Rehoming Pets Reform

Phase 1 Engagement Summary

Animal Welfare Victoria

September 2023

Rehoming Pets Reform

Overview

The rising trend of pet ownership, coupled with challenges faced by certain owners, has led to an increased number of cats and dogs needing to be rehomed. As a result, rehoming groups (including rehoming and rescue groups, Community Foster Care Networks (CFCNs) and foster carers), and shelters and pounds are all facing significant strain.

The Taskforce for Rehoming Pets, established by the Victorian Government in March 2021, conducted sector consultations which informed 17 recommendations on how to improve and better support rehoming pathways for cats and dogs in Victoria, including those used for research and teaching. The Victorian Government announced support for all 17 recommendations made by the Taskforce, including the development and implementation of a regulatory framework for Victoria's pet rehoming sector. The full Taskforce report and the Victorian Government's response are available on the Agriculture Victoria website.

This Phase 1 engagement summary presents the high-level findings from workshops, surveys and other consultations, which sought pragmatic implementation ideas to inform the design and delivery of the Rehoming Pets Reforms.

Engagement methodology

Throughout June and July 2023, Animal Welfare Victoria (AWV), supported by Cube Group – a public purpose consultancy – engaged stakeholders across the pet rehoming and research and teaching sectors, including rehoming groups, shelters, pounds, animal welfare organisations, and research and teaching organisations. The purpose of the engagements was to foster collaboration, share knowledge, explore animal behaviour and health assessment practices, and identify possible ideas that could assist in facilitating reforms to improve rehoming outcomes for cats and dogs across Victoria.

Stakeholders were invited to participate through interviews, workshops (one in-person and three virtual) and surveys (one for the pet rehoming sector and one tailored to the research and teaching sectors).

These discussions were structured around four key reform themes: regulation of Victoria's pet rehoming sector; rehoming sector supports; animal behaviour testing and euthanasia; and rehoming cats and dogs used in research and teaching. Engagement generated numerous policy reform ideas while also identifying potential barriers and enablers for their successful implementation. Stakeholders were encouraged to undertake 'blue-sky thinking', while at the same time advised that not all ideas presented would be possible or viable. This approach aimed to stimulate creativity and innovation with the understanding that the next steps would include realistic assessment of feasibility and practicality.

Summary of themes

Stakeholders across all sectors and engagement forums expressed an overarching sentiment in favour of a pet rehoming framework, additional supports and incentives, and greater transparency to facilitate improved rehoming outcomes for cats and dogs, including those used in research and teaching. There were divergent views on the way in which a regulatory framework should balance mandatory obligations with voluntary guidelines, with particular concern from volunteer-led rehoming groups about any additional administrative burden that may be associated with increased regulation. There was also a general sentiment across all stakeholders that more needs to be done to reduce the unsustainable demand for pet rehoming services at first instance, through regulatory

and other levers that can drive behavioural change. Examples commonly raised included strengthened regulation, enforcement, financial incentives (and penalties) to encourage responsible breeding and selling of cats and dogs, and education campaigns to reduce the number of surrenders and support responsible and maintained pet ownership.

A summary of views specific to each of the four reform themes is provided below.

Theme 1: A regulatory framework for Victoria's pet rehoming sector

Stakeholders voiced concerns over the existing practices in the sector and the possibility of new regulations imposing additional administrative burdens that impact or disincentivise small or volunteer-led rehoming organisations. While there was general agreement that regulation is needed, there were mixed views on the most appropriate level or form of regulation. Elements of a regulatory framework consistently supported by stakeholders included a clearer definition of rescue groups, some form of accreditation process, clarity on minimum standards for supporting animals in temporary care, and better guidance and supports across the pet rehoming sector to encourage good practice and consistency. Stakeholders also noted there is a benefit in investing in more proactive programs to reduce and prevent surrenders. Stakeholders identified a range of barriers to regulatory reform including a lack of public awareness, capacity issues in the sector and challenges with policy enforcement. Additional concerns were raised around identification and microchipping, responsible and maintained pet ownership and challenges with the regulation of breeding and selling cats and dogs. Solutions towards overcoming these barriers included a focus on public education, improving ease of compliance, and better collaboration between agencies.

Broadly, the sector shared ideas like:

- Creating a structured system to ensure the effectiveness, accountability, and integrity of organisations operating within a specific sector or field
- Developing standards and criteria that organisations within the sector must meet to maintain high-quality and effective operations
- Investigating financial mechanisms that could support the sector's primary mission
- Providing resources and support to better enable organisations within the sector
- Encouraging collaborations with relevant stakeholders to enhance the sector's capabilities
- Emphasising openness and accountability in sector operations and decision-making
- Establishing uniform processes and procedures for all sector organisations to promote consistency and fairness

Theme 2: Rehoming sector supports

There was general agreement that greater standardisation is needed for cat and dog rehoming practices. This includes more streamlined and transparent communication between organisations and prospective cat and dog owners, as well as improved screening processes. Barriers to achieving this include limited resources, differences in approaches between urban and rural regions, and challenges in information sharing. Leveraging technology such as web-based platforms, refining regulations, improving accessibility of grant funding and enhancing training programs were all identified as opportunities to help address these challenges.

Broadly, the sector shared ideas like:

- Develop an online platform or resources to support sector operations
- Improve access to grant funding streams through implementing efficiencies

- Skill development and well-being support for individuals working in the sector to enhance their capabilities and resilience
- Identify options to help alleviate pressure on the sector
- Support sector partnerships, communication and collaboration

Theme 3: Animal behaviour testing and euthanasia

Stakeholders highlighted the need for refining behaviour testing approaches to reduce euthanasia rates and ensure better outcomes for cats and dogs. Barriers include the capacity constraints of the rehoming system, ongoing breeding rates, increasing behavioural issues in cats and dogs, and inconsistencies in behavioural testing due to a lack of clearly defined benchmarks or standards. Investment in education, capacity, capability building and prevention programs are potential avenues to mitigate these issues.

Broadly, the sector shared ideas like:

- Promoting improved connections and collaboration between animal pounds and rescue organisations to enhance the rehoming process
- Developing comprehensive guidelines and materials for conducting behavioural assessments to ensure consistency and accuracy
- Encouraging better training and education related to euthanasia decisions and practices, emphasizing humane and ethical considerations
- Elevating public awareness and knowledge about euthanasia practices and animal welfare issues, fostering responsible ownership and empathy
- Advocating for transparency within rescue groups, encouraging the disclosure of euthanasia outcomes to maintain accountability and ethical practices in animal rescue

Theme 4: Rehoming cats and dogs used in research and teaching

Cats and dogs represent less than 1% of animals used in research and teaching in Victoria. There was broad agreement that rehoming of these animals requires distinct considerations. Research and teaching stakeholders raised concerns about a mandatory rehoming policy and the difficulty of defining 'suitability' for rehoming. Feedback highlighted the need to account for complexities associated with mandatory rehoming, including animal welfare outcomes (particularly for animals used for more invasive scientific research), costs of procedures or training required to make animals suitable for rehoming and potential unintended consequences from a sector-wide perspective (such as more animals being bred for research and teaching purposes). Key ideas include defining 'suitable' for rehoming before considering a rehoming mandate, improving rehoming practices and enhancing data collection and transparency.

Broadly, the sector shared ideas like:

- Defining the term "suitable' in the context of rehoming cats and dogs used in research and teaching, while also supporting public education, raising awareness, and fostering understanding of ethical practices in research and teaching
- Enhancing training and support resources for individuals who are involved in rehoming cats and dogs used in research and teaching, ensuring they possess the necessary knowledge and skills to responsibly care for and rehome these animals
- Implementing uniform reporting procedures across various states or regions for animals used in research and teaching, thus facilitating consistency and accountability in these areas.

Next steps

A high-level overview of the key next steps for progressing the Rehoming Pets Reforms is presented below:

Figure 1: Next steps – project timeline

- Phase 1 Stakeholder consultation *Complete*
- Establish the working group *In progress*
- Preliminary policy analysis and research *In progress*
- Phase 2 Stakeholder consultation
- Policy design and finalisation
- Legislative and regulatory amendments
- Implement reforms

Conclusion

The Rehoming Pets Reforms were broadly supported by stakeholders, who noted the value of improving regulation to benefit the welfare of cats and dogs. However, apprehension exists around the implementation of reforms, and their potential to add to the workload of already burdened sectors.

Specific areas highlighted for further consultation include scalable registration or accreditation processes for rehoming groups, the potential implications of a mandatory rehoming policy for cats and dogs used in research and teaching, features for online pet rehoming platforms and balancing obligations for monitoring and managing compliance with a pet rehoming regulatory framework.