



# How targeted, high-intensity, free cat desexing programs are reducing biosecurity risks in urban areas of Australia

Jacquie Rand<sup>1,2</sup> and Emily Lancaster<sup>2</sup>

Correspondence: info@petwelfare.org.au

<sup>1</sup> School of Veterinary Science, The University of Queensland, Gatton, Qld 4343; <sup>2</sup> Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, Kenmore, Qld 4069



The Australian Community Cat Program is a research project initiated and led by the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, which is a not-for-profit organisation focused on reducing euthanasia in animal welfare shelters and local government facilities.

**The aim is to demonstrate that a proactive approach to managing cats, using high-intensity, free desexing programs that prevent kittens being born, is an effective method to humanely reduce their numbers and associated biosecurity risks in urban and peri-urban areas of Australia.**

This collaborative project is being run across four Australian States and targeted to areas with a high cat intake into shelters and pounds, or high numbers of cat-related complaints to councils. It is primarily aimed at desexing owned cats and those being cared for by semi-owners (defined as people who did not regard the cat as their property). There is also a focus on converting semi-owners to owners and increasing responsible cat caring behaviours.

## OBJECTIVES

- Decrease number of free-living and free-roaming cats and increase proportion of responsibly owned cats and cat caring attitudes and behaviours (e.g. desexing and confinement)
- Reduce biosecurity risks from free-living and free-roaming cats, including wildlife predation and disease risks to pets, humans and wildlife
- Reduce nuisance behaviours (e.g. cat fighting and property soiling) leading to fewer cat-related complaints to local government and requests for trapping equipment
- Decrease intake and euthanasia of cats in shelters and pounds and reduce recurring annual management costs (as a result of reduced cat admissions & impoundments)

## PROGRESS OF THE COMMUNITY CAT PROGRAM IN THE CITY OF IPSWICH, QUEENSLAND

### TARGET SUBURBS

Selected based on their high cat and kitten intake into RSPCA shelters, including high proportion of healthy or treatable strays, low proportion desexed (<25%) and over representation of pre-weaned kittens and poorly socialised adults.

Queensland = 7 cats / 1,000 residents	Rosewood = 25 cats / 1,000 residents
Ipswich = 15 cats / 1,000 residents	Goodna = 25 cats / 1,000 residents
2017-2021 RSPCA intake and outcome data	Redbank Plains = 21 cats / 1,000 residents

### CHARACTERISTICS AND ATTITUDES OF RESIDENTS IN TARGET SUBURBS

Residents indicated their most important priorities for cat management are to stop kittens being born (93%), decrease wildlife predation (90%), reduce risk of disease to humans, pets and wildlife (86%-88%) and stop nuisance behaviours (65%-74%).

Cats are owned by 34% of residents (of which 89% are desexed) and 7% of residents feed a stray cat that they do not perceive is their property (semi-owners). Some semi-owners also own a cat.

2020-21 survey of residents in Rosewood, Goodna and Redbank Plains, City of Ipswich (n = 245)

### UNDERSTANDING OWNERS, SEMI-OWNERS AND THE CATS THEY ARE DESEXING

- Most considered themselves owners (80%), but some (20%) considered themselves carers or feeders and the cat was not their property (semi-owners).
- Only 44% of semi-owners actively "got" the cat, versus 73% of owners. In most cases the cat came from a family member, friend, neighbour, or advertised as free give-away. Over half of the cats (56%) enrolled by semi-owners were "found" or "just appeared" at their property, versus only 27% of those enrolled by owners.
- Owners and carers trying to do the best they can to care for cat with the resources they have – they are "responsibility" caring for these cats. In addition to food and water, they provided healthcare (78%), shelter (74%), vaccination (38%), veterinary care for injuries/illness (36%), microchips (21%).
- Most owners and semi-owners attempted some containment so the cat could not wander off their property all the time (49%) or just at night (30%).
- Most people enrolling a cat have a close relationship with it (even semi-owners). Many talk to the cat (80%), stroke, rub its chin or pet the cat (67%), cuddle/relax with the cat (56-58%) multiple times per day.
- Importantly, 90% of semi-owners said "this cat helps me get through tough times" and "gives me a reason to get up in the morning" (60%).
- At the time of enrolment into the program, residents had typically owned or been caring for the cat for 8 to 9 months.
- A higher proportion of females cats were enrolled (58%) and 30% of those had already had at least one litter of kittens (owners = 23%; semi-owners = 68%).

What is the single most important reason why you have not yet had this cat desexed?

Couldn't afford desexing costs = 90 %

What is the single most important reason why you are getting the cat desexed now?

Free-desexing = 70 %

Did not want it to have kittens = 12 %

2021-22 survey of owners and semi-owners enrolling cats in program (n = 228)

To desex and microchip a female cat typically costs from \$350 to \$500. In these low socio-economic areas >20 % of households (with 2.4 people) live on <\$650/week.

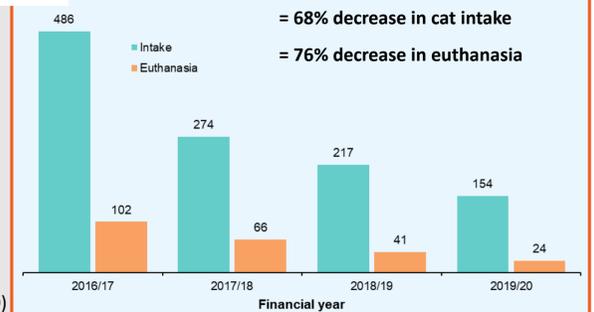
The Australian Community Cat Program is supported by financial or in-kind contributions from 29 national and international partners (2021): 6 Australian animal welfare agencies (Australian Pet Welfare Foundation, Cat Protection Society NSW, Sydney Dog and Cat's Home, PetRescue, Maneko Neki, Cheltenham Cat Rescue); 3 veterinary and pet-care companies (Greencross, MSD Animal Health, Rosewood Veterinary Services); 3 local governments (City of Banyule, Shepparton City Council, Ipswich City Council); 5 national and international foundations (Pets Regardless Foundation, Brigitte Bardot Foundation, Bissell Foundation, Waltham Foundation); 2 international partners (Neighborhood Cats, Dr John Boone); 3 universities (The University of Queensland, Latrobe University, University of NSW); 7 veterinary clinics (Brimbank Veterinary Clinic, Chatswood Cat Palace, Haberfield Veterinary Hospital, Kensington Vet Clinic, The Paddington Cat Hospital, Ringwood Veterinary Clinic, Wantirna Vet Clinic). The Brigitte Bardot Foundation is the biggest single cash supporter for the desexing program having contributed \$140,000 to desex 3,000 cats. MSD Animal Health is the biggest single provider of in-kind support to date, providing F3 vaccines and Bravecto Plus for endo and ectoparasite control for all cats. Pets Regardless Foundation is the biggest single supporter of the vital research component of the Community Cat Program.

## PROGRESS OF THE COMMUNITY CAT PROGRAM IN CITY OF BANYULE, VICTORIA (population 130,000)



After 3 years of a free, high intensity, targeted desexing program for owned and semi-owned cats, cat impoundments decreased from 4 to 1.2 cats/1,000 residents (compared to Victorian average of 7 cats/1,000 residents), and just 24 cats were euthanased (0.2 cats/1,000 residents, compared to the Victorian average of 3.3 cats/1000). Cat-related complaints fell from 11 to 4 calls/1,000 residents.

### TRIAL SITES



### What's included?

Vaccination, microchipping and treatment for endo- and ecto-parasites for all cats being desexed. Healthcare is also provided to improve the welfare of the cat (at no cost to the resident) if deemed necessary. Those utilising the service typically have 1-2 cats.

Total value to residents approximately \$300-\$500 per cat

Information on practical implementation of responsible cat caring behaviours (e.g. practical tips for affordable cat containment, fence attachments, walking on a lead) is also provided.

Keeping your cats safely confined to your property.

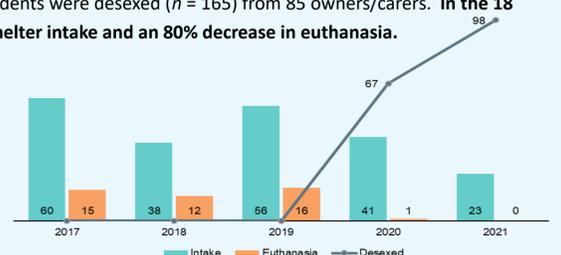


Letter-box flyers and door-knocking used to maximize the number of cats desexed.

### PROGRESS SO FAR...

The pilot program in Rosewood (Qld) is now complete. Baseline cat intake before the program commenced was 25 cats/1,000 residents, more than triple the Queensland average of 7 cats/1000 residents. Rosewood is a small town of 2,800 residents, but its initial cat intake reflects the situation faced by many regional towns across Australia that are struggling with excess cats. High intensity desexing commenced August 2020. As at 31 December 2021, 57 cats/1,000 residents were desexed (n = 165) from 85 owners/carers. In the 18 months after the project commenced, there was a 50% decrease in shelter intake and an 80% decrease in euthanasia.

The program has extended to other suburbs in Ipswich. Over 20 mths, 1,257 cats were desexed, and 98% were owned or became owned. Most were owned cats (80%); 18% were semi-owned but became owned; 2% remained semi-owned, cared for in multi-cat situations on private property (covered by DAF Scientific Research Permit—PRID000664). 46% of cats were under 6 mths and 59% were females, with the potential to produce over 3,600 kittens in the next 12 mths.



## MEASURING THE LONG-TERM EFFICACY OF HIGH-INTENSITY, TARGETED DESEXING

- Monitoring the intake and outcome statistics for cats and kittens entering council pounds and animal welfare shelters
- Monitoring the number of free-living and free-roaming cats in the target suburbs with STREET-LEVEL CAT COUNTING  
Undertaken in November/December and March/April each year, before and after kitten season. Research assistants walk approximately 120 km across the three trial sites during each round of transect walking. For the first trial site (Rosewood), at baseline (2019), 44 cats were observed equating to 17.6 cats per km<sup>2</sup>. Most sighted cats have been on driveways or in gardens at the front of residential properties (not contained), although some have been spotted in stormwater drains. The 4th assessment round is complete.
- Monitoring the number of free-living and free-roaming cats in the target suburbs with WILDLIFE CAMERAS  
Motion-activated wildlife monitoring cameras are deployed twice a year (commenced June 2020). Cameras are placed on residential and commercial properties at approximately 250 m increments (total of 50 cameras) for 3 wks. A visual/scent lure is placed in front of each camera to attract cats. Over 1 million images have been collected. Most cats are detected from dusk to dawn (4pm to 7am). Monitoring activity patterns over time will also determine whether encouraging night-time containment (part of program) has been successful.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

Most owners and semi-owners care greatly for the cats that they are enrolling in the free desexing program. They already undertake a variety of responsible pet ownership practices with the limited resources they have. Cost is the major reason why owners and semi-owners had not already had the cat desexed. When this barrier is removed, the proportion of un-desexed cats in the community is rapidly decreased. It also provides an opportunity to educate residents about responsible pet ownership, including the importance of identification and confinement.

### FEEDBACK FROM RESIDENTS

- "Being able to access the community cat program helped the 2 kittens my family rescued, it made sure that they could have desexing, microchipping and their vaccinations done as soon as possible without delay after coming into our care suddenly and without funding to do so immediately ourselves." AC, Redbank Plains
- "At the time I wouldn't have been able to afford it, so I jumped at the opportunity before it was too late! I was so grateful to have that chance as I wanted to do the right thing by our kitten and by our community." S, Rosewood
- "As a single mother bills are a bit tight. I was very impressed that you offered this service to my suburb as I just received a kitten from a neighbour who had trouble finding a home for my beautiful girl. I didn't want the same problem happening to me, so getting her desexed was the right choice for my family." TH, Goodna
- "I had 2 cats done that I had rescued. Without the help of the program, I would not have been able to afford to get them spayed...No more roaming. Stay in and getting fat cats." NH, Redbank Plains
- "We never chose Buddy to be our cat. Buddy chose us. This program gave us the ability to get him desexed and integrate him into the home (with our other cat and young child) and get him off the streets. Getting him desexed, vaccinated and pest treated unfortunately wasn't in our budget, as we never planned to have two cats and the additional food costs in itself adds up." LH, Redbank Plains
- "I had planned desexing but now being on a limited income and having been recently hit with massive vet bills for other pets, the desexing had to be postponed. It was always a firm priority, but just financially out of reach each time another animal needed assistance." S, Redbank Plains
- "We've never had pets ever, but when a few stray cats came into my backyard searching for food I couldn't turn them away. They were multiplying anyway and I couldn't bear to see them starve. So we adopted a few and took them in. But I couldn't afford to pay to get them desexed. This program really helped me out financially as I have now had my cats desexed and they're doing well healthwise, so a huge thank you for the program." EI, Goodna
- "Tigger came to me as a giveaway and I wanted, as most people do, to give her the best possible life, and part of that is to ensure that she does not add to the cat population. I wanted to have Tigger desexed as soon as recommended, and with the help of the desexing program this was possible. Many people including myself are suffering financially due to the current economic downturn and cannot afford to have their pets desexed." LM, Rosewood

There is much more to this multi-faceted project than could be shown in a poster! Scan the QR code to see what else is involved and follow the progress of the Australian Community Cat Program.

Correspondence: info@petwelfare.org.au

COMMUNITY CAT PROGRAM  
Protecting people, cats & wildlife

