

Homes NSW
NSW Government
Via email:

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Re: Feedback on the draft *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2025-2035*

As a charity that aims to improve the safety and wellbeing of people and animals impacted by domestic and family violence (DFV), **Lucy's Project** welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation paper on the draft *NSW Homelessness Strategy 2025-2035* (the Strategy).

Introduction

Perpetrators of domestic and family violence (DFV) often threaten, harm, and kill animals to control and intimidate women and children, including commonly targeting 'the animal(s) for [whom] the victim-survivor has the most affection' (Butler & McDonald, 2024, p. 6). This violence is perpetrated against companion, assistance, farmed, and wild animals.

As recognised in the draft Strategy, DFV is a key driver of homelessness, and the 'main reason that women and children leave their homes' (Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety, 2019, p. 1). A lack of access to animal-inclusive housing is a significant barrier to safety and wellbeing for people impacted by DFV.

Approximately 70% of Australian households share their lives with animals, and it is common for people to regard animals as beloved family members (Animal Medicines Australia, 2022). When seeking accommodation and housing, people impacted by DFV may not want to be separated from their animals, and in cases where their animal has been threatened or harmed by a perpetrator, an individual may 'fear for the animal's wellbeing if they leave them behind' (Giesbrecht, 2022, p. 16933). When people are unable to obtain accommodation or housing with their animals, they may delay leaving a violent partner (or not leave at all) or be compelled to pursue another unsafe option such as living in their vehicle. Indeed, concern for the wellbeing of an animal may contribute to a person's decision to return to a violent partner after a period of separation (Barrett et al., 2018 in Taylor et al., 2020).

Nobody should ever be compelled to make a choice between their own safety and the safety of animal family members. Requiring women and children to surrender animals in order to

meet eligibility criteria for housing support is not a trauma-informed approach. When faced with a potential loss or separation from an animal, an individual can experience ‘considerable distress’ (Montgomery et al., 2024). Forced separation from an animal, such as that endured by people impacted by DFV, ‘may lead to feelings of intense grief, guilt and trauma, and a decline in psychosocial functioning’ (Walsh, 2009 and Lowe et al., 2009 in Montgomery et al., 2024). When separated from their animals, children can experience socio-emotional distress, such as grief, anxiety, and fear (Butler & McDonald, 2024). For children who have experienced frequent trauma, their animal companions may provide a sense of security, relieve their stress, and support them to heal emotionally (Jegatheesan et al., 2020).

A 2024 paper by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), *Violence against family animals in the context of intimate partner violence*, highlights the need to improve ‘access to crisis and support services that accommodate both human and animal needs’ (Butler & McDonald, 2024, p.10). Research demonstrates that experiencing DFV increases a person’s likelihood of accessing a homelessness service for support (Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research [FACSIAR], 2023). In fact, people impacted by DFV are ‘20 times more likely than the wider NSW population to access homelessness services within a year of a police-recorded DFV incident’ (FACSIAR, 2023, p. 1).

Lucy’s Project affirms the importance of the human-animal bond and believes that people and animals should be supported to maintain their connection and find safe accommodation and housing together wherever possible. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) defines the human-animal bond as ‘a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviours considered essential to the health and wellbeing of both’ (AVMA, 2023 in Montgomery, et al., 2024). There are benefits for both people and animals when they are supported to heal and recover together. For instance, the human-animal bond promotes physical and mental health improvements and assists people to recover after a crisis (Oosthuizen et al., 2023).

Section 1: Guiding principles of the Strategy

We address the following guiding principles:

Housing is a human right

The Strategy states that ‘everyone has the right to housing that is safe, appropriate, affordable, and sustainable’ (p. 9), and one of the stated ways of achieving this is to ensure that ‘mainstream policies and practices do not discriminate or create service gaps and are accessible to people who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness (p. 9).’

A lack of animal-inclusive temporary and crisis accommodation and transitional and social housing creates service gaps for people impacted by DFV with animals. Furthermore, it is imperative that rental tenancy laws and regulations do not create barriers for people and animals who are impacted by DFV and are seeking prompt access to safe private rental housing. For example, rental tenancy legislation that would permit only the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal to determine that an animal *cannot* be kept on a premises eliminates the possibility of discrimination by landlords and agents at the rental application stage.

People with lived experience inform service design

The Strategy recognises that homelessness responses are ‘more inclusive, sustainable and better aligned with the reality of people’s experiences’ when people with lived experience are given the opportunity to provide input into the design and delivery of policies, programs and services (p. 9).

Periodically, Lucy’s Project receives correspondence from individuals impacted by DFV who are seeking housing options for their animals. These requests for assistance demonstrate the bond that people have with their animals, the concerns they hold for the animals’ safety and wellbeing if separated from them, and an overwhelming desire to not be separated from their animals. This correspondence includes situations where women are living in their vehicles so as not to be separated from their animals. The following de-identified excerpts provide examples of this correspondence:

“I am about to flee domestic violence. I need somewhere for my beautiful dog and cat to go for a short period while I escape as I am scared of what might happen if I leave them behind.”

“I am desperately trying to get my dog minded so I can stay in a women’s shelter with my son. My dog is beautiful and so friendly. I’ve been living in my van to keep her, but my ex-partner keeps finding me.”

“I recently left my ex-partner due to domestic violence. I have had to relocate with my children and our beloved fur baby. We are trying very hard not to rehome or surrender him as we feel we have already lost enough to keep us safe and can’t bear the thought of losing him as well.”

Person-centred principles are embedded in policy and practice

Taking a person-centred approach involves considering an individual’s needs and their family members’ needs. For people with animals in their care, this includes their animals. To be truly

person-centred, it is essential that we consider the meaningful connections that people have with others, including whomever it is they identify as essential to their wellbeing and recovery, such as their animal companions. The research findings of a 2024 Southern Cross University study, *Children's voices for change: A rights-based approach to understanding and implementing effective supports for children and pre-adolescents as victim-survivors of family violence* highlight the 'overwhelming importance' of children's relationships with their animals and the 'strong emotional bonds' that children and young people form with their animals (Dimopoulos et al., 2024, pp. 51, 84). 54% of the children and young people that participated in the project nominated their relationship and connection to their animals as fostering a sense of happiness and safety for them in the present (p.51).

Prevention is prioritised

This guiding principle acknowledges that there are 'key transition points' where the provision of coordinated responses would prevent homelessness from occurring in the first place, such as at hospital discharge and upon exiting prison (p. 10). Key transition points to prevent homelessness for people impacted by DFV who live with animals include the following: women and children with animals seeking to leave their homes; people with animals seeking to exit, or forced to exit, temporary and crisis accommodation and transitional and social housing; people with animals seeking to find animal-inclusive rental housing.

Service planning and delivery is flexible, local and joined-up

This guiding principle nominates the importance of 'identifying service system gaps and areas for policy and practice reform' (p.11).

One such important area of policy and practice reform is the provision of animal-inclusive housing as a universal option. Crisis and temporary accommodation, and transitional, social, and rental housing should be animal inclusive to ensure the safety and wellbeing of people and animals impacted by DFV.

If people and animals are unable to be accommodated together, this should only be a rare occurrence or for a limited period. In these situations, it is essential that care and accommodation is provided off-site for animals to ensure they are safe until they can be reunited with their human family. This would reduce the likelihood of people impacted by DFV returning to a violent partner out of fear for the safety of their animals, living in their vehicle or on the street to be able to stay with their animals, or surrendering their animals due to a lack of other options and experiencing the resulting distress, grief and trauma.

Systems, tools and measurement are consistent, accessible and fit for purpose

The development of 'best practice tools for homelessness screening and assessment' must consider animal-inclusivity. For example, it is essential that screening and assessment processes identify that women and children impacted by DFV are at risk of homelessness if they are unable to access animal-inclusive housing and support. It is essential that people are asked at the earliest opportunity whether they have animals in their care. Furthermore, it is essential that data collection systems are urgently updated to capture the number of people who decline temporary, crisis, transitional or social housing, or who are turned away, due to it not being animal-inclusive, as well as to capture the number of people with animals who are being supported through individual services across NSW. This cohort of people will remain largely invisible until systems are implemented to identify them.

Questions:

- 1. What do we need to consider as we implement services and system reform guided by these principles over the next 10 years?**

As service and system reform is implemented in accordance with the guiding principles, it is essential that consideration be given to a cohort that has been overlooked: people who live with animals. This includes people experiencing homelessness with animals, and people impacted by DFV who live with animals. It is important to note that Aboriginal people, Torres Strait Islander people, LGBTQI+ people, people living in rural and regional areas, and households with children aged under 18 years are more likely than other Australians to live with companion animals (Animal Medicines Australia, 2022), and intersecting barriers may impact their access to housing and other supports.

As previously mentioned, effective data collection must be implemented at the earliest opportunity within the ten-year strategy.

Section 2: Strategy focus areas

We provide the following comments on the Strategy focus areas:

Outcome 1: Wherever possible, homelessness is prevented from happening in the first place, making it rare.

1.1 People can get and keep a safe and affordable home

- An increase in the supply of social, affordable and key worker housing is of critical importance to help people acquire and keep a safe and affordable home. To make this housing as accessible as possible, it is essential that it also be animal-inclusive.

- People with animals face greater barriers to entering, or remaining in, the private rental market. Therefore, it is critical that people with animals are supported to obtain and keep rental housing that is animal-inclusive. It is essential that barriers are removed through rental tenancy laws and regulations to ensure that people with animals do not encounter discrimination in their efforts to secure rental housing. This is of paramount importance for people and animals who are impacted by DFV and are seeking safe and affordable rental housing, and who are at risk of homelessness.

1.2 People at risk of homelessness are identified early and linked in with the right supports

- Intake and assessment processes must be animal-inclusive. When obtaining personal details, it is important to ask whether the person lives with animals.
- Capacity building for mainstream government and community services must include education about DFV experienced by people and animals, and the ways in which DFV perpetrated against animals can exacerbate the risk of homelessness for people, including women and children with animals.
- It is essential to provide animal-inclusive supports to people and families at risk of homelessness due to DFV in order to address the barriers that they experience while trying to access housing.

Outcome 2: When homelessness does occur, people are quickly connected to housing and the supports they need.

2.1 People's needs are quickly identified and they are referred to the right support

- Ensure that screening, assessment and referral processes are animal-inclusive. For example, standard intake questions about family or household composition provide an opportunity to ask people whether they have animals in their care.
- Appropriate supports must be provided to people and families to enable them to stay together with their animals wherever possible.
- If people and families are unable to be housed with their animals, they must be supported to find safe temporary care and accommodation for their animals until they can be reunited. This will help to mitigate the likelihood of people experiencing homelessness due to being turned away from, or having to decline, services that will not house them and their animals.
- Animal-inclusive responses must be provided to people sleeping rough in public spaces with their animals.

2.2 People get safe crisis accommodation with appropriate supports when they need it

- Ensure that any new temporary and crisis accommodation models, including supported accommodation, are animal-inclusive so that people and animals can stay together safely.
- The provision of high-quality crisis accommodation must ensure the removal of barriers to access for people with animals. As mentioned previously, perpetrators will harm or threaten to harm, or even kill, animals to exert power and control over people. Consequently, a person may delay leaving a perpetrator who has threatened to harm, or indeed harmed, their animals if they cannot find safe accommodation with their animals or alternative care arrangements for their animals.
- An increase in 'family-centred supports' (p. 13) for people in temporary accommodation must consider that many people regard animals as members of their family.
- Improvements to temporary accommodation for young people to ensure that it is 'safe and responsive to their needs' (p. 13) must also facilitate young people's connection and bond to their animals.

2.3 People are supported out of homelessness into longer-term housing with tailored support

- Social and affordable housing must be animal-inclusive so that it is accessible and meets the needs of people with animals.
- Longer-term housing and any accompanying tailored support must also be animal-inclusive.
- Housing and support models designed for children and young people must enable them to maintain their connection and bond with their companion animals. This is vital for their mental health and their healing and recovery from DFV.

Outcome 3: People with complex needs can access comprehensive, longer-term support so they do not experience repeat homelessness.

3.2 People have strong connections to their community that protect against repeat homelessness

- The companionship of animals can support people to build stronger connections with their community.
- Local councils also have animal management responsibilities, so opportunities exist for those relationships to lead to better outcomes for people with animals experiencing DFV and homelessness. For example, people could benefit from the temporary care of their animals by a local council run or funded animal shelter until

they can find safe housing together. It is essential that these council facilities are safe and appropriate for animals who have experienced violence and trauma.

3.3 People have access to housing that meets their changing needs across their lifespan

- Housing and support models must continue to facilitate people to live with their animals as their needs change across their lifespan. For example, home modifications may support an older person to continue to live with an animal whom they rely on for companionship and to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness.
- Social housing must be designed and modified to be animal-inclusive. Many people live with companion animals and research demonstrates that there are significant physical and mental health benefits to living with animals. For some people, their companion animals may be assistance animals and provide mental health support even though the animal may not have certification as a support animal.
- Any work with Commonwealth Government services to integrate housing, aged care and disability supports must consider how people can be supported to continue to reside with their animals as their support and housing needs change across their lifespan.

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About Lucy's Project

Our vision

Safe Families, Paws & All

Our mission

Make a positive impact on the lives of people with animals at risk of, or experiencing, domestic and family violence, by improving their safety and long-term outcomes.

Our Work

Collaboration, Advocacy, Research and Education (CARE)

Collaboration to build partnerships across services and sectors to promote a coordinated and holistic response to people with animals experiencing violence.

Advocacy to highlight policy, program and legislative changes needed to increase the supports people with animals experiencing violence require to be safe.

Research to increase the evidence base on the issues faced by people with animals experiencing violence and the supports needed, in collaboration with key partners.

Education to improve the capacity of family violence, community and animal services and workers to provide support to people with animals experiencing violence.

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