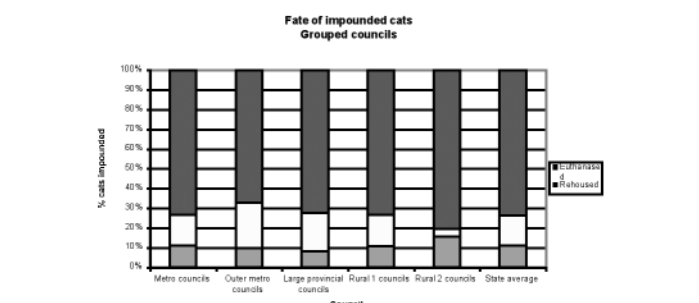
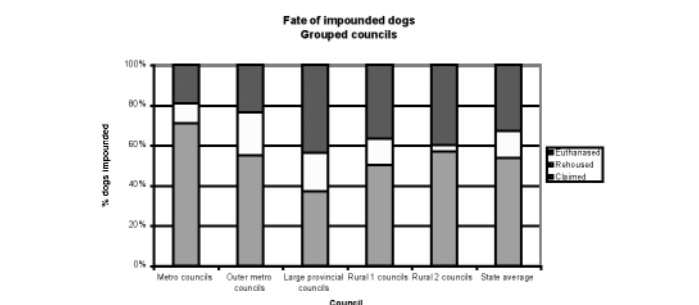
Statewide, the types of pet complaints were fairly consistent. The most common problem was dogs wandering at large (4.64% of the registered dog population), followed by cat trespass on private property (3.81% of registered cats), barking dogs (2% of registered dogs) and dogs being exercised off leash in on lead areas (0.19% of registered dogs).

Impoundment Statistics

On average across the state, councils impounded significantly more dogs (11.17 per 1,000 residents) compared to cats (5.95 per 1,000 residents). This reflects the fact that councils receive substantially more complaints concerning dogs rather than cats. Inner city areas impounded the least pets, perhaps because they also had the lowest rate of pet registration (ie due to high-density housing) and the lowest number of complaints per 1,000 households.



Outer metropolitan and large provincial councils impounded the most dogs, which is surprising given that rural 1 councils had the highest rate of complaints per 1,000 households. This could be due to rural officers only impounding dogs in response to specific complaints, whereas officers in higher density metropolitan areas could also be impounding dogs seen at large whilst on general street patrols. In addition some rural officers may be more likely to return a dog to its property rather than impound it, particularly if the owner is known and long travel time to the pound is involved.



Although there were differences in the rate of dogs impounded, there were no differences in the rate of cats impounded between the council groups. This indicates there is an equivalent demand from the community (ie per 1,000 residents) across the state for cat control services and facilities.

In Victoria, significantly higher proportions of impounded dogs were reclaimed by owners (53.07%) compared to cats reclaimed by owners (11.49%). A significantly higher proportion of impounded cats were euthanased (75.84%) compared to dogs euthanased (32.44%). There were no major differences in the proportion of dogs rehoused (13.31%) compared to cats rehoused (15.59%).

Whilst the reclaim rate for cats is still significantly less than dogs it is nevertheless on the increase. According to the Victorian Cat Protection Society, prior to the introduction of the Act in 1996 the reclaiming rate for stray cats in Victoria was 0.01%, compared to the current benchmarking figure of 11.49%. Nationally in 2001, the reclaiming rate for stray cats was only 3% according to the Cat Protection Society.

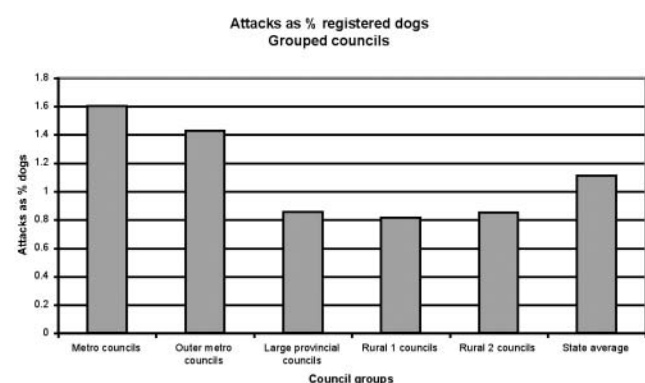
The high euthanasia rates for cats may be because many cats caught in trapping programs are wild, feral or diseased (and therefore immediately euthanased). Low cat reclaim rates may be due to fewer cats being registered, making it difficult to identify their owners. In addition, those responsible for 'semi-owned' cats may not be willing to, or may not think of, looking for missing cats or reclaiming them from the pound.

While benchmarking charts show the proportion of rehoused dogs and cats is similar, it is likely that many councils record all unclaimed pets with suitable temperaments that are sent on to animal shelters as 'rehoused'. In actual fact, a much smaller proportion of cats compared to dogs may ultimately be rehoused after they reach the animal welfare shelters.

Dog Attacks

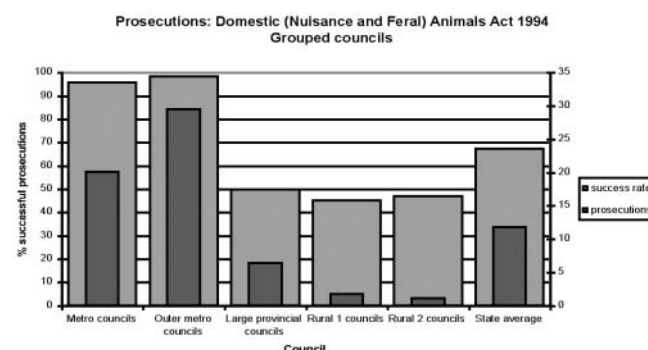
In Victoria during the 2001/2002 financial year, a total of 7,489 dog attack, rush and aggression incidents were reported to councils. This is an average of 144 incidents per week across the state. Wider metropolitan councils had the highest rate of dog attacks compared to other council groups. This could be because these areas are higher density (and there is more likelihood of residents coming into contact with aggressive dogs in streets and parks). Wider metropolitan councils also undertake more education activities (which have been shown to increase dog attack reporting rates), and their residents may have different expectations about dogs than do people in rural areas.

During the benchmarking project period there were a total of 156 declared Dangerous Dogs, 333 declared Guard Dogs, and 56 declared Menacing Dogs living in Victoria.



Enforcement

On average across the state, infringements were issued against 1.99% of the registered dog and cat population. Rural councils issued fewer infringements as a proportion of registered pets than did the other council groups. This is surprising given their high rates of animal complaints.



In Victoria, councils prosecuted 11.77% of animal complaints, and of these prosecutions, 67.21% were successful. Wider metropolitan councils prosecuted more complaints than did rural councils and also had a higher success rate. It is interesting to compare the prosecution success rate with the level of training provided to officers, as there appears to be a correlation, ie the more training provided to Officers the increased likelihood of a successful prosecution.

Overall, compared to other council groups, even though rural councils have the highest rate of animal complaints, they have the lowest rates of animals impounded and infringements issued, they undertake the lowest proportion of prosecutions and the least education activities.

Issues regarding the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994

Based on these results, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the effectiveness of the current legislation. One of the main purposes of the legislation is to create a registration scheme for dogs and cats that promotes responsible pet ownership. Benchmarking results indicate that this has been a success. The vast majority of registered pets attract the reduced fee due to being desexed, microchipped, obedience trained, or registered with an applicable organisation. In areas of Victoria where there is a greater difference between minimum and maximum registration fees, the proportion of reduced fee pets increases. This suggests that the different fee structures do provide an incentive for owners to desex or microchip their pets, or undertake other responsible pet ownership activities in order to save money on registration.

Benchmarking statistics show that much less than 10% of the estimated total pet population in Victoria is involved in animal complaints. Prior to the introduction of the legislation, when the Victorian Social Development Committee held a public enquiry into the role and welfare of companion animals in society, it was estimated that around 20% of all pet owners were irresponsible and caused problems for the community (Vic. Hansard, 1994). These figures suggest that since the legislation was brought in the extent of irresponsible pet ownership in the community has decreased. These results are supported by a recent survey

of Melbourne households (Van de Kuyt, 2003) which found that 79% of respondents saw fewer dogs wandering at large in the streets nowadays compared to five years ago (ie pre-legislation).

Key Findings Requiring Further Consideration

1. **Pet registration.** Only around 64% of all dogs and 41% of all cats in Victoria are registered. By providing a legal link between dogs, cats and their owners, registration is an integral part of responsible pet ownership and is one of the main objectives of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act. Increasing the number of registered pets will provide more funding to improve and expand council animal management services for residents and government education programs on responsible pet ownership. The more pets that are registered per 1,000 households, the less animal control tends to cost council per animal (ie due to efficiencies of scale) and the lower registration fees can be for owners (because the larger number of animals boosts council revenue).

2. **Cat ownership issues.** Statewide there is a consistent demand for cat control services and facilities. There is also considerable disparity in the proportion of cats compared to dogs that are registered and in the fate of impounded cats compared to impounded dogs. These results seem to indicate that problems relating to cats are very different to those relating to dogs, despite the fact that they currently tend to be addressed in the same way. For instance, while the bulk of dog problems may relate to owned pet nuisance issues, perhaps one of the main difficulties with cats could be the overpopulation of feral and semi owned animals (it is likely that the latter also skews impoundment statistics).

3. **Dog and cat wandering at large complaints.** Between 2 to 6% of the registered dog and cat populations in Victoria are involved in wandering at large or trespass complaints, making these the most common animal control problems.

4. **Animal control service difficulties faced by rural councils.** Overall it seems that rural councils provide fewer animal control services for their communities than do wider metropolitan councils. Even though rural councils have the highest rate of animal complaints they have the lowest rates of animals impounded and infringements issued, they undertake the lowest proportion of prosecutions and the least education activities.

This may be a result of particular difficulties faced by rural councils in relation to animal control. For instance, they have to provide services for large areas (in terms of square kilometres) with relatively few staff, many of whom have to take on additional roles such as local laws and fire prevention. There may be fewer training opportunities for officers and they may have to contend with quite different community expectations regarding animal control than do officers in wider metropolitan areas. In addition rural councils are generally under resourced and operate at a loss (and they might feel that given their service limitations, they cannot raise more revenue by charging higher pet registration fees like the wider metropolitan councils).

5. **Animal control officer training.** On average across the state, each animal control officer only receives 25.22 hours of training annually. Benchmarking results suggest that adequate training of officers is important to assist them with community education activities and implementation of the Act, particularly in regard to undertaking successful prosecutions.

Impediment to the Exercise

Whilst initially some councils were suspicious and reluctant to participate in the project this fear was overcome by ensuring Councils that their identity would remain confidential. Consequently whilst each Council was provided with a copy of their like group results, council names were substituted with random codes. Individual councils knew their own code, but not those of others in the like group.

Additionally and upon analysis of the data supplied concern has been expressed about the accuracy of the information supplied by individual councils. Whilst every effort has been made to verify the data the information provided is only as accurate as the data received.

Finally although some councils were willing to participate in the benchmarking exercise they were unable to supply the information required due to extent and nature of records kept at the time.

Conclusion

The Benchmarking exercise has proven to be a valuable tool in identifying the level of services and success of animal control in Victoria at a point in time, the 2001/02 financial year. Based on the benchmarking findings the Bureau of Animal Welfare, DAMIC and individual councils will be able to review the findings and work together on developing a strategy to enhance, review and improve the services provided by Victorian Councils and State Government.

Additionally its hoped that other States and Territories will adopt the Victorian, or similar, questionnaires and reporting models which will enable benchmarking and cross analysis of different States and Territories and ultimately result in national data and information on domestic animal control in Australia.

The benchmarking results discussed in this paper only deal with issues at a regional level and the more important findings. There is still a wealth of data collected by councils that could be analysed, but this was beyond the scope of the current report and this paper.

One of the major benefits of the Victorian council animal control benchmarking exercise will become apparent when future surveys enable long term monitoring of animal control services, issues and trends over the years.

Acknowledgements

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