



Responsible cat ownership in Western Australia

Past attempts,
current efforts
and future
aspirations



WAFCWG

WA Feral Cat Working Group

— Protecting WA's Biodiversity

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Executive summary

The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) is a popular pet and companion animal across the world. Ownership is on the rise in Australia, with one in three households now owning a cat. While there is increasing evidence-based agreement on the key components of responsible pet cat ownership — desexing, registration and microchipping, and permanent containment — there is inconsistent enabling policy and enforcement across the country, particularly at the local government level where these issues are primarily managed.

We sought to clarify past, current and planned future efforts for local governments (LGAs) in Western Australia (WA) to help inform the case for implementing future improvements. Our voluntary survey was completed by 74.1% of the 139 local WA governments, an unusually high rate of return suggesting keen interest in the topic.

We found poor awareness of what best practice responsible ownership involves. 42% of LGAs reported a low level of awareness amongst their community along with low overall compliance with laws. Only 13.6% of LGAs reported a high level of cat registrations and microchipping, and only 16.5% reported a high level of desexing. While almost half of the local governments had a cat local law to enhance the state-level

act, only 3 of 26 have been successful in implementing local laws for permanent containment.

Our survey has revealed a high and increasing public support for cat containment as 78% of local governments said they would include a requirement for permanent containment in a local law if there was a clear pathway to implementation.

Addressing legislative, enforcement and community education aspects of responsible pet cat ownership remains a priority issue for improving the welfare of pet cats, the conservation of native wildlife, and human health values in Western Australia.



**In a national survey,
two in three Australians
reported losing a pet cat to
a roaming-related incident.**

Introduction

The domestic cat (*Felis catus*) is kept by humans as a pet and companion animal throughout the world. Cats were introduced to Australia with European settlement and pet cat ownership has steadily increased over time. It is estimated that there are now 5.3 million pet cats in Australia, representing one in three households with at least one pet cat.

Cats bring many benefits through companionship to their owners. However, there are inconsistencies as to how pet cats are managed across jurisdictions. For example, they are one of the only pets that are allowed to roam freely (along with pigeons and honey bees), the age and prevalence of desexing (i.e. surgical neutering) varies considerably, and how many cats are permitted per household is

not always specified. Policy for cat-ownership is largely implemented at the local government level in Australia. The rigour with which this legislation is enforced differs across and within states and territories, particularly in terms of requirements for registration (and microchipping), age at desexing, and any restrictions on roaming.



Where there is strengthening evidence-based agreement is on the key components of responsible pet cat ownership in Australia: desexing at an appropriate age, registration and microchipping, and prevention of roaming at all times (also known as permanent containment or under effective control):

- There is a consensus among veterinarians and animal welfare organisations nationally and internationally that desexing cats from as early as 4 months (pre-puberty; known as early-age desexing) provides a range of benefits to cats and society. Early age desexing aids in population management as well as reducing unwanted behaviour such as aggression, spraying and calling.
- Registration and microchipping are more frequently required by legislation, but compliance is often low. As Australia moves towards a position where stray cats (i.e. roaming cats in urban environments with no clear owner) are not seen as socially acceptable and are actively managed, there is a greater need for registration and microchipping to ensure pet cats can be identified if they escape containment.
- There is increasing awareness that allowing cats to roam freely has significant negative welfare impacts for both pet cats and the wildlife they kill, as well as impacts on human health. Roaming cats are at greater risk of death or significant injury from vehicle strike and animal attack and are more likely to catch diseases. Roaming pet cats alone kill approximately 546 million animals each year in Australia, representing an area based impact up to 50 times higher than for feral cats in the bush. Moreover, the impacts of pet cats on wildlife are often underestimated, or “invisible” to their owners, with only 15% of prey killed by pet cats being brought home. Roaming also increases the risk of human impacts with higher rates of cat-borne diseases and parasites that can affect humans health and nuisance behaviour that can cause interpersonal tension.

Across Australia, voluntary compliance of regulating cat ownership (through registration and microchipping) and cat containment has been low. Implementing efficient and effective enforcement has been problematic at times. While a number of states have enabled local governments to implement containment laws, such laws are still problematic or not possible in Western Australia (WA) and New South Wales (NSW), respectively. Where responsible pet cat ownership is implemented in full (i.e. desexing, registration and microchipping, and permanent containment), local governments have found efficient and effective ways to deliver best practice outcomes.

Understanding community sentiment for responsible pet cat ownership, particularly at the local government level, is critical for guiding future improvements in how we manage our pet cats. Here we aim to capture the current status quo of responsible pet cat ownership from a local government perspective in Western Australia. Specifically, we wanted to understand past attempts, current efforts and future aspirations surrounding pet cat management.

Over a 10 month period from April 2024, we conducted a voluntary survey of the 139 LGAs managed under Western Australian law. We asked nine questions with the option to provide additional comments. We supplemented this feedback with a synthesis of publicly available reporting. The results of this research will help policy makers identify priorities for improving policy for, and implementation of, responsible pet cat ownership. Full details on methodology are available by request.



“At a 2023 national symposium on cat management, attendees identified that enabling and enforcing permanent containment for pet cats would make the biggest difference to improving cat management outcomes in Australia.”

Findings



- **103/139 LGAs** responded to the survey, with a **90%** response rate from metro LGAs.
- **43%** reported a low awareness of responsible pet cat ownership values.
- **13.6%** reported high levels of compliance with registration and microchipping requirements.
- **16.5%** reported a high level of compliance with desexing requirements.
- **72%** have no understanding of current levels of cat containment (permanent or partial)
- **50%** have a cat local law in place currently
- **44%** of LGAs with a cat local law have exclusion or prohibited zones specified in their cat local law, representing a total of 1356 and 343 zones across metro and non-metro LGAs, respectively.
- **39%** of LGAs with a cat local law have sought community support for including permanent containment clauses.
- **26 LGAs** have sought to implement permanent containment for cats in their local laws, with seven LGAs having tried twice.
- **3 LGAs** have been successful in implementing permanent containment laws for pet cats. A further 23 have had such laws recommended for disallowance and have chosen to accept this recommendation.
- **78%** (80 LGAs) indicated that they would include a requirement for permanent containment in their local law if there was a clear pathway to implementation.





Survey response rate

A total of 103 of the 139 LGAs approached completed our survey (74.1% total; 69.7% non-metro; 90% metro). This is an unusually high voluntary survey response rate, particularly for local governments in Australia. Such a high rate suggests strong community interest in cat management, particularly in the Perth metropolitan area.

Past and current responsible cat ownership

In WA, the *Cat Act 2011*, requires that cat owners desex, microchip and register their pets before six months of age, and that an ID tag should be worn in public places. Our survey results highlight poor awareness of what best practice responsible ownership involves. 42.7% of LGAs reporting a low level of awareness of responsible pet cat ownership in their community (Figure 1; Table 1). In relation to compliance with requirements of the *Cat Act 2011*, only 13.6% and 16.5% report a high level of cat registrations and microchipping, and desexing, respectively (Figure 1; Table 1). Such low awareness and compliance suggests that there is considerable work to be done on effectively communicating the benefits of and enforcing cat management policy.

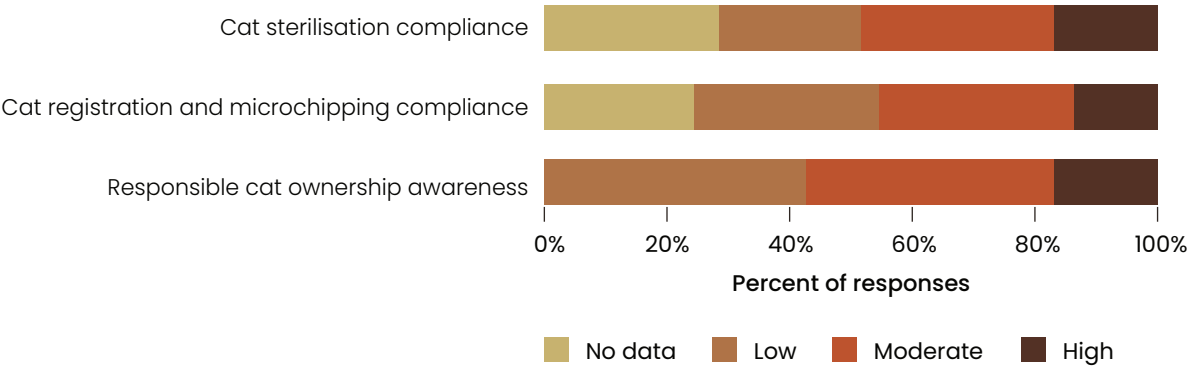


Figure 1. The percent of responses (n=103) for questions related to responsible pet cat ownership compliance requirements for legislation outlined in the *Cat Act 2011* (WA) within each Local Government Authority of Western Australia.



“Without registration at maximum compliance levels it has been hard to know who/where to best target/reach regarding responsible cat ownership.”

Table 1. Survey responses to nine questions covering past, current and future engagement on pet cat management by local governments in Western Australia. Summary statistics are separated by metropolitan and non-metropolitan local governments

Question	Response	Metropolitan	Non-metropolitan	Total	%
Q1. Responsible pet cat ownership awareness	Low	12	32	44	42.7
	Moderate	15	39	54	52.4
	High	0	5	5	4.9
Q2. Registration and microchipping compliance	Low	7	24	31	30.1
	Moderate	8	25	33	32.0
	High	4	10	14	13.6
	No available data	8	17	25	24.3
Q3. Desexing/sterilisation compliance	Low	3	21	24	23.3
	Moderate	9	24	33	32.0
	High	6	11	17	16.5
	No available data	9	20	29	28.2
Q4. Do they know what level of cat containment already exists	Yes	0	7	7	6.8
	No	23	51	74	71.8
	Low	0	3	3	2.9
	Anecdotal	3	6	9	8.7
	No response	1	9	10	9.7
Q5. Cat Local Law	Yes	17	34	51	49.5
	No	10	42	52	50.5
Q6. Exclusion or prohibited cat zones (If LGA has a Local Cat Law)	Yes	11 (1356 total areas/zones)	14 (343 total areas/zones)	25	43.9
	No	8	24	32	56.1
Q7. Active reach for community support for cat containment	Yes	8	12	20	19.4
	No	19	64	83	80.6
Q8. Has there been attempts to include cat containment in their Local Cat Law (i.e. submitted through the JSCDL)	Yes	5	13	18	17.5
	No	22	63	85	82.5
Q9. Would they include cat containment in their local cat law?	Yes	24	56	80	77.7
	No	3	19	22	21.3
	Depends		1	1	1.0

Local laws implemented by LGAs in WA allow for the implementation of laws to address issues such as curtailing pet cat roaming and limiting numbers of cats owned. Preventing pet cats from roaming is better for the welfare of the pet cat, better for the welfare of wildlife preyed upon by roaming pet cats, and better for human health. This position is supported

“We do have a dingo, fox and perentie population in [redacted] that does help control the feral cat population. Many locals in town have lost cats to perenties from not having them contained.”

by an increasingly large body of scientific literature and Australia’s leading animal welfare organisations.

Approximately half of the LGAs in our survey have implemented a Local Cat Law (51/103; Figure 2) with a higher uptake in non-metro LGAs (34/51; Table 1). Of those LGAs that have a Cat Local Law, 25 councils have brought in cat exclusion zones or prohibited areas, with some LGAs listing environmentally sensitive areas where cats are prohibited. Others have laws preventing cats in public areas if they are determined to be a nuisance. Although there were comments to indicate such laws were difficult to enforce and monitor, it does indicate that some LGAs are recognising and implementing containment as an important component of responsible pet cat ownership.



“I am constantly explaining this situation to members of the public in [redacted] and all of them are amazed that such a stupid, unworkable and irresponsible piece of legislation exists.”



At present, it is unclear whether the *Cat Act 2011* allows for permanent containment of pet cats in WA, despite the final reading of the *Cat Bill 2011* being clear that containment would be possible via local government laws.

Eighteen LGAs indicated via a survey response that they had previously attempted to implement permanent cat containment via local laws, yet only three have been successful (Table 1). Contextualising our survey findings with publicly available information, we found that 26 LGAs had included provisions in their local laws to prevent roaming at all times (Table 2). Confirming the survey findings, three LGAs (Shire of Northam, Shire of Narrogin, Shire of Christmas Island) have laws requiring permanent containment, while another (Shire of Pingelly) has recently been gazetted. One LGA removed their local law relating to permanent containment based on advice from the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (City of Gosnells). A further 23 LGAs (and seven on two occasions) have had their local law specifying permanent containment recommended for disallowance by the JSCDL, without clear rationale for these decisions being made public (Table 2).

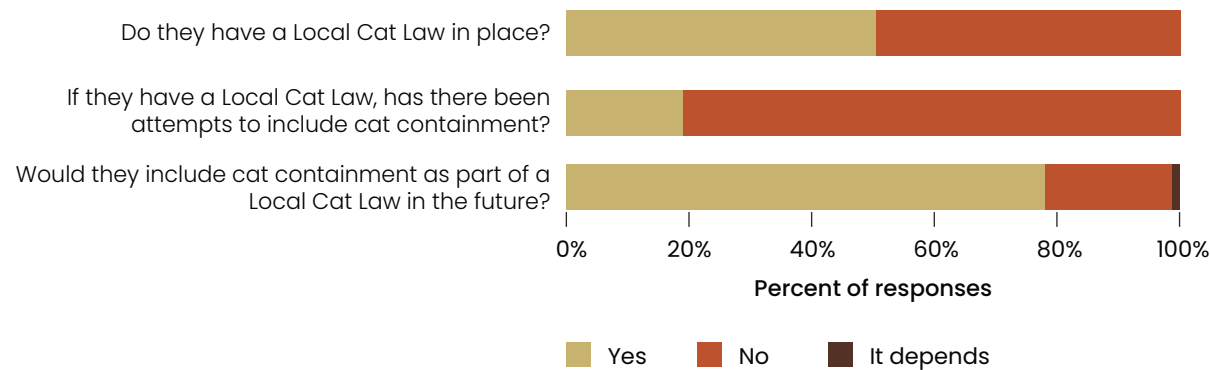


Figure 1. Local government past efforts and future aspirations for cat local laws. Half of the respondents already have implemented a cat local law and 17.5% of local governments have attempted to implement a cat-containment clause in their local law. Close to 80% of respondents indicated that they would implement permanent containment within a cat local law if there was a clear pathway to do so.



Table 2. A synthesis of available online records documenting past attempts by local governments in Western Australia (as well as those operating under WA law) to implement local laws for the permanent containment of pet cats. Outcomes of these attempts are grouped by the limited rationale given in reporting, noting that explanations for the disallowance decision were not always provided

Determination	Metropolitan	Non-metropolitan	All
Approval		3	3
Disallowance – containment clause ^{a,b}	7	14	21
Disallowance – containment and nuisance clause		2	2
Disallowance – nuisance clause	1	1	2
Disallowance – minor errors ^c	3	5	8
Disallowance – penalty charges	1		1
Disallowance – suitability of premises		1	

^a Seven local governments repeated this process a second time.

^b This grouping also includes five LGAs who had clauses relating to containment quashed via the Joint Standing Committee for Delegated Legislation requesting that the Governor repeal these clauses.

^c Minor errors included topographical errors, reference errors to regulations including the *Veterinary Surgeons Act* or cat regulations.

All 23 LGAs decided to accept this recommendation and remove the relevant clause(s), rather than disregarding the recommendation and having the law decided by the Legislative Council. Discrepancies between the survey responses (Table 1) and other documentation (Table 2) can be explained by a combination of the nil-returns to the survey or incorrect survey responses. Taken together, these repeated attempts by LGAs reveals sustained and increasing interest, as well as mounting frustration based on additional comments returned through the survey, in ensuring the original goal of the Cat Bill can be realised to keep pet cats permanently contained.

The future of responsible cat ownership

Ongoing persistence in seeking containment laws over more than a decade in WA, despite inconsistent and often discouraging assessments by the JSCDL, shows strong interest for cat containment across the state. Confirming this intent, almost 78% of respondents (80/103 LGAs) to our survey indicated that they would include a requirement for permanent containment in



their local law if there was a clear pathway to implementation (Figure 2; Table 1). This result suggests increasing public support for cat containment, given that a 2019 survey completed by the WA Government as part of the last Cat Act review indicated that 73% of people wanted permanent cat containment.

Permanent containment is now seen as a core part of responsible pet cat ownership, alongside desexing and registration. Campaigns and research have found that cat owner's will more likely contain their cats when they believe it is better for their cat's safety, rather than concern for reducing wildlife predation. Containment has support from numerous animal

welfare and veterinary organisations who advocate clear welfare benefits to cats, but correctly point out that it needs to be done appropriately, ensuring that physical and mental needs are met, natural behaviours are enabled, and stress is minimised.

In Australia, it is clear that the discussion on cat containment is moving from the why to the how. Currently, various state and territory jurisdictions across Australia have inconsistent legislation and policies that govern, if and how, pet cats should be managed. For example, in Victoria, 19% and 37% of local governments require permanent containment and overnight curfews, respectively, while in NSW it is not currently possible to implement laws to keep pet cats permanently contained. Recent federal policy recommendations placed a high priority on having permanent containment as part of pet cat management across Australia.

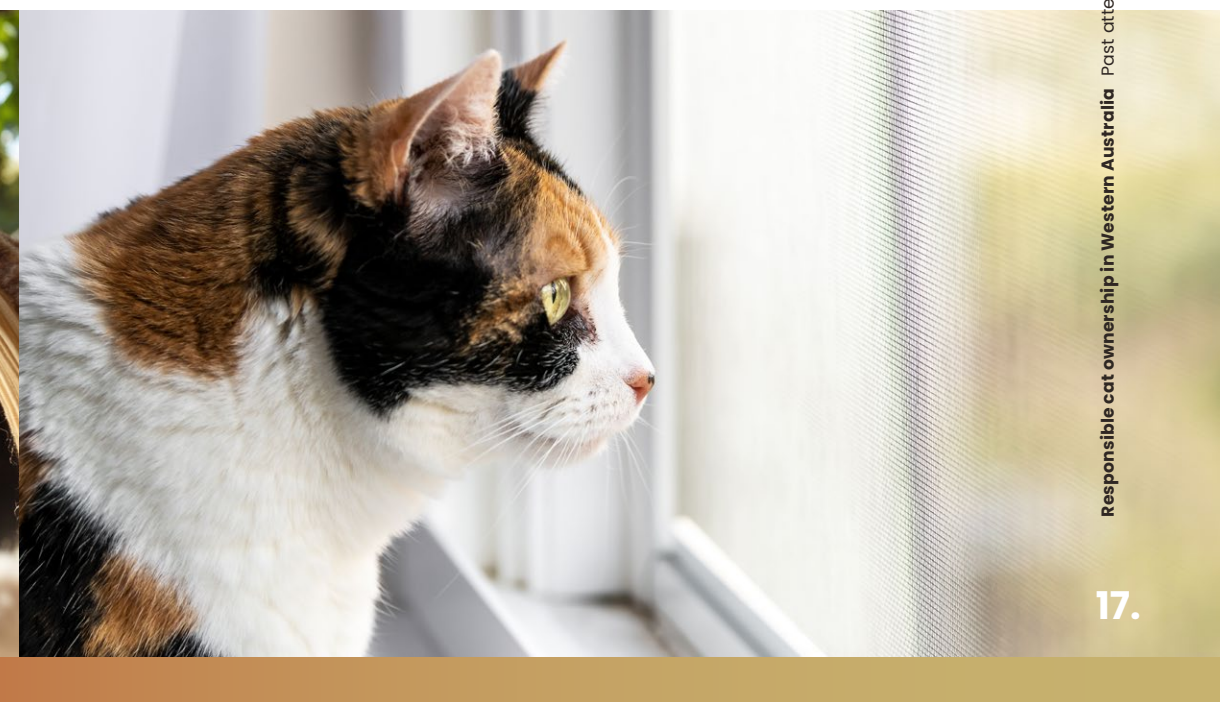
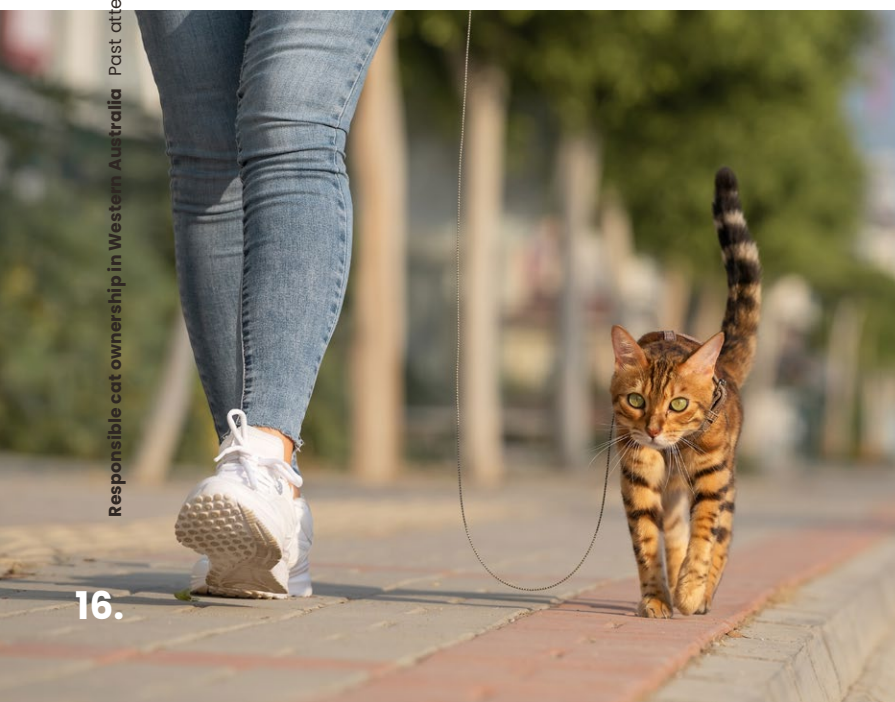
In WA, community engagement and targeted communication strategies involving all stakeholders will be needed to ensure all cat owners are informed and understand the rationale for change. Emphasising the evidence-based case

for reducing the diverse negative impacts from letting pet cats roam is likely to enable both future public support and policy frameworks. Sustained and widespread success will require:

- ongoing education for the rationale to permanently contain pet cats,
- effective laws to require containment,
- adequate resources to enforce containment, and
- education for cat owners on how they can implement appropriate containment solutions.



“Due to limited resources, almost all work undertaken in this space is reactive with little to no long-term planning.”



Once behavioural mechanisms of habit and social acceptance have been established, demands on enforcement are likely to reduce, driven by social norms (e.g. as seen in campaigns addressing littering and wearing seatbelts). We need to rethink what it means to be a cat owner in Australia and see cat containment, alongside early stage desexing and registration/microchipping, as a basic responsibility.


“It is also vital that neighbouring local governments take the same approach. Neighbouring cats who are permitted to roam will simply fill any voids cat containment will produce within [redacted].”

Immediate actions



- **Provide a clear pathway for local governments** to implement local laws for the permanent containment of pet cats (WA State Government).
- **Develop a model cat local law template** to enhance consistent policies statewide, which includes (at a minimum) clauses for permanent containment and limitations on the number of cats allowed without a permit (WALGA and the WA Feral Cat Working Group).
- **Ensure adequate resourcing** to deploy effective community engagement and undertake enforcement actions (Local governments).





“A greater public awareness campaign is needed to reach people. Many people are in denial about their cats, adamant they do not leave their property and do not hunt, when in reality they do.”

Summary and conclusions

Our survey highlights that there is a low level of responsible cat ownership compliance and that many LGAs in Western Australia want to (and many have tried to) implement restrictions to prevent pet cats from roaming, with limited success and considerable frustration. Our findings build on existing awareness that there is overwhelming support for legislating permanent cat containment in WA, albeit with limited community awareness of what best practice ownership for pet

cats involves. It remains a priority for all primary components of responsible pet cat ownership to be implemented as soon as possible – mandatory desexing at an appropriate age, microchipping and registration, and permanent containment. Addressing these legislative, community education and enforcement needs will ensure better outcomes for our pet cats, for native wildlife and for human values, across Western Australia.

Appendix 1: Survey questions

1.

What level of awareness do you consider there is amongst your local community regarding best practice responsible pet cat ownership?
– high, moderate, or low?
2.

Does your Local Government have any data on the level of compliance with pet cat registration and microchipping? If yes, what is the level of compliance?
– high, moderate or low?
3.

Does your Local Government have any data on the level of compliance with pet cat desexing requirements? If yes, what is the level of compliance
– high, moderate or low?
4.

Does your Local Government have any data on the level of pet cat containment in your area? If so, are you able to separate this into insight on permanent or partial (i.e. night curfew only) containment?
5.

Does your Local Government have a Cat Local Law? If so, what are the key issues the Local Law covers?
[please provide a link to the Cat Local Law on your Local Government website]
6.

If your Local Government has a Cat Local Law does it include exclusion zones? If present, how many exclusion zones?
7.

Has your Local Government sought community support for cat containment requirements in your Local Law? If so, what was the outcome?
8.

Has your Local Government tried to implement cat containment requirements as part of your Cat Local Law in the past? If so, when was this and was it successful? If the implementation attempt was unsuccessful, was the reason provided?
9.

Would your Local Government seek to implement a cat containment requirement as part of your Cat Local Law if there was a clear path to implementation available? If no, what would be the limiting factor?
10.

Are there any other challenges that your Local Government is experiencing regarding enabling more responsible pet cat ownership?
11.

Do you have any other feedback for us to consider?

Acknowledgements

This survey was conducted under CSIRO Human Ethics Committee approval (# 149/24). We thank all local governments who participated in the survey and those staff and Councillors who for years have championed best practice pet cat ownership, even through strong headwinds.

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