Merri-bek City Council

Domestic Animal Management Plan

2025-2029

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1 Introduction and Context

1.1 Purpose of Domestic Animal Management Plan

The *Domestic Animals Act 1994* (the Act) requires councils in Victoria to develop a Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP) every four years. The DAMP must outline services, programs and policies established by council to address the administration of the Act, and Council's management of cat and dog issues in the community. Councils must review the DAMP annually and publish an evaluation of the implementation of the past year's actions in the Annual Report.

The DAMP should:

- Encourage compliance with the Act, its regulations and any related legislation.
- Minimise the risk of attacks by dogs on people and animals.
- Address overpopulation and high euthanasia rates for cats and dogs.
- Encourage the registration and identification of cats and dogs.
- Minimise the potential for cats and dogs to create a nuisance.
- Effectively identify all dangerous dogs, menacing dogs and restricted breed dogs in that district and ensure that those dogs are kept in compliance with this Act and the regulation.
- Provide for the review of existing orders made under this Act and local laws that relate to the Council's municipal district with a view to determining whether further orders or local laws dealing with the management of cats and dogs in the municipal district are desirable.
- Provide for the review of any other matters related to the management of cats and dogs in the Council's municipal district that it thinks necessary.
- Provide for the periodic evaluation of any program, service, strategy or review outlined under the plan.

While the primary focus of the DAMP is the management of cats and dogs, Council recognises its broader responsibilities to the community and the environment. This includes protecting native wildlife and biodiversity from the predation and disturbance caused by domestic animals, particularly in environmentally sensitive areas.

The DAMP also acknowledges the diverse needs of the community. Not all residents are pet owners, and some experience fear, discomfort, or access limitations due to off-lead dogs or uncontrolled cats. Council aims to balance the benefits of pet ownership with the rights of all community members to enjoy open space safely and comfortably.

The benefits of pet ownership for people's health and wellbeing are well established. Whilst Domestic Animal Management Plans are concerned primarily with the management of cats and dogs within the community, it is important to note that pet ownership has a range of positive outcomes for the ongoing physical and mental health of community members, including:

- preventing loneliness
- motivating people to exercise regularly
- creating opportunities to meet people and make new friends
- teaching responsibility, as pets require ongoing care.

Pets are often viewed as extended members of the family and can provide great companionship, affection and joy. At the same time, responsible pet ownership involves ensuring that animals do not adversely affect the health, safety or enjoyment of others or the environment.

1.2 Approach to Develop the Plan

Merri-bek City Council's DAMP was developed through a sector-leading approach in partnership with two neighbouring Councils, Darebin and Whittlesea. An inter-organisational working group was developed to encourage partnerships and lead best practice. The development of the DAMP was driven by the working group and through four specific stages.

Stage 1: Background Research and Analysis

A review of the local government area; relevant state and local policies; review of Council's current DAMP; emerging issues in domestic animal management; and current animal management statistics.

Stage 2: Community Consultation

A comprehensive community engagement program was delivered to encourage the community to have their say on domestic animal management issues. Approximately 186 people who live, work or play in Merri-bek provided feedback. Feedback was gathered through four methods: a detailed online survey which was available through a dedicated project webpage; community pop-ups held at key venues and locations across the local government areas; submissions and telephone interviews conducted with key stakeholders.

Online survey	3 Community Pop-ups	Email Submissions	Key stakeholder interviews
131 surveys completed	42 participants	3 submissions	10 key stakeholders interviewed

The feedback received from community members has been used to inform the priorities and actions outlined in the DAMP. A full engagement report which outlines the community feedback is also available. The key themes found across the engagement program are outlined in Table 1. These themes come from the Domestic Animals Act Section 68A(2) which covers the topics required to be included in a DAMP. The relevant subsection references are provided in the table below.

Table 1: Key themes across the engagement program and associated DAMP objectives

Theme and Source	Key sub-theme	DAMP objective *(note: objective numbering draws from relevant section number)*
Responsible pet ownership Section 68A(2)(c)(i)	• Improving owner behaviours and control of animals • Increasing community education and communications about responsible dog and cat ownership	3 Promote responsible cat and dog ownership
Dog attacks Section 68A(2)(c)(iii)	• Education around dog behaviour, selecting the 'right' dog and effects of dog attacks • Improving safety at dog parks • Increased patrol and enforcement of rules associated with dog walking (on leash. off leash and no dog areas)	7A Decrease the number of confirmed dog attacks in the community 7B Increase community awareness of how to report dog attacks

Theme and Source	Key sub-theme	DAMP objective *(note: objective numbering draws from relevant section number)*
Overpopulation of cats and dogs Section 68A(2)(c)(iv)	• Providing free cat desexing program or increasing and continuing to provide low cost and subsidised desexing • Increasing rehoming efforts • Reducing illegal and irresponsible backyard breeding • Reducing stray cats • Provide education to the community about the benefits of desexing animals • Consider the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew	4A To decrease the number of stray, abandoned and unwanted cats 4B To minimise the number of animals euthanised
Registration and identification of cats and dogs Section 68A(2)(c)(v)	• Reducing registration fees • Educating about the purpose and benefits of registration	5 Increase the number of cat and dog registrations
Protection from nuisance Section 68A(2)(c)(vi)	• Addressing dog waste in public places • Addressing roaming cats, especially at night • Addressing cats preying on wildlife • Addressing dogs off-leash when they shouldn't be • Availability of cat traps • Having dog free nature reserves	6 Reduce the number of nuisance complaints in Merri-bek
Dangerous and restricted dogs Section 68A(2)(c)(vii)	• Addressing aggressive dogs in off-leash parks • Stricter rules specifically for dangerous breeds	8A Managing dangerous, menacing and restricted breed dogs 8B Ensure all declared dogs are compliant to relevant legislation and regulations
Review of Council services Section 68A(2)(d) and (e)	• Increasing patrols and officer visibility • Increasing community education • Increasing fines for people doing the wrong thing • Reviewing dog off / on leash areas for different dog sizes	10A Review the operation of the wat djerring Animal Facility to ensure it is achieving best practice 10B Emergency management planning for domestic animals (as part of Council's Municipal Emergency Management Plan)

Theme and Source	Key sub-theme	DAMP objective *(note: objective numbering draws from relevant section number)*
Training for authorised officers Section 68A(2)(b)	• Providing training to encourage positive interactions with the community	2A Develop a training policy that clearly identifies minimum training requirements and any additional training needs that should be undertaken by animal management officers 2B Ensure animal management officers have the skills necessary to support the community and effectively perform their regulatory role

Additional DAMP objectives

Part 4 of the Domestic Animals Act 1994, Sections 44 to 63, covers matters relating to Domestic Animal Businesses. DAMP objectives relating to this are:

9A Identify and register all Domestic Animal Businesses in the municipality

9B Annually inspect and audit all registered Domestic Animal Businesses

Section 68A (3) of the Domestic Animals Act 1994 requires Councils to annually review their DAMP, submit a copy of the Department Secretary and publish in Council's annual report an evaluation of implementation with plan actions. Council's objective is to comply with this clause:

11 Comply with Section 68A(3)

Stage 3: Joint Council planning

Relevant Council officers from Darebin, Merri-bek and Whittlesea participated in a joint Council planning session to analyse the community feedback, determine appropriate actions for their respective DAMPs and identify opportunities for partnerships and cost saving.

Stage 4: Public exhibition

To finalise the Plan and ensure that community feedback was captured on the draft Plan. A formal public exhibition period will be held from 15 September to 12 October 2025.

1.3 Demographic Profile of Council

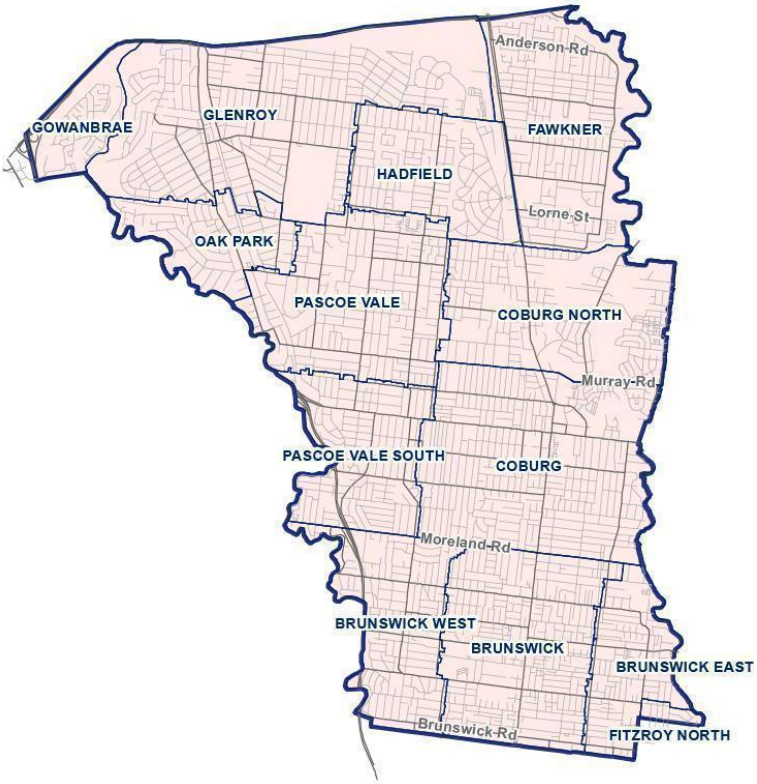
Merri-bek City Council is located in the inner north of Melbourne, about 4km from the Central Business District (CBD). It covers approximately 50.9 square kilometres and is made up of the following suburbs:

- Brunswick
- Brunswick East
- Brunswick West
- Coburg
- Coburg North
- Fawkner
- Glenroy
- Gowanbrae
- Hadfield
- Oak Park
- Pascoe Vale
- Pascoe Vale South
- Fitzroy North (part)

The population of Merri-bek for 2025 is 191,747, with a slightly higher growth rate than Greater Melbourne. In 2021, the City of Merri-bek had a lower proportion of children (under 18) and a lower proportion of persons aged 60 or older than Greater Melbourne.

Merri-bek is a multicultural municipality, where in 2021 over 34.5% of local residents spoke a language other than English at home. The most common languages spoken other than English are Italian, Arabic and Greek. In 2021, there were 1,268 people who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander in Merri-bek.

Figure 1: Map of the City of Merri-bek



1.4 Animal Management in Merri-bek

The purpose of Merri-bek City Council's animal management service is to:

- Implement Council's responsibilities under the Act and the General Local Laws.
- Promote the welfare of cats and dogs.
- Inform and educate the community about the benefits associated with pets, responsible pet ownership and the needs of companion animals.
- Reflect the needs of pet owners, non-pet owners, wildlife and the environment when making decisions about animal management.
- Respond to issues raised by the community about nuisance animals, e.g. barking dogs.
- Provide programs and services to support the community to be responsible pet owners, such as desexing programs, education campaigns and park patrols.
- Provide animal welfare services through the wat djerring Animal Facility in partnership with City of Darebin and City of Whittlesea.

A high-level summary of the Merri-bek services for domestic animals is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Current services for domestic animals

Program or Service	Service Level
Identification & registration	7 business days
Domestic animal complaints	Acknowledge in 2 business days
Dangerous dog complaints	Immediate response
Routine street, park, reserve and creek patrols	Weekly or more frequently in response to complaints
wat djerring Animal Facility	Monday 10am -4pm

Program or Service	Service Level
	Tuesday 12-6.30pm Wednesday 10am - 4pm Thursday 12-6.30pm Friday 10am - 4pm Saturday 11am - 3pm Sunday - Closed
Microchipping and/or desexing programs	Council offers a cat desexing program which includes microchipping, vaccination and first year registration. The program is free for concession card holders and subsidised for non-concession card holders. This program is currently offered annually, limit of 2 cats per household.
After hours emergency service	Emergency call-out service for dog attacks and other animal related incidents.

1.5 Domestic Animal Statistics

Currently there are 21,821 registered pets in Merri-bek, 13,291 dogs and 8,530 cats. There has been a 16% increase in pet ownership since July 2021. Trend information is shown in Table 3.

Merri-bek has 22 dog declared menacing and 20 dogs declared either dangerous or restricted breed.

Merri-bek has thirteen registered Domestic Animal Businesses; 7 boarding establishments, 2 pet shops, 1 dog trainer, 1 combined pet shop and dog trainer, and 2 combined boarding establishments and dog trainers.

Table 3: Number of cats and dogs registered in Merri-bek

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Dogs	13256	13455	13996	13722
Cats	7415	7986	8547	8607
Total	20671	21441	22543	22329

* The periods above relate to the 'animal registration year' of 10 April – 9 April each year.

The animal management team responded to 70 reports of dogs at large and 21 cases where dogs were not under effective control in 2024/25. There were 20 reported dog attacks causing non-serious injury, along with 2 incidents involving failure to collect and dispose of animal waste.

2 Training of Authorised Officers

In order to deliver animal management services that meet the requirements of the Act to the level that the community expects, it is crucial to ensure that all authorised officers are appropriately trained through participation in a robust training program.

The community engagement program illustrated a growing community expectation that Council officers should be fostering partnerships, supporting community education initiatives and facilitating positive interactions with the community.

2.1 Context and Current Situation

Merri-bek has a combination of Animal Management and Animal Collections Officers. A relevant qualification, such as either a Certificate IV in Government Statutory Compliance or Certificate IV in Animal Control and Regulation is desirable when recruiting to these roles.

Authorised Officers involved in animal management undertake Council required training programs as outlined in Table 4. Any training gaps are discussed with relevant staff and plans put in place to address the gaps.

Table 4: Authorised Officer training status - completed and in progress

Authorised Officer Training	Completed
Animal handling training	4
Animal Management Officer specific training e.g. - statement taking and prosecutions training.	3
OH&S training e.g. dealing with aggressive customers and occupational violence prevention training	4
Cert IV in Government Statutory Compliance or Certificate iv in Animal Control and Regulation (Desirable but not required)	2

2.2 Training for Authorised Officers

Merri-bek City Council has planned a thorough training program for Authorised Officers to ensure that they have the skills and knowledge necessary to meet the requirements of the Act and to deliver service in a manner that the community expects. Table 5 shows the planned training for 2026-2029 and the expected timeframe of each.

Table 5: Planned training of Authorised Officers for the 2026-2029 period

Planned Training (2026-2029)	Expected Timeframe
OH&S Dealing with aggressive customers Defensive driving Occupational violence prevention	Annually or as required
Industry Training Animal handling Animal assessment Statement taking Evidence gathering	Annually or as required
Restricted Breed Dog Identification	As required
Council e-learning opportunities	Annually
Customer Service	As required
Cert IV in Animal Control and Regulation	As required
Cert IV in Local Government (Regulatory Services)	As required
Australian Institute of Animal Management	As they are provided
Management seminars/conference	As they are provided
Animal Welfare Victoria seminars	As they are provided

2.3 Our Plan

Table 6 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to meet objectives 2A and 2B.

Table 6: Activities for Training for Authorised Officers

Objective 2A: Develop a training policy that clearly identifies minimum training requirements and any additional training needs that should be undertaken by animal management officers		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Identify minimum training requirements by consultation with management and staff	Year 1	Documentation to be finalised
Objective 2B: Ensure animal management officers have the skills necessary to support the community and effectively perform their regulatory role		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Explore opportunities for ongoing training, development and health and safety practices in partnership with the City of Darebin and City of Whittlesea	Ongoing	No. of events/training programs undertaken
Maintain a training register for individual officers detailing completed and proposed training	Annually	Review of training register
Develop an induction process for new staff members	Year 1	Reviewed induction process
Explore providing information to Council in home service providers around domestic animal management relevant to their roles.	Year 1	Engagement with relevant service providers

3 Responsible Pet Ownership

Responsible pet ownership was a key theme that emerged from the community consultation. There was a strong desire for community education topics such as responsibilities of dog owners when walking or exercising their dog, the importance of desexing, what 'effective control of a dog' means and why cat containment is important. Many key stakeholders were keen to partner with Council to help deliver education programs on these topics as well as others, including domestic animals and wildlife, cat and dog behaviour, how to help injured animals, microchipping and desexing.

3.1 Context and Current Situation

Council provides information and advice to the community regarding responsible pet ownership and has a number of initiatives and programs in place to encourage responsible pet ownership and to address compliance with legislative and regulatory requirements. Some of these programs include:

- Educating the community about responsible pet ownership, including the benefits of desexing, registration and microchipping
- Providing an annual subsidised cat desexing program and an ongoing voucher scheme to reduce the cost of cat and dog desexing for concession card holders
- Providing cat traps to residents for free and facilitating the collection of trapped cats
- Maintaining, promoting and patrolling the on and off-leash dog parks, dog prohibited areas and fenced in dog parks across Merri-bek
- Comparing Council's database of registered animals against microchip registries to ensure breeds align
- Following up on unpaid animal registration renewals to ensure pets are registered as per legislation
- Investigating alleged breaches of the Domestic Animals Act and the General Local Law, issuing infringements for breaches of legislation, pursuing unpaid infringements and prosecuting matters in court as required.

Development of principles and proposed interventions for dog walking in Merri-bek

From March - May 2025, Council asked the community for feedback to help shape how they manage dog walking in parks and open spaces. Over 1,850 people participated through surveys, pop-up events, workshops and submissions. People reported how much they value open space, not just for dog walking, but also for social connection, health and wellbeing, and enjoying nature. Many supported the proposed principles and interventions, such as clearer rules, designated on and off leash areas, and better infrastructure. Others raised concerns about safety, protecting the natural environment and how new rules would be enforced.

This feedback has guided a six-month pilot across eight parks, running on a rolling program in 2025/2026. The pilot is testing different approaches to sharing space, including timed off leash access, fencing and improved signage, to see what works best for the community. The project has highlighted the importance of supporting responsible dog ownership, creating inclusive and accessible spaces, and finding the right balance for all park users, including those who may feel uncomfortable around dogs.

The following parks within Merri-bek have designated off-leash areas:

Brunswick West
Sheils Reserve
Holbrook Reserve
Brady Reserve
Wylie Reserve

Pascoe Vale South
Esslemont Reserve
Brearley Reserve
Morris Reserve

Pascoe Vale
Joyce Reserve
Raeburn Reserve
Austin Crescent Reserve
Hallam Reserve
Cole Reserve
Rayner Reserve

Oak Park
J P Fawkner Reserve

Gowanbrae
* Elms Court Reserve

Brunswick
Clifton Park
A G Gillon Oval
*Gilpin Park
Reaburn Reserve

Coburg
Bush Reserve
McDonald Reserve
DeChene Reserve
Bridges Reserve
Anderson Reserve
Campbell Reserve
Shore Reserve
Egan Reserve
Bowden Reserve
#Harmony Park
#Robinson Reserve
#Tate Reserve
Dunstan Reserve
Fraser Reserve
*Upfield Linear Park (Audley Street)

Glenroy
Sewell Reserve
Wallace Reserve
Gervase Ave Reserve
Jacana Valley
*Kingsford Smith Ulm Reserve
#GE Clarke Reserve

Brunswick East
Balfe Park
Jones Park
Methven Park
Phillips Reserve
Sumner Park
Abrahams Reserve
Kirkdale Park
Fleming Park

Coburg North
Jackson Reserve
Cash Reserve
Hosken Reserve
*Richards Reserve
Parker Reserve

Fawkner
Charles Mutton Reserve
**Lorne Street Fenced Dog Park
*Moomba Park Reserve

Hadfield
Martin Reserve
Roberts Reserve
Tony Mommson Reserve

* Includes a fenced in off-leash dog area
** Fenced dog park only (not surrounding Reserve)
# Part of the Walking Dogs in Merri-bek 6-month trial (As per 9 July 2025 Council meeting)

Compliance activities

Table 7 shows the trend in issue of cat and dog infringements over the past 4 years.

Table 7: Cat and dog infringements issued Merri-bek

Number of offences	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
	1,508	3,111	1,092	1,662

Compliance activities include the following:

- Enforcement using Notices to Comply, infringement notices, Animal Management Agreements and, where required, court prosecution
- Officer visits to properties of non-renewed pet registrations
- Random inspections of properties of declared dogs
- Follow up of notifications from pet welfare agencies of claimed or rehoused pets which are housed within the municipality
- Provision of cat traps to complainants
- Impoundment of dogs or cats found wandering. Unregistered and/or unidentifiable dogs or cats are brought to the wat djerring Animal Facility. Registered and identifiable cats and dogs are reunited with their owners.
- Complaint investigation
- Patrols of dog parks, sporting fields and reserves, creeks and waterways to educate and remind owners of their responsibilities, and where required, issue infringement notices.
- Social media posts around the registration/renewal period and the 'Top of the Class' campaign about responsible pet ownership.

3.2 Orders, Local Laws, Council Policies and Procedures

Section 26 Domestic Animals Act 1994 – Merri-bek Council requires dogs to be kept under effective control while in a public place including in designated off-leash areas.

Orders:

- The Dogs Off-Leash Areas Order was endorsed by Council on 8 March 2006; this order designated the off-leash or partial off-leash dog walking areas within Merri-bek municipality.
- The Dogs Off-Leash Areas Order was amended by the 9 July 2025 Council meeting; the Dog Off-Leash and Dog Prohibited Area Order - the Order creates five new designated off-leash areas and modifies two.

Local Laws:

- General Local Law 2018 Part 5 - Merri-bek requires residents provide responsible care and management of animals.
- The General Local Law 2018 is being reviewed in 2025-2026, consultation is intended in late 2025 and early 2026 where the community will have the opportunity to comment and contribute to the development of the new Local Law.

Policies and Procedures:

- Process for issuing notices to comply, infringement notices and filing charges for prosecution
- Standard Operating Procedures
- Compliance and Enforcement Framework

3.3 Our Plan

Table 8 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to meet DAMP objectives relating to responsible pet ownership.

Table 8: Activities relating to responsible pet ownership

Objective 3: Promote responsible cat and dog ownership		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Develop a communication plan in partnership with City of Darebin and City of Whittlesea and stakeholders on responsible pet ownership topics	Annually	Communications plan developed

Objective 3: Promote responsible cat and dog ownership		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Run a campaign publicising the relevant animal related trends (e.g. the importance of dog socialisation and training, picking up after dogs etc)	Quarterly	Social media reach
Stage 2 of the Dog Walking in Merri-bek	Ongoing	No. recommendations and improvements
Attend Council run festivals and events where residents can meet the team and receive information on responsible pet ownership	Ongoing	No. events
Run a campaign about the importance of responsible pet ownership, sending information or QR codes for information out with renewal notices	Annually	No. nuisance complaints
Hold an annual open day at wat djerring Animal Facility to improve community awareness of the facility and the services delivered.	Annually	No. events
Develop engaging fact sheets and web content regarding legislative obligations	Year 1	Fact sheets completed and distributed
As part of the upcoming Local Law review, review all elements relating to domestic animals	Year 1	Local Law domestic animal clauses reviewed

4 Reducing Overpopulation Rates and Euthanasia Levels

The overpopulation of cats and dogs is an issue that presents challenges in the community such as impacts on wildlife, people and other cats and dogs. There are also impacts on the welfare of cats and dogs if they are stray, semi-owned, or malnourished due to limited capacity of owners to care for them. In particular, the overpopulation of cats leads to challenges with high rates of euthanasia within the stray cat population due to low rehoming rates.

During the community engagement program, key stakeholders highlighted the need for low cost desexing of animals, increased re-homing efforts and reducing illegal and irresponsible backyard breeding to help combat overpopulation and high euthanasia rates. Community education was seen as important to help the community understand the importance of desexing and the impact of un-desexed cats roaming in the community.

Support for the introduction of a cat curfew

Consultation period June-July 2025

There was strong support (78%) for the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew from the feedback in the online survey with 68% strongly supporting the proposal and 19% somewhat supporting but having concerns. This support was also shown from community pop-up participants where 76% supported the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew.

Consultation period September-October 2025

There was strong support (54.81%) for the introduction of a cat curfew from the those that completed the survey. Of this, 37.28% support a 24-hour curfew and 17.53% support a 12-hour curfew.

4.1 Context and Current Situation

Euthanasia rates

The population and euthanasia rates are demonstrated in Table 9. There has been a gradual increase in the number of the dogs impounded over the four year period, rising from 189 in 2021/22 to 228 in 2024/25. The most notable increased occurred between 2023/24 and 2024/25, where impoundments rose by 39. The number of dogs returned to their owners remained relatively stable, with figures

dropping slightly from 133 in 2021/22 to 130 in 2024/25. Rehoming rates have also shown a positive trend, with the number of dogs rehomed increasing from 39 in 2021/22 to 70 in 2024/25.

For cats, the number has fluctuated but remains high overall. Between 2021/22 and 2022/23, there was a decrease of 93 impoundments, followed by another drop of 49 between 2022/23 and 2023/24. However, this trend reversed in 2024/25 with a significant increase of 212, bringing the total number of cats impounded to 954. The number of cats returned to owners has remained low throughout this period, increasing slightly from 43 in 2023/24 to 57 in 2024/25. Rehoming rates have improved over time, rising from 471 in 2023/24 to 570 in 2024/25, an increase of 99, reflecting ongoing efforts to support rehoming.

Table 9: Numbers of cats and dogs impounded and subsequent outcomes

	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Dogs				
Impounded	198	192	189	228
Returned to owner	130	133	133	130
Euthanasia (feral or unsafe to rehome)	11	13	17	35
Rehomed	47	39	39	70
Cats				
Impounded	884	791	742	954
Returned to owner	66	46	43	57
Euthanasia (feral or unsafe to rehome)	203	223	228	334
Rehomed	527	484	471	570

Reuniting domestic animals with their owners is a strong focus for Council and many community welfare organisations. Pets are valued members of the family, and it can be distressing for owners and animals when they are missing or being held within the pound. To be able to reunite animals with their owners the pet must be registered and microchipped, this is further explored in Section 5 of the DAMP.

Animals that are not reclaimed are offered for rehoming if they meet temperament and health requirements. Animals may be euthanised if they have an untreatable disease or if they have temperament issues that pose a risk to the community.

Merri-bek City Council provides the following educational and community awareness activities:

- Print and media campaigns promoting responsible pet ownership
- Cat-trapping service (available to all residents)
- Annual free cat desexing, microchipping and immunisation program for eligible cat owners
- Reduced-rate desexing program for eligible cat owners (ongoing program in conjunction with vets).

Cat overpopulation management

Since its launch in 2019, Council's annual cat desexing program has continued to support responsible pet ownership and reduce the number of unwanted litters in the community. The program has seen consistent uptake, with a total of 908 cats desexed over six years. Annual desexing numbers have steadily increased, rising from 140 in 2019/2020 to a record high of 192 in 2024/25. The most significant growth occurred in the past two years, reflecting increased community awareness and demand. Council will continue to invest in this initiative as a key strategy in managing the local cat population.

Merri-bek City Council has provided a heavily discounted desexing program in partnership with The Vet Project. They have provided an accessible and affordable high-quality desexing service for the local community. This program was delivered through the Targeted Cat Desexing Program grant, funded by Department Energy, Environment and Climate Action.

Merri-bek has held two events with The Vet Project, one in May 2025 where 29 cats and kittens were desexed, and three days in July 2025 where 50 cats and kittens were desexed.

Cat curfew

Unlike Merri-bek's animal management partner Councils of Whittlesea and Darebin, Merri-bek does not have a cat curfew. Instead, there has been a focus on education around cat containment and desexing programs.

4.2 Orders, Local Laws, Council Policies and Procedures

- Local Laws
- General Local Law 2018 Part 5 - maximum number of animals allowed in a private premises.

Compliance Activities

- Investigation of reports of animal hoarding and feeding of community cats
- Enforcement of registration, microchipping and tag-wearing requirements
- Issuance of infringement notices for cats and dogs found at large.

4.3 Our Plan

Table 10 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to meet each activity relating to reducing cat populations and reducing euthanasia rates.

Table 10: Activities to manage cat populations and euthanasia rates

Objective 4A: To decrease the number of stray, abandoned and unwanted cats		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Partner with City of Darebin and City of Whittlesea to seek partnership/funding opportunities to increase the size of the desexing program	As grant funding is available	No. of successful grant opportunities
Increase Council's cat desexing program, focusing on areas with high volumes of cat nuisance complaints	Ongoing	No. cats desexed
Develop and provide material about cat enclosures and nuisance issues for cat owners	Year 1	No. complaints
Design a grant program for low-income residents to help them transition their cats to containment and put it forward for consideration in the 2026/27 Budget	Year 1	Refer to the 2026/7 budget process
Promote 'Safe Cat, Safe Wildlife' education material	Year 1	Fewer reports of nuisance cats
Provide educational material to owners promoting the benefits of cat containment to cats, the community and wildlife ahead of introducing a cat curfew	Year 1	Fewer requests for cat cages
Provide an education and support program to assist residents transition their cats to remaining within their property boundary leading up to the introduction of a cat curfew on 1 April 2027.	Year 1	No. cat owners engaging with the program
Run a campaign on social media about the introduction of a cat curfew	Year 1	Social media reach

Partner with researchers to investigate the effects of cat containment on native wildlife	Year 1	Entered a partnership
Review the impact of cat containment at 12 and 24 months post curfew implementation	Year 3 and Year 4	Report as part of annual DAMP review
Objective 4B: To minimise the number of animals euthanised		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Encourage partnerships between shelters and rescue groups, through section. 84Y agreements	Ongoing	No. partnerships

5 Registration and Identification

Registration and the requirement to be microchipped is a legislative requirement which provides Council with an understanding of the level of pet ownership and allows for the development of relevant services and programs. It also assists in the safe and prompt return of lost cats and dogs to their owners.

A total of 90.5% of respondents in the online survey were aware that dogs need to be registered, and 82.2% did not know anyone who had an unregistered dog or cat. This confirms the majority of cat and dog owners in Merri-bek have a good awareness and responsibility when it comes to pet registration. The top barrier perceived to registering a pet once it reaches the appropriate age was the cost.

5.1 Context and Current Situation

There are currently 13,291 registered dogs and 8,530 registered cats in Merri-bek, as shown in Table 11. It is difficult to capture data on the actual ownership population of cats and dogs, as we know that not all cats and dogs are registered. Of the total registrations, 789 dogs and 636 cats were new registrations, while 11,514 dogs and 7,195 cats were renewals. There has been an increase in the number of cats and dogs registered in 2024/25* from the 2020/2021 period, 28% in cats and 9% in dogs.

Concession rates were accessed by approximately 11% of dog owners and 11% of cat owners.

*'Animal registration year' 10 April 2024 – 9 April 2025

Table 11: Registration and microchipping numbers of cats and dogs

	Dogs	Cats
Registration Numbers	**13291**	**8530**
New	789	636
Renewal	11514	7195
Concessions	1413	903

Merri-bek provides the following educational and community awareness activities:

- Providing education on the need to register animals via social media, print material, online, on hold message and officers on patrol.
- Providing renewal information and reminders via postal mail; emails; text messaging; and prominent displays in the community.
- Liaising with local veterinary practices to ensure relevant information on responsible pet ownership is available.
- Increasing registration education in parks by Animal Management Officers.

- Attending council run events and speaking with the community about responsible pet ownership and the need to register
- Providing pro-rata registration for new applications from 10 July each year.
- Following up registrations for cats and dogs purchased from pet shops and shelters, or adopted.
- Providing free applications for registered animals moving from another Victorian municipality into Merri-bek.
- Offering online application for new registrations (along with hard-copy application forms available on request and at Customer Service Centres).
- Offering online payment options for renewal registrations.
- Ensuring registration application forms are available at all domestic animal businesses.
- Comparing microchip registry databases with Council's registration database and writing to dog/cat owners whose pet is microchipped but not registered
- Fawkner Festa and Glenroy Festa stalls to promote responsible pet ownership and registration.
- Welcome pack for newly registered animals.
- Free registration for the first year for cats if desexed.
- Providing free micro-chipping at Council run events and partnering events e.g. at the RSPCA low-cost veterinary clinics held in Merri-bek

5.2 Orders, Local Laws, Council Policies and Procedures

Domestic Animals Act 1994 s10C – requirement of dogs/cats to be microchipped at time of renewal of registration

Local Laws:

- General Local Law 2018 Part 5 - regulating the number and types of animals a person may keep without a permit

Policies and Procedures:

- Application for registration and renewal of registration of cats and dogs.
- Procedure for seizing and impounding unregistered and/or unidentified cats and dogs.
- Process for issuing notices to comply, infringement notices and filing charges for prosecution.
- Process for follow-ups on unpaid renewals.
- Process for follow-ups of microchipped but not registered pets
- Enforcement guidelines

Compliance Activities:

- Regular patrols of streets, parks, creeks and reserves including random checks of registration and tag details.
- Use of microchip scanners on patrols.
- Issuance of a registration renewal notice in advance of the due date each year.
- Sending of a reminder text followed by a reminder notice for unpaid registrations after the due date.
- Enforcement action if renewal notice is not paid after the reminder

5.3 Our Plan

Table 12 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to meet DAMP objectives relating to animal registration.

Table 12: Activities to encourage pet registration

Objective 5: Increase the number of cat and dog registrations		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Promote registration through annual door knocks and communications e.g. variable message boards, a-frames, decals on vans	Annually	No. pets registered
Partner with vets and key stakeholders to provide information to the community.	Annually	No. stakeholders engaged
Promote registration discounts for concession card holders for desexed cats and dogs	Annually	No. discounted registrations
Cross-reference microchip databases and Central Animal Records (CAR) information with current Council registration database	Annually	No. cats and dogs registered

6 Nuisance

According to the *Domestic Animals Act 1994* a dog or cat is regarded as a nuisance: if it injures or endangers the health of any person; or if it creates a noise (e.g. barking), which persistently occurs or continues to such a degree or extent that it unreasonably interferes with the peace, comfort or convenience of any person in any other premises.

Community feedback showed several key nuisance themes in the community, particularly relating to dog waste, roaming cats, dogs being off-leash when they shouldn't be and cats preying on wildlife. Council has a role in protecting the community from unnecessary nuisance from cats and dogs through their services and community education.

6.1 Context and Current Situation

Table 13 illustrates the number of complaints received by Council in relation to cat and dog management over the past four years. Overall, the data reflects encouraging signs of improvement in several areas, along with increased community engagement in animal management programs.

Reports of dogs at large have declined from a high of 153 in 2023/24 to 122 in 2024/25, suggesting improvements in containment practices and greater awareness among pet owners about their responsibilities. Similarly, barking dog complaints decreased from 252 in 2023/24 to 226 in 2024/25, indicating some success in addressing nuisance issues through education and intervention.

There has also been a strong community response to Council's cat trapping, with cat cage requests rising to 245 in 2024/25, the highest in the four year period. This reflects growing interest in managing stray cats and roaming cats in a humane and proactive way.

While dog attack and dog rushes incidents have shown some increases over the four years, the consistent reporting may also reflect improved community awareness and willingness to report concerning behaviour. These areas remain a priority for Council, with ongoing efforts to support responsible pet ownerships and ensure animals are safely managed in public spaces.

Table 13: Cat and dog complaints to Council from 2021/22 to 2024/25

Nature of Complaint	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25
Dog Attack	131	117	139	149
Dog at Large	87	107	153	122
Barking Dog	214	192	252	226
Dog Rush	69	66	66	76
Animal Violation (other)	328	369	468	457
Cat cage requests	229	156	171	245

Merri-bek's current educational and promotional activities surrounding nuisance include:

- Providing information and advice on methods for resolving nuisance in the community.
- Encouraging complainants to speak to the owner of the animal causing the nuisance directly and as early as possible.
- Providing signage and decals related to control of dogs in parks.
- Patrols of parks, creeks and reserves. Patrols are undertaken on bikes and in vehicles to ensure that officers can access all areas frequented by cats and dogs.

6.2 Orders, Local Laws, Council Policies and Procedures

Local Laws:

- General Local Law 2018 Part 5- any structure used for housing an animal must be maintained: so as not to cause any nuisance.

Compliance Activities

- Animal Management Officers investigate nuisance complaints and issue infringements and, when necessary, prosecute.
- Officers proactively patrol Council parks, reserves and residential areas.
- Officers actively work with other agencies including the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action, and Victoria Police on broader nuisance issues.

6.3 Our Plan

Table 14 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to meet DAMP objectives relating to managing nuisance from domestic animals.

Table 14: Activities relating to managing nuisance

Objective 6: Reduce the number of nuisance complaints in Merri-bek		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Review and adjust frequency of increase patrols as required	Ongoing	Review conducted
Maintain appropriate signage about cleaning up after your dog, on/off leash areas and dogs being under effective control	Ongoing	No. signs installed
Run a media education campaign to promote exercising dogs to reduce barking complaints	Annually	No. barking complaints

7 Dog Attacks

Dog attacks against people and other animals unfortunately do occur in the local area. Community feedback indicated that public dog parks are a particular area of concern and that owner behaviours and understanding of responsibilities needs to be addressed.

7.1 Context and Current Situation

In 2024/25, Council responded to 149 dog attacks, an increase from 139 in 2023/24, 117 in 2022/23 and 131 in 2021/22. This continues an upward trend over the past three years, indicating the need for ongoing community education and enforcement around responsible pet ownership.

In addition to dog attacks, there were 76 dog rush incidents reported in 2024/25, up from 66 in each of the previous two years, but still slightly lower than the 69 incidents recorded in 2021/22.

Dog rush incidents are typically situations where a dog approaches a person aggressively but without physical contact. These are often distressing for the individuals involved and are treated seriously by officers, with follow up.

Reports of dog attacks and rushes are investigated to determine the seriousness of the incident. Serious dog attacks may result in court prosecution, while non-serious matters are addressed through infringements or Animal Management Agreements.

Current activities undertaken by Council to minimise the risk of attacks by dogs on people and animals include:

- Providing proactive park and street patrols.
- Inspecting properties where dangerous and restricted breed dogs reside.
- Responding promptly to complaints about dog attacks.
- Investigating dog attack reports and taking an appropriate course of action.

7.2 Orders, Local Laws, Council Policies and Procedures

Section 26 (2) Domestic Animals Act 1994: Merri-bek City Council requires dogs to be in effective control in any public place, other than designated off-leash areas, and prohibits dogs from being present in specific areas of the municipality.

Policies and Procedures:

- Collection of stray, abandoned or injured animals
- Capture of dogs at large
- Investigation of dog attacks/rushes
- Regular park patrols
- Recording all dangerous dogs on the Victorian Declared Dog Registry and conducting annual audits of their properties
- Prosecution of serious dog attacks
- Information and education programs on effective control of dogs in public places
- Procedures for dealing with dangerous and/or aggressive dogs.

Compliance Activities:

- Issuing official warnings
- Issuing notice to comply
- Issuing infringement notices
- Declaring dogs as menacing or dangerous
- Court prosecution
- Seeking an order for the destruction of a dog/s.

7.3 Our Plan

Table 15 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to meet DAMP objectives relating to dog attacks.

Table 15: Activities contributing to managing dog attacks

Objective 7A: Decrease the number of confirmed dog attacks in the community		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Provide proactive and visible patrols at dog off leash parks, creeks and reserves	Ongoing	No. official warnings/infringements issued
Analyse dog attack data to gain an understanding of trends relating to dog attacks. Implement strategies to address trends	Ongoing	No. strategies implemented.
Educate dog owners on responsibilities to keep dogs under effective control	Year 2	No. educational materials developed
Objective 7B: Increase community awareness of how to report dog attacks		

Activity	When	Evaluation
Develop a community education campaign of what a dog attack is, how to report it and the potential penalty	Year 2	Education campaign developed No. of reports pre and post awareness campaign

8 Dangerous, Menacing and Restricted Breed Dogs

The community's understanding of what constitutes a dangerous or restricted dog may not broadly align with the classifications as per the Act, however it was clear from the community engagement program that there was some community concern about dogs being off leash where they shouldn't be and poor management by owners.

8.1 Context and Current Situation

Table 16 shows there are currently 42 dogs with restrictions in the City of Merri-bek. This is an increase from 2020/21 where there were 14.

Council administers and enforces provisions of the Act to identify and control dangerous, menacing and restricted-breed dogs to ensure the safety of the community.

Table 16: Declared dogs in Merri-bek City Council

Information	Number
Dogs declared dangerous/restricted breed Dogs declared menacing Total	20 22 42
Prosecutions re: dangerous dogs	0
Audits conducted re: dangerous dogs	Annual

Merri-bek City Council's current education/promotion activities surrounding declared dogs include:

- Providing fact sheets and Animal Welfare Victoria brochures on dangerous/restricted breed dogs.
- Implementing educational activities at local events.
- Providing information via the Council website, social media and traditional media.

8.2 Policies and Procedures

Merri-bek City Council's registration application and renewal forms require all owners to declare if their dog is a restricted breed, has been declared menacing or is a dangerous dog as required by the Act. Council has procedures associated with the declaration of dogs, accessing and updating the Victorian Declared Dog Registry, Enforcement Guidelines and Animal Management Standard Operating Procedures.

Compliance Activities:

- Annual and unscheduled inspections of properties housing declared dangerous, restricted-breed and menacing dogs.
- Patrols by Animal Management Officers of all areas and parks to monitor dog behaviour.
- Maintenance of data on the Victorian Declared Dog Registry.
- Investigation of reports of restricted breed dogs.

8.3 Our Plan

Table 17 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to meet DAMP objectives relating to dangerous dogs.

Table 17: Activities to reduce risk associated with dangerous dogs

Objective 8A: Managing dangerous, menacing and restricted breed dogs		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Ensure all declared dogs are recorded on the Victorian Declared Dog Registry (VDDR) and the VDDR is kept up to date	Ongoing	100% recorded
Develop a process to assist decision making regarding refusal of registration/renewal of dangerous and restricted breed dogs	Year 1	Development of process
Conduct random property inspections of registered guard dogs to ensure compliance	Ongoing	No. patrols
Objective 8B: Ensure all declared dogs are compliant to relevant legislation and regulations		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Conduct random property inspections of declared dogs to ensure compliance	Ongoing	No. random property checks

9 Domestic Animal Businesses

All Domestic Animal Businesses must register with their local council. Under Part 4 of the Domestic Animals Act 1994, local councils have the authority (among other things) to:

- Refuse registration of a business if they fail to comply with the legislation and relevant code of practice.
- Set special conditions on the registration of any domestic animal business.

9.1 Context and Current Situation

There are 13 registered Domestic Animal Businesses within Merri-bek as shown in Table 18, These are made up of seven boarding establishments, two pet shops, one dog trainer, one combined pet shop and dog trainer, and two combined boarding establishments and dog trainers.

Table 18: Domestic Animal Businesses in Merri-bek

Domestic Animal Business Statistics	No.
Registered Domestic Animal Businesses	13
Identified non-registered Domestic Animal Businesses	0
Prosecutions related to Domestic Animal Businesses	0
Notices to comply related to Domestic Animal Businesses	0

Current educational, promotional and compliance activities surrounding domestic animal businesses include:

- Providing all Domestic Animal Businesses with the relevant Code of Practice;
- Providing Animal Welfare Victoria fact sheets on Domestic Animal Businesses to registered businesses.
- Registering all Domestic Animal Businesses;
- Conducting annual audits of each Domestic Animal Business
- Follow up any non-compliance as required;
- Regular inspections for new/non-registered Domestic Animal Businesses.

9.2 Policies and Procedures

- Standard Operating Procedures for Animal Management processes.
- Procedure and audit templates for Domestic Animal Businesses

9.3 Our Plan

Table 19 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to ensure Domestica Animal Businesses are appropriately regulated.

Table 19: Activities relating to Domestica Animal Businesses

Objective 9A: Identify and register all Domestic Animal Businesses in the municipality		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Identify businesses that should be registered Domestic Animal Businesses in the municipality and determine their registration status. Partner with Planning department to receive notification when a new animal related business is seeking a permit	Ongoing	No. Domestic Animal Businesses registered (100%)
Investigate any report of unregistered Domestic Animal Businesses	As required	No. reports investigated (100%)
Objective 9B: Annually inspect and audit all registered Domestic Animal Businesses		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Conduct annual audits of all Domestic Animal Businesses within Merri-bek	Annually	No. audits conducted (100%)
Where required, act promptly to address matters of non-compliance	As required	No. reports investigated (100%)
Investigate and act upon public complaints about Domestic Animal Businesses	As required	No. reports investigated (100%)

10 Other Matters

10.1 Context and Current Situation

In October 2022, Whittlesea, Merri-bek, and Darebin Councils took joint responsibility for managing the wat djerring Animal Facility (formerly the Epping Animal Welfare Facility) in house. This collaborative approach aims to improve outcomes by reducing euthanasia rates and increasing the reunification of animals with their owners or placement into new homes.

Managed by animal care and welfare experts, the facility focuses on high standards of care without expecting cost savings. The new model provides greater flexibility for Council to respond to community needs, build stronger partnerships within the animal welfare sector, and lead on shared domestic animal management priorities.

Under this approach, most animals are adopted through rescue groups after staying at the facility until foster or shelter spaces become available. The facility was renamed the wat djerring Animal Facility in July 2023.

The wat djerring Animal Facility has partnered with 26 rescue groups and welfare organisations as well as major animal welfare organisations who offer adoption opportunities to the community.

The objectives for the Facility is to:

- achieve the best outcomes possible for the animals in our care
- reunite every animal possible with their owners or find them loving new homes
- reduce the current euthanasia rates

– The facility provides the following services:

- provide stray, abandoned and surrendered animals with refuge and a new life
- reunite lost pets with their owners
- facilitate adoptions by finding new homes for unowned cats and dogs
- protect animals from cruelty
- promote pet wellbeing
- provide education regarding responsible pet ownership
- provide veterinary care to animals at the centre

Community sentiment from the community of those that had used the wat djerring Animal Facility's services was positive, with over 80% of respondents being very satisfied or satisfied with the helpfulness, professionalism of staff and the timeliness of service.

Emergency Management

Merri-bek City Council has its own Municipal Emergency Management Plan for managing natural disasters and emergencies at the local level, this may include: structural fires, flood, storms, extreme heat and pandemic. These events may impact community members as well as domestic animals.

10.2 Policies and Procedures

The wat djerring Animal Facility supports partner Councils in meeting their responsibilities under the Domestic Animal Management Act 1994 (VIC) and ensuring compliance with the Code of Practice.

10.3 Our Plan

Table 20 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to meet objectives relating to these other matters.

Table 20: Activities relating to other matters

Objective 10A: Review the operation of the wat djerring Animal Facility to ensure it is achieving best practice		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Work with the wat djerring Animal Facility to assist its delivery of its objectives to achieve the best outcomes possible for the animals in our care, reunite every animal possible with their owners or find them loving new homes, and reduce the current euthanasia rates	Ongoing	No. animals rehomed or transferred to rescue
Objective 10B: Emergency management planning for domestic animals (as part of Council's Municipal Emergency Management Plan)		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Ensure animal management staff are involved in Council's Municipal Emergency Management Plan	Ongoing	Animal management addressed in the Municipal Emergency Management Plan.

11 Annual Review and Reporting

In line with the Domestic Animals Act, Council must review its DAMP annually and amend the plan as needed. The following activities outline how the Council will meet these requirements.

11.1 Our Plan

Table 21 shows the activities, timeframe and method of evaluation to meet evaluation and reporting requirements of the Domestic Animal Act Section 68A (3).

Table 21: Activities relating to reporting

Objective 11: Comply with Section 68A(3)		
Activity	When	Evaluation
Provide the Secretary with a copy of the plan and any amendments to the plan.	Year 1 and annually	Copy provided to Secretary
Review the Domestic Animal Management Plan annually and, if appropriate, amend the plan.	Annually	Plan reviewed annually
Publish an evaluation of its implementation of the plan in Council's Annual Report.	Annually	Evaluation report published
Council will undertake a major review of the plan after four years.	Year 4	Major review undertaken