

Reuniting Lost Pets Review

Public consultation summary report

Reuniting lost pets in Victoria

As the law currently stands, all lost cats and dogs must be delivered to a local council authorised officer, or an organisation holding an 84Y agreement*, to establish if the owner can be found.

The Reuniting Lost Pets review is looking at reforms to ensure lost cats and dogs dropped-off at a vet clinic or animal shelter can be reunited with their owners as soon as possible. Reforms will maintain community confidence by ensuring any compliance matters can be followed-up or investigated.



Consultation process

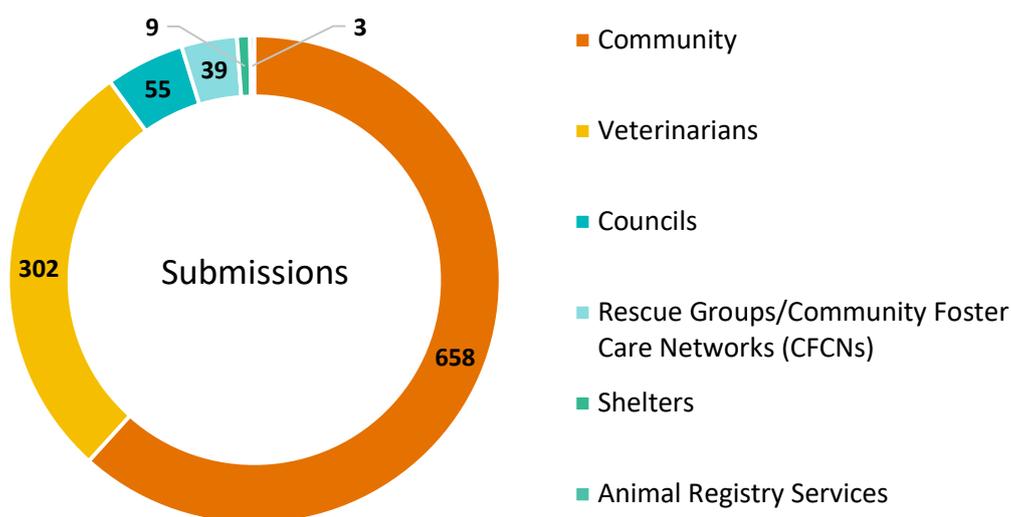
Public consultation on issues around reuniting lost pets took place from 24 July to 24 August 2020.

Six stakeholder-specific online surveys were provided on the Victorian Government's Engage Victoria website; with written submissions also invited.

Who got involved?

Consultation attracted 4,659 visitors and 1066 contributions from the six stakeholder groups.

The Victorian Government thanks all those individuals and groups that provided feedback.



Contributions included 12 written submissions from organisations representing vets, rescue groups, animal welfare organisations, as well as from the general public.

**An 84Y agreement is a specific agreement between a local council and usually a facility made under section 84Y of the Domestic Animals Act 1994. Depending on the conditions of the agreement it can permit actions like receiving lost pets, rehoming unclaimed pets and charging fees for managing, desexing, caring for and microchipping animals.*

Key insights from public consultation

General support for proposed measures

Most respondents support direct pet reunification through vet clinics and registered animal shelters. The level of support ranges from 67% in council respondents, 88% in vets and shelters, 93% in the general community to 97% in rescue groups/Community Foster Care Networks. Improved animal welfare outcomes, trust, convenience, efficiency and general cost savings were frequently cited reasons for support.

Some vets suggested that clinics should be able to opt-out of providing pet reunification services, as they may disrupt their operations and represent an additional legal, financial, emotional, staffing and resource risk.

Some respondents suggested that council should take immediate custody of pets in cases where: there is no identification; the owner can't be contacted; the pet is suspected of being involved in a dog attack; there are obvious neglect issues; there is conflicting ownership information or; the pet is not collected within a day.

Animal welfare

Most respondents recognised that a more efficient reunification process could improve animal welfare outcomes. Many urged that animal welfare be prioritised in any future process and that vets and shelters were often better positioned to deliver these outcomes.

However, vets, shelters and councils identified risks associated with lost pets being abandoned or tethered outside vet clinics and shelters, resulting in adverse animal welfare outcomes. Lost pets handed in also have an unknown medical history, making care more challenging.

Many respondents wanted to ensure there were safeguards in place for vets and shelters to be able to report suspected cases of serious neglect to local council, or the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) Victoria.

Compliance and enforcement

Most council respondents support pet reunification through vets and shelters, providing there is some form of compulsory reporting or record keeping. This ensures council can continue to conduct compliance and enforcement where necessary to protect public safety.

Reporting and record keeping mechanisms were also supported so repeat offenders could be identified and all pet owners could continue to contribute fairly to animal management services.

Ownership

Many survey responses identified out-of-date ownership information on animal registry service (microchip) databases as a major concern with direct pet reunification at a vet or shelter.

Without current information, the pet could be provided to the wrong person. Education programs to remind owners of the importance of identification tags/collars and updating ownership details were widely supported. More frequent, automated reminders sent to owners from registry services was a popular suggestion. Many respondents felt that ownership verification processes were required, to help ensure the pet is returned to the lawful owner.

There were also concerns that attempts to reunite pets via social media meant animals were not being returned to lawful owners.

Some councils were concerned that allowing vet clinics and registered shelters to reunite lost pets directly may cause more distress and confusion for owners, as council would no longer be the reliable, central contact point for lost pets.

Responding animal registry services also supported more education about the importance of updating ownership details and raising awareness for the centralised portal (petaddress.com.au) among pet owners.

Privacy

Most of the general public (86%) had no major privacy concerns in relation to their phone details being shared more broadly for the purpose of pet reunification. Ninety-one per cent of the general public support their phone number being automatically provided by animal registry services for pet reunification purposes.

Public safety

Many groups wanted to ensure that any reunification process included appropriate protections to maintain public safety. The main suggestion was to require reporting to council of suspected dog attacks and dogs that were reunited, so council could maintain public safety through follow-up compliance where required.

Cost

While many respondents identified the potential efficiency, cost and resource savings to council, others also recognised that some of these burdens would be transferred to vets and shelters. Around 86% of the general public supported vets having a mechanism to recoup reasonable costs from pet owners should they wish to do so (e.g. emergency first aid/extended boarding), as did 93% of vets.

The perceived high cost of reunification associated with collecting a pet from a council pound or shelter (fees and fines) was considered a significant deterrent to reclamation, as well as a factor contributing to negative animal welfare outcomes (e.g. unreclaimed pets being held for longer periods and needing to be rehomed). These costs also deter some people from dropping off lost pets and cause some to attempt to find the owner through alternate channels (e.g. social media).

84Y Agreements

Most non-council respondents believe that pets should be reunited without the need for an 84Y agreement, while most councils feel an 84Y agreement (or some form of compulsory record keeping or reporting) is required, so that compliance and public safety can be assured.

Only 23% of responding vets have an agreement with council allowing them to accept lost pets. In some cases, these vets are still obliged to forward the pet to the council. Some vets could not obtain an 84Y agreement as they were not offered by their local council.

Inconsistent 84Y agreement clauses also made compliance difficult for vets, especially if a vet has an agreement with multiple councils.

Most respondents agreed that 84Y agreements could be improved through standardised provisions and regular review.

Animal Registry Services (microchip database managers)

Responding animal registry services supported lost pets being dropped off at a vet clinic or registered animal shelter for reunification purposes, noting these facilities should keep records for passing onto council.

Many public respondents were frustrated that six separate microchip registries exist. It appears many of these people were not aware of the central portal, petaddress.com.au, that allows anyone to quickly determine which registry they need to contact for information or updates.

More frequent and systematic reconciliation of ownership records between microchip registries and councils was suggested, to help keep records current. Many members of the public requested simpler procedures to update ownership details. Other system improvements were also suggested, for example, allowing vets to flag a pet as 'found'. The registry could then automatically send a notification to the owner and relevant council, so owners know where to collect the lost pet and any follow-up compliance activities could occur.

Next steps

While feedback demonstrates high-level support for the proposal to allow vets and shelters to directly reunite lost pets with their owners, there are many different and diverging views regarding the detail of how this should be designed and implemented.

Over coming months, Animal Welfare Victoria will work with the Government to consider and analyse all feedback to determine options for reform. Further targeted consultation may occur to clarify issues or improve proposed reform options.

Animal Welfare Victoria will publish any future updates on the Engage Victoria platform (engage.vic.gov.au). Alternatively, you may wish to register for updates at pet.welfare@agriculture.vic.gov.au.

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