Submission by the

Royal New Zealand Society for the

Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Inc.

on

Matamata-Piako District Council

Long-Term Plan 2024-2034

21 April 2024

Executive Summary

- SPCA is concerned with a recent decrease in the number of companion cats that are desexed, only half of companion cats are microchipped, and very few are kept at home and prevented from roaming.

- Desexing and microchipping companion cats helps protect cat and kitten welfare and are some of the few tools we have for addressing stray cat problems in our communities.

- The cost of the procedures is the most common barrier for companion cat owners to desex and microchip their cats.

- Our Snip ‘n’ Chip programme offers subsidised desexing and microchipping for people who need help with overcoming the cost of the procedures.

- We have included our Snip ’n’ Chip Council Package with more detailed information about how we work with local councils to promote more responsible cat ownership.

- Through this submission, we invite the Matamata-Piako District Council to help us achieve more responsible cat ownership by supporting our Snip ‘n’ Chip programme.

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Introduction

The following submission is made on behalf of The Royal New Zealand Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (trading as SPCA).

SPCA is the preeminent animal welfare and advocacy organisation in New Zealand. The Society has been in existence for over 150 years with a supporter base representing more than 100,000 New Zealanders across the nation.

The organisation includes 29 Animal Welfare Centres across New Zealand and approximately 60 inspectors appointed under the Animal Welfare Act 1999.

SPCA welcomes the opportunity to submit on the Matamata-Piako District Long-Term Plan.

Submission

SPCA thanks the Matamata-Piako District Council for the opportunity to contribute to the Long-term Plan 2024-2034 consultation. Through this submission, we invite the Matamata-Piako District Council to help us achieve more responsible cat ownership by supporting our subsidised desexing and microchipping programme, Snip 'n' Chip.

New Zealand needs more responsible cat owners

Cats are one of New Zealand's most popular companion animals. SPCA supports responsible ownership of companion cats to promote cat welfare and reduce problems with cat overpopulation. SPCA is concerned with a recent decrease in the number of companion cats that are desexed, only half of cats are microchipped, and very few are kept at home (Companion Animals New Zealand, 2020).

Each year, on average 20,000 cats and kittens come into our Centres. Many of these animals are directly or indirectly (through stray cat populations) a result of an owner failing to desex their companion cat. Our SPCA Centres regularly see the welfare problems related to irresponsible companion cat ownership, including:

- the predictable cycle of unplanned litters of kittens born each year because there are too many undesexed companion cats allowed to breed; and
- the number of cats and kittens who are lost or have strayed, and we cannot find their owner because they are not microchipped, or their microchip details are not registered on a national database.

We also know that irresponsible cat ownership can lead to nuisance in communities (e.g., spraying, toileting, fighting), predation on wildlife, and the spread of toxoplasmosis to people and animals including farmed animals and vulnerable native marine mammals (e.g., Hector's and Māui dolphins).

Desexing and microchipping companion cats are some of the few tools we have to address problems with stray cats in our communities. Desexing a companion cat helps prevent unplanned litters of kittens which can end up as stray cats. Having a microchip registered on the New Zealand Companion Animal Register can help us identify an owner to reunite with a lost companion cat that may be living as a stray.

The cost of the procedure is the most common barrier for companion cat owners to desex and microchip their cats (Companion Animals New Zealand, 2020).

Support more responsible cat ownership

Our work in New Zealand communities to increase the number of cats and kittens that are desexed and microchipped is fundamental to our mandate to prevent cruelty and advance animal welfare. We provide more details on the welfare benefits of desexing and microchipping cats in the Background section of this submission.

Our Snip 'n' Chip programme offers subsidised desexing and microchipping for people who need help with overcoming the cost of the procedures. SPCA works closely with local veterinarians to provide this service. The vouchers 'sell out' quickly once they are available, indicating this is a much sought-after service in communities.

SPCA has worked closely with Whangārei District Council, Auckland Council, Waitaki District Council, Dunedin City Council, and four Auckland Local Boards to address the barriers to desexing and microchipping cats.

We invite the Matamata-Piako District Council to join us in our efforts to prevent problems before people end up dealing with difficult decisions about unwanted cats and cat behaviour in their communities.

We have included our Snip 'n' Chip Council Package with more detailed information about how we work with local councils to promote more responsible cat ownership.

Background

SPCA advocates for more responsible ownership of companion cats to improve the welfare of cats and to help address the problems with community nuisance, predation, and the overpopulation of stray cats.

Welfare-related benefits of desexing cats

Desexing can reduce the risk of certain diseases, reduce the likelihood of roaming (which can increase risks of harm such as disease and infection, injury, and becoming lost), and increase lifespan. Desexing can also prevent the mortality of unplanned kittens which is often overlooked as a welfare problem.

Table 1: Welfare-related benefits of desexing cats

Decreased risk of reproductive disease
• Mammary gland tumours are common in cats: ○ 16.3% of all tumours are in the mammary gland in an Italian registry, making this the second most common tumour site (Vascellari et al., 2009).

- 17% of all cancers reported were in the mammary gland in a California registry (1963-1966) making this the third most common cancer (Dorn et al., 1968).
- 8.2% of tumours in a Swiss feline cancer registry (1965-2008) were mammary gland tumours (Graf et al., 2016).
- Japanese and Siamese breeds are at increased risk of mammary tumours (Graf et al., 2016; Ito et al., 1996).

- Mammary tumours in cats have a high risk of being malignant:
  - >90% of mammary gland tumours in cats are malignant (Dorn et al., 1968; Hampe & Misdorp, 1974; Hayes et al., 1981).
  - A more recent study with a Swiss feline cancer registry found that 83% of mammary tumours were malignant (Graf et al., 2016).

- Desexing is protective against mammary tumours in cats:
  - Sexually intact cats have seven times the risk of developing mammary gland neoplasms when they get older compared to spayed female cats (Dorn et al., 1968).
  - Ovariectomy was found to protect against mammary carcinomas but not against benign mammary tumours. Intact cats are seven times overrepresented in the population of cats diagnosed with mammary tumours (Misdorp et al., 1991).
  - Desexed female cats had significantly lower odds than entire female cats of developing tumour/malignant tumour in the mammary gland (Graf et al., 2016).
  - Desexing before one year of age is protective against mammary carcinoma: 91% risk of reduction if desexed before 6 months, 86% reduction if before one year. Desexing after two years increased the risk (likely due to very few cats being desexed after this age) (Overley et al., 2005).

- Pyometra (uterine infection) risk increases significantly with age for female cats (Potter et al., 1991).

Increased lifespan and improved overall health

- Undesexed companion cats have significantly shorter lifespans than desexed companion cats (Hamilton et al., 1969; Kent et al., 2022; O'Neill et al., 2015).

- Being undesexed is a risk factor for cats developing degenerative joint disease (Lascelles et al., 2010; Slingerland et al., 2011), which is considered a leading cause of pain in cats (Robertson et al., 2010).
- Improved health for both male and female cats in managed colonies may be related to reduced reproduction-related aggression in males (Cafazzo et al., 2019; Finkler et al., 2011).
- Desexed male cats live a mean of 62% longer than undesexed male cats, and desexed female cats live a mean of 39% longer than undesexed female cats (Banfield Pet Hospital, 2013).
- For companion cats over five years of age in an English veterinary database, desexed female cats lived .6 months longer than undesexed female cats and desexed male cats lived 1.8 years longer than undesexed male cats (O'Neill et al., 2015).
- For companion cats over 1 year of age in a California teaching hospital database (Kent et al., 2022):
    - desexed females had a median lifespan of 10.48 years, compared to undesexed females that had a median lifespan of 4.68 years.
    - desexed males had a median lifespan of 9.84 years, compared to undesexed males who had a median lifespan of 3.67 years.
- For companion cats over the age of five years of age in a Pennsylvania database (Hamilton et al., 1969):
    - desexed male cats lived a median of 10.8 years compared to undesexed males who lived a median of 8.6 years. Deaths from trauma and infections were less common in desexed males.
    - male cats desexed before the age of five months, had a median lifespan of thirteen years compared to male cats desexed at six to seven months who had a median lifespan of eleven years.
- Cats at least six years of age and not desexed in an English database were twice as likely to have signs related to degenerative joint disease (Maniaki et al., 2021).
- Desexed stray cats were in better welfare condition compared to intact cats likely due to reduced reproduction-related aggression in males (Gunther, et al., 2018).

- Desexed male and female cats in a TNR (Trap Neuter Return) managed colony were less likely to be injured or have impaired health which may be related to decreased risk of infectious disease, nutritional deficiencies, and stress associated with reproduction (Gilhofer et al., 2019).

Decreased roaming risks
• Intact male cats are at higher risk of traffic accidents, injuries, bite wounds, and disease transmission compared to desexed males (Finkler et al., 2011; Gunther et al., 2015; 2018).
• Roaming (and fighting and spraying) reduced or eliminated in 80-90% of cats (Hart & Cooper, 1984).
• Desexing reduces activity related to territorial behaviour. Authors note cats are less active, which they do not specify includes roaming (Cafazzo et al., 2019).

Improved kitten welfare
• Unplanned kittens contribute to high numbers of animals surrendered to shelters. Kittens under the age of six months made up the largest proportion of owner-surrender cats to an animal shelter in Australia; 34% of all owner-surrendered animals were emaciated (Marston & Bennett, 2009).
• Kittens that enter the shelter system because they are from unplanned breeding can often be in a poor state of welfare. This is before shelter entry and not related to shelter stay. An average of 30% of kittens that came into SPCA Centres are categorised as not healthy at intake. Not healthy categories include Dead on Arrival; Unhealthy not treatable; Unhealthy treatable (urgent); Unhealthy treatable (non-urgent) (SPCA Intake Health Data: Jan 2021-Jul 2023)
• Free-roaming kittens had the highest prevalence of emaciation and thinness, lowest BCS (Body Condition Score) scores, and higher prevalence of severe injury or disability than adults. (Gunther et al., 2018).

- There is high variability among kitten mortality in stray cats, however, at least one study showed 75% mortality before six months, with trauma being the most common cause of death (Nutter et al., 2004).

Welfare-related benefits of microchipping cats

SPCA prefers microchipping as the primary form of identification for a cat because the chip cannot be removed, dislodged, or lost without surgical intervention. Once a cat is microchipped, the 15-digit microchip number and the animal and owner's details can be registered with a microchip registration database, such as the New Zealand Companion Animal Register (Companion Animals New Zealand, 2018). Microchipping helps ensure a lost cat can be reunited with their owner, which can be especially true during emergencies.

Table 2: Welfare-related benefits of microchipping cats.

Welfare-related benefits of microchipping
• During the 2011 Christchurch earthquake, 85% of owners of microchipped animals were contacted within 3 hours by the New Zealand Companion Animal Register, compared to only 25% of non-microchipped animals reunited with their owners within seven days (Companion Animals New Zealand, 2018).
• 39% of microchipped cats were returned to their owners, compared to 2% returned for un-microchipped cats (Lord et al., 2010).
• 51% of microchipped cats were returned to their owners compared to only 5% of un-microchipped cats (Lancaster et al., 2015).

The addition of a collar and tag for companion or managed stray cats can provide a visual indication of a cat's ownership/management status and successfully help reunite lost cats with their owners/carers (Alberthsen et al., 2013; Lord et al., 2007, 2010).

Other benefits of responsible cat ownership

More responsible cat ownership can reduce the negative impacts cats can have including nuisance, predation on native wildlife, and spread of toxoplasmosis to both native animals and pastoral animals. Desexing and microchipping are longer-term term strategies that will address problems with the overpopulation of cats and keeping cats at home can provide immediate local benefits for reducing nuisance such as spraying and toileting on neighbouring properties and reducing predation. Preventing cats from defecating away from home can also contribute to a reduction in the spread of toxoplasmosis to other animals and people.

Table 3: Other benefits of responsible cat ownership

Benefits of responsible cat ownership
• Reduced risk of toxoplasmosis transmission to farmed animals (Aguirre et al., 2019; Stelzer et al., 2019).
• Decreased risk of toxoplasmosis transmission to native wildlife (Aguirre et al., 2019).
• Decreased predation on native wildlife (Bell & Bell, 2003; Bellingham et al., 2010; Dowding & Murphy, 2001; Imber et al., 2003; Veitch et al., 2011).

Conclusion

Supporting more responsible cat ownership by subsidising the cost of desexing and microchipping cats helps protect cat welfare, breaks the cycle of unplanned kittens born each year, and reduces the number of cats and kittens that either end up in our Centres or remain as stray cats in our communities.

SPCA appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Matamata-Piako District Council's Long-Term Plan consultation. SPCA is happy to provide further information if needed.

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