

Operation of RSPCA shelters

(adopted 24/09/12)

The policies and positions of the RSPCA referred to in this document represent the guiding principles to which we aspire in fulfilling our various roles. We are committed to giving effect to these principles wherever possible and practical.

1 Introduction

- 1.1 This position paper must be read in conjunction with the following RSPCA policies, RSPCA position papers and external guidelines:
- [Policy A1 Responsible companion animal ownership](#)
 - [Policy A2 Acquiring a companion animal](#)
 - [Policy A3 Adoption of RSPCA animals](#)
 - [Policy A9 Housing of companion animals](#)
 - [Policy D5 Use of animals sheltered or owned by the RSPCA](#)
 - [RSPCA Policy E03 Rescue and rehabilitation of wild animals](#)
 - [Policy F1 Transportation of Animals – general principles](#)
 - [Position Paper A2 Animal Adoption Guidelines](#)
 - [The Association of Shelter Veterinarians Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters \(ASV Guidelines\) 2022](#)
- 1.2 For the purpose of this position paper, a shelter is a place where animals, including companion animals, wildlife and livestock, received by the RSPCA are housed. This includes External Adoption Centres and, where relevant, Foster Care.
- 1.3 This position paper sets out guidelines for the operation of RSPCA shelters. The principles outlined here can also be used as a general guide for other shelters, pounds and related companion animal care facilities (e.g. foster care).
- 1.4 This position paper is informed by the five freedoms and takes into account any Australian state/territory differences.
- 1.5 As a minimum, all shelter operators must abide by any relevant Local, State/Territory and Commonwealth legislation, codes of practice, standards and guidelines.

2 Staff

- 2.1 All people involved with the care of animals at RSPCA shelters including staff, volunteers and work experience students are trained and competent to carry out their duties or supervised by a trained and competent staff member. Competencies include understanding the health (including biosecurity principles), welfare and management of species kept and can be demonstrated by accreditation, certification, experience or continuing education. A training register should be maintained.
- 2.2 The ratio of staff to animals should as a minimum abide by any legal requirements and be sufficient to safeguard the welfare of animals and to ensure the proper management of animals. Guidance for a minimum ratio of staff to animals is provided in the ASV Guidelines Population Management section, page 18.

- 2.3 Measures are in place to ensure the safety of staff and volunteers at all times. Induction training is carried out including safe and appropriate care and handling of animals, animal welfare outcomes and detailed Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S)/Work Safety procedures and protocols.

3 Admissions

- 3.1 The RSPCA will accept any animal offered into its care where it has the facilities, resources and legal capacity to do so.
- 3.2 Where a shelter is restricted in its ability to accept an animal (e.g. rare or unusual species, injured wildlife, livestock, local council restrictions etc), procedures are in place to safeguard the welfare of the animal such as referral of the animal to an alternative appropriate care provider.
- 3.3 Animals are transported in accordance with RSPCA policy (see policies A9.5 and F1).
- 3.4 The admissions process for privately owned animals being surrendered should include a discussion with the owner to explore options other than surrender and the provision of information about options other than surrender. An appointment may be necessary for this discussion.
- 3.5 All animals and their details are recorded on admission to the shelter. The following information (where appropriate for the species) should be requested on admission:
- Date admitted
 - Name and address of person presenting the animal
 - Name of staff member admitting animal
 - Species of animal
 - Breed
 - Age (or estimation of age)
 - Description of animal – colour, markings
 - Sex (evidence of desexing)
 - Where possible – name of animal
 - Distinguishing/permanent identification markers or features including microchip, tattoos, brands
 - Other identification markers including tags
 - Description of collar or other equipment attached
 - Ownership confirmation
 - Origin
 - History:
 - General - housing conditions, socialisation with humans and other animals

- Health - including any medical conditions and medications, dietary requirements, current veterinarian; and previous vaccination, flea, intestinal worm and heartworm prevention (where appropriate)
 - Behavioural history
 - How long the person has been caring for the animal; history of care, behaviour, treatments
 - Why they are surrendering the animal/Reason incoming – e.g. owner surrender, found injured stray etc
 - Location found
 - If animal is to be euthanased/destroyed/adopted and where a client (e.g. person who surrendered/delivered the animal) has requested to be notified prior to euthanasia or animal adoption, the contact details of that person must be recorded and all reasonable effort must be made to contact the person prior to euthanasia or animal adoption.
- 3.6 A health check is undertaken on all shelter animals at an appropriate time by a veterinarian and/or in accordance with legislative requirements. Veterinary treatment is provided, taking into account the current health status of the animal and need for emergency treatment (see Position Paper A2 Animal Adoption Guidelines, clause 2).
- 3.7 Animals are uniquely identified while in the shelter (e.g. collar, tag, microchip etc). See **Table 5** below for the minimum pre-adoption method of identification requirements for animals at RSPCA shelters. For example, cats and dogs must be microchipped prior to adoption.
- 3.8 Protocols for a minimum quarantine period on admission based on veterinary advice are in place, where appropriate for the species and individual animal to safeguard the health and welfare of the individual animal, other animals and staff.
- 3.9 Where appropriate for the species, the behaviour of animals is observed and assessed by trained staff (see clause 2.1) following behavioural assessment protocols prior to making them available for adoption (see Position Paper A2, Animal Adoption Guidelines).
- 3.10 Where possible and appropriate for the species, and after being assessed as suitable for adoption, animals are vaccinated at or prior to intake with core vaccines to protect the welfare of the individual animal admitted and other shelter animals (see **Table 4** below for Australian minimum pre-adoption vaccination requirements by species).
- 3.11 Detailed records are kept covering the animal's admission; period under RSPCA shelter care; the outcome for the animal and where relevant and possible, ongoing records of the animal e.g. where an adopted animal becomes an ongoing patient of the shelter veterinary clinic.

4 Facilities

- 4.1 All animal housing facilities are designed and maintained to provide a clean, hygienic, comfortable and safe environment and to adequately meet the behavioural, social and

- physiological needs of the particular animal (see RSPCA policy A9.1 and The ASV Guidelines sections on Medical Health and Physical Well-being and Behavioural Health and Mental Well-being for details). As a minimum, facilities must abide by any legislative requirements.
- 4.2 The design should provide for proper separation of animals by health status, age, gender, species, temperament, and predator-prey status and should have sufficient space for the different shelter operations such as admissions, veterinary services, isolation, adoption etc (see ASV Guidelines, Medical and Behavioural Well-being sections for details).
- 4.3 The facility should be designed so that movement through the facility and cleaning should proceed from the areas housing the most susceptible to disease and/or healthiest animals to those who are most likely to be a source of contagious disease. The facility should include isolation areas for housing animals diagnosed with or suspected of having infectious diseases by a veterinarian.
- 4.4 Where shelters provide services to privately owned animals (e.g. desexing, boarding or veterinary clinics) these animals should be separated from shelter animals.
- 4.5 Animal housing facilities are appropriate and adequate for the species and individual animal, taking into account temperature, ventilation, air quality, space provided, flooring and bedding material, noise, odours, lighting and shelter from weather extremes. Shelter design is in a process of continuous improvement to achieve the above standards.
- 4.6 Where existing shelter facilities do not meet these minimum guidelines, measures should be taken to provide animals with access to additional space and/or exercise. These guidelines are taken into account when building new shelters or upgrading existing shelter facilities.
- 4.7 Primary enclosures must provide sufficient space to allow each animal, regardless of species, to make normal postural adjustments, e.g. to turn freely and to easily stand, sit, stretch, move their head, without touching the top of the enclosure, lie in a comfortable position with limbs fully extended, move about with clearance and assume a comfortable posture for feeding, drinking, urinating and defaecating (in line with the five freedoms). Separation between food, urination and defaecation, and resting areas should be maximised. In addition, cats and dogs should be able to hold their tails erect when in a normal standing position (see ASV Guidelines, Facility Design and Environment for details).
- 4.8 The size of each primary enclosure must be sufficient to meet the physical and behavioural parameters outlined in clause 4.7 for each animal, regardless of species. The enclosure should be as large as possible. As the length of stay increases (e.g. beyond a few weeks), housing that is more suitable for long-term stays should be provided. For example, foster care (where appropriate) or protected indoor-outdoor access (outdoor spaces must be suitably enclosed to protect from adverse weather, vandalism, and prevent escape or predation). All housing arrangements should be complemented by an exercise and enrichment program to ensure animal welfare (see ASV Guidelines).
- 4.9 **Tables 1-3** provide examples of minimum enclosure dimensions for cats and dogs as a general guide only. These are minimum sizes: wherever possible and appropriate, larger sizes should be provided. Please also note that these are general guides for short-term stays only. If animals are required to stay for prolonged periods (e.g. beyond a few weeks), housing that is more suitable for long-term stays should be provided.

- 4.10 Primary enclosures should allow animals to see out but should also provide at least some opportunity to avoid visual contact with other animals.
- 4.11 Animal housing facilities should provide environmental enrichment to help ensure the animals' behavioural, social and physiological needs are met (see ASV Guidelines).
- 4.12 Animals are housed as appropriate for the individual animal (individually or in compatible pairs/groups) and protected from injury or distress caused by people or other animals. This should take into account visual, olfactory, vocal and physical contact.
- 4.13 Facilities are available to adequately exercise animals in a secure environment on-site. Animals are provided with opportunities for exercise and socialisation with con-specifics (other animals of the same species) and humans where appropriate for the species and individual animal (age, health, behaviour and welfare) based on veterinary advice (see RSPCA policies A9.2 and 9.3).
- 4.14 Minimum exercise requirements for different species are developed and put in place (where appropriate according to species, age, health, behaviour, welfare and based on veterinary advice). For e.g. at least 30 minutes for dogs daily (provide more opportunities for exercise wherever possible) and access to a cat run for cats daily. Temporary exemptions may be acceptable under specific circumstances, for example, animals with medical conditions that require confinement for a short period e.g. pelvic fractures etc
- 4.15 A secure area should be provided for 'meet and greet' sessions with prospective owners and other non-shelter animals e.g. owned vaccinated dogs.
- 4.16 Biosecurity measures are in place to minimise the risk of transfer of infectious diseases including designated isolation areas, personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning/disinfection protocols.
- 4.17 Facilities are designed to minimise pest animal access. Pest control measures used are humane and effective. See RSPCA Australia knowledgebase article: [What is the most humane way to kill pest rats and mice?](#)
- 4.18 Security measures and specific training are in place and constantly under review to protect staff and animals from any external public interference during both business and non-business hours. Facilities are escape-proof and predator-proof.
- 4.19 Emergency and evacuation procedures are in place to protect staff and volunteers, animals and the general public.
- 4.20 Where there is an unavoidable need, Drop-off boxes may be used. Drop-off box design must be safe, secure, prevent unauthorised access and be appropriate and adequate for the species and individual animal. Drop off boxes must be checked daily.

5 Care of animals

- 5.1 Standard operating procedures are developed and put in place for all routine practices for the care of animals housed at the shelter.

5.2 Standard operating procedures are reviewed regularly and readily available throughout the shelter.

These procedures should include but are not limited to:

Admission:

- Reception
- Intake process
- Animal assessment
- Transfer of animals to other suitable care providers
- Lost and found
- Veterinary care

Animal husbandry and care (for all species accepted by the shelter):

- Housing
- Environmental enrichment, socialisation and exercise
- Feeding and watering
- Animal health and welfare monitoring and management (physical, behavioural, social)
- Record keeping
- Disease management

Facilities:

- Maintenance
- Occupational Health and Safety
- Human and animal safety procedures
- Emergency management plans
- Cleaning and Disinfection protocols including substance use and storage
- Hazardous substance use and storage
- Equipment handling
- Humane pest control

Shelter operations:

- Animal Adoption
- 'Meet and greet' arrangements with prospective owners and non-shelter animals
- Animal handling safety
- Infection control
- Quarantine
- Biosecurity

Veterinary procedures:

- Anaesthesia
- Surgery
- Radiology
- Euthanasia (for all species accepted by the shelter)
 - Criteria for evaluating animals for euthanasia
- Pharmaceutical security including S4 and S8 Drugs

Other operational activities:

- Grooming
 - Boarding
 - Retail
 - Consultancy
- 5.3 All animals are checked twice a day and receive appropriate and sufficient feed and water, attention, exercise and health checks to ensure their physiological, behavioural and social needs are met. Daily records of the animals are kept to monitor eating, drinking, urination, defaecation, behaviour and general health. Procedures are in place to ensure medications or other veterinary treatments are given as prescribed.
- 5.4 All animals are provided with general care including grooming, treatments for external and internal parasites and other preventative health care as required and appropriate for the species.
- 5.5 All animals are provided with veterinary care as required. This can be through an on-site veterinarian(s) or through contractual arrangements with a veterinary clinic. An on-call veterinarian should be available for emergencies as required. If animals require 24 hour monitoring or treatment, suitable procedures are in place. Where possible, facilities for veterinary procedures including routine and emergency treatments, desexing, vaccinations, microchipping and euthanasia are available on site.
- 5.6 Staff and volunteers are suitably trained and competent in the handling of all species in their care.
- 5.7 Animals are periodically weighed as appropriate. Young animals may need to be weighed daily.
- 5.8 Where appropriate, animals are provided with behavioural training and opportunities for socialisation with humans and con-specifics (other animals of the same species).
- 5.9 Shelter programs are in place to maximise opportunities for animal placement and to minimise euthanasia. Shelter programs may include but are not limited to:
- Behavioural and Medical Rehabilitation
 - Rehabilitation of ex-cruelty case animals
 - Rehabilitation of surrendered animals
 - Post-adoption support
 - Animal care education
 - Socialisation - Puppy school and Kitty kinder
- 5.10 Procedures are in place to ensure that all animals are adequately monitored and appropriately cared for to maintain welfare standards and to ensure the animals' behavioural, physiological and social needs are met during both business and non-business hours.

- 5.11 Procedures are in place to assess the suitable length of stay for animals on an individual case basis and taking into account any legal requirements.
- 5.12 Procedures are in place regarding foster care programs and external animal adoption (See Position Paper A2, Animal Adoption Guidelines).
- 5.13 Capacity for care: Every shelter has a maximum capacity for care, and the population in their care should not exceed that level. The capacity to provide humane care depends on the number and condition of animals admitted and their duration of stay; the size and condition of the facility; staffing levels and training; the number of available enclosures, among other factors. The capacity of the shelter includes foster care programs, external adoption centres and suitable animal transfer arrangements etc (see the Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters, The Association of Shelter Veterinarians (2010).
- 5.14 Procedures are in place for the appropriate and safe disposal of bodies.

6 Adoption

- 6.1 Adoption of animals is carried out in accordance with *Position Paper A2 Animal adoption guidelines* which sets out minimum requirements for veterinary health checks, vaccinations, behavioural assessment, desexing, identification, and pre-adoption owner assessment (including 'meet and greet' arrangements).
- 6.2 All young animals offered for adoption are of an appropriate age (taking into account their physical, social and behavioural development and ability to feed independently). Where appropriate for the species, young animals are of a suitable size and weight in good health and clinical condition for desexing prior to adoption.

7 Care of Wildlife

- 7.1 Wildlife rescue and rehabilitation is conducted in accordance with RSPCA Policy E03 Rescue and rehabilitation of wild animals.

8 Euthanasia

- 8.1 Euthanasia of animals is conducted in accordance with *Policy A4 Euthanasia of companion animals* and relevant legal requirements (e.g. requirements to euthanase animals declared a pest, maximum terms for companion animals in shelters).
- 8.2 Euthanasia must only be performed by a registered veterinarian or, where allowed by Legislation, a person who is appropriately trained, authorised and experienced in humane euthanasia in accordance with established SOPs (see PP A6 Operation of RSPCA shelters 5.1).

Enclosures

The size of each primary enclosure must be sufficient to meet the physical and behavioural parameters outlined in clause 4.7 for each individual animal, regardless of species. The enclosure should be as large as possible. Separation between food, urination and defaecation, and resting areas should be maximised.

Tables 1-5 provide examples of minimum enclosure dimensions for dogs and cats as a general guide only. These are minimum sizes: wherever possible and appropriate, larger sizes should be provided. Please also note that these are general guides for short-term stays only. As the length of stay increases (e.g. beyond a few weeks), housing that is more suitable for long-term stays should be provided (see clause 4.8). Tables 1-5 must be read in conjunction with the ASV Guidelines.

Animals should be housed as appropriate for the individual animal (individually or in compatible pairs/groups).

All housing arrangements should be complemented by an exercise and enrichment program to ensure animal welfare.

Table 1: MINIMUM DOG PEN SIZES

Minimum pen sizes for each dog, complemented by daily exercise e.g. daily walk

HEIGHT OF DOG (cm)	MINIMUM AREA (square metres)	MINIMUM WIDTH (cm)	MINIMUM HEIGHT (cm)	Floor area for each additional animal (square metres)
Above 70	3.5	120	180	1.7
40 to 70	2.4	100	180	1.5
Below 40	1.5	90	180	1.2

* Up to four weaned pups can be housed in a pen together if they are from the same litter or, if from different litters, at the conclusion of the quarantine period (based on veterinary advice) following vaccination. Each puppy must have sufficient space to meet the parameters in clause 4.7. During the quarantine period, compensatory human socialisation should be considered.

* Injured animals under veterinary supervised treatment may be housed in smaller cages during recovery for medical reasons.

Table 2: MINIMUM CAT CAGE SIZES

Minimum cage size for each cat, for short-term stays only and complemented by daily exercise e.g. access to a cat run daily

MINIMUM FLOOR AREA (square metres)	MINIMUM HEIGHT (cm)
1.5	90

* Up to three weaned kittens can be housed in a cage providing they are from the same litter or, if from different litters, at the conclusion of the quarantine period (based on veterinary advice) following vaccination. Each kitten must have sufficient space to meet the parameters in clause 4.7. During the quarantine period, compensatory human socialisation should be considered.

Table 3: MINIMUM CAT MODULE SIZES

Minimum module size for each cat, complemented by daily exercise e.g. access to a cat run daily

MINIMUM FLOOR AREA (square metres)	MINIMUM WIDTH (cm)	MINIMUM HEIGHT (cm)
0.8	90	180

* A module must contain at least two levels, excluding the floor, and these levels must be connected to the floor by means of a ramp or pole.

* Up to three weaned kittens can be housed in a module providing they are from the same litter or, if from different litters, at the conclusion of the quarantine period (based on veterinary advice) following vaccination. Each kitten must have sufficient space to meet the parameters in clause 4.7. During the quarantine period, compensatory human socialisation should be considered.

Table 4: MINIMUM CAT COLONY PEN SIZES

Minimum cat colony pen size: each individual cat must have a floor area of two square metres and an individual litter tray, individual food and water container and an individual sleeping area that provides a visual barrier from the shared area. This should be complemented by daily exercise e.g. access to a cat run daily. Protected indoor-outdoor access is ideal (outdoor spaces must be suitably enclosed to protect from adverse weather, vandalism, and prevent escape or predation)

CAT HOUSING	MINIMUM FLOOR AREA (square metres)	MINIMUM WIDTH (cm)	MINIMUM HEIGHT (cm)
Colony Pen (area per cat) for up to eight cats	2.0	200	180

* A colony pen must contain at least two levels, excluding the floor, and these levels must be connected to the floor by means of a ramp or pole.

* Cats kept in colony pens should be desexed and have completed their vaccination period. Desexed males (that have completed a six week post-surgery period) and females can be housed together.

Table 5: MINIMUM ENCLOSURE SIZES FOR SMALL ANIMALS

Pen type	Min floor area (square metres)	Min Height (cm)	Number of animals	Floor area for each additional animal (square metres)
Small animal pens	1.0	50	2 guinea pigs	1.0
	1.5	70	2 rabbits	1.5
	0.8	50	2 rats	0.8
	0.7	50	8 mice	0.3

Table 6: RECOMMENDED MINIMUM PRE-ADOPTION REQUIREMENTS FOR ANIMALS AT RSPCA SHELTERS

Prior to adoption, all animals must undergo a veterinary health and behaviour check (RSPCA Policy A03 Adoption of RSPCA animals)

Animal ¹	Method of identification	Desexing	Vaccinations ²
Dogs ³	Microchip	Yes	C3 (parvovirus, distemper, hepatitis)
Cats ³	Microchip	Yes	F3 (feline panleucopenia, feline herpesvirus, feline calicivirus)
Rabbits	Optional microchip	Yes	Calicivirus
Guinea-pigs	Optional microchip	Optional	No
Ferrets	Optional microchip	Yes	Distemper
Mice	Optional microchip	No	No
Rats	Optional microchip	No	No
Birds (as companion animals)	Optional microchip	No	No
Reptiles	Optional microchip	No	No
Cattle	As required under NLIS ⁴	Optional (males only)	5 in 1 vaccine (pulpy kidney (enterotoxaemia), black disease, tetanus, blackleg, malignant oedema)
Sheep	As required under NLIS ⁴	Optional (males only)	Pulpy kidney (enterotoxaemia), tetanus
Pigs	Nil	Optional (males only)	None
Poultry	Nil	No	None
Horses	Optional microchip	Optional (males only)	2 in 1 vaccine (tetanus, strangles)
Donkeys	Optional microchip	Optional (males only)	Tetanus

Goats	As required under NLIS ⁴	Optional (males only)	Pulpy kidney (enterotoxaemia), tetanus
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¹ Requirements and restrictions on companion animal ownership vary across States and Territories. Prospective owners should contact their local RSPCA for more information.

² These are minimum recommended vaccination regimes nationally: additional vaccinations may be recommended in some areas

³ All dogs, cats and other animals must be wormed in accordance with regional requirements. Other species should be wormed as appropriate and necessary. Worming regimes should follow the manufacturer's specifications.

⁴ National livestock identification scheme.