



AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ANIMAL MANAGEMENT SUBMISSION

REUNITING LOST PETS REVIEW

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 companion 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 companion animal management.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 1: Remove the need for animal shelters and veterinary clinics to have an 84Y Agreement with the Local Council before being able to contact the owners of identified pets found by Good Samaritans.

Recommendation 2: Institute provision for any unidentified or unclaimed (suggest within 24 hours) dog to be collected by the Council they were found in and impounded at the impounding facility to serve the mandatory stray hold period.

Recommendation 3: Ensure finders of lost pets have the opportunity to adopt the pet once stray hold period is served.

Recommendation 4: Implement separate return to owner strategies for cats that are different to the strategies applied to dogs, given the evidence available on lost cat, lost cat finder and lost cat owner/carer behaviour.

Recommendation 5: Prioritise expanding and increasing return to owner strategies.

Recommendation 6: Improve the community's view of Council animal management impounding facility operations and outcomes.

Recommendation 7: Separate registration increase strategies from return to owner strategies.

Recommendation 8: Implement review of 8-day stray hold period.

Recommendation 9: Review mechanics of the opt-in consent provision for owner details being available for reunification purposes, on microchip form.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

AIAM are encouraged to see the emphasis that the Victorian Government has on “Any process should prioritise reuniting the lost pet with their owner as quickly and safely as possible, to mitigate welfare risks” as stated in the Reuniting Lost Pets Issues paper.

1. *Remove the need for animal shelters and veterinary clinics to have an 84Y Agreement with the Local Council before being able to contact the owners of identified pets found by Good Samaritans.*

Good Samaritans that find lost pets need to have the options of utilising the services of their local veterinary clinic or animal shelter to determine if the pet has identification. Veterinary clinics and animal shelters don't need an 84Y agreement to do this, the agreements are onerous and unnecessary. It is up to them whether they provide this service for their community or not. If they choose not to provide the service, they need to refer the Good Samaritan to the Local Council for further advice.

Having more convenient locations in the community to reunite lost pets with owners will increase positive outcomes.

It is difficult to see how public safety matters, in terms of access to owner information, have arisen by vet clinics and shelters reunifying pets with their owners, as reported in the Reuniting Lost Pets Issues paper. If directives regarding who can access microchip and registration database information, and how the information is used, are upheld risks should be minimal. Any risks also apply to Council staff having access to the databases.

One way to reduce the risk surrounding lack of Council knowledge of loose dogs is to have a basic, online reporting system, notifying Council of repeat offender dogs and to be able to effectively identify and manage containment issues with potentially problematic dogs.

A completely separate agreement needs to be utilised to allow unclaimed pets to be taken into the care of rehoming organisations. However, the preferred option would be for Council to have a rehoming program inhouse to ensure pets are returned back into the community they came from.

2. *Institute provision for any unidentified or unclaimed (suggest within 24 hours) dog to be collected by Council and impounded at the impounding facility to serve the mandatory stray hold period.*

If the pet is unidentified, not reclaimed by the owner within 24 hours, or if the clinic or shelter cannot hold the pet in the short term, then the pet should be collected by Council and impounded. There needs to be one central facility that holds lost pets for that municipality. Making it clear to the community that there is one location to find their pet will increase reclaims and reduce confusion and distress for all involved.

Allowing shelters and clinics to hold and dispose of lost pets decreases the chances of the original owner finding the pet. Experiences during the Black Saturday fires revealed that many pets were permanently separated from their original owners as pets found in the disaster areas were transferred out of those areas and individual vet clinics and shelters made autonomous decisions about the future of the pets.

There is no need for vet clinics to be holding onto pets' long term (longer than 24 hours) unless they are in need of medical care that Council or the impounding facility cannot provide.

3. Ensure finders of lost pets have the opportunity to adopt the pet once stray hold period is served.

One of the reasons that the community is reluctant to call Local Council to collect a lost pet is that they are concerned for the outcome for the pet if not claimed. Many finders are willing to adopt the pet if unclaimed and this should be embraced and encouraged wherever possible. Ensuring that the finder is kept informed and able to easily adopt the pet if unclaimed is a small step with potentially significant future outcomes in terms of attitudes towards Council animal management.

4. Implement separate return to owner strategies for cats that are different to the strategies applied to dogs, given the evidence available on lost cat behaviour and lost cat owner/carerer behaviour.

Evidenceⁱ suggests that cats and dogs behave very differently when they are lost and stray. In addition, lost cat finders and owners/carers behave very differently when they find or lose a cat and these differences need to be acknowledged and accepted when developing strategies for cat reunification.

Cats are 13 times more likely to return to their owners if they are not impounded and 94% of indoor cats and 84% of outdoor cats are found within a 5-house radius of their home.

Cat owners may not start looking for their cat until a few days to a week have gone past. If the cat has been impounded it may have already finished, or be near the end of, its stray hold period before the owners even start to look for it.

Given that the mean reclaim rate for cats from Victorian poundsⁱⁱ and shelters is less than 15% (with some Councils having reclaim rates as low as 0-5%) and the mean live release outcome is 45%, with some Councils euthanising over 90% of cats (compared to 73% and 71% for dogs), it is imperative that current strategies for reuniting cats with their owners are reviewed and improved upon. It is very unlikely that the cat will have been involved in a community safety incident and so the risks that might apply to a loose dog are unlikely to apply to a cat.

If the cat appears to be healthy, removing it from where it is living will put its life at significant risk. Impounding cats' costs Council and the community millions of dollars a year with the average cost to collect, hold for 4 days and euthanase a cat being around \$220ⁱⁱⁱ. Delaying impounding cats wherever possible is also in keeping with the statement made by the Victorian Government in the Reuniting lost pets issues paper, "The Government would like to reunite these lost pets more efficiently and reduce any regulatory, administrative and resource burdens on councils, vets and animal shelters." Supporting Good Samaritans, who have found a cat, with advice on how to locate the owner/carer is likely to have the best outcome for the cat, as well as the owner and the Council. Impound is always an option if the finder is not willing or able to follow the advice, or if the cat is unwell or injured.



Getting 2 Zero (G2Z) have produced a series of lost and found pet information brochures^{iv} that have been endorsed by AIAM. These brochures are free for anyone to access, print off and use to help their community have the necessary information to reunite pets with their carers. In addition, G2Z have a range of online, fully editable, lost and found poster makers^v. Councils can add their corporate branding and other details to the posters, and they are also available online and free to use.

Owners, carers and finders need to be supported and have this information made available to them to maximise the chances of a pet being reunited with its original home.

5. Prioritise expanding and increasing return to owner strategies.

Information on increasing return to owner strategies can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

These strategies do not need to be costly or difficult to implement and can include:

- Vet clinics being supported to microchip all pets
- Feature all lost pets (whether impounded or not) on Council website and social media
- Free microchipping, collar and identification tags for the pets of Council residents
- Utilising the free posters mentioned above in Recommendation 4
- Ensuring the impounding facility is accessible in terms of opening hours and for those community members that don't have access to a car.
- Counselling owners on how to find missing pets using the information provided in the brochures mentioned above in Recommendation 4
- Determining the needs of the pet owner to ensure the pet does not become lost again
- Capture accurate data and review for areas of need to target with specific strategies

6: Improve the community's view of Council animal management impounding facility operations and outcomes.

In 2020, more than ever, we need to embrace current technology and community communication avenues, as the first step for anyone who has lost a pet and who has access to the internet is to go to their local community social media pages. Ensuring Local Government has a presence on these pages, providing support to the community to resolve their problems wherever possible, ensures the best possible outcomes for all and staff who are free to address serious animal management issues if required.

Community safety does not need to be compromised in order to have an improved community perception of the department. Findings^{vi} from a 2001 Victorian Government Bureau of Animal Welfare study, suggested that community members had better attitudes about Local Government Animal Management services, and rated the services higher, when they were seen to working with/for the community.

Currently many people in the community don't see that utilising Councils' services is putting the pet's best interests first. Increasing public confidence in the services relies upon positive outcomes for pets, the community and their owners and carers, and making sure that the community are aware of these positive outcomes. Increasing live release outcomes, increasing return to owner strategies, increased proactive

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companion animal management strategies (as opposed to a reactive only approach) and supporting the municipalities pet owners and carers to be what we need them to be will all work towards improving relations with the community.

7: *Separate registration increase strategies from return to owner strategies.*

Registration and return to owner strategies need to be dealt with separately as linking them reduces the efficacy of both initiatives. The community needs to know “what’s in it for me?”.

By linking registration requirements to RTO procedures, Councils miss the opportunity to understand and meaningfully address common reasons for failure to register while also reducing the likelihood that pets will be returned to their owners. Both RTO and registration compliance should be seen as opportunities to positively engage with the community. Initiatives such as first year free registration and free ID tag convey the message that council prioritises RTO while also increasing registration compliance.

Additionally, and separately, positively engaging the community by increasing direct benefits of registration to individuals and demonstrating these benefits results in higher registration compliance and better council-community relationships. We recommend you view the [Camden Council presentation](#) given at the 8th National G2Z Summit for their initiatives to increase positive engagement with community.

8: *Implement review of 8-day stray hold period.*

A recent survey of the Victorian Shelter Forum participants revealed what has long been suspected by leadership in this space. That reclaim of lost/stray cats and dogs occurs within the first 3 days of the impound period. Therefore, the current 8-day stray hold period is unjustifiably too long and has serious welfare implications for the pets involved and financial implications for impounding facilities.

We recommend that a review is conducted into the average length of stay to reclaim by municipalities who operate their own impounding service, to determine if the trend is also present there.

9: *Review mechanics of the opt-in consent provision for owner details being available for reunification purposes, on microchip form.*

We agree with comment made in the Reuniting Lost Pets Issues paper and recommend review into a wider use of the consent provision (or having an opt-out rather than opt-in approach for owners to this provision) could assist vet clinics and shelters to more quickly reunite lost pets with their owners.

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<https://www.g2z.org.au/pdf/Search%20methods%20used%20to%20locate%20missing%20cats%20and%20locations%20where%20missing%20cats%20are%20found%20Huang%20et%20al.pdf>

ii

<https://www.g2z.org.au/pdf/Strategies%20to%20Reduce%20the%20Euthanasia%20of%20Impounded%20Dogs%20and%20Cats%20Used%20by%20Councils%20in%20Victoria,%20Australia%20Rand%20et%20al.pdf>

iii

<https://www.g2z.org.au/assets/pdf/The%20Benefits%20of%20Councils%20Funding%20Cooperative%20Desexing%20Programs%20Final%20Jan2020.pdf>

iv <https://www.g2z.org.au/return-to-owners.html>

v Ibid

vi Turning research into reality: How Councils can use findings from a survey to help manage pets in the community – Van der Kuyt, 2004 UAM Conference accessed from the AIAM website