



Toolkit for Cat Management Bylaws

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Introduction

SPCA supports improved coordination across diverse stakeholders on effective animal management in New Zealand. We have created this Cat Management Bylaw Toolkit to facilitate local council engagement with the public. In this document, we discuss key aspects of cat management that we recommend for inclusion in bylaws for the keeping of animals. This toolkit is organised into four parts consisting of topical sections. Each section has a brief description of the topic and then examples of related available resources.

Sharing information

SPCA encourages local councils to provide information on their website to help members of the public access knowledge and resources to improve cat welfare for all cats. SPCA recommends that local council websites include information on the topics in this toolkit: the benefits of desexing, microchipping, responsible cat numbers, and keeping cats at home (i.e., not allowing them to roam from their owner's property). Please see our [Toolkit for Humane and Effective Cat Management](#) for information to share on your website, social media, or other public communications.



Part 1: Importance of Categorising Cats

SPCA distinguishes companion, stray, and feral cats from each other based on their relationship with people and their dependence on people to meet to their needs. Consistent use of clearly defined terms for different types of cats helps reduce potential confusion and misunderstandings about cat management.

Recommendation

SPCA recommends using the definitions in the [Code of Welfare: Companion Cats](#) and further defining a stray cat to include cats born stray¹. Stray cats may be provided care by humans (i.e., managed) or may not be provided care (i.e., unmanaged). We recommend that Councils are clear and consistent with how they categorise cats to avoid confusion which erodes support for cat management.



Cats are currently defined in the in the [Code of Welfare: Companion Cats](#):

- **Companion cat** - means a common domestic cat (including a kitten unless otherwise stated) that lives with humans as a companion and is dependent on humans for its welfare.
- **Stray cat** - means a companion cat that is lost or abandoned, and which is living as an individual or in a group (colony). Stray cats have many of their needs indirectly supplied by humans and live around centres of human habitation. Stray cats are likely to interbreed with the unneutered companion cat population.
- **Feral cat** - means a cat that is not a stray cat and which has none of its needs provided by humans. Feral cats generally do not live around centres of human habitation. The feral cat population size fluctuates largely independently of humans, is self-sustaining and is not dependent on input from the companion cat population.

Although we recommend distinguishing companion, stray, and feral cats from each other, the impacts of improving cat management for one type of cat can help reduce the negative impacts of another. For example, undesexed companion cats can have unplanned litters of kittens that end up living as stray cats. Companion cats can roam far from home and may be identified as stray simply by way of not being at their owner's residence. Similarly, some companion cats become lost and live as "stray" until reunited with their owners. Stray cats that live in rural areas may contribute to feral cat populations.



¹ A broader definition is consistent with the New Zealand National Cat Management Group [Report](#).

Know the Difference - Companion, Stray & Feral Cats

There are three types of cats in New Zealand - companion, stray, and feral. The difference between these types of cats is based on where they live and their relationship with people.

AVOIDS PEOPLE

FERAL CATS
Do not live among people and do not rely on them for their welfare needs.

LIVES NEAR OR AMONGST PEOPLE

STRAY CATS
Live near or sometimes amongst humans but are not owned. They vary in how much they depend on people for their welfare needs. Some are friendly, some are not.

LIVES WITH PEOPLE

COMPANION CATS
Are owned, have a home with people, and depend on people for their welfare needs.



Problems Arising from Inconsistent Definitions

There are examples of local bylaws where cats are defined inconsistently with the Code of Welfare: Companion Cats or the National Cat Management Group and between Councils.

Table 1: Councils with provisions for the management of stray and feral cats and the corresponding definitions.

Council	Term	Definition
Tararua District (2024)	Feral	An animal existing in a wild, untamed state.
Wellington City (2024)	Stray	An unmicrochipped cat or cat otherwise unidentifiable as an owned cat.
Gisborne District (2023)	Stray or Feral	No definition given.
Ruapehu District (2022)	Feral	Any live cat that is not kept by a person or household. Where the cat keeper cannot be identified, the cat is deemed to be feral.
Manawatu District (2019)	Stray	A companion cat that is lost or abandoned, and which is living as an individual or in a group (colony).

The differences in definitions for stray and feral cats between councils shown in Table 1 may lead to inappropriate management strategies. For example, treating feral cats as strays may lead to unsuccessful rehoming efforts while categorising companion or stray cats as feral could prevent them from being reunited with owners or rehomed. Misidentification can also impact legal protections, allocation of council funding, and the effectiveness of population control programmes, ultimately affecting animal welfare and public policy decisions.

In addition to local council bylaws, some Regional Pest Management Plans define unowned cats or pest cats based on their microchip and registration status ([Auckland Council](#), [Greater Wellington Regional Council](#), [Gisborne District Council](#)).

Social License to Manage Cats

Having a social license is important for successful cat management.² Clearly defining companion, stray, and feral cats in a bylaw helps ensure appropriate and acceptable cat management strategies are used to reduce problems with nuisance and overpopulation. Many people in New Zealand communities care deeply for stray cats and the public is generally less accepting of lethal control of them.³ In contrast, there is stronger support for lethally managing feral cats. However, public support for feral cat management is at risk if there is confusion about determining if a cat is truly feral or stray.⁴

² Deak, B. P., Ostendorf, B., Taggart, D. A., Peacock, D. E., & Bardsley, D. K. (2019). The significance of social perceptions in implementing successful feral cat management strategies: A global review. *Animals*, 9(9), Article 617. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9090617>; McLeod, L. J., Hine, D. W., & Driver, A. B. (2019). Change the humans first: Principles for improving the management of free-roaming cats. *Animals*, 9, Article 555. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani9080555>.

³ Farnworth, M. J., Campbell, J., & Adams, N. J. (2011). What's in a name? Perceptions of stray and feral cat welfare and control in Aotearoa, New Zealand. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 14(1), 59-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888705.2011.527604>; Farnworth, M. J., Watson, H., & Adams, N. J. (2014). Understanding control of non-native wild and feral mammals: Similarities and differences in the opinions of the general public, animal protectionists and conservationists in New Zealand (Aotearoa). *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 17(1), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888705.2013.799414>.

⁴ Palmer, A., & Thomas, V. (2023). Categorisation of cats: Managing boundary felids in Aotearoa New Zealand and Britain. *People and Nature*, 5(5), 1539-1551. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10519>.

Part 2: Responsible Cat Ownership

Desexing, microchipping, limits of number of cats permitted at a dwelling, and keeping cats at home are important aspects of responsible cat ownership.

Recommendation

- SPCA recommends cat owners are required to desex their cats by four months of age with exceptions for registered breeding animals or if a veterinarian has deemed it would harm the cat's health.
- SPCA recommends cat owners are required to microchip their cat by four months of age and register the microchip on the New Zealand Companion Animal register.
- SPCA recommends that limits set on the number of cats at a residence are reasonable and allow exemptions to be granted for numbers of cats over any set limit.
- SPCA recommends providing incentives to encourage cat owners to keep their cats at home (i.e., restricting roaming) to keep them safe from harm and promote positive welfare, whilst minimising their negative impacts on wildlife and nuisance in the community.

Desexing

Desexing a cat or kitten provides welfare-related benefits including reduced risk of cancer and unwanted behaviours related to reproduction such as roaming, fighting, and spraying urine. Desexing companion cats is a humane approach to problems with stray cat overpopulation. Desexing prevents unplanned litters of kittens from companion cats that may end up in shelters or end up becoming stray cats.

Kittens typically enter puberty from four to six months of age.⁵ SPCA supports requirements that kittens are desexed by four months of age to avoid unplanned litters of kittens and maximise behavioural benefits.

Microchipping and Registering the Microchip

Microchipping and microchip registration on the [New Zealand Companion Animal Register](#) is a reliable method for identifying a cat that is owned and can help ensure a lost or injured cat's owner can be identified and contacted. Microchipping and registering microchips increase the success of reuniting lost cats with their owners.⁶ In places where cats are trapped, a microchip can help determine the cat is owned and thus not be managed as a stray cat.

⁵ Farnworth, M. J., Adams, N. J., Seksel, K., Waran, N. K., Beausoleil, N. J., & Stafford, K. J. (2013). Veterinary attitudes towards pre-pubertal gonadectomy of cats: A comparison of samples from New Zealand, Australia and the United Kingdom. *New Zealand Veterinary Journal*, 61(4), 226-233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00480169.2012.738591>.

⁶ Companion Animals New Zealand. (2021). *Animal microchip implantation best practice guide*. https://production-animal-register-assets-652425776511.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/uploads/public/MicrochipGuide2021_Fixed.pdf; Lord, L. K., Ingwersen, W., Gray, J. L., & Wintz, D. J. (2009). Characterization of animals with microchips entering animal shelters. *Journal of American Veterinary Medical Association*, 235(5), 160-167. <https://doi.org/10.2460/javma.235.2.160>.

Limits on Cats

Limiting the number of cats permitted to be kept per dwelling can help reduce the potential for an owner to be unable to care for their cats and can reduce cat-related nuisance such as odours from spraying and defecating and cat fighting. SPCA recognises the value of cats living a Good Life and that too many cats at one dwelling can lead to welfare problems. However, we are concerned that the focus on setting the limit does not take into consideration how an owner keeps their cats. In places where limits on the number of cats per dwelling are set, responsible cat ownership could be promoted by including microchipping, desexing, and keeping cats at home (on the owner's property) as criteria for allowing a person to have more than the permitted number of cats.

Keeping Cats at Home (Restricting Roaming)

Cats kept at home are less likely to spread diseases, sustain injuries through fighting with other animals or being hit by cars, and are less likely to cause nuisance associated with toileting and spraying on neighbouring properties. Additionally, the likelihood of undesexed companion cats contributing to the unwanted population of cats is exacerbated by most cat owners allowing their cats to roam freely.

There can be substantial barriers to keeping cats at home such as the cost of doing so and changes in lifestyle. Therefore, SPCA recommends Councils consider incentives to keeping cats at home such as allowing exceptions to cat limits in bylaws based on criteria.



Part 3: Why a Bylaw?

A bylaw legislates on issues specific to a local area, enabling tailored rules and regulations to address unique community needs. Often focused on public health, safety, offensive behaviour and nuisances, bylaws fill gaps not covered by broader national laws, allowing local authorities to manage matters requiring specific regulation.

Recommendation

SPCA recommends Local Councils pass bylaws that advance more responsible cat ownership. In the absence of national cat legislation, there is an opportunity for local councils to take the lead in setting expectations for responsible cat owners, and achieve better outcomes for cats, wildlife, and the community. Animal-specific bylaws with clear parameters can allow for faster resolution of disputes upon detection of non-compliance, compared to legislation requiring a nuisance determination before issuing a notice to abate.

Early intervention in managing cat-related issues is important for minimising community nuisance and helps prevent animal welfare concerns for cats. Key benefits of cat management bylaws include:

- 1. Encouraging responsible ownership** – Education on the importance of desexing, microchipping, and containment reduces stray and feral cat populations, preventing overpopulation and associated welfare issues.
- 2. Enforcing desexing and microchipping regulations** – Mandating desexing and microchipping helps control breeding, improves traceability of lost or abandoned cats, and ensures owners take responsibility for their pets.
- 3. Managing stray and feral populations** – Early intervention including targeted trapping, desexing, and rehoming programmes prevents uncontrolled population growth, reduces the number of unowned cats, and helps mitigate the effects of predation on native wildlife.
- 4. Preventing disease spread** – Controlling stray cat populations helps limit the spread of diseases such as feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV) and toxoplasmosis, which can affect other animals and humans.
- 5. Reducing community nuisance** – Stray and uncontained cats can cause noise disturbances (fighting and mating calls), damage property, and prey on wildlife. Proactive management minimises these impacts, creating a more sustainable and harmonious coexistence between cats, their owners, and the wider community.
- 6. Providing support for owners in need** – Councils can assist low-income pet owners with access to subsidised desexing and veterinary care, reducing the likelihood of neglect or abandonment due to financial hardship.

A bylaw is a reasonable approach to motivating cat owners who have not desexed or microchipped their cats for reasons other than financial ones. Reasons for owners not desexing their cats include they felt it was unnecessary, did not realise a kitten could reproduce before 6 months of age, or believed there are benefits to allowing a cat to have a litter of kittens before being desexed. Reasons for owners not microchipping their cats include they thought it was unnecessary or legally not required, the cost, have not made time to do it, or kept their cats indoors.⁸

⁸ Companion Animals New Zealand. (2024). *Companion animals in New Zealand. NZ Pet data report 2024*. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d1bf13a3f8e88001289eeb/t/67c0d98167e45312ebf98c08/1740691894336/CANZ+2024+Pet+Data+Report+++FINAL+for+PDF.pdf>

Cat Management Bylaws are Increasing

There has been a steady increase in councils that have adopted bylaws to manage cats. Table 2 below lists the Councils in New Zealand that require cat owners to desex and microchip their cats and register the microchip on the [New Zealand Companion Animal Register](#) (NZCAR).

Table 2: Local Councils with bylaws requiring cats to be desexed and microchipped.

Council (year)	Desexing requirements	Microchipping requirements
Porirua City (2025)	Any cat over four months of age must be desexed (with exemptions for registered breeders or to protect the cat's health or welfare).	Any cat over four months must be microchipped and the microchip registered with the NZCAR.
Nelson City (2024)	Any cat over four months of age be desexed (with exemptions for registered breeders or to protect the cat's health or welfare).	Any cat over four months be microchipped and the microchip registered with the NZCAR.
Tasman District (2024)	Domestic cats over the age of six months must be desexed (with exemptions in place for registered breeders or to protect the cat's health or welfare).	Domestic cats over the age of six months must be microchipped and registered with the NZCAR.
Tararua District (2024)	Every cat over four months old must be desexed.	Every cat over four months old must be microchipped and the microchip registered on the NZCAR.
Palmerston North City (2024)	All cats over four months of age, born after the 1st of July 2018 must be desexed (exemptions are in place for registered breeders).	All cats over six months of age and born after the 1st of July 2018 must be microchipped and registered on the NZCAR.
Wellington City (2024)	All domestic cats over six months must be desexed (exemptions are in place for registered breeders or to protect the cat's health and/or welfare).	All cats over the age of twelve weeks must be microchipped and registered on the NZCAR.
Hutt City (2024)	Every person who keeps cats must ensure they are desexed by twelve weeks of age or older (with exemptions for breeders or to protect the cat's health and welfare).	Every person who keeps cats must ensure they are microchipped by twelve weeks of age or older and registered on the NZCAR.



Buller District (2023)	Any cat over six months of age must be desexed (with exemptions in place for registered breeders or to protect the cat's health and/or welfare).	Any cat over six months of age must be microchipped, and the microchip registered on the NZCAR.
Ruapehu District (2022)	Every person who keeps a cat that is over six months must ensure the cat is desexed (exemptions are in place for registered breeders or to protect the cat's health and/or welfare).	Every person who keeps a cat that is over six months must ensure they are microchipped, and the microchip is registered on the NZCAR or other Council approved microchip registry.
Whangārei District (2022)	Any cat over six months of age must be desexed (exemptions are in place for registered breeders or to protect the cat's health and/or welfare).	Any cat over six months of age must be microchipped, and the microchip registered on the NZCAR.
Selwyn District (2021)	None.	Every person who keeps a cat over the age of four months is required to microchip and register the cat with the NZCAR or other approved registry.
Whanganui District (2020)	Any cat over four months of age is required to be desexed (exemptions are in place for registered breeders or to protect the cat's health and/or welfare).	Any cat over four months of age is required to be microchipped and registered with the NZCAR.
Manawatu District (2019)	Every person who keeps cats must ensure cats over six months are desexed (exemptions in place for registered breeders).	None.

There has also been a steady increase in the number of bylaws that include a limit on the number of cats per property or dwelling.



Table 3: Local Councils with bylaws for limits on cats per residence or dwelling.

Council	Number of Cats
Buller District	2
Carterton District	3
Hastings District	2-4 (depending on residence type)
Invercargill City	3 (if creating a nuisance)
Kaipara District	5
Mackenzie District	2
Manawatū District	4
Marlborough District	4
Masterton District	3
New Plymouth District	3
Palmerston North City	3
Rangitikei District	3
Ruapehu District	4
South Waikato District	5
South Wairarapa District	3
Southland District	5 (if creating a nuisance)
Taranua District	3
Wairoa District	3
Whanganui District	3

Part 4: Will a Bylaw Work?

SPCA acknowledges the important question of whether including cat management in a bylaw will work to reduce the negative impacts on cats.

Recommendation

- SPCA recommends Councils conduct periodic surveys to gauge public perceptions of cat-related nuisance.
- SPCA recommends Councils develop robust systems for tracking nuisance complaints associated with cats including property damage, spraying, and defecating on neighbouring properties, and fighting with other cats causing injuries that require veterinary treatment.
- SPCA recommends engagement with animal management teams to identify ways to assess if cat management bylaws are working. This could be related to the resolution time for nuisance complaints.
- SPCA recommends a grandfathering approach to a lead-in time for when a bylaw comes into force.

Bylaws for cat management are relatively new, with most passed in the previous four years.

This is a short period to evaluate a bylaw.

We have seen a change in cat owner behaviour reflected in the increase in the number of new registrations of microchipped cats on the New Zealand Companion Animal Register after a bylaw has been passed (Companion Animals New Zealand, personal communication, 2024).

Keeping Track of Nuisance Complaints

It will be difficult to evaluate a bylaw if measures are not in place to monitor change. For example, if nuisance complaints related to cats are not systematically monitored, then it will be difficult to see the impact of a bylaw on reducing nuisance.

SPCA regularly receives emails and calls from the public about cat nuisance (e.g., the neighbour's cat is toileting in their garden). We even have a [website article](#) offering advice and tips for keeping a cat out of your garden. However, these strategies place the onus of managing nuisance on those who do not own the cat. Our organisation considers preventing nuisance is a cat owner's responsibility.

SPCA is concerned about issues related to keeping cats such as disease transmission. Cats are the definitive host of toxoplasmosis, and exposure to cat faeces in waterways, soil, sandpits, vegetable beds, and gardens is a risk factor for transmission to people and other animals.⁷

Grandfather and Transitional Clauses

A transitional period enables existing cat owners to prepare for new legislative requirements such as desexing, microchipping, and limits on cats, and other members of the community to make more informed decisions. For example, some people may decide to desex their cat before required, while others may choose another type of pet.

A grandfathering approach can also be applied to cats born after a certain date and allow for a more gradual phase-in of cat management over the lifespan of an average cat and prompt people to consider the need to manage their cat through desexing and microchipping their cat when they are thinking about purchasing or acquiring a new pet cat. Table 4 lists the Councils that have grandfather and transitional clauses for their cat management-related bylaws.

⁷ Aguirre, A. A., Longcore, T., Barbieri, M., Dabritz, H., Hill, D., Klein, P. N., Lepczyk, C., Lilly, E. L., McLeod, R., Milcarsky, J., Murphy, C. E., Su, C., VanWormer, E., Yolken, R., & Sizemore, G. C. (2019). The One Health approach to toxoplasmosis: Epidemiology, control, and prevention strategies. *EcoHealth*, 16(2), 387-390. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10393-019-01405-7>; Dubey, J. P., Cerqueira-Cézar, C. K., Murata, F. H. A., Kwok, O. C. H., Yang, Y. R., & Su, C. (2020). All about toxoplasmosis in cats: The last decade. *Veterinary Parasitology*, 283, Article 109145. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vet-par.2020.109145>.



Table 4: Grandfather and transitional clauses in Council Bylaws.

Council	Bylaw passed	Compliance date	Comments
Nelson City (2024)	19 December 2024	1 June 2026	Current cat owners have until 1 June 2026 to comply with these requirements.
Tasman District (2024)	1 January 2025	1 June 2026	Current cat owners have until 1 June 2026 to comply with these requirements.
Palmerston North City (2024)	1 September 2024	1 September 2024	These requirements only apply to cats born after 1 July 2018.
Wellington City (2024)	18 April 2024	June 1 2025	Existing cat owners allowed transition period for desexing.
Buller District (2023)	13 December 2023	20 December 2023	Not retrospective and does not affect cats living in the area prior to 20 December 2023.
Whangārei District (2022)	26 May 2022	1 July 2022	None.
Selwyn District (2021)	01 July 2021	01 July 2022	None.
Whanganui District (2020)	03 Aug 2020	01 July 2021	None.

Regulation and Enforcement of Cats Under a Bylaw

SPCA acknowledges that without national cat legislation, using bylaws to manage cats under the Local Government Act 2002 provides limited powers to compel compliance. The Local Government Act does not provide the opportunity to issue infringements (i.e., instant fines) but provides the opportunity for prosecution under the bylaw when there are persistent breaches or non-compliance. A person convicted of an offence against a bylaw made under Part 8 of the Local Government Act (other than a bylaw made under [Part 8](#) referred to in subsection (5)) is liable to a fine not exceeding \$20,000. SPCA is concerned that this is disproportionate to the behaviour and creates an undue hardship on cat owners struggling to desex or microchip their cats. SPCA is also concerned that Councils will not want to pursue this enforcement option as prosecutions are expensive.

SPCA recognises the value of an educative approach to promoting responsible cat ownership. Bylaws that require cats to be desexed and microchipped send a clear expectation to cat owners that they have a responsibility to reduce the nuisance that their cats can cause to neighbours and wildlife. For example, having a bylaw requiring cats are desexed and microchipped or that there is a limit of cats permitted at a dwelling can be useful for animal management officers that are trying to resolve nuisance at a multi-cat location. An educational approach to enforcement helps to shift attitudes and behaviour over time, creating lasting change. Instead of just imposing fines or penalties, an educational approach encourages pet owners to adopt responsible practices, which promotes a culture of responsibility and proactive care. This can have a lasting impact on the cat population.

Supporting More Responsible Cat Ownership

SPCA acknowledges that regulations alone will not address the problems of cat overpopulation and are in full support of complementary non-regulatory approaches to cat management. When the primary barrier to desexing and microchipping cats is the cost of the procedure, a bylaw is not an appropriate approach to motivate more responsible cat ownership without subsidised help.

[Snip 'n' Chip](#) is our national programme that works with local veterinarians to provide subsidised desexing and microchipping for companion animals. In coordination with local councils, we can offer Snip 'n' Chip in targeted postcodes, including those in sensitive ecological areas. We are happy to support and work with councils to provide comprehensive services for cat owners to help ensure more responsible cat ownership and to prevent problems before people end up dealing with difficult decisions about unwanted cats and cat behaviour in their communities.

Part 5: More Information

More Information From SPCA

- SPCA's [Toolkit for Humane and Effective Cat Management](#).
- SPCA's advocacy for [Mandatory Desexing of Cats](#).
- SPCA's advocacy for [National Cat Legislation](#), including desexing, microchipping, and keeping cats at home.

The National Cat Management Group (NCMG)

The National Cat Management Group is a multi-stakeholder group with the aim of achieving humane and effective cat management in New Zealand. The NCMG has developed a set of recommendations for cat management available in the [National Cat Management Report](#).

Related Legislation

Below are the main pieces of legislation and related bylaws and codes of welfare related to cat management.

- [Animal Welfare Act 1999](#)
 - > [Code of Welfare Companion Cats, Code of Welfare Temporary Housing of Companion Animals, Code of Welfare Transport within New Zealand](#)
- [Biosecurity Act 1993](#)
- [Conservation Act 1987](#)
- [Local Government Act 2002](#)





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