# Welfare Report

## Exploring the link between human wellbeing and animal welfare

**The first statewide exploration of how human wellbeing intersects with animal welfare outcomes across NSW.**

2026

RSPCA New South Wales

# Acknowledgement of Country

RSPCA NSW acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we work and care for animals across NSW. We pay our respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

We recognise the deep and enduring connection First Nations peoples have with Country, animals, waterways, and the natural world, and acknowledge the knowledge, care, and stewardship that has existed for tens of thousands of years.

As an organisation dedicated to the welfare and protection of animals, we are committed to listening, learning, and building respectful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as we work towards a more compassionate future for all living beings.

***Tracks of Care*** | Brendon Nilsson - Gundungurra mob

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# Executive summary

**Guided by our purpose to create better lives for animals, RSPCA NSW envisions a future where animals and people live together with dignity, respect and compassion. Achieving this vision requires a clear understanding of the challenges affecting animal welfare across NSW and a strategic, evidenced-informed response.**

This report lays the foundation for RSPCA NSW's approach to improving the welfare of animals, and the people who care for them. We set out a framework for understanding where the need is the greatest, why it exists, and how we aim to deliver meaningful and lasting change.

We argue for a systematic, evidence-based approach that shifts focus from largely responding to harm, to preventing it. By applying a public health approach, we aim to improve the health, safety, and wellbeing of the entire population of companion animals in NSW. This preventative approach is widely used to address human health and social issues as it provides a powerful model for advancing animal welfare.

Central to our approach is understanding the factors that place animals at risk or protect their wellbeing. Because animals share the same environments as their caregivers and depend on the capacity of these caregivers, there are compelling reasons to consider that the social determinants of human health are closely linked to animal wellbeing. A growing body of evidence supports this relationship [1].

This report describes RSPCA NSW's efforts to create a framework and data tool to identify, define, monitor and better understand animal welfare challenges, while supporting the design, trial and evaluation of interventions. The data tool combines available data on human health determinants and animal-centred welfare data and maps them across NSW local government areas. Human-centred data were categorised into the following health determinant factors: economic disadvantage, geographic isolation, domestic and family violence, and health and social vulnerabilities. Animal-centred measures include cat and dog impoundments, dog bite reports, number of veterinary clinics, RSPCA NSW animal stray, surrendered and inspectorate intake and cruelty reports.

This method demonstrates the interconnected nature of the social determinants of health, with many local government areas experiencing adversity across multiple factors.

**The work also highlighted an important gap: there are currently insufficient animal-centred data to draw comprehensive conclusions about the wellbeing of the companion animal population in NSW, and one which also focuses on positive welfare outcomes instead of the presence of problems.**

Addressing this gap is essential if we are to develop a meaningful barometer of animal wellbeing for the state.

RSPCA NSW has established a series of support programs and strategies that have evidence of improving outcomes for people and their animals, relating to:

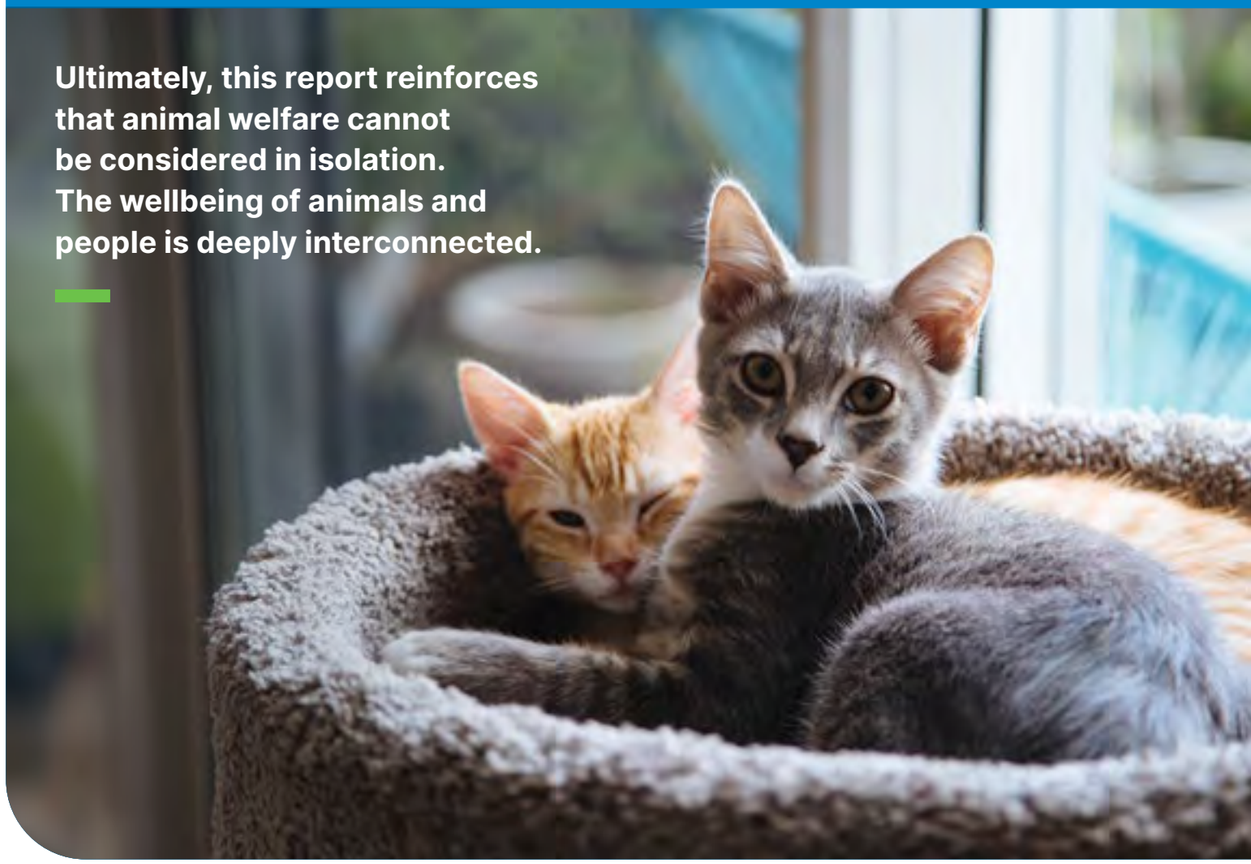
- advocacy
- crisis support
- community-based prevention activities
- accessible targeted desexing programs
- increasing financial and physical access to veterinary care.

We intend to strengthen these programs, directing them to the communities where they can have the greatest impact, while continually evaluating their effectiveness.

Ultimately, this report reinforces that animal welfare cannot be considered in isolation. The wellbeing of animals and people is deeply interconnected. Advancing animal welfare, therefore, requires a One Welfare approach built on collaboration between animal and human welfare sectors [1].

While this is the first step in a critical readjustment in how we impact animal welfare, RSPCA NSW is proud to lead this change in our state. By working together, informed by evidence and focused on prevention, we have the opportunity to create lasting improvements for animals, people and communities across NSW.

**Click to hear RSPCA NSW CEO Steven Coleman talk about why the wellbeing of the *entire* family is so important.**



# A message from our Chief Executive Officer

**For more than 150 years, RSPCA NSW has helped animals in need. Over that time, we've protected countless animals, and that experience has taught us something important.**

Many of the most serious welfare issues we encounter are not simply animal issues. They are often connected to challenges people are facing in their own lives.

Financial hardship can delay or prevent access to veterinary care. Geographic isolation can leave people without access to essential services. Domestic and family violence can place both people and animals at risk. Physical and mental health challenges can affect a person's ability to care for the animals they love.

If we are serious about creating better lives for animals, we must understand and address these realities.

This report represents an important step in that journey for us.

RSPCA NSW has brought together animal welfare data and indicators of human social determinants of health to create a statewide picture of where animals may be most at risk and why.

This undertaking does not lessen the importance of animal protection or our commitment to animal welfare.

Rather, it strengthens our mindset that:

*Prevention* is our priority.
Protection is our *promise.*

That means supporting people, strengthening communities, improving access to services, and addressing the common barriers that prevent animals from receiving the care they need.

This report establishes a baseline. It is the first edition of what we intend to become an annual assessment. Each year, we'll deepen our understanding, measure progress, identify emerging challenges, evaluate our impact and, most importantly, encourage industries, government and communities to do their part in helping the animals and people of NSW.

The challenges outlined in these pages are significant, but so too is the opportunity. By recognising the connection between human wellbeing and animal welfare, we can create a future where more animals are safe, healthy and thriving, and where more people have the capacity to care for them.

**Steve Coleman**
Chief Executive Officer
RSPCA NSW



# A message from our Chief Veterinarian

**As companion animal veterinarians, we protect the welfare of our patients through individualised care aided by epidemiological research – studies exploring patterns and determinants of health and disease.**

By examining companion animals at a population level, this research has contributed significantly to our understanding of disease and our capacity to adopt a preventative health approach for our patients.

In human health and disease, population thinking is the basis for the modern public health approach that aims to prevent or reduce an illness or social problem by identifying risk indicators. It is an approach that is strongly argued for in a range of contexts, from communicable disease to child abuse and neglect. It focuses on the health of communities and populations, prioritising, wherever possible, those at greatest risk of disease or injury, with an emphasis on prevention rather than treating the consequences [2].

The concept of preventative health care is not new to veterinary medicine, but its application to animal welfare and protection is in its infancy. Researchers have recently begun to examine social determinants of health as a lens through which to consider risk to animal welfare [1]. We believe strongly that this needs to be an area of focus and action, because every day we see the challenges people face in caring for their animals.

These are animals that have often been passively acquired; taken on by a caregiver because they were found stray, abandoned or unwanted with few other options available to them. This is relevant when reflecting on notions expressed by some members of the community that pet ownership is irresponsible where the circumstances are not ideal for providing for the animal. The scale of the problem related to overpopulation of dogs and cats requires a collaborative effort to address, and we should support those seeking to be part of the solution. We know that for many animals in need, there is a person who is also struggling.

The impacts reach beyond the animal owner and their animal. It affects the broader animal welfare system. Veterinarians are at the front line of trying to negotiate acceptable outcomes for cost-constrained clients and their pets needing care. The compassion fatigue and moral distress caused by these difficult circumstances have been identified as a profound risk to the wellbeing of our profession.

When people can't access veterinary care, support services or practical assistance, animals are more likely to enter pounds, shelters and rescue organisations. While these services play a critical role in protecting vulnerable animals, they are not environments in which animals thrive. Even with the highest standards of care, dedicated staff and significant resources, shelters can never replace the stability, familiarity and security of a healthy home.

We see the impact this has on animals. We see the stress this places on veterinarians, shelters, pounds and rescue groups who are increasingly being asked to fill the gaps created by broader social challenges.

This is why RSPCA NSW's new strategic direction is focused on preventing animal suffering before it occurs and why this report is important to our function.

The systemic causes of animal welfare compromise must be examined and addressed if we are to make real progress. This report provides an important foundation for that work. I hope it sparks collaboration across the animal welfare, veterinary, health, community and government sectors, and helps focus our collective efforts on creating lasting change.

**The best animal welfare outcome is not rescuing animals at crisis point. It is preventing that crisis from ever occurring.**

**Dr Liz Arnott**
Chief Veterinarian
RSPCA NSW

# Animal welfare in NSW at a glance

**17,946**
**animal cruelty reports received** [2]

**10,692**
**animals entering RSPCA NSW shelters** [2]

**4,796**
**dog bites** [2]

**36,978**
**cats and dogs entering NSW pounds** [2]

**73%**
**of households own a pet** [3]

**2.5 million**
**pets estimated to be living in food insecure households**[1]

**66,000**
**pets estimated to be living in households experiencing domestic and family violence**[2]

## Key insights

1 RSPCA NSW has created an LGA-level planning and decision-making approach to operationalise a social determinants framework for animal welfare.

2 Our Animal Welfare Vulnerability Framework and data tool are capable of demonstrating the intersectionality of social determinants of health.

3 Animal welfare data in NSW are incomplete and fragmented, limiting assessment of population-level companion animal welfare trends.

4 Early outcome data from RSPCA NSW support programs indicate the positive impacts on animal and human wellbeing.

## Social determinants of health examined in the RSPCA NSW Vulnerability Framework:

- **Economic disadvantage**
- **Geographic isolation**
- **Domestic and family violence**
- **Health and social vulnerabilities**

### Factors relevant to effective program delivery:

- **Language diversity**
- **First Nations heritage**

*Prevention* **is our priority. Protection is our** *promise.*

## What's needed next

**Establish more robust methods and improved data collection for estimating the state of animal welfare in NSW**

A coordinated effort between research institutions and government and non-government organisations, to evaluate population-level wellbeing in NSW companion animals.

**Research to understand risk and protective factors for animal welfare compromise**

A prevention approach will require a better understanding of the root causes of animal neglect and welfare compromise.

A collaborative approach between animal welfare and human services sectors is needed to better understand these complex issues.

**Tailored animal welfare support programs designed and delivered in highest risk communities**

Ongoing evaluation of the impact of all support programs that are delivered where impact is likely to be greatest.

1 **Appendix 2.1**
2 **Appendix 2.2**

# Our One Welfare approach

**RSPCA NSW's new vision and organisational strategy is grounded in the One Welfare framework which recognises the interconnection between animal welfare, human welfare and environmental sustainability [1, 4].**

Under this framework, animal welfare is intrinsically linked to the social, economic, physiological and psychological circumstances of caregivers [1].

Social determinants of human health (SDOH) are the social, economic and environmental conditions that influence how people live and, consequently, their health and wellbeing. These factors include income, education, housing, neighbourhood safety, social inclusion and food security, and they have a greater influence on health outcomes and life expectancy than genetics or healthcare alone [5-7].

SDOH such as economic disadvantage, geographic isolation, experience of violence, language barriers, mental and physical health challenges also impact a person's ability to care for their animal [1].

These pressures can limit access to veterinary care [8], food, shelter and bedding [9, 10], and have direct consequences for the physical and emotional health of animals. In crisis situations such as domestic and family violence (DFV) [11, 12] and certain mental health conditions [13], animals face an increased risk of neglect or abuse. Pet ownership itself can also influence caregiver safety and help-seeking behaviours [14, 15].

A One Welfare approach recognises that improving outcomes for animals often requires supporting the people who care for them.

**By understanding the factors that influence caregiving capacity, we can better identify communities at risk and develop interventions that improve the wellbeing of both animals and people.**

**Figure 1: A One Welfare approach helps to identify and recognise the links that exist between different sectors**
Graphic: R. Held [4]

# What we know about animal welfare in NSW

**Understanding the state of animal welfare across NSW is challenging because there is no dataset that comprehensively evaluates animal welfare across species and contexts.**

For this report, animal-centred welfare indicators were drawn from government agencies, the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board and RSPCA NSW. As these indicators are limited and confounded by a range of variables, the overall state of animal welfare across NSW is unknown. While the limitations and use of inconsistent data across organisations contributes to this challenge, we can glean information about local government areas (LGAs) where animals may be experiencing disadvantage, reduced access to care or increased exposure to welfare risks to develop some LGA-specific insights around animal welfare.

It's also important to acknowledge that this report has an emphasis on companion animal welfare as RSPCA NSW has the greatest exposure and data related to this sector. However, many of the issues discussed may also be relevant to the care and welfare of livestock in NSW.

The available animal-centred welfare indicators were examined alongside a series of SDOH known or reasonably inferred to present challenges to animal welfare. These were used to create a data tool we have called the 'RSPCA NSW Animal Welfare Vulnerability Framework'.

**As meaningful animal welfare data accrues, this framework will enable us to identify patterns and explore important relationships between human and animal wellbeing. This will highlight areas where further data collection, investigation or support is needed.**

**The list of metrics representing the Animal-Centred Welfare Indicators:**

- Number of reported dog bites
- Number of veterinary clinics in the LGA
- Total number of incoming cats into pounds
- Total number of incoming dogs into pounds
- Dog bites per 1,000 people residing in the LGA
- Stray animal intake into RSPCA NSW – all animal types
- Number of cruelty reports to RSPCA NSW Inspectorate
- Overall animal intake into RSPCA NSW – all animal types
- Inspectorate animal intake into RSPCA NSW – all animal types
- Owner surrender animal intake into RSPCA NSW – all animal types
- Number of cats and dogs impounded per 1,000 people residing in the LGA

# Animal-centred welfare indicators

## POUND INTAKE

Pound intake provides an indication of the number of animals becoming lost, abandoned, unowned or relinquished within a community. Animals entering pounds may be reclaimed, rehomed or euthanised. Consequently, high rates of impoundment are undesirable from an animal welfare perspective.

**When analysed on a per-capita basis, the LGAs with the highest pound intake were predominantly located in regional NSW.**

Pound intake data should be interpreted with caution as intake numbers are influenced by local policies and operational practices. The data may be more reflective of local service provision than the animal welfare situation, in some cases. For example, some facilities do not routinely accept cats, meaning intake figures will underestimate the true number of unowned or roaming animals in some communities.

Furthermore, reporting has been inconsistent and ambiguous across LGAs. The government data source has variably recorded 'no report' for some LGAs and in more recent years changed the data fields to 'zero'. Determining whether no data are being recorded, or whether zero animals have been impounded is not possible.

We have used the RSPCA NSW Animal Welfare Vulnerability Framework to look for relationships between the number of cats and dogs impounded per capita and the socio-economic status of the LGA (Table 1). Socio-economic status has been assessed using the Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) tool, the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage (IRSD) which ranks geographic areas using data related to income, qualifications and occupation. A lower score indicates greater relative disadvantage.

**Table 1: Heatmap of SEIFA IRSD and the ten LGAs with highest reported animal impound rate per capita – 2025**

| LGA | SEIFA disadvantage score | Impound (cat + dog) per capita (per 1,000 people) |
|---|---|---|
| Central Darling | 827 | 257.7 |
| Brewarrina | 818 | 96.8 |
| Hay | 956 | 54.1 |
| Liverpool Plains | 926 | 48.2 |
| Forbes | 969 | 47.3 |
| Narrandera | 929 | 45.4 |
| Lachlan | 950 | 42.7 |
| Temora | 972 | 42.1 |
| Coonamble | 883 | 41.0 |
| Walgett | 888 | 39.2 |

Heatmaps indicate severity of the measure (**Appendix 3**).

## VETERINARY CLINIC PROXIMITY

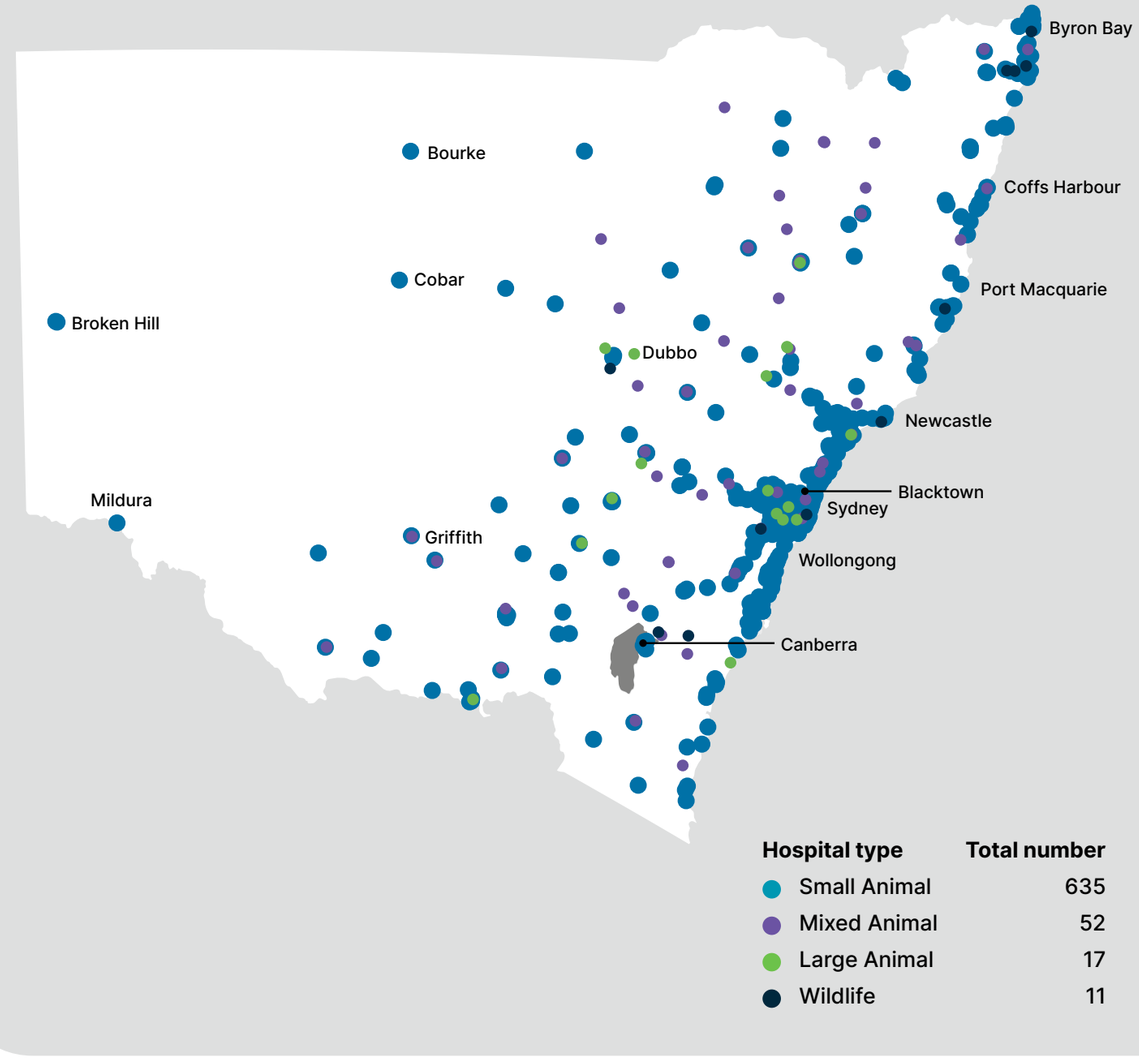
Limited access to veterinary care is a significant animal welfare risk [16, 17].

While financial constraints are recognised as the most significant barrier to accessing veterinary care, physical access to veterinary services presents a challenge in many parts of NSW [18].

Several LGAs have no permanently operating veterinary clinic, including Central Darling, Brewarrina, Lachlan, Carrathool, Balranald, Coolamon, Murray River and Lockhart. Across these LGAs, we estimate 50,525 companion animals to live, as detailed in **Appendix 2.3**.

Limited transport options can also make veterinary care difficult or impossible to access. In geographically isolated LGAs, 4.6% of households are without a motor vehicle.

**Figure 2: Veterinary deserts of NSW (Appendix 4)**




**Limited access to veterinary care is a significant animal welfare risk. Several LGAs have no permanently operating veterinary clinic.**

## SHELTER INTAKE

Animals enter RSPCA NSW shelters for a variety of reasons, including owner surrender, straying, injury, emergency boarding requirements or seizure during animal cruelty investigations.

**Understanding the drivers of animal shelter intake is critical to reducing the number of animals entering care and improving outcomes for both people and animals.**

There are limitations to these data as they are influenced by factors such as:

- local population size
- location of RSPCA NSW facilities
- the distribution of companion animals across the state.

Nevertheless, they provide valuable insight into communities where additional support may help prevent animals entering shelter systems.

**Table 2: Heatmap of RSPCA NSW animal intake by LGA, showing LGAs greatest number of all animals entering RSPCA NSW – FY25**

| LGA | RSPCA intake FY25 - all animals | RSPCA intake FY25 - cat + dog | RSPCA stray intake FY25 - all animals | RSPCA owner surrender intake FY25 - all animals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Canterbury-Bankstown | 2,027 | 1,454 | 1,761 | 117 |
| Cumberland | 864 | 748 | 721 | 59 |
| Maitland | 652 | 550 | 350 | 152 |
| Blacktown | 495 | 454 | 16 | 40 |
| Wollongong | 481 | 308 | 90 | 49 |
| Fairfield | 481 | 440 | 346 | 28 |
| Liverpool | 470 | 403 | 318 | 32 |
| Newcastle | 367 | 348 | 175 | 125 |
| Cessnock | 308 | 292 | 118 | 107 |
| Penrith | 296 | 225 | 66 | 42 |
| Lake Macquarie | 294 | 281 | 60 | 135 |



## ANIMAL CRUELTY INVESTIGATIONS

Animal cruelty and neglect represent some of the most serious animal welfare concerns. Data collected by RSPCA NSW provide insight into the number of cruelty reports received and the type of alleged cruelty across different LGAs.

While the number of investigations does not indicate that cruelty offences have occurred in each case, the number of animals entering RSPCA NSW care through the Inspectorate provides a good indication that significant welfare concerns have been identified.

These data are influenced by local population size, reporting behaviours, community awareness and the visibility of enforcement agencies. While they can't be used as a direct measure of cruelty or neglect prevalence, they provide valuable insight into communities where significant animal welfare concerns are being identified and investigated.

**As expected, the 22 LGAs with the greatest number of animals entering through the Inspectorate correlates with the LGAs where there are the highest number of investigations.**

**Table 3: Heatmap of RSPCA NSW Inspectorate investigations and animal intake showing 22 LGAs in order from the highest intake of dogs and cats – FY25**

| LGA | Inspectorate investigations FY25 | Inspectorate intake FY25 - all animals | Inspectorate intake FY25 - cat + dog |
|---|---|---|---|
| Blacktown | 931 | 287 | 259 |
| Hawkesbury | 217 | 187 | 185 |
| Wollongong | 701 | 249 | 142 |
| Central Coast | 901 | 162 | 138 |
| Penrith | 517 | 187 | 125 |
| Liverpool | 523 | 115 | 104 |
| Fairfield | 329 | 101 | 94 |
| Parramatta | 364 | 95 | 93 |
| Lake Macquarie | 540 | 92 | 90 |
| Cumberland | 379 | 80 | 79 |
| Campbelltown | 485 | 90 | 78 |
| Cessnock | 329 | 81 | 75 |
| Shoalhaven | 270 | 74 | 74 |
| Wollondilly | 196 | 72 | 71 |
| Mid-Western Regional | 85 | 70 | 69 |
| Canterbury-Bankstown | 656 | 80 | 59 |
| Mid-Coast | 374 | 62 | 59 |
| Dubbo Regional | 257 | 54 | 54 |
| Sydney | 431 | 95 | 50 |
| Newcastle | 459 | 56 | 46 |
| Cabonne | 76 | 47 | 46 |
| Tamworth Regional | 360 | 53 | 42 |

## DOG BITES

Dog bites have direct implications for both animal welfare and public safety.

Dog bite incidents can involve bites to people or other animals, occur within the home or in public spaces, and range in severity from minor injuries to fatalities. While dog bites are influenced by many factors, they may indicate underlying canine welfare concerns, including:

- fear
- anxiety
- poor containment
- inadequate socialisation
- inappropriate breeding practices
- limited access to behavioural support
- stray populations due to low levels of desexing
- inappropriate management or handling practices.

Dog bite data have limitations. Many incidents go unreported, particularly those involving owners, family members, less severe injuries and, consequently, potentially incidents involving smaller dogs.

**Reporting may also be influenced by cultural factors, language barriers and awareness of reporting pathways.**

Because reporting frequency is influenced by population size, both total dog bite reports and per capita rates were examined.

**Table 4: Heatmap of highest total number reported dog bites by LGA – 2025**

| LGA | Dog bites in calendar year 2025 | Dog bites per capita (per 1,000 people) |
|---|---|---|
| Blacktown | 337 | 0.8 |
| Shoalhaven | 246 | 2.3 |
| Northern Beaches | 236 | 0.9 |
| Wollongong | 199 | 0.9 |
| Central Coast | 189 | 0.5 |
| Moree Plains | 158 | 12.2 |
| Sydney | 157 | 0.7 |
| Clarence Valley | 142 | 2.6 |
| Wagga Wagga | 140 | 2.1 |
| Lake Macquarie | 134 | 0.6 |
| Campbelltown | 105 | 0.6 |
| Coffs Harbour | 104 | 1.3 |
| Byron | 103 | 2.9 |

**Table 5: Heatmap of highest number of dog bites per capita by LGA – 2025**

| LGA | Dog bites per calendar year 2025 | Dog bites per capita (per 1,000 people) |
|---|---|---|
| Moree Plains | 158 | 12.2 |
| Coonamble | 14 | 3.7 |
| Byron | 103 | 2.9 |
| Clarence Valley | 142 | 2.6 |
| Forbes | 22 | 2.3 |
| Shoalhaven | 246 | 2.3 |
| Weddin | 8 | 2.2 |
| Cowra | 27 | 2.1 |
| Wagga Wagga | 140 | 2.1 |
| Bellingen | 27 | 2.0 |
| Orange | 87 | 2.0 |

## Key insights from the animal welfare data

**The key finding from this analysis is that a committed effort is needed to establish a more robust method of estimating population level animal welfare.**

Animal welfare data in NSW are currently fragmented, permitting only limited inferences to be made. Notwithstanding this, animal welfare challenges don't appear to be evenly distributed across the state. Indicators such as animal impoundment, owner surrender, cruelty and neglect reports, shelter intake and dog bite data show geographical variation. Orange, Blacktown, Coffs Harbour, Wollongong and Cessnock consistently recording higher levels of these animal welfare concern than others (Figure 3).

Some LGAs, particularly those in regional and remote NSW, have limited or no permanent veterinary services. In these areas, animals may face substantial barriers to accessing preventative healthcare, routine treatment and emergency veterinary assistance. The absence of veterinary care represents an important animal welfare risk, particularly where alternative services, such as mobile veterinary clinics, are difficult to access.

High rates of pound intake and shelter intake were identified in a number of LGAs across the state with nine LGAs recording greater than 40 dogs and cats impounded per 1,000 people in FY25 (Table 1). These indicators suggest ongoing pressures associated with stray, roaming and unplanned cat and dog populations. However, these data also indicate LGAs where councils are providing impound services. Where areas have comparable stray animal problems, but limited council services, they will be underrepresented.

Animal cruelty and neglect remain significant animal welfare concerns across the state. RSPCA NSW Inspectorate data indicate concerning rates of animal suffering (Table 3). Although these data have limitations for comparing cruelty prevalence between LGAs, they offer valuable insight into communities where animal welfare concerns are being identified and investigated.

Dog bites continue to represent an important issue for both animal welfare and community safety. Reported dog bites were observed across metropolitan, regional and remote communities, although rates varied considerably between LGAs (Table 4, 5). These data highlight the importance of consistent data reporting and identifying and prioritising evidence-based approaches to dog bite prevention.

Our analysis highlighted significant gaps in data from which to draw robust conclusions about the welfare of animals across NSW. Existing datasets primarily capture animals experiencing crisis, interacting with welfare systems, or coming to the attention of authorities.

There are no periodic censuses of our companion animal populations. There is also limited capacity to measure positive welfare outcomes, quality of life, access to care, or the wellbeing of the broader companion animal population. As a result, many aspects of animal welfare remain invisible within existing datasets.

**Taken together, these findings suggest that there are LGAs where animal welfare challenges in NSW are concentrated and are characterised by recurring themes of limited veterinary access, animal overpopulation, animal cruelty concerns and pressure on welfare systems.**

Our findings also demonstrate the need for improved animal welfare measurement to better understand both the welfare risks and positive welfare outcomes across the state.

With these limitations in mind, a more complete picture of animal welfare risk was sought by considering human SDOH that are known, or can be inferred, to impact animal welfare.

**Figure 3: LGAs with multiple animal welfare indicators that deviate from the state average**

| LGA | Impound (cat + dog)* | Dog bites* | # Vet clinics | RSPCA intake FY25 | Inspectorate jobs FY25 | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Orange | ● | ● | | ● | ● | 4 |
| Blacktown | | ● | | ● | ● | 3 |
| Coffs Harbour | | ● | | ● | ● | 3 |
| Wollongong | | ● | | ● | ● | 3 |
| Cessnock | | ● | | ● | ● | 3 |
| Sydney | | ● | | ● | ● | 3 |
| Wagga Wagga | ● | ● | | | ● | 3 |
| Lithgow | ● | ● | | | ● | 3 |
| Moree Plains | ● | ● | ● | | | 3 |
| Liverpool Plains | ● | ● | ● | | | 3 |
| Coonamble | ● | ● | ● | | | 3 |
| Narromine | ● | ● | ● | | | 3 |
| Walcha | ● | ● | ● | | | 3 |

* per capita (per 1,000 people)

# How human wellbeing intersects with animal welfare

**Evidence increasingly demonstrates that animal welfare and human wellbeing are closely interconnected [1, 19]. Understanding the scale, distribution and drivers of these interconnected challenges is critical in developing targeted, evidence-based interventions that improve outcomes for animals, people and the communities they share.**

**For many animal caregivers, particularly those experiencing economic disadvantage and isolation, meeting an animal's needs may compete with meeting their own basic needs, including housing, food, healthcare and transport.**

These pressures can reduce the caregiver's ability to access veterinary treatment, preventative care, behavioural support and appropriate husbandry resources, ultimately compromising the animal's welfare [17, 20-22].

Recognising these connections, RSPCA NSW and several other animal welfare organisations around the world are increasingly adopting approaches that address the broader circumstances influencing people's capacity to care for animals. While animal sheltering and law enforcement remain essential safeguards, they are most effective when complemented by prevention-focused initiatives that support people before animal welfare concerns escalate into crisis.

This report has been developed to support that approach. It provides an evidence base for understanding animal welfare vulnerability across NSW to inform:

- impact evaluation
- advocacy priorities
- resource allocation
- future program design.

The report also highlights opportunities for collaboration across government, community services and the animal welfare sector to improve outcomes for both people and animals.

# Social determinants of human health with animal welfare significance

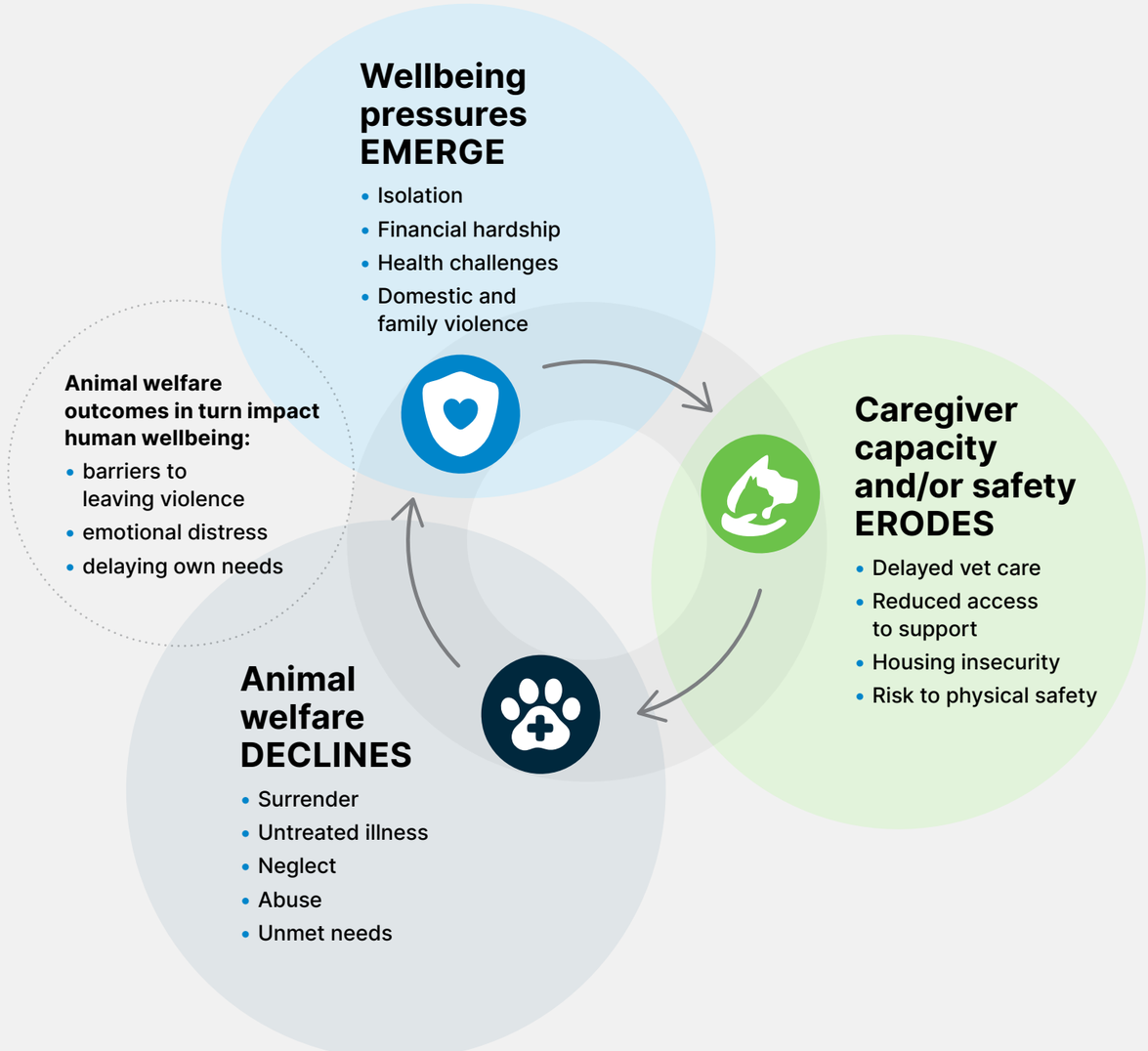
**Because companion animals share the same social and physical environments as their caregivers, the factors that affect human wellbeing often directly affect animals [1].**

Based on a review of the literature, we examined SDOH that are known or reasonably inferred to influence people's capacity to care for animals or access services, and in the case of DFV, that puts animal safety at risk.

Importantly, these factors rarely occur in isolation. People experiencing economic disadvantage may also face reduced access to services, higher levels of social isolation, housing insecurity and other compounding challenges.

Understanding how these factors intersect provides important insight into the conditions that can increase animal welfare risk.

**Figure 4: Diagram of the proposed bidirectional relationship between SDOH and animal welfare**



# Mapping social determinants of health and the associated animal welfare vulnerability across NSW

**To better understand where these challenges may be concentrated, the RSPCA NSW Animal Welfare Vulnerability Framework data tool was employed to assess NSW LGAs.**

Four SDOH factors were examined:

1. Economic disadvantage
2. Geographic isolation
3. Domestic and family violence
4. Health and social vulnerabilities

Two other factors relevant to effective program delivery were also examined in this report:

1. Language diversity
2. First Nations heritage

Each factor was assessed using multiple indicators sourced from government agencies and other reputable data providers, as detailed in **Appendix 4**. A qualifying level (usually the average of the metric across all LGAs) was then set for each indicator. Any LGA with an indicator that fell below the average was considered to qualify for further review.

The number of qualifying indicators within each SDOH were tallied for each LGA. The LGAs with the most qualifying indicators are identified as requiring priority attention. For these LGAs, heatmap tables identify the quantum of each indicator and how they contributed to the SDOH.

The resulting analysis does not predict animal welfare outcomes directly. Rather, it highlights communities where the conditions associated with increased animal welfare risk are most prevalent, helping to identify areas where targeted support and preventative programs may have the greatest impact.

A detailed description of the methodology is provided in **Appendix 4**.

## Economic disadvantage

An economic disadvantage factor was created using:

- SEIFA disadvantage scores and rankings
- median equivalised total weekly household income
- percentage of LGA with total personal weekly income below $649.

**Table 6: Heatmap of highest ranking LGAs for economic disadvantage using RSPCA NSW Animal Welfare Vulnerability Framework – 2025**

| LGA | SEIFA disadvantage score | Ranking within NSW (1 = most disadvantaged) | Total personal income (weekly) < $649 | Median equivalised total weekly household income |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fairfield | 814 | 1 | 33% | $552 |
| Brewarrina | 818 | 2 | 32% | $496 |
| Central Darling | 827 | 3 | 28% | $519 |
| Coonamble | 883 | 4 | 32% | $532 |
| Glen Innes Severn | 906 | 8 | 27% | $505 |
| Kyogle | 921 | 13 | 28% | $479 |
| Liverpool Plains | 926 | 15 | 30% | $546 |
| Gilgandra | 930 | 19 | 37% | $526 |

Economic disadvantage is the most relevant indicator for assessing barriers to accessing veterinary care and, consequently, is a significant risk for poorer animal welfare outcomes [8].

Brewarrina and Central Darling LGAs were identified as regions experiencing significant economic disadvantage and geographic isolation, with some of the highest homelessness rates in NSW. Neither LGA has a permanently operating veterinary clinic within a 100 km radius, creating substantial barriers to accessing veterinary care. These LGAs recorded the highest and second-highest rates of animal impoundment per capita in NSW in FY25.

Coonamble is an LGA experiencing both economic disadvantage and comparatively high rates of DFV per capita. This LGA recorded the second-highest rate of reported dog bites per capita and a moderately high rate of animal impoundment. RSPCA NSW Inspectorate data further identified a comparatively high number of reports relating to abandoned animals within the Coonamble region.

Conversely, Gilgandra – an LGA identified to also be facing SDOH challenges – recorded no dog bites and relatively moderate impound rates per capita. This illustrates the many variables influencing the animal-centred data and the caution that should be applied in interpreting them.

Fairfield – an LGA experiencing both economic disadvantage and high levels of language diversity – recorded comparatively high numbers of stray animal intakes, owner surrenders and animal cruelty reports. Of the 329 cruelty reports received by RSPCA NSW for Fairfield during the year, 75% included issues related to food and water provision and 82 instances of animal abandonment were reported. Reports relating to inadequate food provision, abandonment and poor animal care may reflect broader financial pressures experienced by some households and highlight the importance of accessible and culturally appropriate support services.

These findings highlight the complex and interconnected ways in which economic disadvantage can adversely affect animal welfare. The literature reports that communities experiencing economic disadvantage report higher rates of animal neglect and cruelty, including [9, 23-28]:

- confinement
- overcrowding
- lack of shelter
- inadequate nutrition
- untreated medical conditions
- poor living conditions for animals.

Collectively, these factors, together with financial barriers to accessing desexing, veterinary care and behavioural support, may increase the likelihood of dog bites and contribute to higher rates of animal impoundment.

**Importantly, many of these outcomes do not necessarily reflect intentional acts of cruelty. Rather, they often arise when people are experiencing circumstances that present barriers to providing necessary care such as veterinary treatment, appropriate food, drink and grooming and suitable housing.**

## Geographic isolation

A geographic isolation factor was created using:

- population density
- number of veterinary clinics
- percent of households with no motor vehicle
- digital connectivity indices and classification
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) remoteness score.

Geographic isolation is generally considered to be a significant contributor to animal welfare risk across NSW due to the inherent barriers that exist to accessing services and support. Remote and regional communities often face reduced access to veterinary services, animal welfare support programs, transport and other essential resources that help people care for their animals.

The most isolated LGAs identified through the analysis were Bourke, Brewarrina, Cobar, Walgett and Central Darling (Table 7).

Other than high impound rates reported in Brewarrina, Walgett and Central Darling, these LGAs recorded limited animal welfare data, including:

- limited animal cruelty complaints
- low numbers of reported dog bites
- low RSPCA animal intake numbers.

While this may suggest lower levels of animal welfare concerns, it may also reflect that animal welfare concerns are not being identified, reported or captured through existing systems. This highlights the challenges of understanding animal welfare in remote communities and reinforces the need for improved outreach, service delivery and data collection. As a result, the absence of recorded data should not necessarily be interpreted as a lack of animal welfare need where risk factors have been identified.

Geographic isolation reduces the availability and accessibility of veterinary services, in turn delaying treatment and limiting access to preventative animal health care. These barriers can contribute to poorer animal welfare outcomes. For example, reduced access to parasite prevention can result in large parasite burdens, emaciation and anaemia. Another example is restricted access to treatment of serious, acute injuries such as a broken limb [17].

**This challenge is further exacerbated in rural and remote regions of NSW where veterinary workforce shortages have been identified across many of these communities [18]. Long travel distances and limited transport options can further restrict access to essential services for both people and animals.**

The findings highlight LGAs in NSW where reducing geographic barriers to veterinary care and animal welfare support should be prioritised while efforts are made to evaluate the animal welfare impact [8, 28-31].

**Table 7: Heatmap of geographic isolation and demographic information by LGA – 2025**

| LGA | Remoteness score | Population density (persons/km²) | Digital connectivity score | Digital connectivity score classification | Number of veterinary clinics | Number of motor vehicle household |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Brewarrina | Remote | 0.1 | 32 | Below average | 0 | 13% |
| Bourke | Very remote | 0.1 | 30 | Below average | 1 | 6% |
| Central Darling | Very remote | 0.0 | 20 | Poor | 0 | 9% |
| Cobar | Remote | 0.1 | 38 | Below average | 1 | 4% |
| Walgett | Remote | 0.3 | 40 | Below average | 1 | 5% |

## Domestic and family violence

DFV has significant implications for both human and animal welfare.

**The relationship between interpersonal violence and animal abuse is widely recognised as 'The Link', reflecting the strong association between violence towards people and violence towards animals.**

Animals living in households affected by DFV are at increased risk of neglect, abuse and abandonment. Perpetrators may use threats or harm towards animals as a form of coercive control, while concern for the safety of companion animals can create additional barriers for victim-survivors seeking to escape abusive situations [11, 12, 32, 33]. Research shows that many people delay leaving violent relationships because they fear what may happen to their animals if they leave them behind [34].

Understanding where DFV is concentrated can therefore provide important insight into communities where both people and animals may be at increased risk.

DFV was examined using the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research information including average DFV incidents per year (10-year average), 2025 total DFV incidents and rate of incidents per 100,000 population (10-year average).

The analysis identified two distinct patterns of DFV:

1. LGAs with high total numbers of DFV incidents, influenced by large population size (Table 8)
2. LGAs with lower total incident numbers but high per-capita rates of DFV (Table 9).

Both patterns are important because they have implications for service delivery and the design of targeted support programs.

**Table 8: Heatmap of 10-year average of total number of DFV reports by LGA (2016-2025)**

| LGA | Average DFV incidents per year (10 year average) |
|---|---|
| Blacktown | 2,196 |
| Central Coast | 1,689 |
| Canterbury-Bankstown | 1,413 |
| Penrith | 1,200 |
| Sydney | 1,106 |
| Liverpool | 1,106 |
| Campbelltown | 992 |
| Cumberland | 954 |
| Lake Macquarie | 840 |
| Parramatta | 799 |

The LGAs recording the highest total number of DFV incidents were Blacktown, Central Coast and Canterbury-Bankstown. These communities also demonstrated intersecting vulnerabilities, including language diversity in Blacktown and Canterbury-Bankstown, and health and social vulnerabilities in the Central Coast region.

The LGAs with the highest per-capita DFV rates were Walgett, Coonamble and Moree Plains. These communities also experienced additional vulnerabilities, including geographic isolation in Walgett and economic disadvantage in Coonamble.

**Table 9: Heatmap of rates of reported DFV by LGA (2016-2025) per capita**

| LGA | Rate per 100,000 population (average over 10 years) |
|---|---|
| Walgett | 2,689 |
| Coonamble | 1,896 |
| Moree Plains | 1,889 |
| Broken Hill | 1,367 |
| Dubbo Regional | 1,082 |
| Narromine | 1,050 |
| Lachlan | 1,027 |
| Wentworth | 1,027 |
| Gilgandra | 1,010 |
| Inverell | 949 |

Animal impoundment and surrender were above average in the LGAs where DFV is prevalent. Blacktown recorded the highest total impoundment numbers in NSW, while the Central Coast recorded the third-highest total impoundment numbers. All three LGAs with the highest per-capita DFV rates recorded moderately high rates of animal impoundment.

Canterbury-Bankstown recorded the highest level of owner surrender intake into RSPCA NSW shelters, while Blacktown recorded the second-highest number of abandonment-related reports investigated by the RSPCA NSW Inspectorate. We also recorded some of the highest levels of animal cruelty investigations in these LGAs.

Dog bites were also more frequently reported in LGAs experiencing high levels of DFV. Moree Plains and Coonamble recorded the highest and second-highest dog bite rates per capita respectively, while Blacktown recorded the highest total number of reported dog bites.

However, Walgett doesn't reflect the same pattern. Despite recording one of the highest per-capita DFV rates in NSW, Walgett recorded relatively limited animal welfare data, including low numbers of reported dog bites and limited cruelty complaints. Given the community's geographic isolation and broader vulnerability profile, this likely reflects gaps in reporting, service access or data collection rather than an absence of animal welfare concerns.

Animal abuse may serve as an indicator of broader family harm. For example, children who harm animals are also more likely to be experiencing abuse themselves [35-37]. Concern for animal safety can create significant barriers for people seeking support during times of crisis [34]. Addressing these interconnected challenges requires collaboration between animal welfare organisations, domestic violence services, housing providers, community organisations and government agencies.

**In Australia, 33% of women in crisis accommodation reported delaying leaving a domestic violence situation due to concern for their animals' welfare [11, 34]. Therefore, directing resources and support to affected families is an important component for protecting animal welfare and promoting human safety.**

The findings suggest that pet-inclusive crisis accommodation, animal safeguarding programs and stronger cross-sector partnerships have an important role to play in protecting both people and animals affected by DFV.

## Health and social vulnerabilities

Health and social vulnerabilities can affect a person's capacity to provide consistent care for animals, particularly where illness, disability, mental health challenges, hospitalisation, social isolation or reduced functional capacity, limit access to support. A person living with a physical or cognitive disability may find routine care tasks, such as grooming, transporting an animal, or administering medication, physically exhausting or confusing without assistance.

These circumstances may be further exacerbated for individuals living alone. While companion animals can provide important social and emotional benefits and may help reduce feelings of loneliness among people living alone [38], sole responsibility for an animal can also increase caregiving demands. Without another person to assist during emergencies, share financial responsibilities, or provide support with daily activities such as transport, meal preparation, and household tasks, individuals may face additional challenges in maintaining both their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their animals.

A health and social vulnerability factor was established using the following ABS data:

- percentage of the population over 65 years old
- percentage of people living with a mental health disorder or condition
- number of lone person households
- number of people with need for assistance with core activities
- percentage of people with need for assistance with core activities.

Eleven LGAs were identified as experiencing high rates of physical and/or mental health vulnerabilities (Table 10). All LGAs that identified as experiencing high physical health vulnerability were also identified as experiencing high mental health vulnerability. These included:

- Central Coast
- Clarence Valley
- Coffs Harbour
- Lake Macquarie
- Mid-Coast
- Port Macquarie-Hasting
- Tamworth Regional
- Tweed.

A further three LGAs – Newcastle, Albury and Wollongong – were identified as experiencing high mental health vulnerability alone.

**Table 10: Heatmap of rates of physical and mental health vulnerabilities by LGA – 2025**

| LGA | Mental health condition (including depression or anxiety) (%) | Lone person household (no.) | Lone person household % | Persons who have need for assistance with core activities (no.) | Persons who have need for assistance with core activities (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Newcastle | 13% | 19,486 | 26% | 10,752 | 6% |
| Lake Macquarie | 12% | 20,010 | 23% | 15,456 | 7% |
| Albury | 12% | 7,002 | 28% | 3,916 | 7% |
| Clarence Valley | 11% | 6,054 | 23% | 4,580 | 8% |
| Mid-Coast | 11% | 12,219 | 24% | 8,714 | 9% |
| Port Macquarie-Hastings | 11% | 10,035 | 25% | 7,187 | 8% |
| Central Coast | 11% | 35,866 | 23% | 24,360 | 7% |
| Coffs Harbour | 11% | 8,195 | 24% | 5,415 | 7% |
| Tamworth Regional | 11% | 6,726 | 24% | 4,204 | 7% |
| Wollongong | 10% | 21,265 | 24% | 14,458 | 7% |
| Tweed | 9% | 10,812 | 24% | 7,241 | 7% |

Elevated owner surrender rates were observed in some LGAs experiencing high physical and mental health vulnerabilities, with Lake Macquarie recording the second-highest RSPCA NSW owner surrender intake and Newcastle the third highest. This was not consistent across all LGAs noted for this factor.

RSPCA NSW cruelty investigations were above average in all LGAs experiencing high physical and mental health vulnerabilities. The Central Coast recorded the second-highest number of cruelty investigations and Wollongong recorded the third highest. Tamworth Regional recorded the second-highest number of animal hoarding cases attended by RSPCA NSW Inspectors.

Animal hoarding is an important example of the connection between human health and animal welfare. In hoarding situations, the number of animals exceeds the caregiver's capacity to provide adequate care, often resulting in [13, 39, 40]:

- poor nutrition
- untreated illness
- inadequate shelter
- unsanitary conditions
- unmet behavioural and social needs.

These cases require coordinated responses that address both animal welfare and the underlying human mental health condition.

Beyond hoarding, the relationship between caregiver wellbeing and animal welfare can be bidirectional. Owner stress has been shown to correlate with elevated stress levels in dogs, suggesting that animals often mirror the emotional state of their caregivers [41]. Similarly, an animals' behavioural or health problems can negatively impact caregiver mental health, increasing stress, anxiety and feelings of guilt [42-44].

**At the same time, companion animals can provide emotional support, routine, social connection and an improved quality of life [45, 46], particularly for people experiencing loneliness, grief, disability or mental health challenges.**

These findings highlight the importance of support models that recognise both the value of the human-animal bond and the practical challenges some caregivers may face. In some cases, temporary support may be enough to prevent animal welfare concerns from escalating. This may include:

- veterinary support
- aged care providers
- emergency boarding
- transport assistance
- mental health services
- community organisations
- help with basic care tasks or referral pathways through hospitals.

Strengthening referral pathways between animal welfare organisations, health services, aged care providers, mental health services and community support organisations may help prevent animal welfare concerns while supporting people to retain and care for the animals they love.

Greater understanding of the relationship between caregiver mental health and incidents of animal relinquishment, unintentional neglect, or cruelty may help inform more targeted and effective support services, ultimately improving outcomes for both people and animals.

## Factors relevant to effective program delivery

**Other non-SDOH factors may influence the ability of RSPCA NSW to effectively deliver programs. These are examined here to aid our investigation.**

### LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

While language diversity is not itself a vulnerability, communication barriers and limited familiarity with available services may influence a person's ability to access information, navigate support systems and seek assistance when needed [47]. Similarly, language barriers may affect a person's ability to read medication instructions, appointment reminders, animal welfare information or service eligibility criteria.

These barriers can increase the likelihood that animal health concerns go untreated or that available support services remain underutilised, even where a strong human-animal bond exists.

**This barrier does not indicate lower concern for animals. Rather, it highlights the importance of culturally responsive communication, translated resources, community partnerships and trusted local engagement to ensure support services are accessible to all animal caregivers.**

A language diversity factor was established from ABS data on the number and percentage of people who speak a language other than English at home and the percentage of the population that do not speak English well or not at all (Table 11).

**Table 11: Heatmap of language diversity by LGA – 2025**

| LGA | Speaks a language other than English at home (no.) | Speaks a language other than English at home (%) | % Population speaks English not well or not at all |
|---|---|---|---|
| Fairfield | 145,297 | 70% | 23% |
| Strathfield | 29,762 | 65% | 11% |
| Cumberland | 153,492 | 65% | 14% |
| Burwood | 25,278 | 63% | 14% |
| Canterbury-Bankstown | 219,107 | 59% | 13% |
| Parramatta | 144,802 | 56% | 9% |
| Liverpool | 125,558 | 54% | 10% |
| Georges River | 81,024 | 53% | 10% |
| Bayside | 90,153 | 52% | 8% |
| Ryde | 63,963 | 50% | 8% |
| Blacktown | 183,593 | 46% | 5% |
| Sydney | 73,722 | 35% | 5% |



Fairfield, Canterbury-Bankstown and Blacktown were identified as LGAs where language diversity intersected with other SDOH and animal-centred welfare indicators. These communities also demonstrated comparatively high levels of animal impoundment, owner surrender and cruelty investigation activity.

Culturally responsive approaches, including translated resources, interpreter support, community partnerships and targeted outreach, may help reduce barriers to care and improve outcomes for both people and animals.

Ensuring that animal welfare services are accessible, inclusive and culturally appropriate is an important component of supporting diverse communities across NSW.

### FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES AND COMMUNITIES

Ongoing social and economic inequities resulting from the enduring impacts of colonisation continue to contribute to poorer health, social and economic outcomes for many First Nations communities [48].

**An awareness of where First Nations communities exist in NSW allows opportunity to provide culturally responsive animal welfare support.**

The LGAs identified as having the highest (>20%) percentage of First Nations peoples were Brewarrina, Central Darling, Coonamble, Bourke and Walgett (Table 12). These LGAs were also identified as experiencing multiple SDOH factors, including economic disadvantage, geographic isolation and/or elevated rates of domestic and family violence.

The highest total population of First Nations peoples in NSW is on the Central Coast, Blacktown, Lake Macquarie and Penrith. Each of these regions were notable for above average DFV cases and Lake Macquarie and Central Coast for physical and mental health compromise.

These findings highlight that many First Nations communities are navigating multiple, intersecting challenges that can influence both human and animal wellbeing.

Improving outcomes with these communities requires a culturally responsive, place-based approach that is developed in partnership with local First Nations communities and organisations. This may include:

- increasing access to affordable veterinary care
- strengthening access to human support services
- ensuring that animal welfare initiatives are aligned with community priorities
- supporting animal health and welfare programs delivered through trusted community networks.

By addressing the underlying social determinants that affect both human and animal wellbeing, a One Welfare approach has the potential to support more equitable and sustainable outcomes for First Nations communities and their animals.

**Table 12: SDOH factors in LGAs with the greatest First Nations populations - 2025**

| LGA | Economic disadvantage | Geographic isolation | Domestic and family violence | Health and social vulnerabilities | Language diversity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Blacktown | | | ● | | ● |
| Coonamble | ● | | ● | | |
| Walgett | | ● | ● | | |
| Central Coast | | | ● | ● | |
| Lake Macquarie | | | ● | ● | |
| Penrith | | | ● | | |
| Brewarrina | ● | ● | | | |
| Central Darling | ● | ● | | | |
| Bourke | | ● | | | |

## The intersectionality of social determinants of health

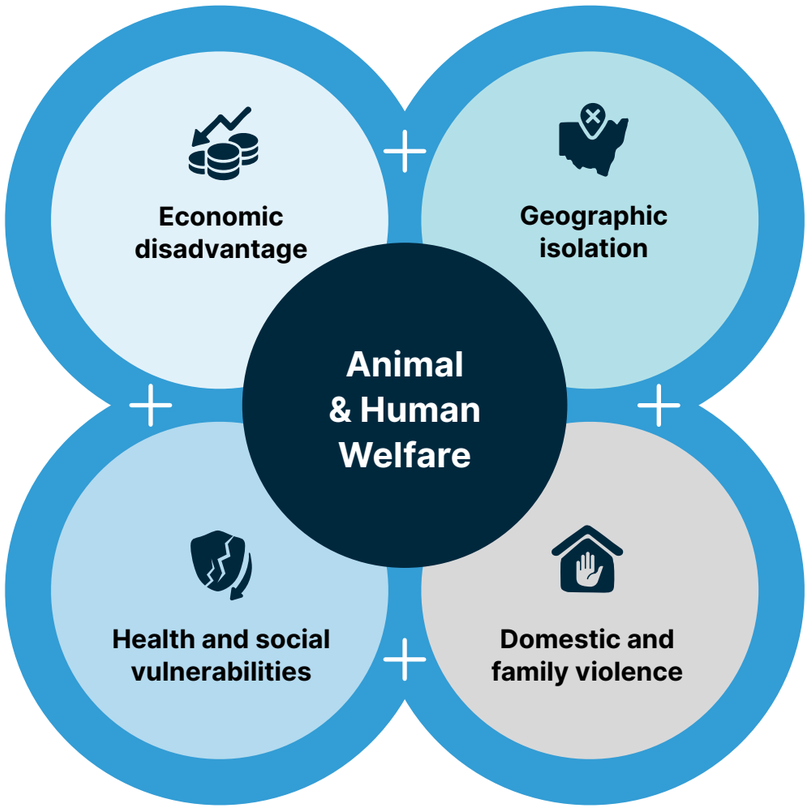
The method we developed to explore areas experiencing vulnerability demonstrates the multi-dimensional nature of SDOH on human and animal welfare. The SDOH examined in this report rarely occur in isolation in an area. Individuals, families and communities often experience multiple challenges simultaneously, and these challenges can interact to increase risks for both people and animals (Figure 5).

For example, consider a dog owner who has a physical disability, experiences depression, and speaks English as a second language. Individually, each factor presents challenges but together they may significantly limit the person's ability to seek help when their dog becomes unwell.

Vulnerability is complex and multidimensional. It requires collaboration to deliver specific and targeted action to support individuals to maintain the health and wellbeing of their animals.

Understanding where vulnerabilities overlap is important because it helps identify communities where support may have the greatest impact. It also highlights the need for flexible and locally tailored responses. While some communities and individuals may benefit most from increased access to affordable veterinary care, others may require place-based service delivery, pet-inclusive crisis accommodation, temporary care programs, and stronger referral pathways between animal welfare and human service organisations.

**Figure 5: SDOH can intersect and compound the effects on animal and human welfare**




**A One Welfare approach recognises that improving animal welfare often requires addressing the broader circumstances affecting people's capacity to care for animals.**

**Human and animal wellbeing are inextricably linked. RSPCA NSW seeks to expand and deliver multiple programs aimed at supporting both people and their pets.**

# Addressing animal welfare vulnerability

**OUR NEW STRATEGIC PLAN FOCUSES ON THE FOLLOWING KEY ACTIVITIES:**

1. Access to Vet Care
2. Animal Welfare Safety Net
3. Community-based Prevention
4. Targeted Desexing
5. Advocacy and Engagement

Together, these initiatives aim to improve outcomes for animals while strengthening the wellbeing and resilience of the people and communities that care for them.

The RSPCA NSW Animal Welfare Vulnerability Framework data tool allows us to examine which LGAs are in most need of particular programs, and how they will most effectively be deployed for the greatest benefit.

# 1 Access to Vet Care

## THE CHALLENGE

**Access to veterinary care is critical to providing animals with good welfare. The 2025 Pets in Australia report [49] identified that financial pressures affected 1 in 10 households owning a pet, which equates to nearly 3.84 million companion animals.**

Concerningly, this cohort reported experiencing significant ongoing financial stress, requiring financial assistance to access veterinary treatment, and were more likely to consider surrendering their pets or making compromises to their animals' healthcare due to cost pressures [49].

In 2025, RSPCA NSW received 4,970 complaints relating to the failure of animal owners to provide necessary veterinary treatment. The circumstances of these cases vary significantly but cost barriers are known to be a contributing factor in some circumstances. Economic distress is recognised as the most common underlying factor contributing to barriers in accessing veterinary care [8].

## OUR RESPONSE

Our Access to Veterinary Care (AVC) Program has been developed to tackle this issue and improve access to essential veterinary services for vulnerable members of the community.

The program provides subsidised veterinary treatment through RSPCA NSW clinics, flexible, no-interest payment options for urgent treatment and partnerships with private veterinary clinics to improve access to care for financially vulnerable animal caregivers.

## IMPACT ACHIEVED

**2025/26 FINANCIAL YEAR OUTCOMES:**

**3,488**
clients supported

**4,612**
animals assisted

More than
**$196,000**
in emergency veterinary treatment supported through payment plans for 160 animals

**87%**
of participants accessed care that would otherwise have been unaffordable

**23%**
of participants were able to avoid surrendering their animal

**19%**
of participants were able to avoid economic euthanasia

## WHAT MORE IS NEEDED

Achieving equitable access to veterinary care across NSW requires ongoing financial support, advocacy, and collaboration between animal welfare organisations, veterinarians, government and community service providers.

A community care model for veterinary services provides an opportunity to expand access. Grounded in a spectrum of care approach, it combines a family-centred framework with collaboration between not-for-profit organisations and private veterinary practices. A spectrum of care approach – or contextualised care – is providing care and treatment options that consider the circumstances of the animal, its carer and the veterinary practice to meet the needs of those involved. This is a critical approach for reducing barriers for those needing veterinary care for their animals.

Expanding affordable access to preventative and emergency veterinary care remains one of the greatest opportunities to improve animal welfare outcomes statewide.

### CASE STUDY

**Improving animal welfare by responding to economic disadvantage through our AVC Program**

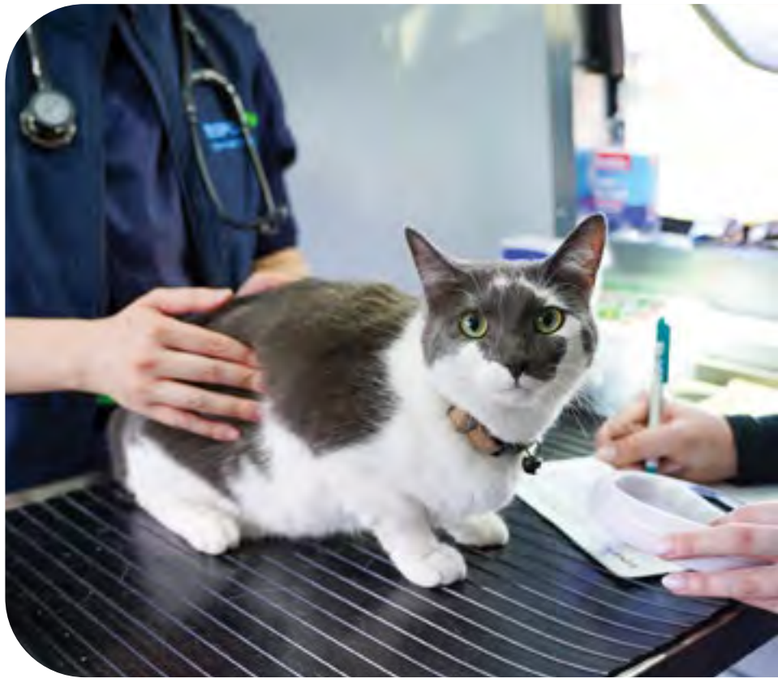
Honey, an eight-year-old female British Bulldog, presented to RSPCA NSW veterinary hospital after becoming unwell. She was diagnosed with a pyometra, a serious infection of the uterus that requires urgent surgical intervention.

Honey's owner, who relies on a pension, was unable to afford the upfront cost of the surgery. Through the AVC Program we were able to provide financial assistance, so that Honey could receive immediate treatment.

During surgery, veterinarians discovered a tumour approximately the size of a bowling ball arising from one of Honey's ovaries. The mass was successfully removed, along with the infected uterus.

Without the financial assistance made available through our program, Honey's owner reported they would have been forced to surrender her or elect to euthanise due to the cost of treatment. Instead, Honey received the urgent care she needed and was able to return home to recover with her family.

This case illustrates how the AVC Program directly addresses the intersection between economic disadvantage and animal welfare. By removing financial barriers to care, the program not only alleviates animal suffering but also preserves the human–animal bond and supports positive outcomes for both animals and their caregivers.



# 2 Animal Welfare Safety Net

## THE CHALLENGE

**Crises affecting people often place animals at risk. DFV, illness, hospitalisation, housing instability, homelessness and financial hardship can all create situations where people struggle to care for their animals or fear losing them altogether.**

## OUR RESPONSE

RSPCA NSW has developed a range of crisis support programs designed to keep people and animals together – wherever safe and appropriate – while ensuring animals remain protected during times of crisis.

## 1 DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

### THE CHALLENGE

DFV has significant implications for animal welfare. Animals living in households affected by DFV are at increased risk of neglect, abuse and abandonment.

(See **Domestic and family violence** at page 28.)

### OUR RESPONSE

RSPCA NSW provides emergency boarding, foster care, veterinary assistance, transport support and other practical assistance for the pets of people escaping DFV.

### IMPACT ACHIEVED
**2025/26 FINANCIAL YEAR OUTCOMES:**

**183**
families supported

**309**
animals assisted

**92%**
of participants reported improved personal safety

## SAFE FAMILIES FRAMEWORK

### THE CHALLENGE

The shortage of pet-inclusive crisis refuges in NSW means many people experiencing DFV face an impossible choice between their own safety and the safety of their animal. Without access to appropriate, pet-inclusive crisis housing, people and their animals remain in dangerous situations for longer, increasing the risk to both.

### OUR RESPONSE

We have developed the Safe Families Framework which supports DFV refuges to become pet-inclusive, creating infrastructure and providing equipment, guidance, and training, allowing victim-survivors to safely access crisis accommodation without being separated from their animals.

### IMPACT ACHIEVED

**14**
pet-inclusive refuges established since 2018

**5**
additional refuges now in development

Several participants reported that they would not have left a violent environment had they been unable to bring their companion animals with them.

### CASE STUDY

**Supporting safe escape through the RSPCA NSW Crisis Support Program**

In April this year, RSPCA NSW was contacted by a social worker supporting a client who had experienced domestic violence and required assistance with her two dogs. The woman and her son needed to urgently leave their living situation but the temporary accommodation available did not permit pets.

This created distress for them, as they considered their dogs to be part of their family and feared their dogs would not be returned if separated from them. This acted as a barrier to leaving their dangerous living situation.

The woman's concerns were compounded by past trauma. Her former partner was convicted of aggravated animal cruelty and sentenced to imprisonment after killing her pets in retaliation for her leaving him.

The ongoing stress of these experiences, combined with the challenges of being a single mother on a pension and frequent relocation needs, had a profound impact on her physical and mental wellbeing.

We were able to offer immediate support in the form of emergency boarding for their two dogs. While in care, the animals received veterinary care including vaccinations and parasite prevention. During their stay, one of the dogs was diagnosed with cancer. We were able to carry out diagnostic testing as well as perform surgery to remove the cancer.

Once the woman and her son secured safe accommodation, they were reunited with their dogs.

This story is an example of the importance of integrating animal and human support services, demonstrating that pet-inclusive approaches are essential to effective and compassionate responses to DFV.

The woman has expressed a willingness to share her experience to raise awareness of these services, noting that "real stories help people connect, and encourage others to reach out for support."

**Strengthening the animal welfare safety net will require expanded access to temporary care options, pet-inclusive crisis accommodation, emergency veterinary support and partnerships with human service providers.**

## 2 AGED CARE SUPPORT

### THE CHALLENGE

Many older Australians rely on animals for companionship, routine and emotional support, with 59% of Australians aged 50–69 years and 45% of those aged over 70 years owning pets [50].

Older pet owners also worry what will happen to their animals if they are hospitalised and may even compromise their own care when worrying about their pet [51]. Services that support older adults and their pets are essential.

### OUR RESPONSE

RSPCA NSW provides practical assistance including temporary boarding, transport support, welfare checks and veterinary assistance to help older people maintain the care of their animals during periods of illness, hospitalisation or reduced capacity.

### IMPACT ACHIEVED
**2025/26 FY OUTCOMES:**

**117** families supported

**232** animals assisted

**84%** maintained or improved their relationship with their companion animal

**49%** reported improved social inclusion or reduced isolation

## 3 HOMELESSNESS SUPPORT

### THE CHALLENGE

Companion animals can play an important role in the lives of people experiencing homelessness. At any given time, there are more than 116,000 people experiencing homelessness in Australia [52]. For these people, pets provide companionship, emotional support, physical warmth, routine and a sense of safety and security [53].

Pets can also reduce social isolation by facilitating social interaction and connection within the community [53].

### OUR RESPONSE

RSPCA NSW assists people experiencing homelessness through veterinary support, essential pet supplies and referrals to appropriate community services.

### IMPACT ACHIEVED
**2025/26 FY OUTCOMES:**

**16** families supported

**26** animals assisted

**90%** reported improved mental health and wellbeing

### WHAT MORE IS NEEDED

Strengthening the animal welfare safety net will require:

- emergency veterinary support
- pet-inclusive crisis accommodation
- expanded access to temporary care options
- partnerships with human service providers.

Ensuring people do not have to choose between their own safety and the welfare of their animals remains a critical priority.

### CASE STUDY
**Improving human and animal welfare through the RSPCA NSW Homelessness Support Program**

Following the sudden passing of his brother, Noel was left without a caregiver and stable accommodation. The loss had a profound impact on his wellbeing. Noel reported that his dog, Izzy, was the only family he had remaining and the primary source of emotional support helping him cope during this period of grief and instability.

Due to financial hardship, Noel was unable to continue living in the accommodation he had previously shared with his brother and required urgent housing support. He was reluctant to access emergency accommodation services unless he could ensure Izzy's safety and ongoing care. Like many people experiencing housing insecurity, the prospect of separation from his companion animal presented a significant barrier to seeking assistance.

Through our Homelessness Support Program, temporary care and support were provided for Izzy for a period of four months while Noel engaged with housing and community support services. During this time, Noel was able to secure suitable accommodation and was subsequently reunited with Izzy.

This case highlights the important role companion animals can play in supporting emotional wellbeing during periods of crisis and demonstrates how pet-inclusive support services can improve outcomes for both people and animals.

# 3 Community-based Prevention

**Community-based prevention empowers communities through equitable access to preventative veterinary care, education, information and practical support.**

## THE CHALLENGE

Where there is broad community disadvantage, there is potential for animal welfare to decline. Many communities face barriers to accessing veterinary care, animal welfare services and trusted sources of support.

## OUR RESPONSE

RSPCA NSW's community-based programs deliver preventative veterinary care, education and support directly to communities experiencing increased vulnerability.

Programs are targeted to communities experiencing economic disadvantage, geographic isolation and reduced access to veterinary services.

## KEY INITIATIVES

**Healthy Pet Days**

Communities are selected using indicators, including:

- geographic isolation
- economic disadvantage
- reduced access to veterinary services
- a higher-thanaverage number of welfare complaints received by RSPCA NSW Inspectorate.

The program targets people who have never or have rarely accessed veterinary services previously.

Events provide:

- vaccinations
- microchipping
- behaviour advice
- free veterinary health checks
- resources including parasite prevention and food
- access to low cost/no cost desexing at local veterinary clinics.

To maximise long-term impact, partnerships with local human services providers are developed to support ongoing referrals, continuity of care and to assist with case management required by some clients.

**Indigenous Community Companion Animal Health Program (ICCAHP)**

We deliver culturally responsive veterinary services in partnership with First Nations communities.

**Community Animal Welfare Scheme (CAWS)**

This targeted desexing program assists low-income pet guardians in priority communities. Vaccination and microchipping are included as part of the program.

CAWS is often delivered through partnerships with local councils and local veterinary clinics.

**Community capacity building and school education**

Community capacity is built by providing practical support and education resources, as well as access at events and afterwards via telehealth services with animal professionals such as vets and behaviourists. This supports human behaviour change and increases awareness of positive animal care practices.

Delivering school education within priority communities is an important part of community-based prevention. When aligned with outreach services, school education:

- strengthens trust
- reinforces key animal welfare messages
- ensures information is delivered where it can make the greatest difference.

## IMPACT ACHIEVED

**2025/26 FY OUTCOMES:**

**3,340** animals supported

**3,368** adults engaged

**2,231** families supported to access veterinary care

**3,076** children educated

**1,804kg** of pet food distributed

**2,069** doses of parasite prevention distributed

**1,310** animals desexed

**43%** of people accessed vets for the first time via a Healthy Pet Day

**74%** of people learned something about caring for their pets via a Healthy Pet Day

## WHAT MORE IS NEEDED

Continued consultation and evaluation of these programs is required to ensure sustained responsiveness to the needs of the community and to drive animal welfare enhancement.

Expanding community-based prevention programs offers an opportunity to address animal welfare challenges long before they escalate into crisis and to strengthen local capacity to support animals and their caregivers. Central to this is the development of strong partnerships with local human service providers, including housing services, so that assistance can be directed to the most vulnerable in the short term.

This is not simply about securing funding from these services but about encouraging them to recognise their clients' relationship with animals as an important and legitimate consideration of service provision.

**Over the longer term, these partnerships build human services understanding of the importance of the human-animal bond to individual and community wellbeing.**

## CASE STUDY

**Healthy animals, healthy community in Wilcannia**

Wilcannia is a remote community on Barkindji Country, located on the Barka (Darling River), approximately 950 kilometres north-west of Sydney. With the nearest veterinary clinic two hours away in Broken Hill, access to animal health care is shaped by distance, cost, transport, trust, cultural safety and limited access to information.

To deliver culturally responsive programs that employ local community workers and provide preventative veterinary care, ICCAHP has worked alongside various partners such as:

- NSW Health-Aboriginal Environmental Health Unit
- NSW Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development
- Central Darling Shire Council
- Wilcannia Local Aboriginal Land Council
- First Nations community leaders
- Maari Ma Primary Health Care Service
- other local human service partners.

Services include desexing, vaccination, microchipping, parasite prevention, health checks, pet food, community education and school education. These services are delivered free of charge for eligible local community members.

The program recognises that pet 'ownership' may be understood differently, with many people seeing themselves as carers and dogs as having autonomy within community. This supports a contextualised and respectful approach to care.

The program has also supported research into companion animals, community health risks and biosecurity, including tick born disease (Ehrlichia canis) awareness and prevention.

Over time, the program has contributed to sustained improvements in animal and community health outcomes, including long-term reductions in unwanted litters and improved access to preventative animal health care. It has also demonstrated reductions in dog bites to people in community and reductions in euthanasia in local pounds.

ICCAHP is making a meaningful difference in remote NSW communities, particularly Wilcannia.

By providing access to veterinary care, desexing services, pet care supplies, employment opportunities (even if brief and ad hoc) and education, the program supports the health and wellbeing of both animals and their owners.

It strengthens the bond between people and their pets while helping to build compassionate, healthy, and thriving communities where companion animals can receive the care they need.

I was fortunate to watch the program build trust and break down shame barriers for Aboriginal families struggling to care for their pets and use the bridge of goodwill to flow into other Aboriginal environmental health initiatives.

**Jess, Project Officer Aboriginal Environmental Health Unit, NSW Health**

# 4 Targeted Desexing

## THE CHALLENGE

**Uncontrolled breeding contributes to increasing numbers of stray and unowned animals, placing pressure on communities, local governments, shelters and rescue organisations, as well as creating an animal welfare threat.**

From a public safety perspective, roaming dogs increase the risk of dog bites, as well as a greater potential for zoonotic disease transmission through environmental contamination. Roaming animals also contribute to negative impacts at a community level, including excessive noise, animal fighting, and environmental soiling. There are also environmental and ecological consequences associated with free-roaming animals as well as animal welfare implications for wildlife and the domestic animals themselves.

Free-roaming animals are at increased risk of [54]:

- dehydration
- malnutrition
- road traffic injuries
- attacks by other animals
- untreated disease or injury.

Competition for limited food, water and shelter resources can further compromise welfare outcomes [54].

Overpopulation also places significant pressure on animal shelters and rescue organisations. When intake exceeds the capacity of shelters to provide appropriate care and housing, animal welfare outcomes may deteriorate due to overcrowding, resource limitations and increased disease transmission risk. This can contribute to higher euthanasia rates and may also negatively impact the wellbeing of shelter staff and volunteers exposed to ongoing compassion fatigue [54].

Historical efforts to address this problem have had limited success. Regulatory approaches and ad hoc catching, sheltering, rehoming and euthanasia have not seen a reduction in stray and unowned cats in communities around the world.

**However, there is an emerging and compelling evidence base for the efficacy of targeted and high intensity desexing of cats.**

## OUR RESPONSE

In partnership with the NSW Government, RSPCA NSW will open a Community Desexing Clinic in Western Sydney in early 2027. This hub will deliver targeted desexing initiatives that focus on local communities where access barriers and animal overpopulation are significant.

We also deliver a range of community-based desexing programs aimed at improving outcomes for animals, wildlife and communities. The Keeping Cats Safe at Home program combines subsidised desexing, community education and local partnerships to reduce cat overpopulation and support responsible cat ownership [55, 56].

More broadly, RSPCA NSW branches and volunteer groups work with local partners and veterinary clinics to improve access to veterinary care, particularly desexing services, through subsidised programs and negotiated discounted pricing.

Desexing support is currently provided by branches and volunteer groups across many regions:

- Albury
- Bathurst
- Broken Hill
- Central West
- Eurobodalla
- Goulburn (including voucher-based support and a longstanding pound desexing program)
- Hunter
- Inverell
- Illawarra
- Orange
- Port Macquarie
- Shoalhaven.

## IMPACT ACHIEVED SINCE 2021:

Approximately
**9,800**
cats desexed

**26**
veterinary clinics engaged

**30**
council areas supported

## WHAT MORE IS NEEDED

Long-term reductions in animal overpopulation require sustained investment in accessible and affordable desexing programs, delivered through partnerships between government, veterinary providers, animal welfare organisations and local communities.

## CASE STUDY

### RSPCA NSW's Keeping Cats Safe at Home initiative

Keeping Cats Safe at Home was a human behaviour change pilot project assisted by the NSW Government through its Environmental Trust.

The project aimed to reduce the impact that domestic cats have on wildlife by encouraging cat caregivers to desex, permanently identify and register their cats and prevent them from roaming.

Between 2021 and 2024, during what is now called Phase One of the program, we developed and implemented a holistic strategy to protect both cats and wildlife through partnering with 11 NSW councils.

Engagement and consultation of a diverse array of stakeholders (including local government, veterinarians, wildlife and animal welfare organisations, and cat-owning individuals) assisted with identifying factors contributing to and preventing cat containment. A tailored behaviour change strategy was developed for each participating LGA.

**Key results from the pilot program**

- More than 2,700 cats desexed and 1,700 microchipped
- More than 14,000 information resources provided to cat caregivers
- Social change content reached more than 3,500,000 people over Instagram and Facebook
- A reduction in cat-related nuisance complaints by more than 40% in seven of the council areas
- 50% reduction in free-roaming cat density in the Blue Mountains
- 35% reduction in free-roaming cat density in Campbelltown
- 25% reduction in free-roaming cat density in Tweed Shire
- 53% reduction in cat impoundments in the Blue Mountains
- 59% reduction in cat impoundments in Campbelltown

# 5 Advocacy and Engagement

## THE CHALLENGE

As is the case for determinates of human wellbeing, many of the factors affecting animal welfare are influenced by broader systems, policies and community infrastructure.

**Addressing the root causes of animal welfare vulnerability requires action beyond the animal welfare sector alone.**

## OUR RESPONSE

The findings of this report have informed RSPCA NSW's advocacy agenda. We will continue working with government, industry, community organisations and service providers to address the systemic drivers of animal welfare vulnerability.

Priority areas for advocacy include:

- supporting initiatives for pet-inclusive housing
- expanding access to affordable veterinary care
- increasing pet-inclusive crisis accommodation
- improving animal welfare data collection and monitoring
- improving recognition of the links between DFV and animal welfare
- advocating for inclusion of pet care and veterinary support within aged care and social support systems.

## IMPACT ACHIEVED

**2026 FINANCIAL YEAR PARTICIPATION IN:**

**5**
committee memberships advising on animal welfare regulation

**8**
inquiries and consultation processes

## WHAT MORE IS NEEDED

Improving animal welfare outcomes across NSW will require coordinated action across sectors. Government, animal welfare organisations, veterinarians, community services, housing providers and local communities all have a role to play in strengthening people's capacity to care for animals and creating safer, healthier and more resilient communities.

## CASE STUDY

### The Game and Feral Animal Legislation Amendment (Conservation Hunting) Bill 2025

The Game and Feral Animal Legislation Amendment (Conservation Hunting) Bill 2025 was introduced in the NSW Legislative Council in May 2025 by the Shooters, Fishers and Farmers Party. In June of the same year, the Legislative Council referred the bill to the Standing Committee on State Development (the Committee) for inquiry and report.

We considered that the bill, if passed as law, presented significant risks to animal welfare and public safety and significantly weakened safeguards necessary to regulate hunting in NSW, including our gun laws. We provided written evidence to the inquiry and appeared at the hearings to advocate against what was being proposed by the bill.

When the Committee failed to provide any meaningful guidance to the Government in the recommendations of the report, we stood with a coalition of national and state-based peak bodies and civil society organisations to oppose the bill, co-signing an open letter to the Premier of NSW.

The organisations involved represented animal welfare, environmental not-for-profits, gun safety lobby groups, the medical profession and domestic and family violence organisations and charities. They reflected the intersection of a critical issue across the full One Welfare spectrum.

The bill was withdrawn from being further debated and is currently listed as 'debate interrupted' in the Legislative Council.

# The future of animal welfare intelligence

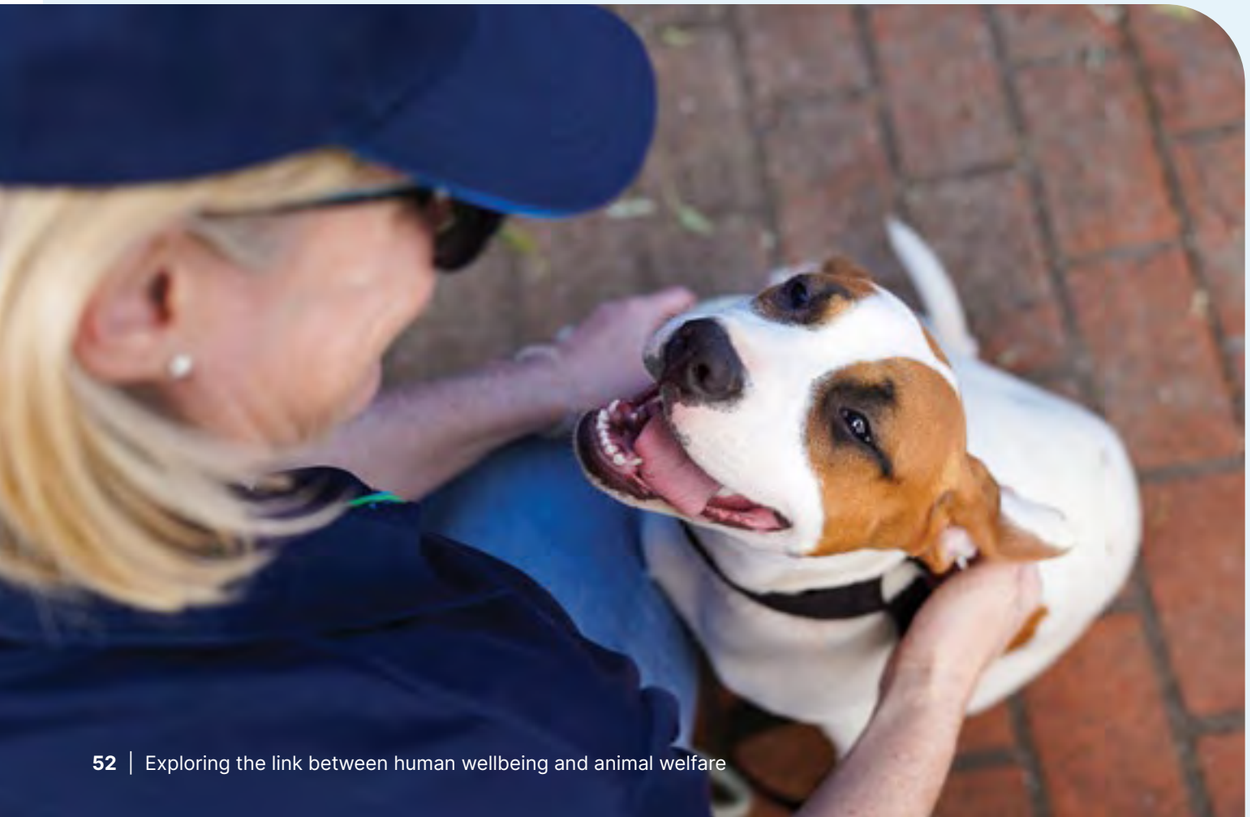
**This report represents an important first step towards understanding the intersection of animal welfare and human wellbeing across NSW at a population level. The analysis identifies communities experiencing some of the greatest disadvantage and demonstrates the potential value of bringing together animal welfare data and SDOH through a One Welfare lens.**

The report also highlights a significant challenge: NSW currently lacks a comprehensive framework for monitoring animal welfare.

It is critical to define and monitor the extent of the problem we are trying to impact. To do this we must work towards an improved method of monitoring animal welfare.

While the available indicators provide some insight into communities where animals may be experiencing increased vulnerability, most current measures focus on animals already experiencing crisis. Pound intake, owner surrender, cruelty investigations and dog bites are all important indicators, but they tell us little about the welfare of the broader animal population.

**As a result, animal welfare is often measured by the presence of problems rather than by the evidence of positive welfare outcomes.**



## What we can't yet measure

Many important aspects of animal welfare are not routinely measured or reported.

Current datasets provide limited, if any, information about:

- caregiver confidence and capacity
- early indicators of emerging welfare concerns
- human-animal attachment and bond strength
- protective factors that support good welfare outcomes
- the quality of social interactions and behavioural opportunities
- quality of life
- emotional wellbeing
- community resilience
- positive welfare experiences
- the physical health of animals.

As a result, many animals experiencing compromised welfare may remain invisible within existing systems, while animals experiencing good welfare are rarely captured at all. This creates an incomplete picture of animal welfare across NSW, obstructing efforts to understand contributing factors and monitor the effectiveness of interventions.

## Building a better understanding of animal welfare

Creating a more complete picture of animal welfare in NSW will require collaboration between government agencies, veterinarians, researchers, animal welfare organisations and community service providers.

Priority opportunities include:

- developing practical methods for estimating quality of life
- evaluating the effectiveness of prevention-focused programs
- establishing a statewide animal welfare monitoring framework
- improving consistency of animal welfare data collection and reporting.
- strengthening links between animal welfare, public health and social service data
- supporting research into the relationship between human and animal wellbeing.

A key challenge identified through this report is the limited availability of data from remote and underserved communities. Strengthening community-level data collection through outreach programs, veterinary services and local partnerships will improve understanding of animal welfare needs in areas where information is currently limited.

## Looking ahead

This report establishes a baseline for future measurement and action. Future editions of the report will build on this foundation, tracking trends over time, refining indicators, measuring impact, expanding the evidence base and improving our understanding of the factors that influence animal welfare across the state.

**By strengthening animal welfare intelligence, we can move towards a more proactive, evidence-informed and prevention-focused approach to improving outcomes for animals and the people who care for them.**

# Recommendations

**Throughout this report we have explored the relationship between animal welfare and human social determinants of health. We propose that improving animal welfare requires a public health style approach with a focus on measuring the issues, identifying underlying causes, evaluating targeted interventions and focusing on the expansion of the most impactful.**

**This will inevitably require a combination of animal protection activities, preventative support services and cross-sector collaboration. These are complex challenges without simple solutions.**

The following priority recommendations are informed by the evidence presented throughout this report. We have identified opportunities to improve outcomes for animals, people and communities across NSW.

## 1

## Invest in impactful programs

**This report clearly communicates that investment in prevention activities, practical and equitable support, and early intervention is critical if we want to help more animals. For fewer animals to suffer, we must address the challenges that place them at risk in the first place.**

That means expanding access to veterinary care, increasing affordable desexing services, supporting and empowering communities, creating more pet-inclusive housing options and strengthening the services that help families stay together.

As we continue to explore the risks and protective factors for animal welfare, we commit to continued evaluation of the programs that currently show strong evidence of being important animal welfare safeguards. But for the evidence base to build and for animals to benefit, these programs must be funded.

### PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Inspire philanthropic investment that expands the reach and impact of our services.
2. Develop purpose-led partnerships with human welfare services that advance shared goals and deliver measurable community benefit.
3. Deliver compelling public campaigns that inspire action, grow support and fund vital programs.

## 2

## Improve access to veterinary care

**Access to veterinary care is a critical issue for ensuring good animal welfare. Financial hardship, geographic isolation, and limited-service availability frequently intersected in communities intensifying barriers to providing necessary care for their animals.**

Without access to timely veterinary care, preventable health conditions can worsen, increasing the risk of suffering, relinquishment and economic euthanasia.

### PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Ensure veterinary support programs are culturally appropriate and accessible to diverse communities.
2. Generate and share evidence demonstrating how reducing barriers to veterinary care delivers broad benefits for animals, people and communities.
3. Progress a community care approach to veterinary services by collaborating with veterinary practitioners seeking to increase to care within their practices.

## 3

## Strengthen the statewide animal welfare safety net

**This report identifies circumstances where people may temporarily struggle to care for their animals, including DFV, financial hardship, illness, hospitalisation, ageing, disability and mental health challenges.**

Without support, these situations can result in animal relinquishment, abandonment or compromised welfare outcomes, as well as straining or severing the human-animal bond – the very thing that can provide immeasurable benefit and comfort through crisis.

### PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Establish strategic partnerships to increase the availability of pet-inclusive crisis accommodation through the Safe Families Framework.
2. Develop referral pathways between animal welfare organisations and human service providers.
3. Increase awareness of available animal support services among community organisations and frontline workers.

# 4

## Expand community-based prevention

**Community-based programs provide an opportunity to directly and practically address animal welfare concerns before they escalate.**

Prevention-focused approaches can improve access to services, strengthen community capacity and reduce demand on shelters and enforcement systems.

### PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Deliver accessible, targeted desexing programs through partnerships between government, veterinary providers, animal welfare organisations and local communities.
2. Strengthen place-based partnerships with local organisations and councils.
3. Prioritise service delivery in geographically isolated communities and areas experiencing multiple vulnerabilities.

# 5

## Work towards a foundation for long-term monitoring of animal wellbeing

**Current animal welfare data are limited, and does not measure positive welfare, quality of life, caregiver capacity and the effectiveness of prevention-focused interventions.**

Improved measurement is essential to inform evidence-based decision making and evaluate the impact of future initiatives.

### PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Improve collection of companion animal welfare information through community engagement activities.
2. Include measures of positive welfare and quality of life.
3. Strengthen evaluation of prevention-focused programs.

# 6

## Build cross-sector collaborations

**The interconnections between animal welfare and human wellbeing are complex. Improving outcomes for animals therefore requires collaboration between animal welfare organisations and human health services, community organisations, housing providers, local government and other stakeholders.**

Cross-sector collaboration can improve early identification of risk, strengthen referral pathways and support more holistic responses to vulnerability.

### PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Strengthen referral pathways between human and animal service providers.
2. Increase awareness of animal welfare issues within health, housing and community sectors.
3. Support collaborative service delivery models that address both human and animal needs.

# 7

## Recognise companion animals in public policy

**Stresses affecting humans have significant impact on the animals they care for, from housing stability, domestic and family violence responses, and ageing, to mental health and community wellbeing. However, companion animals are often overlooked in policy development and service design.**

Greater recognition of the role animals play in people's lives can improve outcomes for both people and animals.

### PRIORITY ACTIONS

1. Increase recognition of companion animals in aged care planning and service delivery.
2. Embed consideration of companion animals within domestic and family violence policy and practice.
3. Incorporate companion animals into emergency management and disaster preparedness planning.

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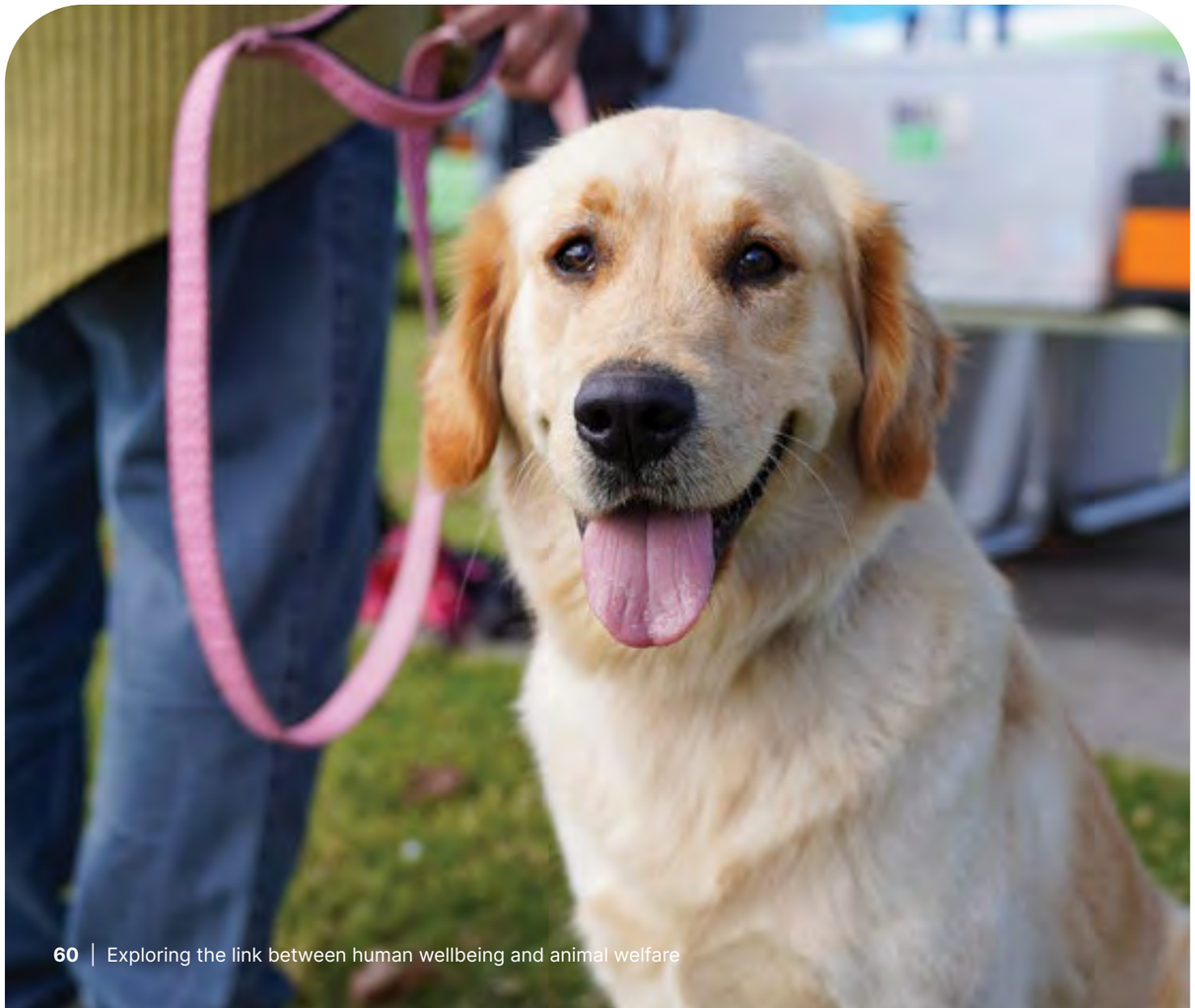
# Appendix 1

## List of shortened forms

| | |
|---|---|
| **ABS** | Australian Bureau of Statistics |
| **AVC** | Access to Vet Care Program |
| **CAWS** | Community Animal Welfare Scheme |
| **DFV** | domestic and family violence |
| **IRSD** | Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage |
| **LGA** | local government area |
| **SDOH** | Social determinants of human health |
| **SEIFA** | Socio-economic Indexes for Areas |





# Appendix 2

## Estimated calculations

**1. Estimate calculation:**

- There are 3,357, 785 households in NSW (2021 New South Wales, Census All persons QuickStats | Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- 33% of households in NSW are experiencing food insecurity (https://reports.foodbank.org.au/foodbank-hunger-report-2025/)
- 56% of households experiencing food insecurity own at least one pet (https://reports.foodbank.org.au/paws-in-need/)
- There are an average of 4 pets per household (Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people 2025 « Animal Medicines Australia)

**2. Estimate calculation:**

- NSW police report 41,346 domestic and family violence in 2025 (NSW Trends in Domestic & Family Violence - Quarterly Report)
- Average number of pets per person estimated to be 1.6 (3,357,785 NSW households x 4.1 pets per household = 13, 766,919 pets /8,592,524 NSW human population)

**3. Estimate calculation:**

- 16,881 of households in affected LGAs (2021 New South Wales, Census All persons QuickStats | Australian Bureau of Statistics)
- 73% of households have at least one animal and there are an average of 4 animals in these households (Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people 2025 « Animal Medicines Australia)

# Appendix 3

## Heatmap severity measures

**Heatmaps indicate severity of the measure**

# Appendix 4

## Indicators used to evaluate social determinants of health and their qualifying levels

### GEOGRAPHIC ISOLATION

| Indicator | Data Source |
|---|---|
| Remoteness score | Australian Bureau of Statistics - remoteness score |
| Digital connectivity index | NSW Digital Connectivity Index |
| Digital connectivity index classification | |
| Number of veterinary clinics | Veterinary Practitioners Board |
| No motor vehicle households % | Australian Bureau of Statistics - 2021 Census |
| Population density | |

### DOMESTIC AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

| Indicator | Data Source |
|---|---|
| Average DFV incidents per year (10yr average) | NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research - DV assault regional comparison tool, January 2016 to December 2025 |
| 2025 DFV incidents | |
| Rate per 100,000 population (10yr average) | |
| 2025 domestic AVO in place rate per 100,000 | NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research - NSW Apprehended Violence Orders Quarterly Report 2025 Q4 |
| Domestic AVO in place in Q4 2025 | |

### ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

| Indicator | Data Source |
|---|---|
| SEIFA disadvantage score | Australian Bureau of Statistics - Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Australia |
| SEIFA ranking within NSW | |
| Median equivalised total weekly household income | Australian Bureau of Statistics - 2021 Census Poverty-in-Australia-2025-Overview-V4_print.pdf |
| % of LGA with total personal weekly income < $649 | |

### SOCIAL AND HUMAN CHALLENGES

| Indicator | Data Source |
|---|---|
| % Population over 65 years old | Australian Bureau of Statistics - 2021 Census |
| % Mental health condition (including depression or anxiety) | |
| Number of lone person households | |
| % Lone person household | |
| Number of persons with need for assistance with core activities | |
| % Persons with need for assistance with core activities | |

### LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES

| Indicator | Data Source |
|---|---|
| No. speaks a language other than English at home | Australian Bureau of Statistics - 2021 Census |
| % Speaks a language other than English at home | |
| % Population speaks English not well or not at all | |

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