



DOMESTIC ANIMAL MANAGEMENT PLAN 2025–2029

Engagement Summary
Merri-bek City Council
August 2025

Conversation Co. proudly acknowledges and celebrates First Peoples of Australia and their ongoing strength in upholding some of the world's oldest living cultures. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands throughout what is now Victoria – where we live, conduct pop-ups, and engage with our communities – and pay our respects to their Elders, past and present. Conversation Co. acknowledges First People's sovereignty has never been ceded. The strength, resilience and pride of First Peoples, their cultures, communities and identities continue to grow and thrive today despite the impact of colonisation and ongoing experiences of racism.

Executive Summary

Overview

Conversation Co was engaged by Merri-bek City Council to analyse and report on community and stakeholder feedback and support the development of their Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP) 2025-29.

The purpose of the engagement was to:

- Inform a new DAMP
- Understand the evidenced needs and understood needs of the community regarding animal management
- Understand the competing community priorities regarding animal management
- Identify potential solutions/activities for the DAMP
- Identify potential partners for delivery of DAMP actions

There are three engagement phases in this project. Each stage builds on the previous stage, both in the data collected and the intensity of engagement. The three engagement stages are:

- **Stage 1:** June - July 2025: Broader community engagement
- **Stage 2:** June - July 2025: Interviews with key stakeholders
- **Stage 3:** September - October 2025: Test draft DAMP with the wider community

This report summarises data collected from Stage 1 and Stage 2 only. Public Exhibition of the DAMP In stage 3 will be undertaken by Merri-bek City Council. The findings from this report will be used to inform the development of Merri-bek City Council's Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP) 2025-29.

Methodology

Engagement activities consisted of an online community survey, 3 community place-based pops and 10 phone interviews with key stakeholders. The following table shows participation by engagement activity:

Table 1. Participation by Engagement Activity

Engagement Activity	No.	%
General online/hardcopy surveys	131	70.4
Pop ups	42	22.6
Stakeholder interviews	10	5.4
Email submissions to Council	3	1.6
Total	186	100%

Key Findings

The Merri-bek community was engaged on a variety of issues surrounding domestic animal management.

Conversation around the DAMP focused on the key themes of the Domestic Animal Act, with the key findings across the engagement outlined in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Key themes across the engagement program

DAMP Theme	Key sub-theme
Responsible pet ownership	● Improving owner behaviours and control of animals ● Increasing community education and communications about responsible dog and cat ownership
Dog attacks	● Education around dog behaviour, selecting the 'right' dog and effects of dog attacks ● Improving safety at dog parks ● Increased patrol and enforcement of on and off leash dog areas
Overpopulation of cats and dogs	● Providing free cat desexing program or increasing and continuing to provide low cost and subsidised desexing ● Increasing re homing efforts ● Reducing illegal and irresponsible backyard breeding ● Reducing stray cats ● Provide education to the community about the benefits of desexing animals
Registration and identification of cats and dogs	● Reducing registration fees ● Educating about the purpose and benefits of registration
Protection from nuisance	● 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 ● Consider the introduction of a 24 hour cat curfew ● Availability of cat traps ● Having dog free nature reserves
Dangerous and restricted dogs	● Addressing aggressive dogs in off-leash parks ● Stricter rules specifically for dangerous breeds
Review of Council services	● Increasing patrols and officer visibility ● Increasing community education ● Reviewing dog off/on-leash areas to include areas for specific breeds (e.g. greyhounds) ● Increasing fines for people doing the wrong thing

Training for authorised officers	• Providing training to encourage positive interactions with the community
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Recommendations

Based on the feedback in this report, it is recommended that Merri-bek City Council:

- Analyse best practice programs and services that address the feedback outlined by the community.
- Explore opportunities to work with the key stakeholders to address identified issues.
- Identify partnership opportunities with surrounding Council's, City of Darebin and Whittlesea City Council.
- Consider further community engagement on the introduction a 24 hour cat curfew.
- Keep the general community and key stakeholders updated in the development of the DAMP and their respective actions.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Project background

Conversation Co was engaged by Merri-bek City Council to analyse and report on community and stakeholder feedback and support the development of their Domestic Animal Management Plan (DAMP) 2025-29.

1.2 Engagement Purpose and scope

The purpose of the engagement was to:

- Inform a new DAMP
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2.Methodology

2.1 Engagement objectives:

- Gather data and high-level community themes to inform the development of the DAMP.
- Raise awareness within the community of domestic animal management and the role of the DAMP.
- Gather expert and key stakeholder feedback to inform the development of the DAMPs.
- Explore potential partnership opportunities to help deliver DAMP objectives.

Key engagement questions

Participants were asked their connection to the project and surveyed on key topics related to animal management including:

Broad community

- Do you support the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew in your local area?
- Do you know that dogs need to be registered in Merri-bek?
- Do you know anyone who lives locally, who has an unregistered dog or cat?
- Priorities for Council services
- Priorities for actions on pet ownership: microchipping, registration, responsible pet ownership, cat containment, desexing, lost pets, effective control
- How can Council improve its animal management services for pet owners and general community members?
- Satisfaction with pound service

Targeted stakeholders:

- In your experience, what are the main animal management issues of concern for dogs and cats?
- What services or programs could Council provide to promote responsible pet ownership, minimise dog attacks, address overpopulation of animals and support registration?
- Are there any partnership opportunities for animal management programs or services?

A full list of engagement questions are available in Appendix 1 and 2.

2.2 Engagement methods

Community engagement was conducted from 25 June- 23 July 2025. Engagement activities consisted of online surveys, community pop ups and stakeholder interviews.

Table 2: Engagement Activities

Activity	Description	Dates
Online survey and project information <i>via Conversations Merri-bek</i>	Participants responded to a series of questions, in line with the survey questions either through an online intercept.	June to July 2025
Key stakeholder interviews	Phone interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, who were asked 10 questions about domestic animal management from the perspective of their organisation.	June to July 2025
Community pop up sessions	- Community pop-ups were held across the municipality, at different locations and times. - Participants responded to a series of questions, in line with the online survey questions by engaging with posters at pop-up events.	Brunswick Town Hall, Brunswick July 12 2025 Glenroy Library, Glenroy July 16 2025 Coburg Farmers Market, Coburg July 19 2025
Direct submissions to Council	Community members were able to email submissions to the project team to provide feedback on the DAMP	June - July 2025

Survey

A survey was provided online and promoted via the project's webpage, and also made available in hard copy format. The survey focused on the key engagement questions outlined above. Respondents were also asked to provide demographic information including their age, postcode, household type, gender, Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status, languages spoken at home, disability status, and their connection to Merri-bek. For the Community Survey questionnaire, refer to Appendix 1.

Community Pop-ups

Three place-based community pop-ups were held across the municipality, at different locations and times. The following locations were chosen because of their community appeal:

- Brunswick Town Hall, Brunswick, Saturday July 12 11am - 2pm
- Glenroy Library, Glenroy, Wednesday 16 July 11am - 2pm
- Coburg Farmers Market, Coburg Saturday 19 July 8am - 1pm

Participants responded to a series of questions, in line with the survey questions either through an online intercept or by engaging with posters at pop-up events. For the Community Survey questionnaire, refer to Appendix 1.

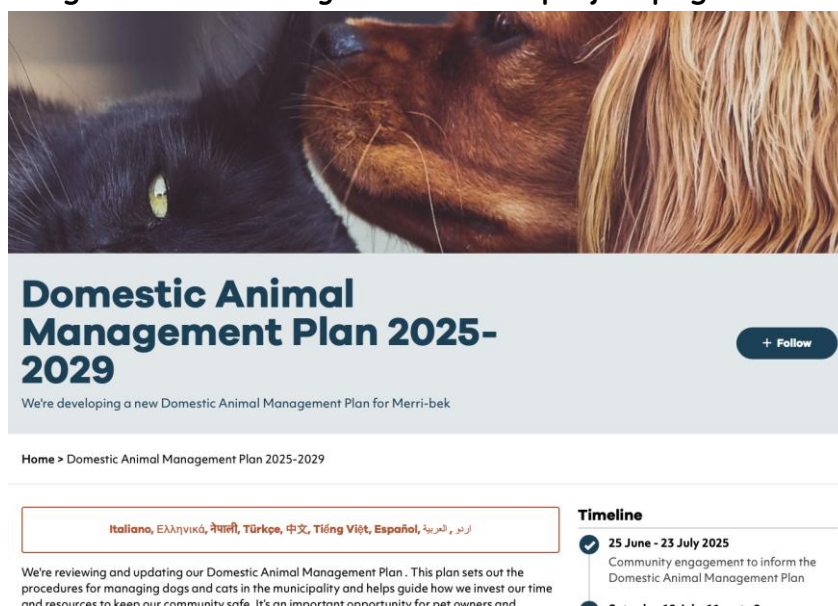
Interviews with Key Stakeholders

10 phone interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, who were asked 10 questions about domestic animal management from the perspective of their organisation. These one-hour interviews sought to gather expertise from key organisations across Merri-bek, Darebin and Whittlesea Councils. The interviewees were selected by Councils in collaboration and were based on a detailed stakeholder analysis that was completed as part of the engagement plan.

Phone interviews were conducted with the following key stakeholders:

- Rescue Rehabilitate Release
- Reservoir Vet Clinic
- RSPCA Victoria
- Petbarn Preston
- Cat Protection Society
- Second Chance Animal Rescue
- Bundoora Veterinary Clinic and Hospital
- Friends of Merri Creek
- Pascoe Vale Veterinary Clinic
- Project Underdog Rescue

Image 1: Merri-bek City Council DAMP project page



Source: [Project Page](#)

2.3 Communications strategies

Community engagement activities were supported by a communication campaign undertaken by Merri-bek City Council. The campaign had multiple touch points including the Council's website, social media, e-newsletters, and internal communications.

- Project page: The project page encouraged readers to provide feedback on the plan through an online survey. It also advertised the dates for three in-person community consultation pop-up locations.
- Social media: Posts were made on the Council's Facebook and Instagram pages, inviting feedback for the development of the plan.

Image 2: Merri-bek City Council's DAMP social media content



source: [Facebook Post](#)

3. Who Participated?

Demographic data such as gender, age, communities of interest and place of residency was obtained across pop ups and the survey engagement activities.

3.1 Participation by engagement activity

Table 3 shows a summary of the engagement activities by involvement. A total of 186 participants were involved in the broad engagement. It is important to note some participants may have participated in more than one activity, for example they may have completed an online survey and also attended a community pop up.

Table 3. Participation by Engagement Activity

Engagement Activity	No.	%
General online/hardcopy surveys	131	70.4
Pop ups	42	22.6
Stakeholder interviews	10	5.4
Email submissions to Council	3	1.6
Total	186	100%

Throughout this report, the abbreviation “n=” is used to indicate the number of participants or responses. Percentages are rounded to one decimal place and as such may be subject to rounding errors (sum to 99.9% or 100.1%).

3.2 Characteristics of participants

The demographic characteristics of engagement participants are shown in Table . Percentages shown in Table 3 are of all responses received (excludes participants who did not provide this information).

Table 4. Characteristics of participants

Selected characteristics	No.*	%	2021 Census %
Gender			
Woman/girl	88	52%	51.3%
Man/boy	63	37%	48.7%
Gender diverse	5	3%	-
Prefer not to say	11	6%	-

Selected characteristics	No.*	%	2021 Census %
Use a different term	3	2%	-
Total respondents	170	100%	100%
Age Group			
Under 18	0	0%	19.6%
18-24	2	5%	7.3%
26-34	11	26%	21.7%
35-44	10	24%	16.7%
45-54	8	19%	12.1%
55-64	7	16%	9.2%
65-74	4	10%	6.2%
75+	0	0%	7.2%
Total respondents	42	100%	100%
Communities of interest			
Identifies as someone with a disability (responses)	6	9%	6.5%
Carer of a person with a disability (responses)	7	10%	-
Parent/guardian of children (responses)	18	27%	36.4%
A person experiencing homelessness (responses)	1	1%	0.6%
Part of the LGBTQIA+ community (responses)	6	9%	-
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders (responses)	0	0%	0.6%
Prefer not to say	3	4%	-
None of the above	9	13%	-
Born overseas	17	25%	32.9%
Total respondents	67	100%	-

Data sources: Survey, pop ups

Source for 2021 Census data is

Disability approximated by Need for Assistance variable

This engagement program had greater representation from women than other genders (n=88, 52%), which aligns with patterns often seen in community engagement activities. Representation of men was slightly lower than the population proportion (n=63, 37% compared to 48.7% in the Census), while a small proportion of participants identified as gender diverse (n=5, 3%), used a different term (n=3, 2%), or preferred not to say (n=11, 6%).

Young adults aged 18–24 were underrepresented (n=2, 5%) in comparison to their makeup of the population (7.3%). The engagement had stronger representation among adults aged 26–59 years (n=29, 69%) compared to the Census (48.5%), particularly those aged 26–44 years. Participants aged 65 and over were underrepresented (n=4, 10%) compared to the population proportion (13.4%).

Among participants who responded to the communities of interest question (n=67), 9% identified as someone with a disability (slightly above the Census proxy of 6.5%), and 10% were carers of a person with a disability. Just over a quarter (27%) were parents or guardians of children, lower than the population proportion (36.4%). No respondents identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, despite making up 0.6% of the population. A quarter of respondents (25%) were born overseas, slightly lower than the population proportion of 32.9%.

Participants were also asked the open-ended questions; ‘What language(s) do you speak at home?’ and ‘What language(s) do you speak other than English?’ There were a total of 40 responses to these questions. A total of 21 indicated they spoke English at home. The top community languages other than English participants spoke were:

- Arabic
- Urdu
- Mandarin
- Greek
- Italian
- Chinese
- Auslan

3.3 Residential location

Community survey and pop up participants were asked to provide their residential location. There were a total of 159 responses to this question, with the bulk of participants residing in the Merribek municipality. Table 5. shows the breakdown of participation by residential location in comparison to census data.

Table 5. Participation by residential location

Residential location	No.*	%	2021 Census %
Brunswick / Brunswick East	56	35.2%	26.0%
Brunswick West	9	5.7%	9.0%

Residential location	No.*	%	2021 Census %
Coburg / Coburg North	47	29.6%	20.2%
Fawkner	10	6.3%	8.0%
Glenroy	14	8.8%	13.6%
Hadfield	2	1.3%	3.6%
Oak Park	4	2.5%	3.9%
Pascoe Vale / Pascoe Vale South	17	10.7%	16.2%
Total	159	100%	100%

Source: Survey, pop ups

A total of 11 (3.6%) participants lived in locations outside our Merri-bek. Locations included:

- Moonee Vale (n=5)
- Outside Australia (n=2)
- Banyule (n=1)
- Broadmeadows (n= 1)
- Gladstone Park (n=1)
- St Albans (n=1)

3.4 Connection to the project

Participants were asked about their connection to Merri-bek. There were a total of 126 respondents to this question, in which (n=124) were residents and (n=2) were students.

3.4.1 Interest in the project

Participants were asked about their interest in this topic and able to select all that apply from a list of options. The most common interest in the project was dog/cat owners (n=120) followed by community members who use local parks, reserve and playground (n=108) and members of a wildlife or environmental group (n=23). Table 6. shows the breakdown of interest in the project.

Table 6. Participants' interest in the project

Residential location	No.
Dog/cat owner	120
Use local parks, reserves or playgrounds	108
Sportsclub member/player/volunteer	13
Veterinarian/Vet Nurse	0

Residential location	No.
Member of animal advocacy/rescue group	12
Member of a dog club	2
Member of a wildlife/environmental group	23
Registered dog or cat breeder	0
Business operator - animal behaviourist/trainer/walker	2
Registered Domestic Animal Business	0
Other	28

Source: survey, pop ups

Of the participants who gave an 'other' interest in the project, the bulk of responses indicated that they did not own a pet (n=11), were planning on getting a pet (n=4) or had concerns about parkland and natural areas (n=3).

3.4.2 Community groups represented in this engagement

Participants who were a member of a group or club provided the names of the organisations that they represented and are listed below:

- Friends of Merri Creek
- Gardens for Wildlife Merri-bek
- AdvoCats
- Urban Guerrillas
- WIRES
- Inner North Greyhounds
- Coburg Harriers
- Upfield Urban Forest
- Urban cat welfare collective
- German Shepherd Dog club of victoria
- Greyt Greys Rescue
- Little Athletics
- Volunteer at Zoos Victoria
- Member of FoMC but not representing that group here
- Electrify yarra
- Alley Katz Australia Org
- Friends of Moonee Ponds Creek
- Forever Friends Animal Rescue

4.Findings

The Merri-bek community was engaged on a variety of issues surrounding domestic animal management. Findings for community members across engagement activities are reported by theme in the following sections:

- 4.1 Pet ownership
- 4.2 Cat management
- 4.3 Dog management
- 4.4 Priorities for domestic animal management and Council services

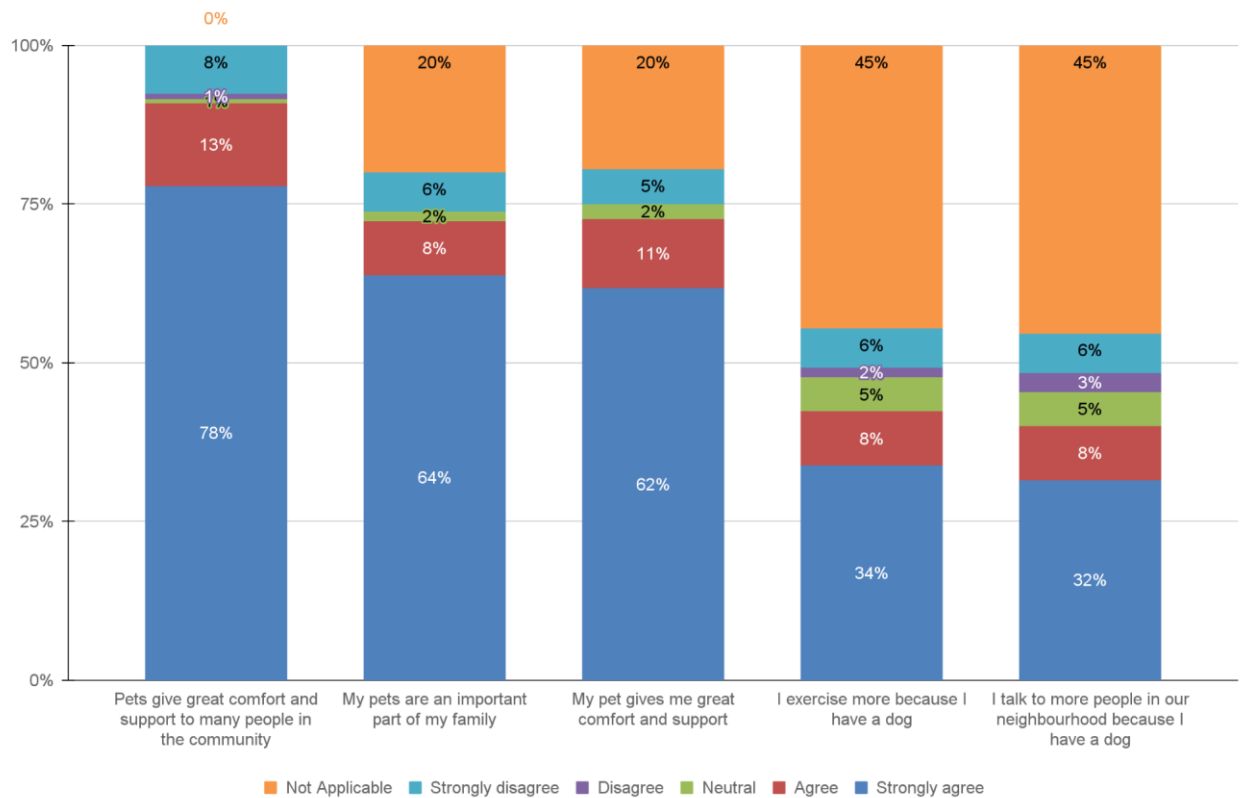
Findings from key stakeholders and submissions to Council have been reported separately in sections:

- 4.5 Submissions to Council
- 4.6 Key stakeholder interviews

4.1 Pet ownership

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 dogs and cats 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. Survey participants were asked the following question - '*To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?*' Figure 1. is a breakdown of how they responded.

Figure 1. Community attitudes to pets



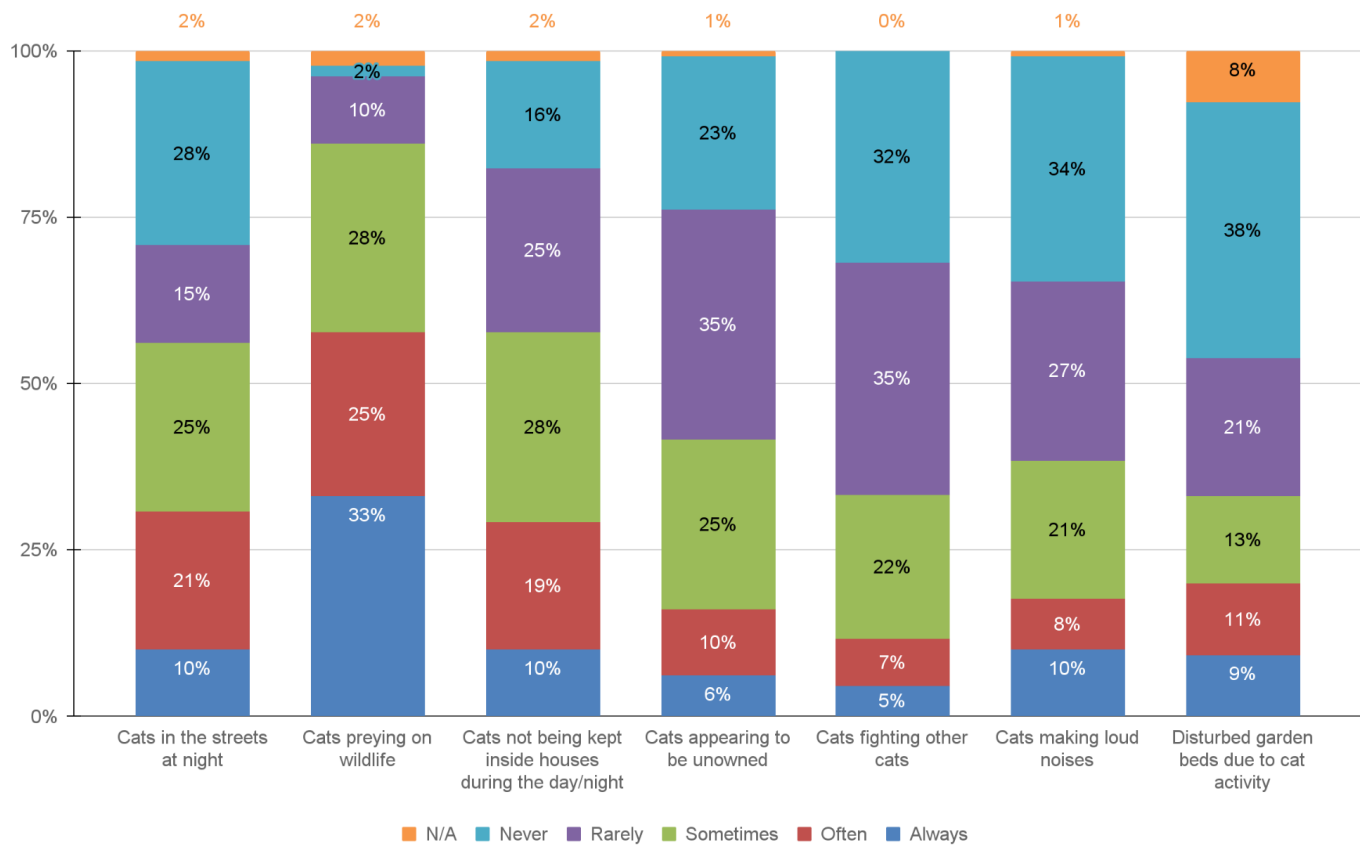
Data source: surveys, pop ups.

As seen in the above graph, the statement with the highest percentage of ‘strongly agree’ was - ‘*Pets give great comfort and support to many people in the community*’ (n=102, 78%). The statements with the lowest percentages of ‘strongly agree’ were ‘*I talk to more people in our neighbourhood because I have a dog*’ (n=41, 32%) followed closely by ‘*I exercise more because I have a dog*’ (n=44, 34%). This could show a general trend of participants’ feelings towards pets as providing more of an emotional support rather than functional purpose for exercise and socialising.

4.2 Cat management

Participants were asked the question - ‘*In the last year, have you noticed any of the following things about cats when out and about in your local area?*’. Survey participants were asked to indicate the level of frequency for each item on a list provided as shown in Figure 2 and pop-up participants were asked to select the items they noticed, as shown in Figure 3.

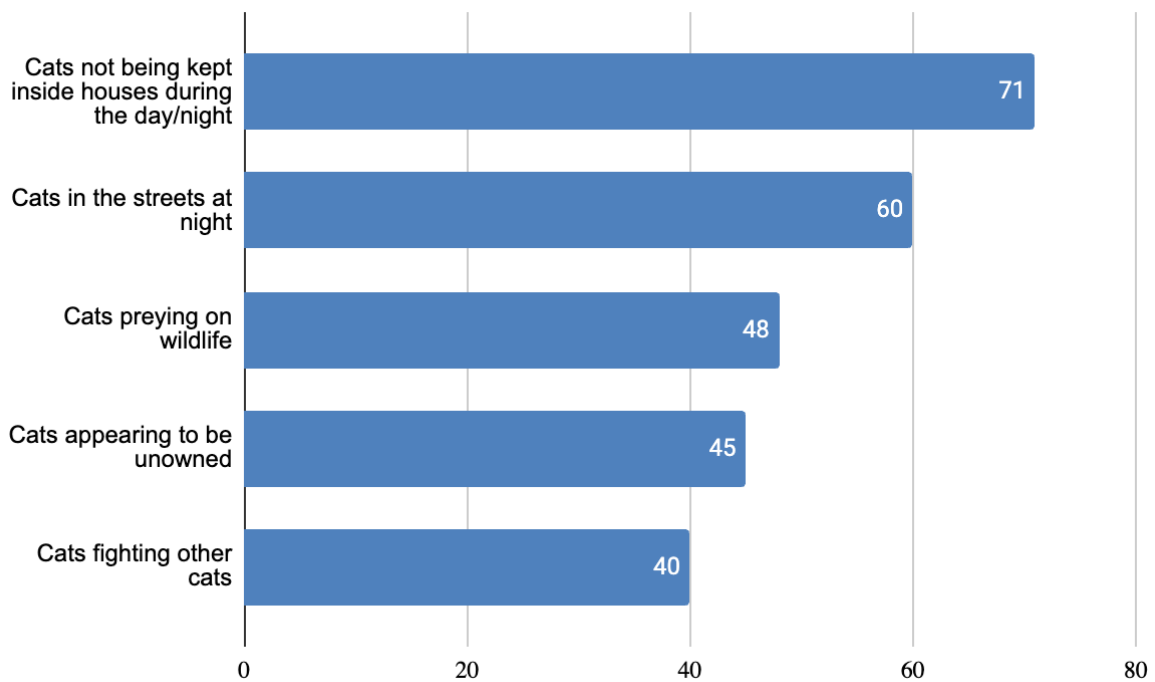
Figure 2. Cats in the community



Data source: online survey

As seen in Figure 2., the statement with the largest number of participants' who selected 'always' (n=43, 33%) and 'often' (n=32, 25%) was '*cats preying on wildlife*'. The statement with the least number of participants who selected 'always' (n=6, 5%) was '*cats fighting other cats*'. This statement also had the total most selections for 'rarely' (n=45, 35%) and 'never' (n=41, 32%).

Figure 3. Observations about cats in the local area in the last year

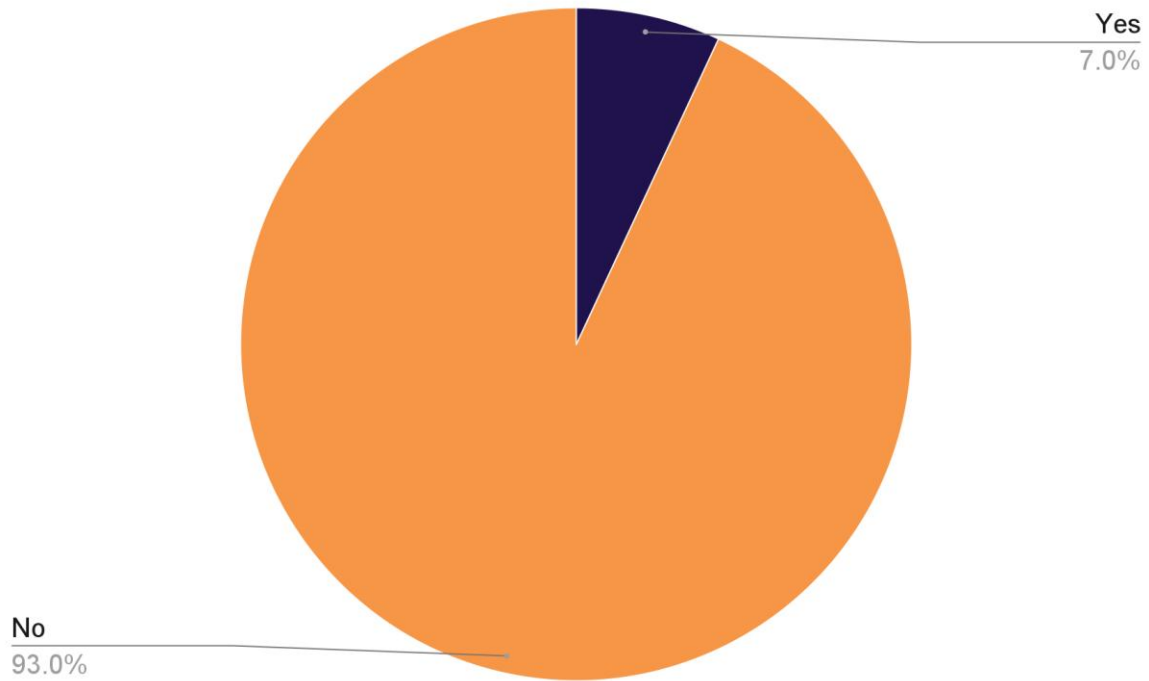


Data source: survey.

As seen in the above graph, the most commonly observed issue by participants was *'Cats not being kept inside houses during the day/night'*, selected by 71 respondents. This was followed by *'Cats in the streets at night'* (60), indicating strong concern around cats roaming unsupervised. *'Cats preying on wildlife'* (48) and *'Cats appearing to be unowned'* (45) were also frequently selected, highlighting community awareness of the environmental and welfare risks posed by uncontained or stray cats. The least commonly selected issue was *'Cats fighting other cats'* (40), though still notable. These findings suggest a clear public perception that better containment and management of cats is needed, particularly in relation to nighttime roaming and associated impacts on wildlife and safety.

Figure 4. provides a breakdown of the responses to the survey question - *'Do you occasionally feed (or look after) any other neighbourhood cats who come to your house?'* There were 129 participants who responded to this question.

Figure 4. *'Do you occasionally feed (or look after) any other neighbourhood cats who come to your house?'*

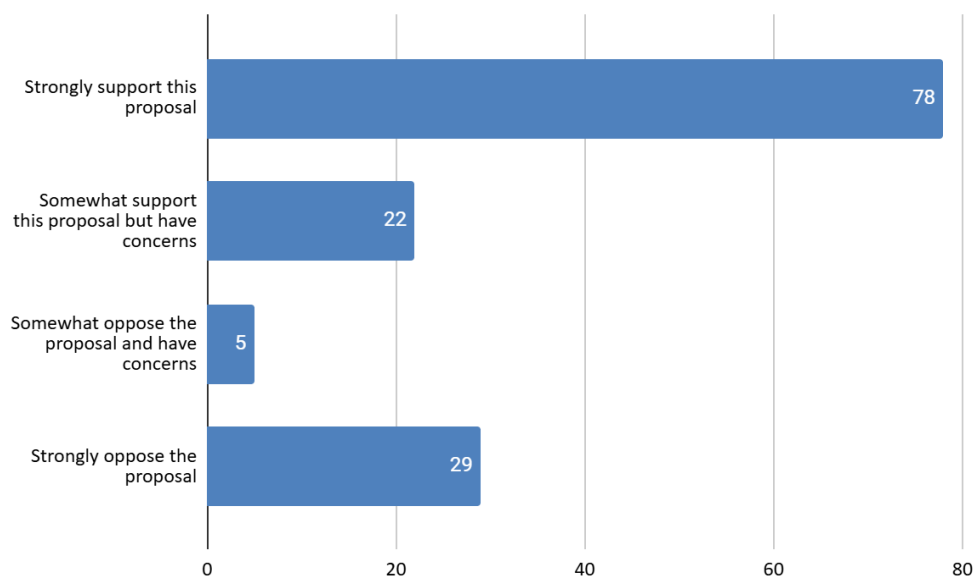


Data source: survey.

As shown in the above graph, the overwhelming majority of respondents (n=120, 93.0%) reported that they do not occasionally feed or look after neighbourhood cats who come to their house. Only 9 (7.0%) participants indicated that they do. This suggests that informal care of roaming or stray cats by residents is relatively uncommon within the community, and that most people do not engage in feeding or supporting cats that are not their own.

Figure 5. (below) gives a breakdown of how participants responded to the survey question - *'Do you support the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew in your local area?'*

Figure 5. Community sentiment on introducing a 24-Hour Cat Curfew

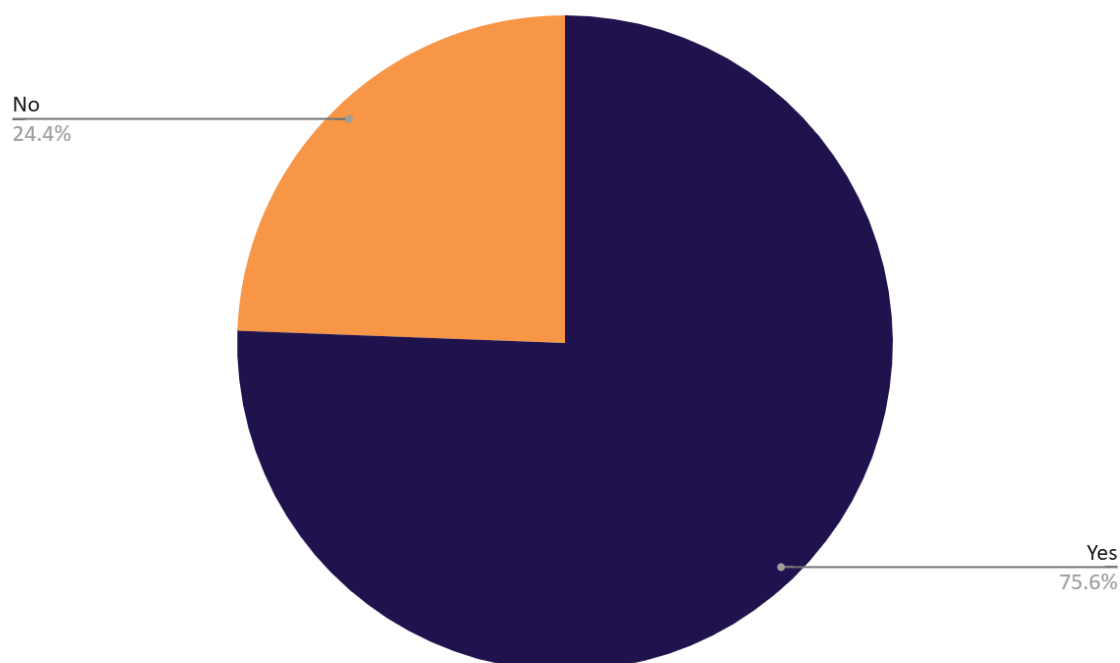


Data source: survey.

As shown in the graph above, the majority of respondents strongly support the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew, with 78 individuals selecting this option. An additional 22 respondents somewhat support the proposal but have concerns, indicating that over half of participants are generally supportive of the curfew. Conversely, only 5 people somewhat oppose the proposal, while 29 strongly oppose it. Notably, 38 participants used the free-text field to specify concerns, suggesting that while support is high, there are a range of perspectives and potentially nuanced views about implementation. This data indicates strong overall support for the cat curfew, though community consultation should consider the nature of concerns raised.

At the community pop-ups, participants were asked the question - 'Do you support the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew?', and provided with the options yes or no as shown in Figure 6, below.

Figure 6: Level of support for the introduction of 24 hour cat curfew



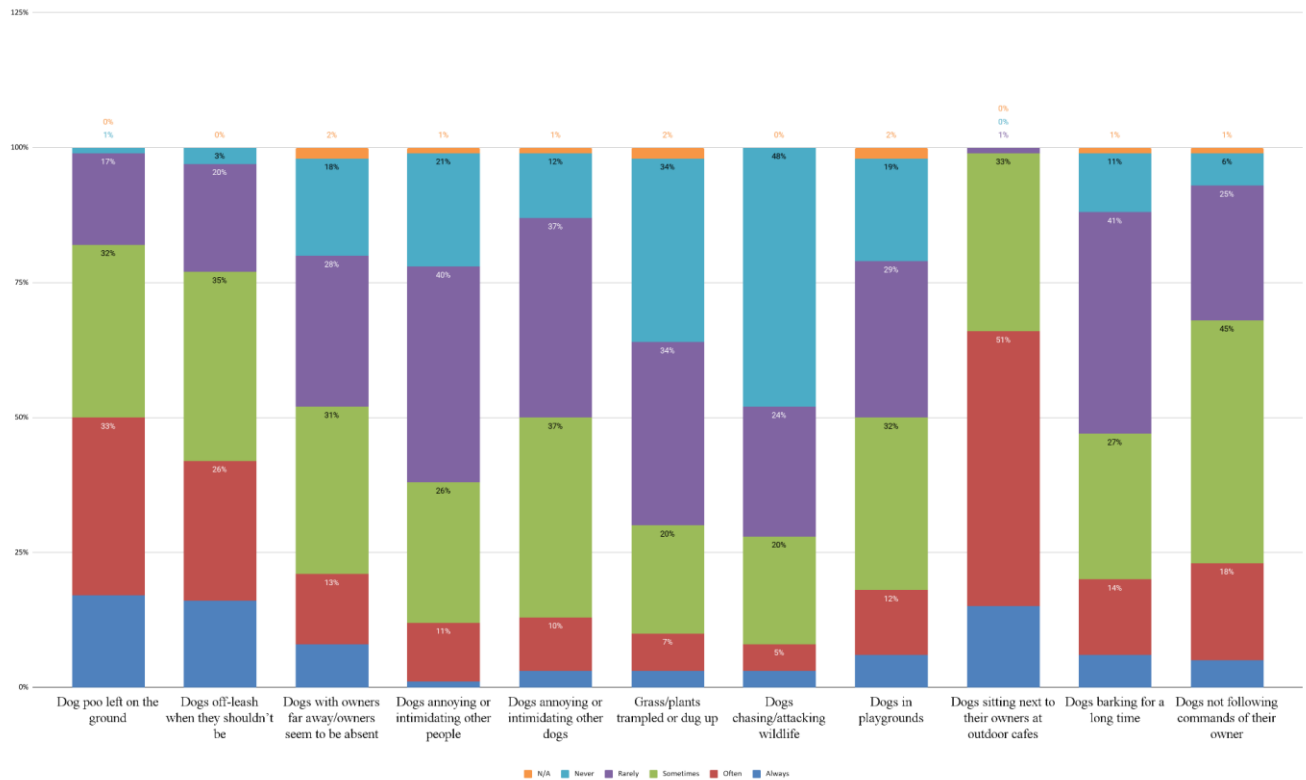
A total of 75.6% of pop up participants support the introduction of a 24 hour cat curfew, with only 24.4% selecting no.

Overall, between the community survey and pop-up responses, there is strong support for the introduction of a 24 hour cat curfew in the City of Merri-bek.

4.3 Dog management

Participants were asked the question - '*In the last year, have you noticed any of the following things about cats when out and about in your local area?*'. Survey participants were asked to indicate the level of frequency for each item on a list provided as shown in Figure 7 and pop-up participants were asked to select the items they noticed as shown in Figure 8.

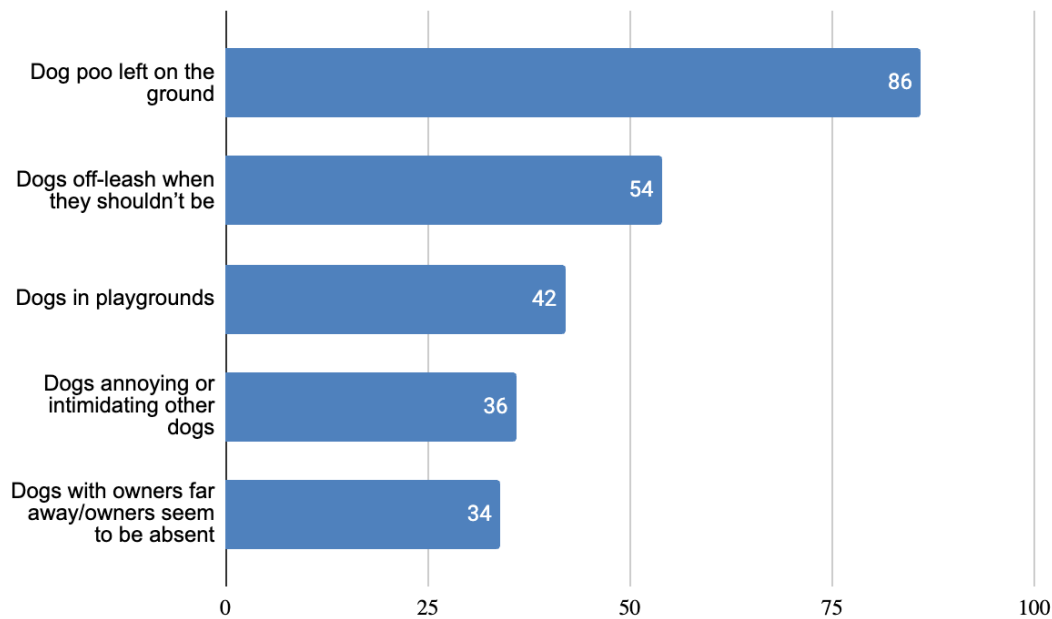
Figure 7. Dogs in the community



Data source: online survey

As shown in Figure 7, the statement with the largest number of participants' who selected 'always' (n=20, 15%) and 'often' (n=67, 51%) was *'dogs sitting next to their owners at outdoor cafes'*. This was followed by 'dog poo left on the ground'. The statement with the least number of participants who selected 'always' (n=4, 3%) was *'dogs chasing and attacking wildlife'*.

Figure 8. Observations about dogs in the local area in the last year



Data source: pop-ups.

As seen in the above graph, the statement that was most noticed by pop-up participants was *'dog poo left on the ground'* (n=86) followed by *'dogs off leash when they shouldn't be'* (n=54).

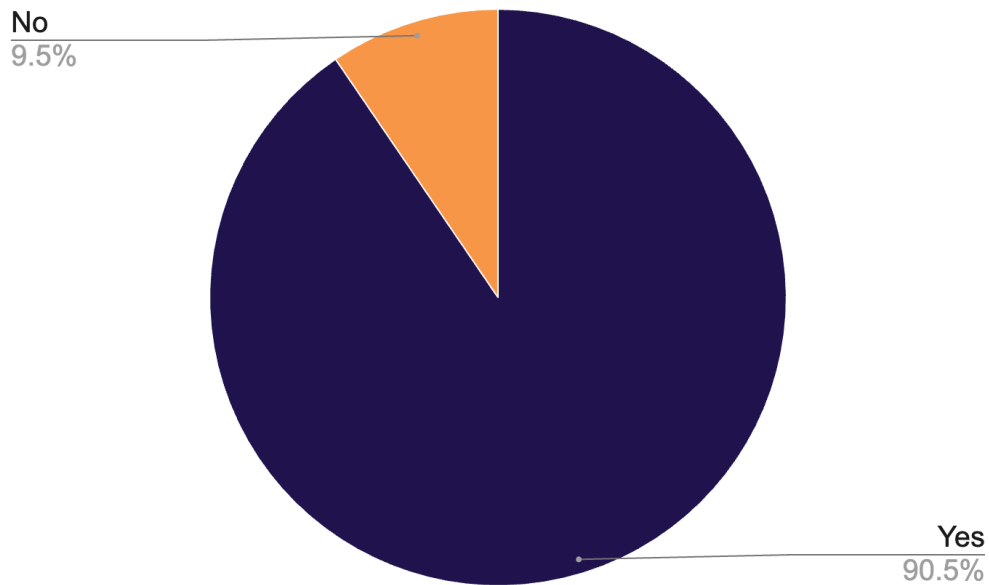
4.4 Priorities for domestic animal management and Council services

The following section is an analysis of engagement findings on priorities for domestic animal management and Council services.

4.4.1 Registration

Participants were asked the following question - *'Do you know that dogs need to be registered in Merri-bek?'* Of the 115 participants who answered this question, only 10 participants (9.5%) answered 'no' to this question. As seen in Figure 9. (below), the vast majority of participants (n=95, 90.5%) are aware dogs need to be registered.

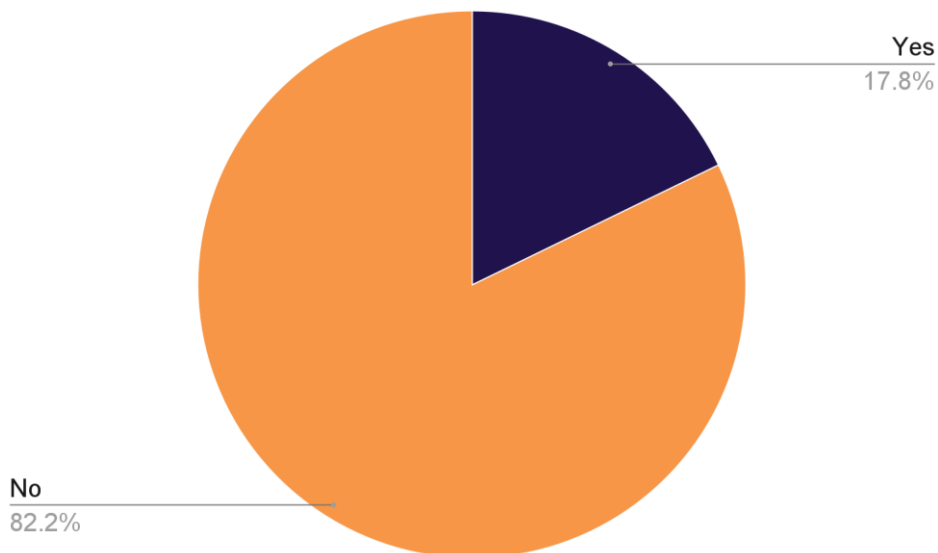
Figure 9. Do you know that dogs need to be registered in Merri-bek?



Data source: pop-ups, online survey.

Participants were then asked whether they know anyone who has an unregistered dog or cat. As seen in Figure 10 (below) the majority of participants who answered the question (n=106, 82.2%) did not know anyone locally who had an unregistered dog or cat. Along with the previous graph (Figure 9), this confirms that the majority of dog/cat owners in Merri-bek have good awareness and responsibility when it comes to registration.

Figure 10. Do you know anyone who lives locally, who has an unregistered dog or cat?



Data source: pop-ups, online survey.

Participants were asked the following question - *‘Why do you think people do not register their pet, once the pet reaches the appropriate age?’* There were 102 participants who responded to this free text question. The following table presents their

feedback according to the main themes - numbered and in descending order. Examples of verbatim quotes from participants are used in the table to support each theme.

Table 6. Pet registration

Theme and no. of comments	Verbatim quotes
Cost of registration (n=64)	• <i>'Cost is the main barrier to desexing and registration.'</i> • <i>'Feels like an added expense that should be included in rates.'</i> • <i>'Presume they don't want to pay the fee and would rather risk getting a fine.'</i> • <i>'Affordability and / or lack of knowledge about the benefits.'</i>
Suspicious of/anti-authority (n=38)	• <i>'The pet owner gets nothing out of the registration (a benefit), folk figure their pet is never going to go missing, so why bother? Plus no visible presence of enforcement (unlike, say, police) so no apparent pressure to register their pet.'</i> • <i>'...dislike authority.'</i> • <i>'Lack of awareness, lack of consequences.'</i>
Lack of awareness (n=27)	• <i>'They don't know they are meant to.'</i> • <i>'There are many new residents each year in Merri-bek. Many of these new residents do not know the rules.'</i> • <i>'...unaware of laws...'</i>
No value for money (n=14)	• <i>'No benefits for cat-owners.'</i> • <i>'Registration only gives benefits to dog owners - such as dog-parks and social events. Cat owners only register for if a cat gets lost.'</i>
Inconvenience (n=11)	• <i>'Cost, inconvenience.'</i> • <i>'They see it as an unnecessary hassle.'</i>
Lazy (n=11)	• <i>'Unaware of requirements, or can't be bothered.'</i> • <i>'Lazy and believe they are above the conditions that have been set by council. These are the same people who totally disregard on leash areas.'</i>
Language/cultural barriers (n=2)	• <i>'Possibly language or cultural barriers.'</i>

As seen in the table above, 'cost of registration' (n=64) was by far the most frequently mentioned theme. There was an overall sentiment that there was a lack of awareness about the benefits of desexing your pet so residents were less likely to be inclined to pay for the service.

4.4.2 Preferences for key council services

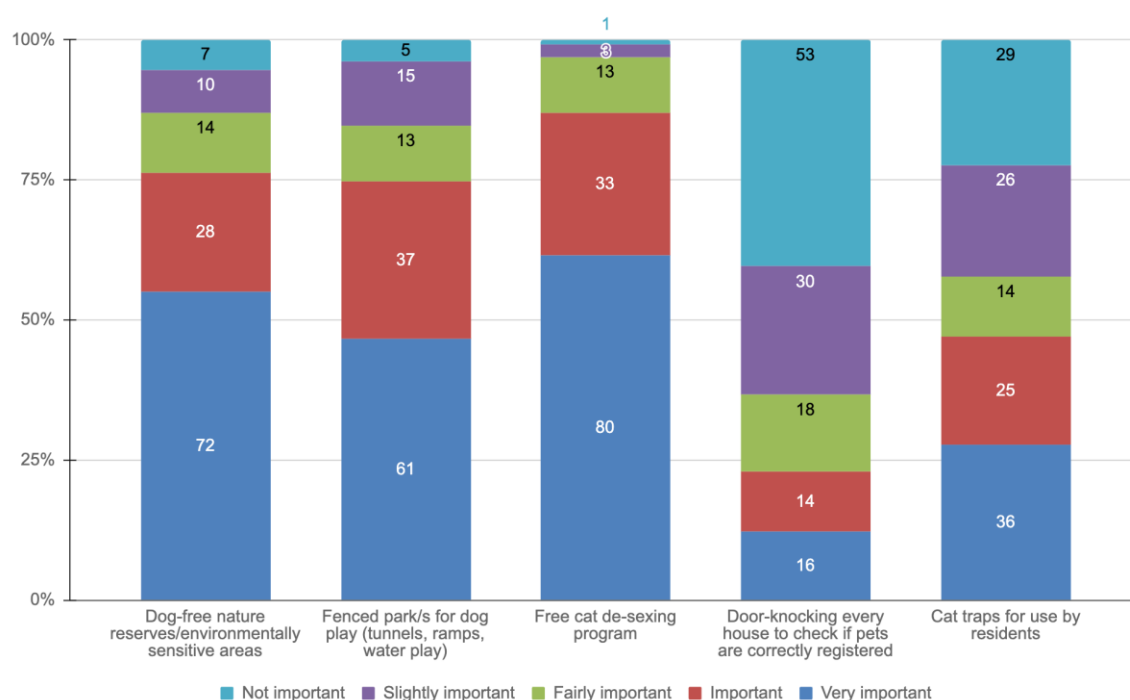
Key services

Participants were asked the following question - ‘How important do you think it is for councils to provide the following services for the community?’ They were asked to indicate importance from ‘not important at all’ to ‘very important’. The areas were:

- Dog-free nature reserves/environmentally sensitive areas
- Fenced park/s for dog play (tunnels, ramps, water play)
- Free cat de-sexing program
- Door-knocking every house to check if pets are correctly registered
- Cat traps for use by residents

The following graph shows a breakdown of how participants’ preference was distributed according to these five key areas.

Figure 11. Preferences for key services



Data source: survey.

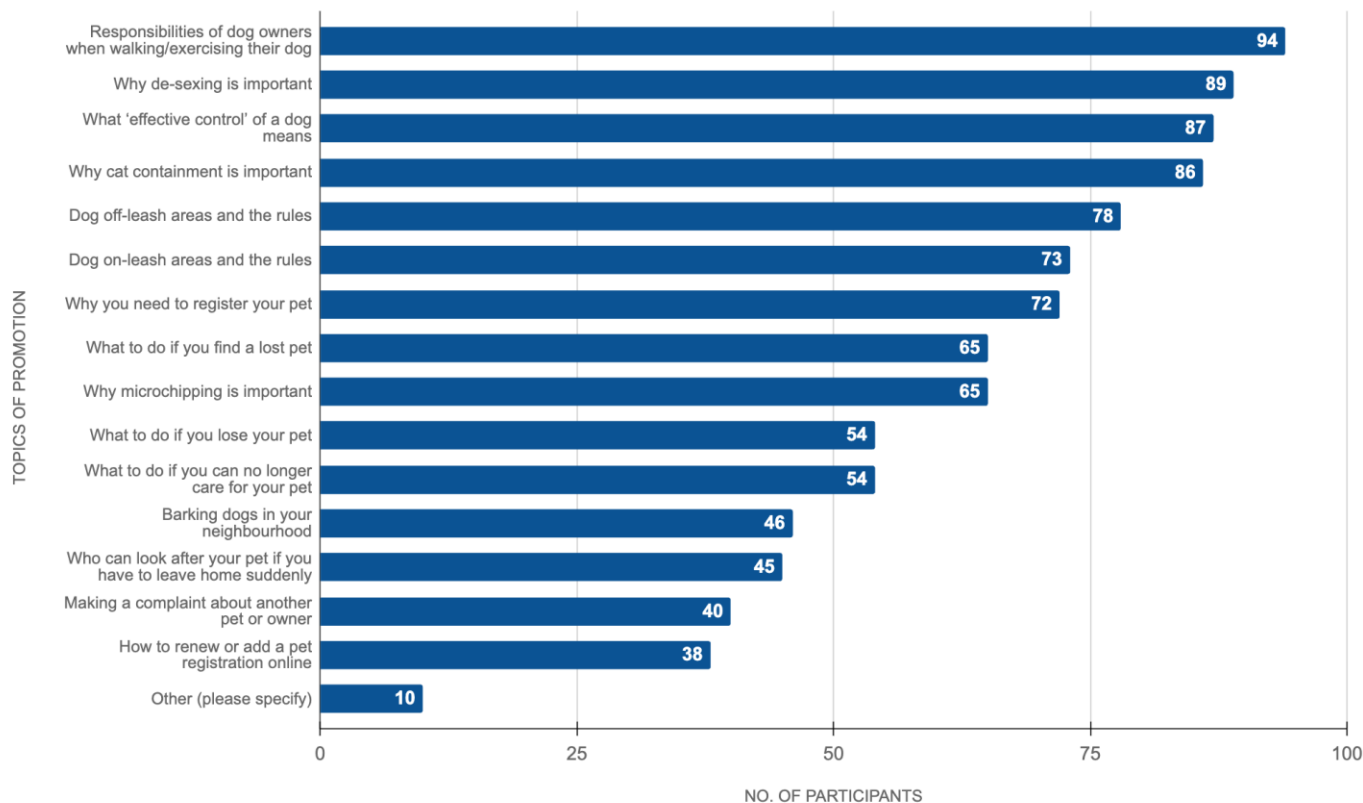
As seen in Figure 11 (above), the statement with the highest total of ‘very important’ (n=80, 61.5%) and ‘important’ (n=33, 25.4%) was ‘free cat de-sexing program’. The statement with the least amount of ‘very important’ (n=16, 12.2%) selections as well as largest total of ‘not important’ (53, 40.5%) and slightly important (30, 22.9%) was ‘door-knocking every house to check if pets are correctly registered’.

Communications

The following multi-choice question was asked to participants - ‘Council provides written and online information for residents and visitors, about the rules for owning a pet. Which of the following topics need more promotion in the general community?’

Figure 12. (below) provides a breakdown of how participants responded according to what topics they thought needed better promotion.

Figure 12. Preferences for topics of promotion



Data source: survey.

As seen in the above graph, '*responsibilities of dog owners when walking/exercising their dog*' (n=94) had the highest number of selections followed by '*why de-sexing is important*' (n=89); '*what 'effective control' of a dog means*' (n=87) and '*why cat containment is important*' (n=86).

There were 10 participants who selected 'other' and gave a free text response for their answer. The following points are a summary of how they responded:

- **Feral and roaming cats:** Major threat to native wildlife; need better control and public education.
- **Cat ownership:** Encourage containment; many owners unaware it's safe and responsible to keep cats indoors.
- **Public education:** Improve awareness of pet ownership responsibilities, with resources (e.g. translated material) to meet CALD communities.
- **Pet registration:** Clearly explain its purpose and benefits.
- **Injured wildlife:** Educate the public on what to do and who is responsible.
- **Dog safety:** Address dangers of certain breeds and keep dogs out of playgrounds.
- **Local concerns:** Highlighted by an example - cat killed on Pallett St.

Animal management services for pet owners

Participants were asked the following question - ‘How can Council improve its animal management services for pet owners?’ There were 78 participants who provided free text responses.

Table 7. Animal management services for pet owners

Theme and no. of comments	Verbatim quotes
Infrastructure (n=15)	• ‘Provide safe off leash area for greyhounds/ sighthounds. Please consider making dog parks more inclusive and create spaces accessible for all breeds.’ • ‘More poo bags and bins around parks.’ • ‘Well designed dog parks that includes swimming ponds.’
Responsible pet ownership education (n=15)	• ‘Running pet ownership workshops. I think many people are new to pet ownership and aren’t sure where to start with the responsibilities (e.g. vaccination, registration, de-sexing, basic training etc).’ • ‘More up to date, evidence based education.’ • ‘Promote responsible pet ownership and make that easy for people experiencing disadvantage.’
Communications (n=11)	• ‘Chase up desexing for all pet owners, even just a regular text to nudge them. Regular reminders of behaviour standards for dogs off and on lead, with penalties.’ • ‘A flyer with the information listed above sent out to all residents with the Council newsletter (especially the importance of cat desexing, registration and containment for the animals sake).’
Concessions (n=9)	• ‘Continue providing reduced cost desexing for low income earners.’ • ‘Lower registration fees.’
Enforcement (n=9)	• ‘I believe enforcement to be the best course of action as well as subsidising pet registration and making desexing free. 24 hour curfew to keep cats safe.’ • ‘Enforcing dog on leash areas. It is very dangerous when I’m riding my bike in the creek.’
Cat curfew/cat programs (n=7)	• Implement a Community Cat Program with intensive, targeted desexing in hotspots, and helping carers and rescuers with Council resources. • Introduce a 24 hour cat curfew to keep cats and other animals living in Merri-bek safe
Traps (n=6)	• ‘Better information and greater ease of gaining a trap or an animal officer when there is a problem animal/animal in need.’

Desexing (n=6)	• <i>'Support (e.g. cat desexing) and clear rules as well as enforcement.'</i>
Support instead of punishment (n=5)	• <i>'Provide support not punishment or cost.'</i>
Strengthen local laws dogs (n=1)	• <i>'Strict rules specifically for pitbulls/dangerous breeds (muzzle, always leashed, etc).'</i>

There were 9 participants whose comments were not related to the above themes. They highlighted the fact they weren't pet owners; commented on the survey/engagement process and some were supportive comments to Council to say they were doing a good job and to keep it up.

Animal management services for the community

Participants were asked the same question as the previous, but taking a community lens - *'How can Council improve its animal management services for the benefit of the general community?'* There were 86 participants who provided free text responses.

Table 8. Animal management services for the community

Theme and no. of comments	Verbatim quotes
Enforcement (dogs) (n=24)	• <i>'Policing of playgrounds on weekends when dogs are frequently off-lead. Some that I cannot take my kids to any more.'</i> • <i>'More enforcement in off leash and on leash areas.'</i> • <i>'Larger focus on fining people for not picking up their dog poo.'</i> • <i>'Be proactive patrol at peak times after work 4pm weekdays and weekends and fine people for not following requirements.'</i> • <i>'Greater enforcement of regulations for irresponsible pet owners.'</i>
Education: responsible pet ownership (n=23)	• <i>'Public education program.'</i> • <i>'Dog training courses and advice.'</i> • <i>More clarity on information around pet ownership and what's allowed in Merri Bek</i> • <i>'More information about keeping cats inside and picking up after your dog.'</i>
Infrastructure (n=14)	• <i>'Provide safe off leash area for greyhounds/sighthounds.'</i> • <i>'Provide dog parks that don't have children's play equipment in them. Consider spaces where people would like to spend time with their pets.'</i> • <i>'Provide rubbish bins at park entrances for disposal of dog poo.'</i>

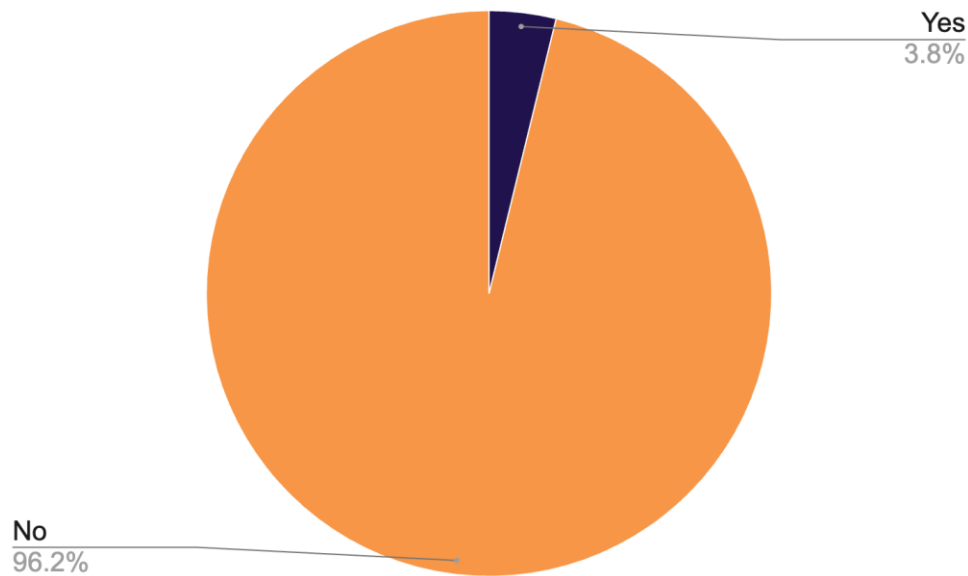
Trapping (n=9)	• <i>'Cat trapping is a must. Simply unacceptable to have so many cats roaming and killing wildlife.'</i> • <i>'Feral cat trapping.'</i> • <i>'More support for residents to deal with having other people's cats on their property.'</i>
Enforcement (cats) (n=9)	• <i>'Enforce local laws relating to cat curfews...'</i> • <i>'Cat rules and reduction.'</i> • <i>'Introduce and enforce a cat curfew = less disturbance from cats due to trespass and fighting...'</i>
Support rather than penalise (n=7)	• <i>'Do not over-police, but provide guidance for correct behaviour.'</i> • <i>'Introduce incentives for pet owners who do the right thing, rather than introducing more laws to punish them.'</i>
Concessions: desexing/ rego, cat programs (n=6)	• <i>'Greater share of the DAMP budget towards cat desexing and cat containment education and programs.'</i> • <i>'Work with the Australian Pet Welfare Foundation to run an effective, and low-cost, Community Cat Program.'</i>
Environment protection (n=5)	• <i>'Better protection of sensitive environmental spaces.'</i> • <i>'Humans and their associated impact including pets should not be the only stakeholders in our environment.'</i>

There were 6 participants' comments who had comments that were considered to be 'other' (outside the above categories). Some of these were supportive of Council's current efforts; one was around providing Councillors with correct and updated information on the Domestic Animals Act and some were not relevant to the question.

Facilities

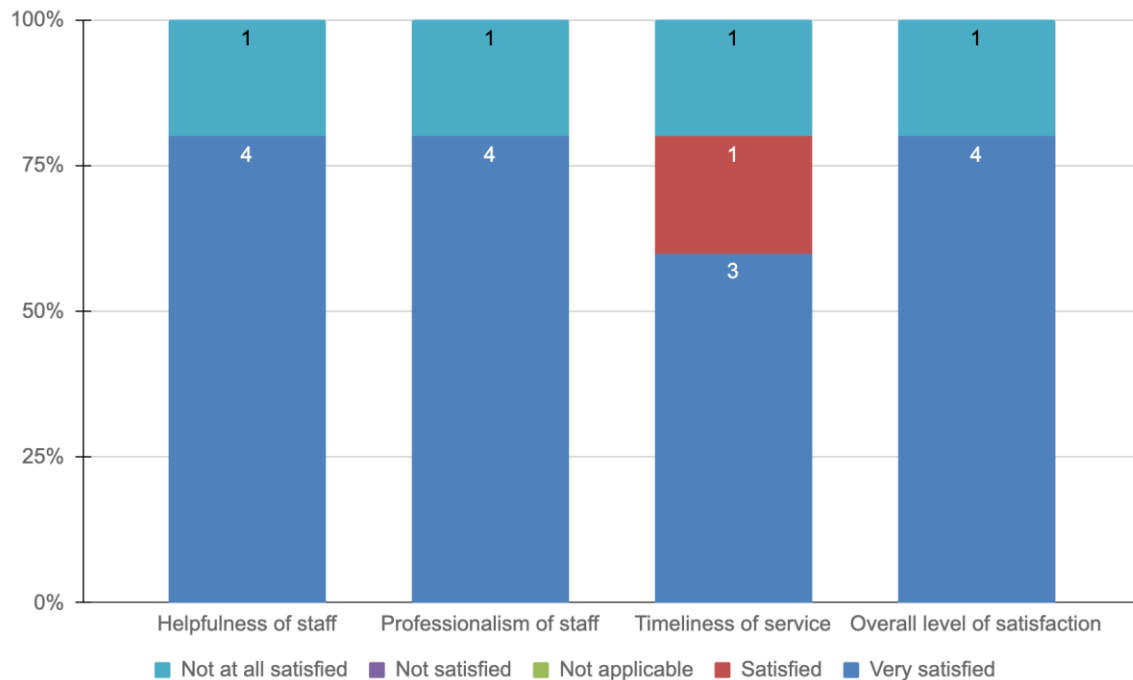
Participants were asked if they had visited the Epping Pound (wat djerring Animal Facility) to adopt a pet in the last year. There were 136 participants who answered this question, with only 5 participants selecting 'yes' and the other 126 selecting 'no'. The following graph shows a breakdown of how participants responded in percentages.

Figure 13. 'In the last 12 months have you visited the wat djerring Animal Facility (Epping Pound) to retrieve a lost pet or adopt a pet?'



The 5 participants who answered 'yes' to the above question were given an opportunity to rate their level of satisfaction with the following statements of the Epping Pound service, as seen in Figure 14. (below).

Figure 14. Satisfaction levels with the wat djerring Animal Facility (Epping Pound).



Data source: survey.

While there was only a small number of participants who responded to this question (n=5), all statements had 3 or 4 participants who were 'very satisfied' with the service.

Additional comments

Participants were asked the following free text question - ‘*Do you have any further comments to make about pet ownership or Council’s animal management services in Merri-bek?*’ There were 27 participants who responded to the question. The following table is a summary of their responses, themed and with supporting verbatim quotes.

Table 9. Additional comments

Theme and no. of comments	Verbatim quotes
DAMP/Council processes (n=19)	• <i>‘Thank you for inviting the public including non pet owners to have some input.’</i> • <i>‘Database and registration management.’</i> • <i>‘More information around pet ownership that isn’t dogs or cats, e.g. rabbits, guinea pigs, lizards, fish, chickens, birds.’</i>
Animal facility (n=3)	• <i>‘Much preferred it when RSPCA were servicing our pets. The quality of care has dropped exponentially.’</i>
Positive feedback (n=2)	• <i>‘Overall, I think Merri-Bek does a solid job with animal management.’</i>

In addition to the above comments, there were also 3 participants who made comments that were either out of scope or irrelevant to the project.

4.5 Submissions to Council

The Council received three submissions from residents, each highlighting a variety of views, concerns, and suggestions for the Merri-bek Council to consider during the development of their new Domestic Animal Management Plan for 2025-2029.

The following is an overview of each submission, highlighting key points and the reasoning behind them:

Submission One

This submission is mainly concerned with the use and transparency of registration revenue. The key points outlined include:

- **Questioning value for money from pet registration fees:** Based on 2020–21 data, the resident estimates that Merri-bek receives around \$800,000 annually from the 14,000 registered dogs. They point out that only a small proportion of these dogs require management by Council intervention (around 6%), suggesting that only a fraction of the registration revenue is needed to manage “problem” cases (e.g. dog attacks or nuisance behaviour).
- **Advocacy for better use of funds:** The submitter argues that registration revenue from responsible pet owners should be reinvested into services that

benefit all pet owners, such as dog parks, off-leash areas, free microchipping, desexing, and community education programs.

“If income is \$800K less cost of managing registered dogs who don’t have responsible owners, ie through fines, \$800K is available for dog parks, off leash areas, free microchipping, desexing and other resources like community education.”

- **Lack of follow-through on previous plans:** The submitter notes that the previous DAMP referenced the creation of a “Top of the Class” video, which they were unable to locate on Council’s website, suggesting a need for clearer follow-up or communication on DAMP initiatives.
- **Emphasis on education and equitable responsibility:** The submission proposes that all ratepayers should contribute to managing stray animals, but irresponsible owners should bear additional costs through fines. They encourage positive community education that highlights the benefits of pet ownership on physical and mental health, especially through programs in schools and bush kinders.

Submission Two

This submission raises concerns about the lack of a cat curfew in Merri-bek and criticises the current approach to community consultation, particularly the survey format, which the submitter felt was too simplistic and did not allow for detailed feedback. Key points include:

- **Strong support for a 24/7 cat curfew:** The submitter believes it is well-established that free-ranging cats pose a significant threat to native wildlife and also cause nuisance issues by entering private property to fight, defecate, or breed

“Free-ranging cats also intrude onto non-cat owning properties to fight, defecate, and copulate.”

- **Calls for policy alignment with other councils:** The submission notes that many other Victorian councils have already implemented cat confinement (e.g. Darebin, Knox, and Whittlesea) and urges Merri-bek to reconsider its position and implement a full-time curfew in the next DAMP.

“Whittlesea has a 24/7 curfew; Knox City Council has a 24-hour curfew... Darebin has a night-time cat curfew (from 7 pm to 7 am) which, while better than no curfew, ignores the reality that cats cause the same problems alluded to above during daylight hours.”

- **Critique of current Council messaging:** The response provided in the existing DAMP, which suggests residents try deterrents like citrus peels or motion-activated sprinklers, is described as unrealistic and unreasonable, placing the burden of responsibility onto neighbours rather than cat owners

Submission Three

This detailed submission raises concerns about the environmental impacts of domestic animals and advocates for a more balanced and inclusive Domestic Animal Management Plan, one that considers the needs of non-pet owners, environmental restoration, and wildlife protection, alongside pet owner responsibilities. Key points include:

- **Expand the scope of the DAMP:** The submitter recommends broadening the Plan's purpose to include protecting wildlife from domestic predators and recognising the rights of non-dog owners to access open spaces without interference from off-leash dogs. The DAMP should align more clearly with open space and environmental restoration goals, such as those along the Merri Creek.
- **Critique of off-leash dog areas and non-compliance:** The submitter highlights that many off-leash areas are located in environmentally sensitive areas and notes poor compliance and enforcement, with reports of dog owners being aggressive when asked to follow rules. They argue that dog-free areas should be preserved, especially those supported by decades of volunteer restoration work.
- **Call for greater accountability through pet registration:** The submission questions the purpose and accountability of pet registration, suggesting that pet owners should be required to sign a behavioural agreement, and that registration should be linked to evidence of training and responsible ownership.
- **Support for a 24/7 cat curfew:** They strongly advocate for full-time cat confinement to protect wildlife, citing personal experiences of property damage and impacts on native birds due to roaming cats. He notes that night-time curfews are insufficient.
- **Need for better reporting mechanisms and stricter enforcement:** They suggest easier online reporting tools, including drop-down categories for nuisance, DNA testing for dog waste enforcement, and more visible registration tags. They also recommend enforcing on-leash rules near paths and waterways, banning off-leash use near sensitive areas.
- **Ensure pet owners bear the cost of pet-related services:** The submission calls for pet registration fees to cover all related Council services, including enforcement, fencing, and facilities. It also proposes setting limits on pet ownership per household in high-density areas to prevent overpopulation and community disruption.
- **Regulate domestic animal businesses:** They suggest expanding the DAMP to cover dog walking and dog training businesses, with specific bans on their operation in natural parklands like Merri Creek, unless licensed and regulated. He emphasises the need to protect these public spaces from commercial misuse.

4.6 Key Stakeholder Interviews

Phone interviews were conducted with 10 key stakeholders, who were asked 10 questions about domestic animal management from the perspective of their organisation. These interviews sought to gather expertise from key organisations across three Council areas about domestic animal management across Merri-bek, Darebin and Whittlesea.

Phone interviews were conducted with the following key stakeholders:

- Rescue Rehabilitate Release
- Reservoir Vet Clinic
- RSPCA Victoria
- Petbarn Preston
- Cat Protection Society
- Second Chance Animal Rescue
- Bundoora Veterinary Clinic and Hospital
- Friends of Merri Creek
- Pascoe Vale Veterinary Clinic
- Project Underdog Rescue

.For the Stakeholder Interview Questionnaire, refer to Appendix 2.

"People willingly take their dogs into wildlife habitats. They chase kangaroos, cause stress injuries, and get them hit by cars. There's a 98% euthanasia rate if we're able to contain them."

"More messages in vet clinics, dog parks, and on social media linking to the 'why', explaining the positive impacts of human behaviour on animal outcomes."

"Even if we pool our resources, we can probably reach a larger audience than just doing it by ourselves separately."

"You could use council social media and flyers at local shops, we've got a brochure station. Just need approval through head office."

"Dogs off leash is a constant issue. From what I've read on the local Facebook page, some aren't controlled and are quite aggressive... I think it's in every area."

"Have a more approachable local laws team, people with a keen interest in keeping people and pets together. That really makes a difference."

"It was a cost-cutting decision, but it hurt the community. RSPCA provided great support and knowledge, we haven't had a partnership like that since."

"When the right person is in the role, local laws officers become part of the community rather than someone that's feared. That's when behaviour starts to change."

"I get worried when aggressive or dangerous dogs are in the community and the Council is potentially not aware of them. Imagine if the fence backs onto a school."

"Our Fear Free certified team would welcome opportunities to collaborate with Council on education, community welfare, and responsible pet ownership campaigns."

Animal management issues of concern regarding dogs

Key stakeholder groups reported the following issues of concern regarding the management of dogs:

- A lack of education among dog owners regarding responsible ownership, including dog behaviour, training, and appropriate confinement. Several stakeholders linked behavioural issues to dogs being poorly socialised, particularly following COVID-19, when many owners did not attend puppy school or obedience classes.
- Dogs off-leash in on-leash areas, particularly in parks and natural reserves. This was frequently cited as a cause of distress for on-lead dogs and their owners, with reports of repeated dog-on-dog incidents and attacks.
- Dog attacks on wildlife, including birds and kangaroos, with some stakeholders reporting a high euthanasia rate for native animals injured by dogs. Concerns were raised about dogs being exercised off-lead in areas with known wildlife habitats, including creeks and revegetation zones.
- Poor understanding or enforcement of on-leash rules, with signage often ignored and community members reluctant to confront non-compliant dog owners. Several stakeholders emphasised the importance of visible local laws officers during peak times.
- Ongoing issues with unregistered dogs and backyard breeders, including concerns about breeding practices, lack of vaccinations, and dogs not being microchipped. Some stakeholders expressed concern about low registration rates in Darebin overall.
- Aggressive dogs not being adequately confined, with some stakeholders worried about the proximity of aggressive dogs to schools or other sensitive areas.
- Stray dogs being brought to vet clinics without Council support. Stakeholders reported that delayed pick-up or lack of after-hours services created a financial and emotional burden, especially when animals had no clinical history or were fearful.
- Barking complaints linked to poor dog management, such as a lack of enrichment or inappropriate dog selection for the owner's lifestyle. Some stakeholders felt that Council advice in these cases could be outdated or ineffective.

- Dog waste in parks and open spaces continues to be a problem, impacting amenity and causing frustration for staff and volunteers working in the community.
- A need for greater support for vulnerable community members, including access to low-cost desexing, vaccinations, and surrender pathways during times of crisis.

Some stakeholders suggested that holding Council events in dog parks could be an opportunity to model and promote responsible pet behaviour. Others noted that while dog ownership has increased significantly since COVID, the support and infrastructure to educate new owners has not kept pace.

Animal management issues of concern regarding cats

Key stakeholder groups reported the following issues of concern regarding the management of cats:

- Large numbers of stray, roaming, and semi-owned cats across the municipality, particularly in areas like Reservoir
- Low desexing rates and a need for greater awareness and enforcement of mandatory desexing requirements
- Community misunderstanding around cat ownership responsibility, particularly in cases where people feed but do not formally claim cats
- Inadequate enforcement of cat containment and a lack of penalties for roaming cats
- Roaming cats contributing to wildlife predation, nuisance behaviour, cat fights, and disease spread
- Lack of awareness of existing containment rules or cat curfews
- Difficulties accessing low-cost desexing and the need for targeted support in lower-income communities
- Delays or inconsistencies in Council response to reports of stray cats, including limited after-hours support
- Poor reclaim rates and low registration levels for cats, often due to out of date microchip details or lack of owner engagement
- Concern from veterinary clinic and shelters around caring for cats outside of council processes.

Services and programs to promote responsible pet ownership

Key stakeholder groups nominated the following services or programs to promote responsible pet ownership:

A focus on community education as the main tool, including:

- Educational seminars or online sessions led by vets or certified trainers, available via Council websites or hosted at local venues such as parks or community halls
- Increased visibility of Council officers through pop-up events at dog parks, offering free giveaways (e.g. leads, doggy bags), chip scanning, and one-on-one conversations about pet responsibilities

- Education targeting children and youth through school partnerships or scout group visits, to encourage early understanding of responsible pet care
- Greater promotion via mainstream and digital media around the costs of pet ownership, vaccination importance, and preventing impulse pet purchases
- Materials in Council rate notices and pet registration mailouts reminding residents of wildlife protection laws and the impact of domestic pets
- Encouraging the use of collars with visible ID tags alongside microchips, particularly for dogs and puppies that may not have updated chip details
- Awareness campaigns about curfews and containment, especially for cats, and the benefits of enrichment for indoor pets
- Supporting residents to understand and manage community cats, including clearer guidance around when and how to take responsibility

Low-cost and accessible services to reduce financial barriers, including:

- Free or low-cost desexing, microchipping, and vaccination days, particularly for low-income or vulnerable households
- Discounted or free registration events and clearer information on how to access concessions
- Emergency pet boarding for residents experiencing crisis
- Promotion and support for DIY cat enclosures, such as instructional materials, in-person workshops, or grants to assist with building

Improved communication and partnerships, including:

- Clear, consistent communication between Council and vet clinics, with up-to-date guidance on containment laws, cat curfews, and registration requirements
- Dedicated efforts to reach multicultural communities with translated information and culturally sensitive messaging
- Partnerships between Council, local vets, and animal behaviour experts to co-deliver programs and ensure enforcement advice aligns with best-practice welfare standards

One vet clinic noted that clients often don't know the difference between microchipping and registration, and many dogs remain registered under breeders well after rehoming. Improved education around chip transfers and visibility of Council programs through vet clinics was considered essential.

The success of other Council-led models was raised as a potential guide for Merri-bek. For example, stakeholders praised Whittlesea's cat desexing and curfew approach, and Banyule's free cat desexing program. These were seen as scalable options that combine regulation with meaningful community support.

Services and programs to minimise dog attacks on people and animals

The following suggestions were made for services or programs to minimise the risk of attacks by dogs on people and animals:

- Greater community education on recognising dog stress signals, including signage with visual guides in off-leash areas to help owners identify when a dog is fearful or reactive (e.g. ears back, rigid body)
- Public seminars and workshops run by force-free, qualified animal behaviour professionals focusing on dog behaviour, body language, and safe human-dog and dog-dog interactions
- Promotion of humane, evidence-based training methods, with caution around aversive or punishment-based training approaches that may increase risk of aggression
- More low-cost or free access to puppy school, ongoing training, and behavioural support, particularly in communities experiencing financial hardship
- Public education campaigns (e.g. letterbox flyers, social media) featuring real stories from victims of dog attacks to raise awareness of their long-term impacts and promote responsible ownership
- Clearer education at the point of adoption or purchase around matching dogs to appropriate homes and lifestyles, with guidance on breed traits and behavioural needs
- Stricter requirements around the registration and monitoring of high-risk or restricted breed dogs, including education on muzzle use and containment
- More consistent fencing and containment advice for all owners, and stronger enforcement around secure confinement of dogs to properties
- Increased Council presence in off-leash parks and more frequent ranger patrols during peak times (e.g. mornings and evenings)
- Stronger enforcement of on-leash rules, particularly in areas with sensitive wildlife or high foot traffic
- Improved behaviour and risk screening at Council-operated pounds to ensure suitability of dogs for rehoming
- Use of colour-coded leads or harnesses to indicate reactive or nervous dogs, aligned with international conventions
- Support for accessible training options beyond puppyhood, with emphasis on behavioural development through adolescence (up to 18 months)
- Council support for or partnerships with ethical training providers, including promotion of accredited force-free training programs
- More educational materials at dog parks, in registration packs, and online explaining the links between poor socialisation and aggression
- Better data collection and sharing of dog attack statistics to understand risk factors, including whether dogs were off-leash, escaped, or unsupervised

Some stakeholders suggested Council involvement in promoting best practice training programs and supporting participation through subsidised fees. Others emphasised that education campaigns should extend beyond rules and enforcement, and instead empower owners to understand and manage their dogs' emotional and behavioural needs.

Services and programs to address over-population and high euthanasia rates

The following suggestions were made for services or programs to address over-population and high euthanasia rates for dogs and cats. These are in addition to several raised previously in the sections *"Animal management issues of concern regarding dogs"* and *"Animal management issues of concern regarding cats"*. Suggestions included:

- Free or low-cost desexing days coordinated across multiple local vet clinics, including clinics with high capacity to perform bulk procedures
- Greater promotion and uptake of desexing vouchers, particularly for vulnerable residents, healthcare card holders, or pensioners
- Mandatory desexing for cats, alongside better education about when animals can begin to reproduce and common misconceptions (e.g. that siblings cannot breed)
- Stronger enforcement around excess animal numbers and backyard breeding, including better regulation of online pet sales and increased oversight of unregistered breeders
- Clearer public education on the responsibilities associated with stray or semi-owned pets, including defining ownership and the role of Council versus community members
- Built-in registration and microchipping services at vet clinics to streamline the process and reduce barriers to compliance
- Public information campaigns to explain why microchipping, desexing, and registration matter, and what outcomes they help achieve
- Behavioural support programs to reduce pet surrenders, including free seminars, vouchers for force-free trainers, and support for owners struggling with dog behavioural issues
- Programs to support aged care residents and people with disabilities to retain companion animals, recognising the emotional and health benefits of pet ownership
- Improved after-hours response for stray dogs to prevent further stress on rescue volunteers and reduce wildlife harm

Stakeholders emphasised that addressing over-population and reducing euthanasia rates requires a coordinated effort between Councils, vet clinics, and rescue organisations. Funding and collaboration were seen as critical enablers, both for desexing programs and to strengthen rehoming pathways. Education was also identified as key to addressing community misunderstandings about pet care responsibilities and to encourage preventative action before animals end up in the pound system.

Services and programs to encourage registration and identification

Key stakeholder groups suggested the following services or programs to encourage the registration and identification of dogs and cats:

- Free or discounted registration for residents experiencing financial hardship, such as those on Centrelink or students, with a simple application process
- Free microchipping and registration events, promoted through Council's website, social media, and local partners such as vet clinics or pet stores
- Incentives for newly registered pets, such as discounts on desexing, behaviour training, or pet products
- Education campaigns about the benefits of registration, not just the legal requirement, such as the role it plays in reuniting lost pets, and the real-world outcomes for animals
- Clear and accessible messaging explaining where registration fees go, and how they support services like rangers, shelter care, and community safety
- Use of posters, pamphlets and QR codes in public spaces (e.g. dog parks, vet clinics, pet stores) to simplify registration and chip-checking processes
- On-the-spot registration support in parks or at events, using Council officers with chip scanners and digital registration tools
- Promotion of microchip checks during routine vet visits, to ensure chip details are accurate and linked to current owners
- Review and reform of fee structures, particularly for desexed dogs whose procedures are now being delayed for behavioural and health reasons so owners aren't unfairly penalised
- Messaging that explains the 'why' behind registration from the pet's perspective, helping owners understand how identification keeps their animals safer

Stakeholders highlighted that many community members view registration as a tax, and recommended campaigns that shift the narrative from compliance to care. Council visibility in public spaces, use of engaging media formats (e.g. short videos or animations), and a positive, outcomes-based messaging approach were all recommended to build trust and increase registration rates.

Services and programs to to effectively identify dangerous, menacing and restricted breed dogs

The following suggestions were made for services or programs to effectively identify dangerous, menacing and restricted breed dogs and to ensure that those dogs are kept in compliance with the Domestic Animals Act:

- A need for stricter registration and clearer identification of aggressive or dangerous dogs, with Council maintaining updated records of where such dogs are located
- Consideration of additional physical inspections to confirm secure confinement of dangerous or menacing dogs, particularly in proximity to schools or other sensitive areas
- Education for the community on recognising early signs of aggression or stress in dogs and how to respond appropriately
- Increased enforcement of leash requirements and clearer signage in on-lead and off-lead areas, to reduce risk in public spaces

- Greater visibility of local laws officers and more patrols in parks, especially during peak times, to monitor compliance and intervene where unsafe behaviour is observed
- Education campaigns that promote responsible ownership, regardless of breed, with emphasis on the importance of socialisation, training and secure confinement
- Promotion of reporting pathways for the public to raise concerns about aggressive or non-compliant dogs, with reassurance around privacy and follow-up processes
- Support for behaviour training programs, particularly in cases where reactivity or aggression is identified early, to prevent escalation

Stakeholders noted that aggressive or dangerous dogs are not always on Council's radar due to lack of registration or failure to update details. Vet clinics and rescue groups identified a potential role for clinics to help flag concerning behaviours, but expressed uncertainty about privacy constraints and what follow-up action Council could or would take. There was a call for stronger partnerships between Council and vets to ensure information sharing is effective and responsible.

Overall, a shift toward risk-based monitoring, focusing on individual behaviour rather than breed was seen as preferable by some, provided it is backed by clear procedures, consistent enforcement, and support for owners to take preventative action.

Improving Councils' animal management services for the benefit of pet owners and/or the general community

Key stakeholder groups suggested the following improvements to Council's animal management services for the benefit of pet owners and the wider community:

- Creating a more visible and approachable presence of Council officers at community events and in parks, with a focus on education and support rather than enforcement
- Providing multilingual education resources and targeting information through schools to reach a broader cross-section of the community
- Re-establishing or building partnerships with reputable animal welfare organisations to increase service capacity and deliver community support programs
- Offering grants or support to volunteer wildlife rescue groups, and recognising the contribution of these groups through collaboration and improved communication
- Ensuring that community education emphasises practical, compassionate pet care and builds understanding around dog behaviour, body language, and respectful interaction

- Improving responsiveness to community enquiries and increasing local laws staffing to meet demand, particularly in complex cases involving hoarding or multiple animals
- Delivering free or discounted pet care initiatives such as registration, microchipping, desexing, or pet food assistance for residents experiencing financial hardship
- Clearly communicating what Council's animal management team does, why they do it, and how their work benefits the broader community and animal welfare
- Including wildlife messaging in pet communications, such as reminder notices or pamphlets, to raise awareness about the impact of domestic pets on native species
- Enhancing customer service processes and streamlining animal pick-up procedures from vet clinics and members of the public

Several stakeholders expressed a desire for Council to be seen less as an enforcement body and more as a helpful resource for pet owners. Stakeholders recommended reframing public messaging to emphasise care, support, and shared responsibility between Council and the community in promoting responsible pet ownership.

Key topics requiring greater promotion in the community

Stakeholders were asked to identify the top three topics that require stronger promotion through Council's written and online communications. While views varied, several consistent themes emerged across the responses:

- Understanding pet behaviour and safe interaction, including how to read dog body language, interact with dogs respectfully, and promote safe greetings between pets and people
- Pet ownership responsibilities, such as desexing, registration, microchipping, and secure confinement, with an emphasis on the 'why' behind these requirements
- The impact of pets on wildlife, including the need to keep dogs on-lead in sensitive areas and the importance of keeping cats contained to reduce harm to native species

Additional suggestions included making educational materials more accessible, particularly by using plain language, multiple formats (e.g. pamphlets, social media, signage), and translated resources for non-English speaking communities. Schools were also identified as key settings for early education, with children acting as messengers to their families.

Partnership opportunities for animal management programs and services

Stakeholders expressed strong interest in partnering with Council on animal management programs, particularly those that are humane, evidence based and community focused.

Key themes included:

- Willingness to collaborate - several organisations showed enthusiasm for partnerships, especially in outreach, education and event participation. Suggestions included working in schools, libraries, shelters and local events to deliver accessible education.
- Support for education and outreach - Groups highlighted the importance of ongoing education and preventive programs, such as wildlife talks and behavioural sessions for pet owners. There was also interest in delivering low-cost or free training to improve pet outcomes.
- Existing partnerships - some stakeholders confirmed existing partnerships with Council, such as involvement in desexing programs.
- Specialist support - one stakeholder offered certified trainers and expressed a keen interest in delivering welfare and education initiatives.

5. Next Steps

Engagement on this project has created significant interest and aspirations for the Domestic Animal Management Plan, for those who participated, walked past a pop up or read a post online.

Keeping people updated

Issue a statement and update each Council project page thanking participants for participating in the project and for sharing their ideas. As we move into the next phase of the project we need to keep the wider community updated about the progress of this project.

Share the data

Even after this initial stage we have collected a large level of data that can be used by other agencies and organisations to plan the delivery of services. Consider ways you can share this data such as creating a snapshot of the engagement data, to bring the data to life with infographics to help participants digest the information in an easy form.

Adherence to the Local Government Act 2020

Keeping participants informed in engagement and the project is called 'closing the loop' - the information loop is currently open. Participants have shared their ideas and their feedback through the engagement process and are waiting to see what happens next. A new requirement of the Act requires councils to share the information that has been collected and inform the community as to how this will shape thinking.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Community Survey Questions

1. What is your interest in this topic? (Select one or more)

- Dog/cat owner
- Use local parks, reserves or playgrounds
- Sports club member/player/volunteer
- Veterinarian/Vet Nurse
- Member of animal advocacy/rescue group
- Member of a dog club
- Member of a wildlife/environmental group
- Registered dog or cat breeder
- Business operator – animal behaviourist/trainer/walker
- Registered Domestic Animal Business
- Other

2. Name of group/organisation/other connection

(Please specify)

3. Pet ownership

- How many dogs owned by your household?
- How many cats owned by your household?

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

- Pets give great comfort and support to many people in the community
- My/our pet/s are an important part of my/our family
- My/our pet gives me/us great comfort and support
- I/we exercise more because I/we have a dog
- I/we talk to more people in our neighbourhood because I/we have a dog

5. In the last year, have you noticed any of the following about dogs in your local area?

- Dog poo left on the ground
- Dogs off-leash when they shouldn't be
- Dogs with owners far away/owners seem to be absent
- Dogs annoying or intimidating other people
- Dogs annoying or intimidating other dogs
- Grass/plants trampled or dug up
- Dogs chasing/attacking wildlife
- Dogs in playgrounds
- Dogs sitting next to their owners at outdoor cafes
- Dogs barking for a long time
- Dogs not following commands of their owner

6. In the last year, have you noticed any of the following about cats in your local area?

- Cats in the streets at night
- Cats preying on wildlife
- Cats not being kept inside houses during the day/night
- Cats appearing to be unowned
- Cats fighting other cats
- Cats making loud noises
- Disturbed garden beds due to cat activity
- Cats living in sensitive environmental areas or reserves

7. Do you occasionally feed (or look after) any neighbourhood cats who come to your house?

- Yes
- No

8. Do you support the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew in your local area?

- Strongly support this proposal
- Somewhat support this proposal but have concerns
- Somewhat oppose the proposal and have concerns
- Strongly oppose the proposal
- Please specify any concerns: (Open text)

9. Do you support the introduction of a 24-hour cat curfew?

- Yes
- No

10. Do you know that dogs need to be registered in Merri-bek?

- Yes
- No

11. Do you know anyone who lives locally, who has an unregistered dog or cat?

- Yes
- No

12. Why do you think people do not register their pet once it reaches the appropriate age?

(Open text response)

13. How important do you think it is for councils to provide the following services for the community?

- Dog-free nature reserves/environmentally sensitive areas
- Fenced park/s for dog play (tunnels, ramps, water play)
- Free cat de-sexing program
- Door-knocking every house to check if pets are correctly registered
- Cat traps for use by residents

14. Which of the following topics need more promotion in the general community?
(Select one or more)

- Why microchipping is important
- Why you need to register your pet
- Responsibilities of dog owners when walking/exercising their dog
- What 'effective control' of a dog means
- Why cat containment is important
- Why de-sexing is important
- How to renew or add a pet registration online
- Dog on-leash areas and the rules
- Dog off-leash areas and the rules
- Who can look after your pet if you have to leave home suddenly
- What to do if you can no longer care for your pet
- What to do if you find a lost pet
- What to do if you lose your pet
- Barking dogs in your neighbourhood
- Making a complaint about another pet or owner
- Other (please specify)

15. How can Council improve its animal management services for pet owners?

(Open text response)

16. How can Council improve its animal management services for the benefit of the general community?

(Open text response)

17. In the last 12 months, have you visited the Wat Djerring Animal Facility to retrieve a lost pet or adopt a pet?

- Yes
- No

18. Please rate your level of satisfaction with the following aspects of the Epping Pound service:

- Helpfulness of staff
 - Professionalism of staff
 - Timeliness of service
 - Overall level of satisfaction
- (Scale responses – e.g., Very satisfied to Very dissatisfied)

19. Do you have any further comments to make about pet ownership or Council's animal management services in Merri-bek?

(Open text response)

20. My gender is...

- Woman/girl
- Man/boy
- Gender diverse
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-identify (please specify)

21. What suburb do you live in?

(Open text or dropdown list)

22. Connection to Merri-bek

(Open text or predefined options such as resident, worker, student, etc.)

23. Were you born overseas?

- Yes
- No

24. I was born in:

(Open text)

25. What language(s) do you speak at home?

(Open text or multiple choice)

26. What languages do you speak other than English?

"I speak: ____" (Open text)

27. My age

(Select one)

- Under 18
- 18-24
- 26-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75+

28. I am: (Select all that apply)

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
- A person living with a disability
- Carer of a person living with a disability
- Parent/guardian of children
- A member of the LGBTIQ+ community

- A person experiencing homelessness
- Prefer not to say
- None of these

Appendix 2. Stakeholder Interview Questionnaire

- In your experience, what are the main animal management issues of concern for dogs?
- In your experience, what are the main animal management issues of concern for cats?
- What services or programs could Council provide to promote responsible pet ownership?
- What services or programs could Council provide to minimise the risk of attacks by dogs on people and animals?
- What services or programs could Council provide to address any over-population and high euthanasia rates for dogs and cats?
- What services or programs could Council provide to encourage the registration and identification of dogs and cats?
- What services or programs could Council provide to effectively identify all dangerous dogs, menacing dogs and restricted breed dogs in that district and to ensure that those dogs are kept in compliance with this Act
- How could Council improve its animal management services for the benefit of pet owners and/or the general community?
- Council provides written and on-line information for residents and visitors, about the rules for owning a pet. What do you believe are the top three topics that need more promotion in the general community?
- Are there any partnership opportunities for animal management programs or services?