

Increased responsibilities of cat owners – increased return to owners

Blyth Moir

INTRODUCTION

I pose the question – What is it that we as Animal Management Officers can provide to assist or encourage cat owners or carers to own and look after their pets, to know where to look for lost pets and what services are available to assist them? Some would say very little if anything at all.

Let's have a look at the regulations we have. In Victoria, prior to April 1996, there were no formal regulations or Acts dealing with cats. Some Councils had a local law requiring cats to be registered. At least one Council required all registered cats to be desexed. In April 1996 it became compulsory for the first time for cat owners to register their cats with the introduction of the Domestic (Feral/Nuisance) Animals Act 1994. Other states have similar Acts or local laws.

Some Councils in Victoria and other states, have introduced local laws requiring cat owners to house their pets at night and have introduced a curfew. There are even areas and estates that are cat free. In my Council, Moreland, we have no such curfews or areas.

Most Councils provide traps, to collect and remove cats that are deemed to be a nuisance by residents. These cats are taken to the pound and held for the required time to enable owners to retrieve them. If they are not retrieved, the cats are either rehoused or humanely destroyed.

TREND IN THE COMMUNITY

One of my biggest concerns is that there are a lot of residents who take in stray or dumped cats. These people care for these cats by feeding them, providing shelter and at times, they even take them to the vet for treatment and pay to have them desexed.

My concern is not so much that people are doing this, but that they are not taking the extra step and having the cat registered with the Council. Yes, I know what some of you are saying, that Acts or local laws deem that an owner is someone who is harbouring and feeding an animal and as such could be liable for a fine for failing to register that animal.

What I am suggesting, and at Moreland what we are very much working towards, is trying to encourage these people to take the extra step to register the cat through education and encouragement rather than enforcement. If people do this, then at least these cats, if caught in a trap, would be able to be returned to the owner. We as Animal Management Officers would then be able to educate the owner to ensure that their cat does not become a nuisance to others.

This would mean that we have one less stray cat to worry about within our community, as it would now belong to someone.

Another problem is that cats seem to be in ready supply and can be acquired for very little cost and in some cases for free. Maybe this is the reason people don't try to find their lost cat. At Moreland 97% of cats registered are desexed which would indicate that we have very responsible cat owners within our community. Over the past few years some owners, through our programs, are also micro chipping their cats.

WHAT HAPPENS TO LOST CATS?

Most are taken to a pound or shelter and held for a time to allow the owner time to come and collect the animal. Statistics show us that owners claim only 3% of all cats taken to the pound or shelters. 5% are rehoused and the rest are put to sleep.

This is a tragic situation for the cats, cat owners and Councils. Residents rarely contact the Council if their beloved cat has gone missing. – Why?

Is it because people just get another cat, or believe that the cat has found another home; maybe they think the cat's nine lives have run out, or could it be that they just don't know where to go in search of their pet?

It is hard to put a finger on the real reason but I believe it is because cat owners just don't know where to search or who to go to when their pet moggie has gone. When I talk to people, I find that some don't really understand that it is possible that their cat can be taken to a pound and held to enable the owners to be re-united with their pet. They thought that pounds were for dogs and that cats were destroyed.

Admittedly in some cases pet owners just lose interest and dump their cats in the hope that others will look after them.

WHAT CAN COUNCILS DO TO INCREASE AWARENESS AND RESPONSIBILITY?

We as AMOs can do many things to try and encourage those who look after stray cats to take that extra step and register it with the Council. The cost of registering a cat with Moreland is one of the cheapest in the state of Victoria - \$50 for an undesexed cat and \$7.50 for a desexed cat. It is half as much again for a pensioner or if your cat is over ten years of age.

Compared to the cost of registering a dog (\$90 undesexed, \$20 desexed) cats are cheaper, yet cat owners still feel that they are not getting value for money. Nothing appears to be offered to them other than a registration tag.

We need to talk to those in the community who are looking after these unregistered cats, encourage them to register the animal and advise them of the benefits that this may have, such as being able to return the cat if it is found at large.

The majority of the people who are caring for these stray cats are the elderly or lonely. We need to look at ways that you as AMO's can help, work with your local vets or pounds. In Moreland we have at times worked with our cat pound agent (The Cat Protection Society) to enable cats to be desexed with both the Council and the agent sharing the cost.

These cats are then registered and as such have a home and are not going to breed and create further problems.

We also have to make ourselves available to answer questions and be able to provide solutions, rather than appear to be ready to enforce or destroy. These are only some of the ways that Councils can help.

HOW CAN WE INCREASE THE NUMBER OF CATS RETURNED?

This is obviously a concern that we all share. As I have previously stated nationally, of all cats taken to a pound only about 3% are ever recovered by their owners and another 5% are rehoused. This has been a concern of mine for some time and I take no pride as an Animal Management Officer to think that so many cats are not recovered.

There are a few ways that I can think of to try and increase the number of lost cats returned to their owners. No doubt some of you will have other ideas and if so I encourage you to try them and if successful, let others know.

Some of the ways in which we at Moreland are trying to increase the number of cats returned to their owners and encourage others to take the extra step and register the cat are:

- a lost and found register where owners can log the details of their lost cat. This enables us to try and match cats we find and return them to their owner;
- public education programs, where we go out into the community and advise residents where they may find their lost cat,
- encourage owners to microchip their cat/s,
- introduced FREE registration (first time) for the first year if the cat (and dog) is desexed and micro chipped,
- conducted micro chipping days where we encourage cat owners to attend. The chipping is done at a cheaper rate on these days, and
- offer desexing vouchers where Council contributes to the cost of desexing a cat.

Some of the other initiatives that we will be trying are:

- placing articles in the local newspapers;
- working with our pound agent, The Cat Protection Society of Victoria, to see if there are any joint ventures that we could do to encourage greater ownership and improve the return to owner figures, and
- look at things that we can offer to cat owners as an encouragement such as maybe free cat collars, food bowls or some sort of cat toy.

WHAT IS IT THAT WE AS AMO'S CAN OFFER CAT OWNERS?

Dog owners have parks where they can take their pets to so that they can be exercised. There are also brochures and freebies that Councils give away. What do we offer to the cat owner?

No doubt if I was to carry out a quick brain storming session now we would come up with many ways and ideas that we could offer (or in some cases do offer) to the owners of registered cats. If we offered more would this increase ownership or increase the number of cats returned to their owners from pounds?

Maybe we can run cat expo's in conjunction with breeders or registered cat organizations. Maybe we could look at giving away free gifts such as nametags or collars with bells for example. These do cost money and may need to be considered at budget time; maybe we go out and find sponsors. This may need to be worked through with your managers.

At Moreland we will be trying some of the ideas we raised and we are interested in any other ideas or initiatives that have been tried. We will be monitoring the results to see if these offers will actually increase ownership and the number of cats returned to owners from pounds. Our target is to increase the percentage rate of returned cats to owners to 5%, initially.

CONCLUSION

I am not here to advise, as I and other AMO's like me don't have all the answers. Far from it: all I'm trying to do is provoke you to think about what it is that we as Animal Management Officers can do, to encourage and assist cat owners to take that extra step and register the animal they have been caring for and to try and improve the return rate of cats lost back to their owners.

I believe that we as Animal Management Officers have a duty to make all pet owners within our community feel wanted and to have processes in place to ensure that we can manage the return of pets to their owners. We also need to encourage and educate residents to register their cats particularly if they have taken in a stray cat. Education, if not regulation, and compassion, not enforcement, are the key to creative ways that we as AMO's can work towards increasing the responsibility of cat ownership and improve the return rate of lost cats to their owners. We can increase the percentage returned to owners if we all just try one extra bit of promotion.

We need to look at ways that we can educate owners, to ensure they know where their cat may be and how to find it if it is lost as well as taking that extra step to register the cat with the Council. To make owners feel that Council care about them and their pet cats. Whether you love or hate cats, they are as much a part of society as dogs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Blyth Moir is 48 years of age and is the current Team Leader of the Animal Management Unit within the Moreland City Council. Moreland's Animal Management Unit is operated by council staff and consists of two AMOs and Blyth as the Team Leader.

Moreland Council is in Victoria, has a population of 137,000 and is located to the north of the capital city, Melbourne. It is a mixture of light industry, commercial and residential with a wide range of cultures with whom the AMOs work.

Blyth has been with the council for eight years starting off as a Parking & Local Laws Officer with the City of Brunswick prior to the amalgamations of council within Victoria. He has been the Team Leader of the Animal Management Unit for the past three years. Blyth has dealt with a variety of animals over the years including dogs, cats, sheep, goats, cattle, horses and ferrets, which is not bad, considering the municipality is predominantly residential.

He manages all animal complaints including noisy animals. Moreland City Council has two pound contractors, one for dogs and one for cats, which are his responsibility to oversee.

Blyth is also a licensed snake catcher and offers his service to the Moreland community for free.