

# PPA08 Cat containment

(adopted 26/10/2023)

NOTE: Reference to 'the RSPCA' or 'RSPCA' in this document means RSPCA Australia and each of its member Societies.

RSPCA policies reflect the best available evidence to direct and guide RSPCA and others, to promote and achieve good animal welfare outcomes.

## 1 Introduction

1.1 This position paper must be read in conjunction with the following RSPCA policies, position papers, guide, and reports:

- [RSPCA Policy A1 General principles](#)
- [RSPCA Policy A2 Responsible companion animal ownership](#)
- [RSPCA Policy A3 Acquiring a companion animal](#)
- [RSPCA Policy A4 Shelter and rehoming of companion animals](#)
- [RSPCA Policy A7 Companion animal management](#)
- [RSPCA Policy A8 Housing and environmental needs of companion animals](#)
- [RSPCA Policy E2 Management of wild animals](#)
- [Safe and happy cats guide](#)
- [Identifying best practice domestic cat management in Australia](#)
- [Pre-pubertal desexing in cats](#)
- [Policy GP1 Good animal welfare](#)

### Definitions

**Cat containment:** keeping a domestic cat within the owner's property boundaries.

**Roaming cat:** a cat moving or traveling unhindered beyond the owner's property boundaries.

### **Cat population categories:**

- Domestic - all cats with some dependence (direct or indirect) on humans. There are three sub-categories of domestic cats:
  - Owned - these cats are identified with and cared for by a specific person and are directly dependent on humans. They are usually sociable although sociability varies.
  - Semi-owned - these cats are fed or provided with other care by people who do not consider they own them. They are of varying sociability with many socialised to humans and may be associated with one or more households.
  - Unowned - these cats are indirectly dependent on humans with some having casual and temporary interactions with humans. They are of varying sociability, including some who are unsocialised to humans, and some may live in groups (e.g. common aggregation sites including rubbish tips, food outlets, coastal fishing spots associated with urban environments etc).
- Feral - these cats are unowned, unsocialised, have no relationship with or dependence on humans, and reproduce in the wild.

**A 'grandfathering' clause:** a transition period that exempts existing companion cats from mandatory 24/7 cat containment by implementing the requirements only for new cats acquired after a determined date.

1.2 The RSPCA's policy on cat containment is as follows:

**7.12.3 Containment of cats**

The RSPCA encourages the containment of cats within the boundaries of the owner's property in a way that safeguards cat welfare. See Position Paper A8 Cat Containment for the RSPCA's full position on cat containment (including mandatory cat containment).

- 1.3 People keep their cats in a variety of ways, including allowing their cats to roam (with uncontrolled outdoor access all or some of the time, e.g. daytime only) or keeping their cats contained (either with access to safe contained outdoor environments, or as totally indoor cats). There are risks and benefits associated with each way of keeping cats.
- 1.4 Cat containment means keeping a domestic cat within the owner's property boundaries. Safe and reliable containment can be achieved by using an escape-proof contained outdoor area on the owner's property (e.g. via cat proof fencing or using netting or rigid wire to form a fully enclosed area or by keeping the cat contained indoors. Cat containment can be implemented as containment 24 hours a day, seven days a week (24/7 containment) or as partial containment (e.g. night time only containment or curfew).
- 1.5 There are benefits for cats associated with having access to the outdoors; importantly, this helps to provide an environment that: meets the cat's physical and mental needs; increases the cat's opportunity for choice, activity, and stimulation; and allows and encourages the cat to express normal feline behaviours. However, allowing cats to roam with uncontrolled outdoor access has associated risks, including:
- increased risk to cats of infectious disease, parasite infestation, trauma, predation, fighting and poisoning
  - increased risk that cats will become lost, trapped, or impounded by the local council
  - the risk of transmitting diseases to other domestic animals, wildlife, and humans
  - detrimental effects on wildlife numbers and welfare through predation and other mechanisms such as disturbance, fear, competition
  - the potential for negative community impacts such as digging, defecation and urination on private property, excessive vocalisations, and fighting
  - adding to unowned and semi-owned cat populations, through breeding or becoming lost (or leaving their home), or not returning home.
- NOTE: *An animal's physical and mental needs are what the animal requires to have good physical and mental wellbeing (including positive feelings and experiences). This includes good nutrition (food and water), a safe and comfortable environment, optimal health, and the opportunity to choose how they behave and interact with others and the environment and how they spend their time. All of these factors impact how they experience the world, their feelings, and their mental state.*
- 1.6 These risks can be reduced or mitigated by keeping cats contained to the owner's property in an environment that meets their physical and mental needs.
- 1.7 Cat containment is one strategy that can be used as part of a holistic approach to cat management but does have both potential associated benefits and risks. On the one hand, containing cats has many potential benefits to cats, wildlife, and the community. However, on the other hand there are also complex potential cat welfare risks with permanent containment; especially if the containment environment does not meet the cat's physical and mental needs.
- 1.8 The RSPCA advocates for responsible cat ownership that provides for cats' physical and mental needs while taking into account potential cat impacts on wildlife, other cats (owned, semi-owned, unowned, and feral), and the community.

## 2 General principles

- 2.1 The RSPCA advocates that keeping cats contained in an environment that meets the cats' physical and mental needs helps them thrive rather than just survive and strikes the right balance between cat welfare, safety, and longevity, while also safeguarding the welfare and survival of wildlife and reducing community impacts from roaming cats.
- 2.2 Cat containment must be implemented in a way that safeguards cat welfare. Contained cats must be provided with an environment that is optimised to meet the cat's physical and mental needs, allows and encourages the expression of normal feline behaviours, minimises stress, and promotes good health and welfare (see the [RSPCA Australia safe and happy cats guide](#) for more information). Cats should have choice and control in their lives, this includes choice about how or if to interact with the environment, people, animals, and objects in it.
- 2.3 Effective steps must be taken to mitigate stress experienced by cats and to assist them with the transition to containment including seeking veterinary or behavioural advice where necessary.
- 2.4 Ideally, all cats should have the benefits of access to the outdoors in a safe escape-proof contained outdoor environment, as this helps to provide a more complex environment that increases the cat's opportunity for choice, activity, and stimulation, which has significant benefits for the cat's physical and mental wellbeing.
- 2.5 Care should be taken to ensure that the risk of harm to wild animals in backyards from contained cats is mitigated and minimised (e.g. through management of the environment and the use of effective and humane anti-predation devices where appropriate).
- 2.6 There are some circumstances under which a cat's physical and mental needs will not be successfully met in containment due to a range of factors including the presence of other animals, space available, human factors, and ability to modify the property. There are also some cats who are unable to cope with containment. In situations where the cat is unable to be contained, alternate strategies should be implemented.
- 2.7 Mandatory 24/7 containment may increase the potential for negative impacts on animal welfare and the community, compared to voluntary implementation of 24/7 containment on an individual basis, by imposing it on people and cats who are not suited or capable of implementing it appropriately (see 4.2).
- 2.8 Due to the ambiguity surrounding the risks and effectiveness of 24/7 containment, the RSPCA advocates that further research is undertaken to provide evidence of the positive and negative outcomes of cat containment before 24/7 containment can be adequately assessed.
- 2.9 Cat containment may be achieved through voluntary action by cat owners or by mandated cat containment through state/territory or local government; this may be mandatory 24/7 cat containment or mandatory partial containment (e.g. night-time only containment or curfew). Both options present potential risks as well as benefits for companion cats, wildlife, and the community.
- 2.10 Education and behaviour change initiatives play an important role in shifting cat ownership norms towards greater uptake of cat containment.
- 2.11 Regardless of whether the move to contain cats is voluntary or mandated, there are potential negative welfare outcomes for companion cats, including cats being contained in an environment that does not meet their physical and mental needs (e.g. insufficient resources and enrichment, and inadequate opportunities for positive interactions with people and, where appropriate, other animals) and/or being housed in inappropriate circumstances (such as outdoor sheds, kennels, or cages) which limit the cat's ability to express normal feline behaviour and impede good health and welfare. In such circumstances, cats may be at an increased risk of some medical conditions (e.g. diabetes mellitus) and problem behaviours (e.g. inappropriate toileting, aggression, and destructiveness). These conditions can also subsequently contribute to cats being

surrendered or abandoned, which has further consequences for rescue shelters and other relevant bodies.

- 2.12 To inform effective decision making in the future, more data are needed on the impact of cat containment on: prevention of wildlife predation; health and welfare of contained cats; and risks associated with the trapping of roaming cats after cat containment legislation has been enacted.

### **3 Potential risks associated with mandatory 24/7 cat containment**

- 3.1 There is presently limited data on the impacts or effectiveness of legislative change to require cat containment, but basic principles and risk assessment indicate the potential for negative consequences and suggest actions that could be taken to mitigate these.
- 3.2 Although there is a lack of research and strong evidence in this area, the RSPCA considers based on the best available evidence, basic principles, and risk assessment that the following broad potential risks of mandatory cat containment include:
- Increased incidence of cats being surrendered or abandoned due to owner inability or unwillingness to transition currently roaming cats to a contained lifestyle and provide an appropriate contained environment.
  - The expense of erecting cat-proof barriers to contain cats on a property could be a barrier to cat ownership or retaining cats, which would have an inequitable impact on existing or potential cat owners on low incomes. The potential difficulties of mandatory containment for cat owners in rental properties would include getting permission from the property owner to have a cat and/or to erect cat-proof barriers, and additional associated expenses which could be incurred multiple times if the renter needs to move property.
  - Cat owners might avoid permanently identifying their cats, to reduce the risk of a penalty being imposed if their cat is caught roaming away from home, which could reduce the probability of a roaming cat being reunited with their owner.
  - High euthanasia rates or negative welfare outcomes for impounded cats.
  - Imposing a significant financial and resourcing burden on local government and animal management services.
  - The potential for a significant impact on the operations and staff at animal shelters, pounds, and animal welfare organisations.
  - Community members who do not like cats might be incited to trap or even harm cats outside their owner's property.
  - A perception that cat containment will resolve all cat-related community issues, which could lead to a reduction in resourcing of other important cat management projects (e.g. programs for desexing and/or effective and humane management of unowned and semi-owned cats).
  - Inadequate education on cats' physical and mental needs. Insufficient understanding of cats' physical and mental needs and appropriate containment methods could lead to people containing their cats in unacceptable ways such as by tethering.
  - If no 'grandfathering' clause\* is included in Council by-laws, cats who are unable to cope with containment will suffer with welfare compromise, potentially develop associated physical or mental problems, be surrendered, or euthanased.

The potential for negative (and positive) consequences and their level of impact are likely to depend on a variety of factors relating to how mandatory 24/7 cat containment is implemented (e.g. whether there is a 'grandfathering' clause and if mandatory containment is enforced) and the extent and effectiveness of other cat management efforts in the area (e.g. strategies which address semi-owned and unowned cats). This also makes assessment of outcomes (positive and negative) challenging.

\*NOTE: A ‘grandfathering’ clause is a transition period that exempts existing companion cats from mandatory 24/7 cat containment by implementing the requirements only for new cats acquired after a determined date.

#### **4 Legislating for mandatory 24/7 cat containment**

- 4.1 The RSPCA encourages owners to keep cats contained in environments that meet their physical and mental needs. However, given the current lack of evidence on the outcomes associated with 24/7 mandatory companion cat containment and many complex potential negative consequences which may arise, the RSPCA does not currently support the introduction of mandatory 24/7 cat containment legislation.
- 4.2 Support for the introduction of mandatory 24/7 cat containment would need to be based on evidence that it can achieve the stated objectives for cats, wildlife, and the broader community, and that the potential negative consequences can be eliminated or effectively mitigated. The RSPCA supports and encourages such research.
- 4.3 If mandatory 24/7 cat containment is introduced, effective monitoring is needed that will provide evidence of outcomes (positive and negative) and inform a better understanding of potential negative consequences and strategies to eliminate or effectively mitigate these.

#### **5 Guidelines for those considering mandatory 24/7 cat containment legislation**

- 5.1 Owners of existing cats should be strongly encouraged to contain their cats and must ensure that their cat’s mental and physical needs are met. However, there should be a transition period that exempts existing companion cats from mandatory 24/7 cat containment by implementing the requirements only for new cats acquired after a determined date (a ‘grandfathering’ clause).
- 5.2 Before a decision is made to introduce mandatory 24/7 cat containment, data on the impacts of regulatory cat management strategies that are already in place around Australia should be analysed to inform the decision.
- 5.3 Exemptions to the 24/7 containment requirement must be allowed for cats who are certified by a qualified veterinarian or animal behaviourist to be unable to cope with containment.
- 5.4 Legislation should allow cats to be taken ‘on leash’ outside the owner’s property, under direct supervision. Allowing cats to be taken outside ‘on leash’ provides an additional option for people to provide cats with access to the outdoors and enrichment. However, this option will only be suitable for some cats and should only be done where it is safe, well-accepted by the cat, risks to cat safety and welfare are mitigated, and in the best interests of the cat.
- 5.5 Inhumane containment of cats must not be allowed (e.g. the tethering or confinement of cats in small or barren enclosures that do not meet their physical and mental needs or the use of aversive techniques such as using electric collars/‘virtual fencing’) and owners found guilty of such offences should be prosecuted in line with relevant federal and state laws.
- 5.6 The RSPCA discourages the use of negative terminology (e.g. labelling of cats as ‘nuisances’) as this may heighten the risk of disrespectful or cruel treatment of cats.
- 5.7 The RSPCA strongly advocates for all domestic cats to be desexed before puberty, if they are not intended to be registered breeding animals and there are no specific

health and welfare contraindications for the individual animal. Desexing, particularly pre-pubertal desexing, helps to reduce the drive for behaviours such as fighting and roaming, which is likely to contribute to a higher likelihood of successful containment, as well as having general health and welfare benefits for cats (see [Pre-pubertal desexing in cats](#)). Note that in some jurisdictions desexing of cats is mandatory.

- 5.8 Any decision to implement mandatory 24/7 cat containment must be preceded by a sufficient period of time to allow appropriate steps to be taken to mitigate the potential negative consequences of such a course. These efforts should be sufficiently resourced and ongoing during and after implementation. Such steps would include:
- Research to fully understand cat experiences and welfare in home environments and how to best minimise any negative impacts of containment in such environments.
  - Provision of information to cat owners and prospective owners about the benefits of containment and how to provide an environment that meets the cat's physical and mental needs, allows the expression of normal feline behaviours, and promotes good health and welfare.
  - The introduction and enforcement of mandatory identification requirements (if not already in place), with existing cat owners and semi-owners supported to meet those requirements (e.g. through community outreach and government subsidised microchipping and registration).
  - Advance notification of the community of the changes to cat ownership requirements with sufficient lead time so cat owners can make the necessary plans to successfully contain a cat in an environment that meets the cat's physical and mental needs.
  - Allowing time for roaming cats to be gradually transitioned to containment.
  - Provision of support for financially disadvantaged owners and renters to assist with implementation of cat containment.
  - Careful community messaging to guard against demonisation of cats, emphasising that there are legal and moral obligations to protect all cats from cruelty and harm and discouraging inappropriate behaviour towards free-roaming cats once legislation is implemented.
  - Review of companion animal management legislation to permit and require councils to humanely manage stray and displaced cats.
  - Amendment of legislation to require that persons trapping cats must be competent, trained, and operating as part of a program run by the government, or a welfare or research organisation that adheres to recognised welfare codes of practice and standard operating procedures. The organisation undertaking trapping is responsible for monitoring use and outcomes and these data should be publicly reported.
  - Concerted and effective efforts to humanely reduce populations of unowned or semi-owned cats ('stray' cats); e.g. through high-intensity targeted desexing and rehoming programs.
  - Humane management of unowned or semi-owned cats including the development and support of innovative new humane solutions to problems associated with cat management.
  - Consultation and planning to minimise negative impacts on organisations likely to bear the burden associated with increased cat impoundments due to active enforcement of mandatory cat containment.
  - Adequate resourcing for shelters and pounds to prepare to provide appropriate housing for increased cat impoundments.
  - Investment in research to monitor appropriate indicators of the potential positive or negative impacts of mandatory containment on cats, wildlife, and the community. Baseline and ongoing data should be collected to allow adequate monitoring of the outcomes of cat containment (including positive or negative impacts on cats, wildlife, and the community).
  - Review and revision of objectives, and improvements to implementation strategies.