

COMPANION ANIMALS

Loved, cherished, but also abused, neglected and killed in staggering numbers — we need to do more for our companion animals.

Policy

The Animal Justice Party (AJP) cherishes the role of companion animals in the average Australian family. While your own cat or dog may receive constant care and affection, the sad reality is that thousands of companion animals are unwanted and unloved and this will not change until we consider animals as individuals rather than commodities.

The requirements of companion animals are inadequately understood. Too many animals are put to death every year in pounds and shelters while others suffer from cruelty or neglect. We must rethink our relationship with animals; they are not simply commodities or “pets” to breed and sell. There is much to cherish with companion animals who bring so much to our own lives. We must pursue change to make their lives better too.

The Animal Justice Party will promote reform to protect the best interests of companion animals consistently across Australia. Addressing the breeding and associated oversupply of companion animals is central to solving the many problems they experience. Like most Australians, we believe that every companion animal deserves a loving home. The Animal Justice Party supports people living with companion animals.

Key Objectives

1. To reframe companion animals as individuals rather than as commodities and promote the benefits of a beloved companion animal (e.g. lower stress levels).
2. To promote animal adoption ahead of commercialised breeding and to provide shelters with adequate funding to cater to lost and unwanted animals, and prevent euthanasia other than for medical necessity.
3. To provide education on the proper care of animals to prevent cruelty and neglect while also increasing resources to investigate and prosecute animal cruelty (see our Animal Law policy).
4. To ensure that all companion animals are housed in appropriate environments without undue confinement and are given appropriate care, enrichment, exer-

cise and stimulation according to their individual and species-specific needs.

5. To increase desexing levels through targeted government subsidies and community education programs, while investigating other options proven to work in reducing the oversupply of unwanted animals.
6. To outlaw puppy farms and kitten farms (see our Puppy Farm policy) and to introduce a nationally consistent Breeder Permit system to stop dodgy breeders and reduce the number of animals born without loving homes available.
7. To phase out the breeding of animals with inherent genetic problems.
8. To repeal breed-specific legislation throughout Australia.
9. To stop unnecessary discrimination against tenants with companion animals and increase the availability of homes, including retirement homes, where they are allowed, balancing the rights of landlords, tenants and companion animals.
10. To ensure our cities are suitable for companion animals with suitable toilet options, recreational spaces and better companion-friendly transport.
11. To include companion animals in probate and guardianship laws so that they are adequately cared for after the death or incapacitation of a human guardian.

Background

Companion animals are recognised and cherished by the majority of Australians for their friendship, comfort and devotion. Indeed, over 60 percent¹ of Australian households include a companion animal. Companion animals can be the cats and dogs, but also the birds, reptiles, horses, etc. that we care for and are frequently referred to as “pets”, although “companion” better recognises their individuality and sentience. They are individuals with whom a human guardian has a symbiotic relationship and are socialised to enjoy the company of people. All these animals deserve consideration and respect - they provide us with many benefits, but also with obligations. A companion animal is not an accessory.

¹<https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/AMA-Pet-Ownership-in-Australia-5-AUGUST-2013.pdf>



Want a voice for animals in Parliament? Join, donate, or find out more about the Animal Justice Party at animaljusticeparty.org. You can also read our policies, here: animaljusticeparty.org/policieslist.

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Local and state governments are responsible for overseeing the wellbeing and management of companion animals, including their breeding and sale. But there is little national consistency in these laws. Our legal system regards companion animals not as individuals but as property, with some promise of “welfare”. Laws tend to focus on protecting people from danger and nuisance rather than animals’ wellbeing.

This specific fact sheet does not consider therapy animals, working animals or rescue animals and focuses only on the animals with whom we share our homes because of our love and care for them. Most healthy animals of other species who have not been domesticated should be allowed to live free and are generally not suitable as companion animals.

Reducing the killing

Thousands of companion animals are killed in shelters Australia-wide each year. Unfortunately many are healthy, socialised and able to be rehomed, so their deaths are avoidable. One study² estimates more than 40,000 dogs are killed in Australia each year. Thousands of cats, birds, fish, mice and other animals are also killed. Animal shelters Australia-wide need to be provided with proper funding and other support to take care of, return or rehome these animals. In addition to surrendered animals, many cats and dogs are abandoned or allowed to wander and also end up in shelters or worse. We need governments who will stop this welfare crisis.

The primary driver behind these issues is an oversupply of animals by the “pet” industry. For animal shelters to pursue a kill rate of zero³ we must reduce the number of new animals and then reimagine “owners” as “guardians”.

The first step to achieving this is changing how guardians acquire new companion animals. Currently, animals can be bought from backyard breeders and also cruel intensive puppy farms, kitten farms or other commercial breeding facilities. Breeding so many new animals for profit, many with genetic defects, is unacceptable especially while so many thousands of companion animals are killed in shelters because there are not enough homes for them all. The “market” is oversaturated.

Current regulatory attempts are failing, with both guardian and companion suffering the consequences. Breeders can easily become invisible to attempts at regulation, especially with remote breeding facilities and online trading. Even with face-to-face sales, new guardians still cannot ensure that the breeder is meeting expectations in regards to animal health and welfare. Existing breeders permits or registration fees relate more to management and local government compliance rather than animal welfare with standards varying wildly depending on the industry group or regulator responsible for the permits. One solution is to target commercial breeders with tough restrictions and to mandate that anyone selling an animal must display a breeder’s permit linked to publicly available information about the health and wellbeing of related animals. This will give power to guardians to make better-informed decisions about the source of their new companion.

But when it comes to unethical breeding it isn’t just a matter of size and financial motives of the breeder. Small and “backyard” breeders have been producing animals with genetic defects for decades. And unfortunately, many who accidentally or deliberately breed their companions have little knowledge regarding the proper care of kittens or puppies and are not equipped to ensure that the offspring find a suitable, loving home. This leaves unwanted kittens or puppies to be disposed of through other means.

While better regulation of the number of companion animals is needed, we must also promote the benefits of adoption and rescue. Part of the problem is reframing animals as individuals needing a home rather than as accessories to be bought.

Individuals not commodities

Ensuring that there is a loving home for every companion animal also requires reclassifying animals as individuals with wants and needs. While companions are still treated merely as commodities, there will be no proper assessment of a person’s preparedness and commitment to properly care for the animal they acquire. Until people view animals as companions rather than “pets”, animals will also be bred to meet the desires of “designer” breeds in vogue regardless of the inherent welfare concerns. This is especially true for commercial “pet” shops and online sales.

One suggested avenue for reform is the desexing of companion animals at an appropriate age (as recommended by your veterinarian) to help prevent overpopulation. But should desexing be mandatory or recommended and provided freely? The Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) rejects mandatory desexing⁴, saying “mandatory desexing of animals has not proven an effective strategy for reducing the number of unwanted companion animals. Mandatory desexing of owned animals also doesn’t account for the impact of semi-owned, stray and feral animals in pet overpopulation.” There are also unforeseen issues with mandatory desexing proving too costly for many and noncompliance difficult to find and enforce. Mandating that animals be desexed before being reclaimed from council pounds can also be a barrier to many unless the operation is free or subsidised. “Mandatory” desexing schemes are also problematic when there isn’t a human guardian to hold responsible, e.g. street cats.

Therefore the AVA recommends⁵, among other things, targeted low cost desexing options and community education. Proper identification of animals would also help empty our shelters: currently only 36% of dogs, 4% of cats and 9% of other animals are reclaimed from pounds and shelters. Mandatory microchipping will mean that lost companion animals are easily found and their guardians identified.

AJP will have to pursue a suite of policy measures addressing oversupply, such as restrictions on inbreeding and on the number of litters per animal. We will fight for properly empowered and resourced animal protection agencies and

²<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5532565/>

³<https://www.gzz.org.au/why-getting-to-zero.html>

⁴<https://www.ava.com.au/policy-advocacy/advocacy/unwanted-companion-animals/mandatory-desexing/>

⁵https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/advocacy/unwanted-companion-animals/ava_policy_framework_unwanted_dogs_cats.pdf

publicly available information on all animal breeders. We acknowledge that breeders have a lot of political influence and that our campaigns will attract negative attention from these industries.

Housing and hardship

The RSPCA (SA) reports⁶ that 16.9% of animals are surrendered due to changes in the caretaker's accommodation. By removing unnecessary barriers for tenants with companion animals we can ensure that guardian and companion remain together. Prohibiting discrimination against tenants with animals and legislating a presumption in favour of a tenant's request to keep an animal on the property will reduce the number of animals who are surrendered because their guardian cannot bring them to the new home. Recent reforms in Victoria⁷ mean that there is a presumption in favour of a tenant keeping their companion animal, with landlords needing a tribunal order to reasonably refuse companions. The AJP hopes to see similar reforms adopted across Australia to help families stay with beloved animals.

Changes to the guardian's financial position was reported to be responsible for another 12.2% of total animal surrenders. Therefore we must rethink how we help those in need, from ensuring that local food banks have sufficient animal food through to properly funding family violence shelters so that

they can cater for beloved companions too. Important procedures, like desexing, must also be free or heavily subsidised so that those less fortunate do not have to choose between their companion's wellbeing and making ends meet. By being kinder to human guardians, we are also kinder to companion animals.

Evacuation shelters also need to cater for animals during disasters like floods and fires. Many families will refuse to leave their loved ones behind, so it is kinder and safer to make the arrangements necessary to also care for companion animals.

Reducing the cruelty

Despite Australians' overwhelming love for companion animals, each year there are over 50,000 complaints made about their abuse with only a handful going on to be investigated and successfully prosecuted. As well as changing our culture to have more respect for animals, we need to overhaul our animal protection laws and enforcement to remove excuses for cruelty while introducing new agencies and resources to prevent and prosecute more cruelty cases (see our Animal Law policy for more information). Penalties also need to reflect the seriousness of violence towards animals. A national *Animal Abuser Registry* would help ensure that people who abuse animals can no longer have responsibility for their care.

⁶<https://www.rspcasa.org.au/pet-surrenders-2018/>

⁷<https://www.consumer.vic.gov.au/housing/renting/applying-for-a-rental-property-or-room/pets-and-renting#tenants-right-to-keep-a-pet-with-the-landlords-consent>



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