

**Submission to:
Tasmanian Housing Strategy
Discussion Paper**



October 2022

1. Overview

Tasmanians have one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world and pets are integral members of many of our families.

And we know that most people care for their pets as they care for other members of their family: they look after their health and hygiene, exercise and entertainment; they clean up after them; and generally care well for them.

For many of us, having a pet keeps us sane in stressful times. Our experience during the pandemic has reinforced the fact that our companion animals are an integral part of family life, and they provide comfort and company when we need it most.

More and more people are becoming concerned about the impact of the rising cost of living on their ability to care for their pets, with the biggest source of worry being able to afford vet care.

Whilst this is increasingly an issue across Australia, the issue is of specific relevance to the Tasmanians for two reasons:

- Tasmania's lack of legislation surrounding pet-owner discrimination amongst rental owners;
- Tasmania's lack of options for pet-compatible refuges surrounding victims fleeing family or domestic violence.

For a lot of people, their pets are their significant other. This means their pet is their only comfort and, in many cases, their only link to the outside world.

We know that pets are one of the best types of therapy for someone going through a hard time, so to separate someone from their pet where they're going through a hard time or trauma it actually makes it worse.

However, as the cost of living crisis forces people to make impossible sacrifices, many will have no choice but to give up the very thing that keeps them going. Kids have to come before pets, and other vulnerable people such as the elderly and sick are going to suffer the most during this financial crisis.

Imagine having to give your pet up for adoption because you can no longer afford to keep it. Most of us simply can't contemplate the distress this would cause. We cannot ignore the fact that this will make life so much harder than it already is for some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

Evidence shows that Tasmania's housing market is growing increasingly difficult for tenants - and even for people who own their own homes.

Tasmanian policies and legislations should support all those going through challenging times; yet the present state of Tasmania's housing market harms those that are already struggling.

Most Tasmanians, whether they live in suburbia, rural properties, or in regional towns, say animal welfare is important or extremely important to them, and most Tasmanians expect improved animal welfare outcomes should be a high priority for the state government.

In reviewing the state's housing strategy, the RSPCA therefore urges the government to take in to account the important role companion animals play in ensuring positive outcomes for all Tasmanians.

A contemporary housing policy should take into account the needs of all Tasmanians, regardless of family structure, socio-economic status, demographic grouping, and location.

In our view, the strategy outlined in the discussion paper is simply promoting more of the same. This approach may alleviate some of the issues outlined elsewhere in this submission, such as the very low levels of affordable housing.

However, it will not adequately address the fundamental legislative issues surrounding discrimination against pet owners particularly in the rental housing market.

Tasmania must follow the legislative path seen in states like Victoria given that this will benefit the state through decreasing animal surrenders, increase housing possibilities for pet owners, and increasing competition in the housing market.

The Tasmanian housing strategy must also recognise the need for support for people with companion animals fleeing family or domestic violence; and also those facing homelessness.

Given important role pets play in their owners' lives, it is essential that responses to homelessness take into account the human-animal bond and support this group to meet their basic needs, like housing and shelter, food, and healthcare, without separating pets and people.

Such options include increasing the availability of animal-friendly refuges and increasing funding in programs that temporarily home animals during times of difficulty, such as the RSPCA's Safe Beds program (<https://www.rspcatas.org.au/rspca-petbarn-foundation-safe-beds-program/>).

We know that pets provide companionship and a sense of purpose, and that this helps improve mental health and well-being. In troubled times like these, people need the security and comfort they get from their pets.

Now is the time to harness the things we have long known and now proven about the importance of the bonds between people and animals.

The RSPCA therefore believes it is incumbent on the government to ensure that the importance of companion animals is recognised in all state legislation and policies.

On that basis, we urge the government to amend the strategy as outlined in this discussion paper to better reflect the needs of all sections of our community – and to deliver policies and programs that recognise the vital role companion animals play in enriching our lives.

2. Housing Affordability

Tasmania is facing a crisis in affordable housing.

By definition, a property is affordable if it costs less than 30% of a person's income (*Anglicare TAS, 2022*).

Affordable rentals for various family types in Tasmania, 2022

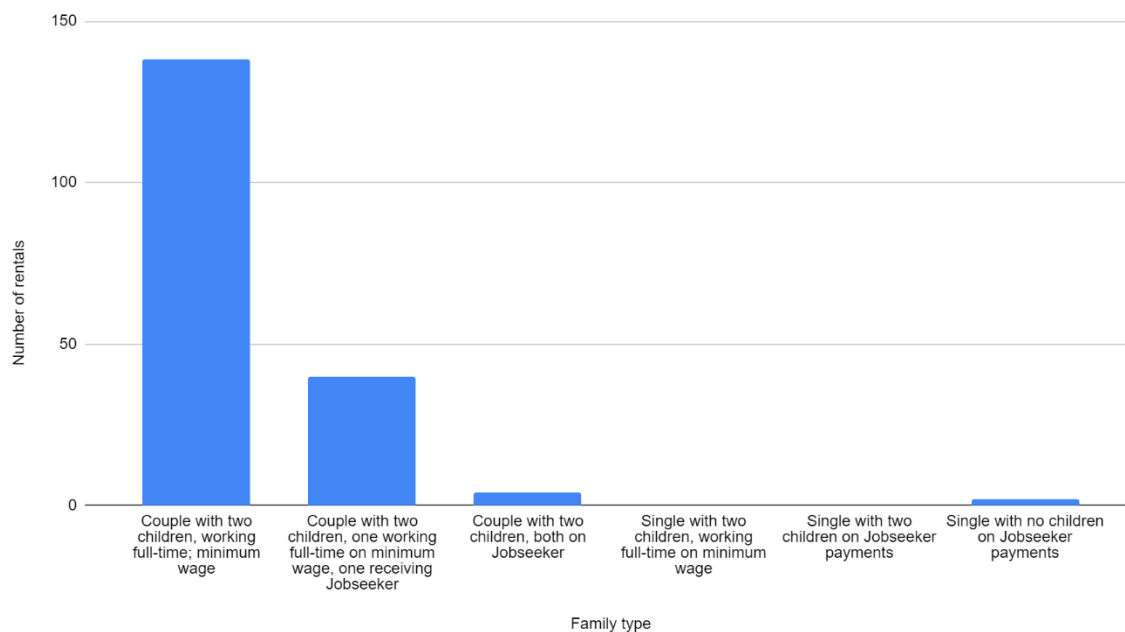


Chart 1: Affordable rentals for various family types in Tasmania, 2022 (*Anglicare 2022 & Gwynn, 2022*)

Furthermore, Tasmania's rental market has historically had relatively low rental vacancy rates when contrasted to other Australian jurisdictions (*Gwynn, 2022*). This issue is becoming more prevalent as rental prices rapidly increase.

Family type	Income	Number of Affordable Rentals Available in Tasmania	Affordable rentals that allow pets
Couple with two children	Both full-time on minimum wage	138	17.25
Couple with two children	One full-time on minimum wage, one receiving Parenting Payment from Centrelink	40	5
Couple with two children	Both receiving Jobseeker payments	4	0.5
Single with two children	Working full-time on minimum wage	16 (13 in rural areas)	2
Single with two children	Jobseeker payments	0	0
Single with no children	Jobseeker payments	2	0.25

Table 1: Tasmanian rentals available depending on income and pet situation (*Anglicare 2022 & Gwynn, 2022*)

As this data shows, it is near impossible for people of lower socio-economic status Tasmanians to find affordable housing.

For a household where both parents are unemployed and receive Jobseeker, there were only four properties in Tasmania where it was classified as affordable, three of which were on the East Coast. For a single person reliant on Jobseeker payments, there are only two properties in the state that are classified as affordable. This issue is further exacerbated if a person has children; for a single parent on Jobseeker with two children, there are “no properties in the state that they can afford.” (*Anglicare TAS, 2022.*)

The situation is worst of all for those that are vulnerable, be it on reliant on social security incomes or fleeing domestic violence.

This challenge is even greater for individuals and families with pets - with some individuals and families literally unable to find affordable housing where they can keep human and pet family members together.

Affordable rentals for various family types with pets in Tasmania, 2022

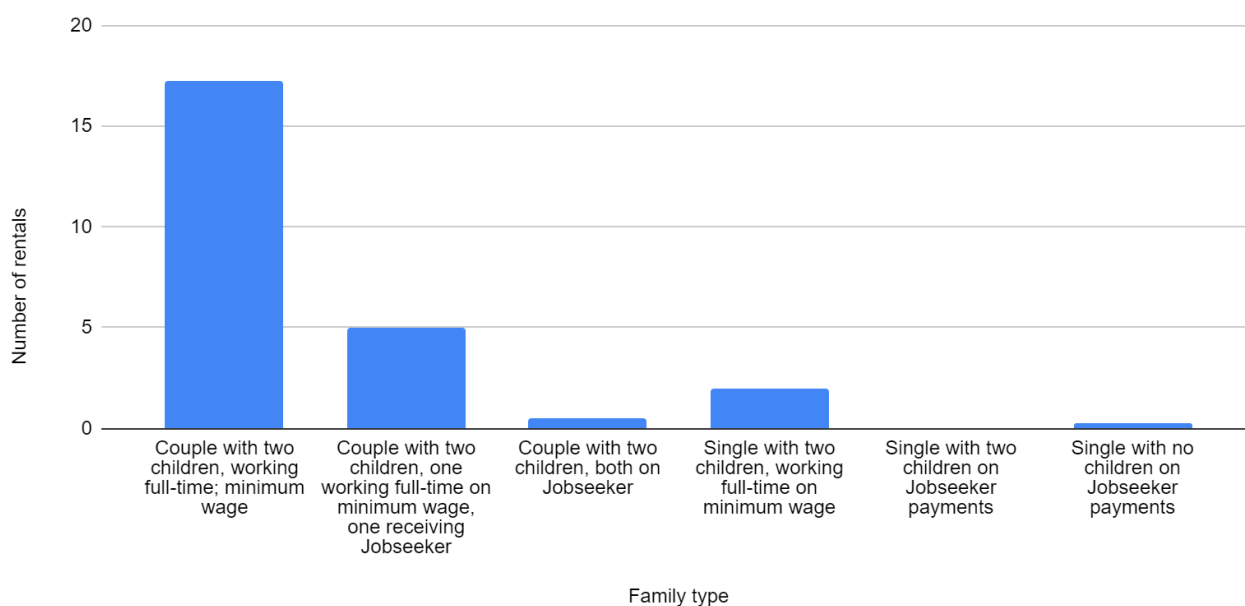


Chart 2: Affordable rentals for various family types in Tasmania, 2022 (*Anglicare 2022 & Gwynn, 2022*)

The ongoing increases in rental prices give rise to a myriad of issues for Tasmanians with pets.

Our experience indicates that the average family is less able to look after their pet or to adopt a new member of the family. Our data shows that a total of 1285 animals came into our care during the 2021/2022 year. This represented an increase of 7.44% when compared with the previous year.

Even if an applicant is able to find a rental and is willing to live in financial hardship in a property that is not affordable, it is common to find rentals that will only rent to people that are employed and do not have pets. Whilst this may be put in place to ensure that tenants can afford the rental, it acts to “prejudice against people on Centrelink benefits.” (*Anglicare TAS, 2022.*)

3. Pets in Rentals

We've all heard about the shortage of rental properties, so finding a home to rent can be hard enough – but, when you have a pet, it can be twice as tricky. The situation has been bad for several years but, with the cost of rent rising and vacancy rates at a record low, more animals are also becoming victims of the state's housing crisis.

Given the prevalence of pet ownership in Australia, many pet parents feel the need to lie about their pets so as to be able to apply for rentals (*Australian Dog Lover, 2019*). This situation is not ideal for either party.

Record low rental vacancy rates and rapidly increasing rents are pushing many low-income earners with pets out of the market. This means that more and more Australians are faced with a tough choice: keeping a best friend or having somewhere to live.

Yet evidence shows pets can be a lower risk option than children, and that pet owners are statistically more willing to sign a longer lease. Pet friendliness adds value, which means more applicants and who may be willing to pay a higher rent.

Personal responsibility, not pet status, is the key. Just think about the number of million dollar properties that have pets padding the hallways without any disastrous effects. With the right pet and a responsible tenant, this reality can be true for any rental property.

In NSW, the Animal Welfare League is finding that one in three people surrendering dogs to their shelters explicitly blamed the rental market for the decision (*Fitzsimmons, 2022*).

These increasing difficulties related to the cost of living are particularly harmful to pet owners in Tasmania given the exclusion of applicants with pets. Anglicare TAS has found that “many - perhaps most - advertisements state that pets are not permitted” (*Anglicare TAS, 2022*). Tasmania has historically low rental vacancies and only one in eight landlords allows pets. (*Gwynn, 2022*).

Despite the traditional arguments against pets in rentals, the alleviation of this issue lies not in exclusion of potential tenants and thus limiting the demand for rentals. Rather, it should be addressed by ensuring the landlords' concerns are incorporated into leases i.e., mandatory cleaning schedule, additional damage bonds etc. (*Australian Dog Lover, 2019*).

Some of the benefits of allowing pet owners into rentals include (Australian Dog Lover, 2019):

- Added security - pets, especially dogs, allow a greater level of security.
- Longer Tenancy - given the limited options of pet owners and the difficulties surrounding moving rentals with a pet, pet owners tend to remain with properties for longer periods.
- Demonstrated competency - the ownership and management of a pet provide proof of a potential tenant's level of responsibility.

These benefits need to be more widely promoted; and to be more effectively reflected in contemporary legislative frameworks.

The legislation surrounding pets and rentals varies significantly across Australia's jurisdictions. However, over the past couple of years, new laws have been introduced in most states which make it easier for tenants to have pets in rental properties. As well, many apartments are relaxing their bylaws for suitable pets, like small dogs, cats and reptiles.

The current state of play has been summarised in Syfret, 2022:

- ACT: In 2021, the ACT implemented legislation that means that, whilst pet owners can still be refused a rental on the basis of said pet, the landlord must formally submit their refusal, along with the reasoning behind the refusal, to the state's Civil & Administrative Tribunal and the Tribunal decides the outcome.
- NSW: NSW does not presently have a firm law surrounding the issue, but the standard residential tenancy agreement released by Fair Trading NSW includes an optional term that can require

professional cleaning etc when pets are included on leases.

- Queensland: Currently legislation states that a tenant needs a landlord's permission to keep a pet. However, new housing laws set to come into effect in October will make it harder for Queensland landlords to ban pets in rental properties.
- South Australia: Tenants must apply to house a pet; it is up to the landlord and there is little room for appeal.
- Northern Territory: There is no specific legislation in NT surrounding pets in rentals, therefore in reality it comes down to the landlord's decision.
- Western Australia: WA's pet rental regulations state that a tenant must gain permission to have a pet on the property, further there is a pet bond of up to \$260 that is charged on top of the regular bond.
- Victoria: legislation was recently updated. If a tenant wishes to house a pet on the property, they must submit a form to the landlord, who then has 14 days to take it to the Victorian civil and administrative tribunal, who will then make the final decision.

Sadly, the situation in Tasmania has lagged behind most other states. Tenants must apply to house a pet; it is up to the landlord and there is little room for appeal.

Animal lovers were therefore excited to hear that the Tasmanian government has recognised the need for change, too.

Consumer Affairs Minister Elise Archer recently announced that the government would consider reviewing the laws 'straight away'.

"This is about balance (between landlords and tenants), but I'm very open to looking at this because I know how important it is for people to have their pets because they are great companions and indeed sometimes, someone's best friend," she said.

This is very welcome news, and the RSPCA looks forward to working with the government to bring these changes into force as soon as possible.

4. Pets and Family Violence

A woman's decision to leave a violent and abusive relationship is a complex process. She first needs to consider the personal risks and the risks to her children. Paradoxically, taking that step towards safety is also the time of greatest danger of homicide, sexual assault and increased violence.

Companion animals and service animals are also a part of the lives of many families. This means they are an important part of the decision-making process when women consider leaving a violent situation.

Seventy per cent of women fleeing domestic violence also report pet abuse. This is in fact another reason many victims delay leaving. They fear the animal who has provided love and support when they need it most will be neglected, or they will not be fed or cared for. Worse, they are worried their animals will be harmed – or even killed.

And these fears are real.

Violence towards companion animals is a strong indicator that people will also be violent towards the humans in their life. Animal abuse often is linked to the severity of domestic violence; and individuals who commit pet abuse are more likely to inflict physical and mental violence on other family members.

Current laws exist to prevent animal cruelty. However, they often do not recognise or protect animals in relation to domestic and family violence.

Many jurisdictions are recognising these facts and changing legislation to include animals in family violence laws.

More than two-thirds of US states have already enacted legislation that includes provisions for companion animals in domestic violence protection orders.

In 2021, NSW laws were amended to include harm, or threats of harm, to an animal in the definition of intimidation. This means perpetrators can also be charged with domestic violence offences when animals are used to coerce the victim. The changes mean that protection of animals will also be made standard in domestic violence orders.

The Victorian Parliament is currently considering a motion which proposes that animals should be recognised as victims of family violence, which would result in similar provisions to those now in place in NSW.

Sadly, despite all this evidence, Tasmania is falling behind. These proposed reforms offer an opportunity for our government to follow step and adopt changes in legislation that recognise animal abuse as a form of family violence.

These measures would be a crucial step towards improving support for, and so the safety of, victim-survivors when animals are also caught up in family violence. When domestic violence victims know their pet will be safe, it allows them to take care of themselves and their children. And the safety of vulnerable Tasmanians should be of paramount importance to all of us.

Various organisations, including the RSPCA, have established programs to assist families with companion animals by providing pet care when an individual or family need to escape quickly. However, some women are either not aware that some animal welfare agencies provide emergency accommodation or would not utilise this service if it was available (*Tiplady et al. 2012*).

Keeping the whole family together, including pets, during this critical time is paramount with some refuges able to accommodate companion animals under certain conditions but this needs to be greatly expanded. Children in particular, often rely on their pet to provide stability, security and companionship.

Another issue facing families affected by domestic violence who may have a pet in foster care or other accommodation is the difficulty in accessing rental properties where companion animals are allowed. Being forced to relinquish a pet for this reason after experiencing significant family abuse is extremely traumatic.

Animal welfare and domestic violence service agencies in several states are working together to resolve the significant issues that affect families with companion animals who are impacted by domestic violence to support both people and animals. However, as yet, there is no evidence of this happening in Tasmania.

The RSPCA's position on these issues is as follows:

- The RSPCA supports and encourages integrated, cross-agency collaboration to develop strategies for responding effectively to domestic violence issues and ensuring the necessary services are available to adequately cater for the welfare needs of both vulnerable people and animals.
- The RSPCA recognises the empirical link between animal cruelty, child abuse, and domestic and interpersonal violence including its physical, psychological, and economic dimensions, and that cruelty to animals is a strong marker for other forms of violence.
- The RSPCA supports and encourages cross-agency collaboration to raise awareness of this link, to identify and investigate cases involving both animal cruelty and interpersonal violence, and to promote early intervention strategies.
- The RSPCA supports the development of systems for cross-reporting between the RSPCA, the veterinary profession, the police, housing organisations, and relevant community service agencies.
- The RSPCA believes veterinarians, community service workers and other frontline staff should be trained and supported to identify, and report suspected cases of animal cruelty, further, these staff must be aware of the housing options available to accommodate victims and their animals.
- Where resources allow, the RSPCA aims to protect the welfare of animals and their owners at risk through domestic and interpersonal violence by providing appropriate emergency care and support for companion animals; and by working with key agencies to empower them to create more opportunities for companion animals to be accommodated at refuge centres and other emergency housing facilities.
- The RSPCA believes that relevant state and territory legislation should allow for the inclusion of companion animals in violence intervention/restraining orders.
- The RSPCA supports education programs that promote empathy and the humane treatment of animals for children who have been exposed to animal cruelty, domestic or other interpersonal violence.

5. Pets and Homelessness

In these tough times, people's circumstances can change rapidly – marriages break up, people lose their jobs or have to move for work, or landlords unexpectedly decide to sell their flat.

According to Homelessness Australia, around half of one per cent of Australians are currently homeless. (*Homelessness Australia.*)

Many of them sleep in overcrowded temporary accommodation, boarding houses, supported accommodation for the homeless or – if they're lucky – with friends or acquaintances. If you happen to have a companion animal with you, your eligibility to access accommodation is reduced.

Around six per cent of homeless people sleep in abandoned buildings or even tents.

For those with companion animals, accommodation like this – often without power or running water – may be the only option. There may be pressure to surrender a pet in these circumstances – yet when the going gets tough, a companion animal may be the only constant, the only source of unconditional friendship.

Although pet ownership greatly enriches the lives of those who are homeless, it also comes at a significant financial cost. Annual vaccinations, flea treatment, routine worming, de-sexing and microchipping an animal costs hundreds of dollars.

More and more animals are being cared for by the RSPCA, as owners struggle to care for their pets as the cost of living crisis bites. Figures released earlier this year by RSPCA UK show rehoming has dropped eight per cent, while animal intake is up 8.4 per cent year-on-year. (*Webb, 2022.*)

This trend is becoming increasingly apparent in Australia.

Every day, RSPCA Tasmania receives calls from people who are either homeless or facing homelessness – and some of these people are having to make a heartbreaking decision to choose between their pets and having a roof over their heads.

The cost of living crisis also means more animals are coming into our care, while fewer people consider taking on a new pet. Shelters, including the RSPCA, are also beginning to see more animals coming into care because their owners simply couldn't afford to care for them anymore; or, in the most extreme cases, having been neglected or abandoned due to the rising cost of pet care.

Given important role pets play in their owners' lives, it is essential that responses to homelessness take into account the human-animal bond and support this group to meet their basic needs, like housing and shelter, food, and healthcare, without separating pets and people.

6. Companion Animals in Tasmania

Almost two-thirds of Australian households have a, and 90% of us have had a pet at some time. This includes an estimated 5.1 million dogs, 3.8 million cats, 11.3 million fish, 5.6 million birds, 614,000 small mammals, 364,000 reptiles and 1.8 million 'other' pets.

If this data were extrapolated across all Australian households, it would mean there are more pets than people in Australia. (*Animal Medicines Australia, 2021*).

Tasmania is the state with the highest incidence of pet-ownership, with 44% of its residents living with at least one dog, 34% living with at least one cat, and 16% living with at least one of each. (*Roy Morgan Research, 2020*).

We've progressed from a sense that pets are just "fun" to recognising that pets support positive changes in mental health, address significant medical conditions and promote social connection. Studies even show that pets have the power to lower the cost of health care and strengthen the social fabric of local communities. (See, for example, the work carried out by the Waltham Petcare Science Institute.)

More health professionals are recommending pets and incorporating them into the long term management of mental health conditions.

Pets improve physical health as well. Research demonstrates that pet owners have lower blood pressure and are more likely to achieve recommended levels of daily exercise. Dog ownership has also been shown to correlate with reduced obesity and longer life expectancy.

Research on child health has indicated that growing up with a pet can positively influence children's development. Kids with pets are more likely to be physically active and social, and learn important life skills through taking care of pets.

Pets also bring us together, reducing loneliness and social isolation. We now know that communities with more pets are more closely-knit and connected. Pets help us interact with each other and serve as the common ground that can often be missing in our society.

The pandemic has brought home how profoundly pet ownership and interaction can positively impact people at all stages of life.

Anecdotal evidence shows that pet owners say their pet helped them cope emotionally with the pandemic.

There is no doubt that there is significant public interest in the welfare of companion animals, as evidenced by the thousands of people who sign petitions, follow animal-oriented social media pages, and the numbers of animal-centered news items in Tasmanian media publications.

Polling by Roy Morgan Research in March this year found that:

- 98% of Australians consider animal welfare to be important
- 94% support laws that ensure animals are provided with a good quality of life
- 97% support laws that ensure animals are protected from cruel treatment
- 80% support government doing more to protect animal welfare
- 74% support the creation of an independent body to oversee animal welfare
- 85% support animal welfare laws reflecting community expectations and best available science.

(*Roy Morgan Research, 2022*).

7. About RSPCA Tasmania

Who we are

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Tasmania (RSPCA) is a not-for-profit non-government organisation. We have been working to improve the lives of animals in this state since 1878.

The RSPCA is the only Tasmanian organisation named in animal welfare legislation and we enjoy the continued support of all levels of government.

The community respects our knowledge of animal welfare, which is grounded in science and based on experience. In the 143 years since the RSPCA was established in the state, we have helped hundreds of thousands of animals in need in all kinds of situations: in homes, backyards, on farms, in the wild, and at sporting arenas.

As a charity, we strive to maintain an open-door policy, so no abandoned, neglected, injured, or surrendered animal is turned away or forgotten. Along with cats and dogs, the RSPCA aids a wide range of other animals, including horses, rabbits, guinea pigs, birds, goats, and sheep.

During the past three years, RSPCA Tasmania has:

- Investigated over 25,000 reports of animal cruelty;
- Provided care for more than 6,670 animals; and
- Delivered information to thousands of people on animal welfare, responsible animal care and pet ownership through school, community, and online education.

Our role is to act as a conduit for the community's concerns about animal welfare, to ensure those concerns are heard by our state's decision makers. So, our advocacy activities are a vitally important part of our work

Animals play a significant role in the lives of many people. Most Tasmanians, whether they live in suburbia, rural properties, or in regional towns, say animal welfare is important or extremely important to them.

Many Tasmanians expect improved animal welfare outcomes to be a high priority for the state government.

With an ultimate goal of improving animal welfare state and country-wide, we acknowledge the crucial role of humans in keeping our animals safe.

So, we not only serve animals in need, but also pet parents and supervisors who require guidance and support through education and assistance in relation to domestic violence, aged care, homelessness, mental health, and more.

What we do

Our strategic priorities are built on the pillars of Animals, Sustainability, and Our People. Within that framework we aim to:

- manage costs efficiently, and grow reliable revenue streams – by removing unnecessary costs and operating within available resources
- achieve the best welfare outcome for every animal in our care – through adopting socially conscious sheltering principles, improving the capability of our facilities, and increasing adoptions and foster care arrangements
- reduce animal cruelty and neglect – through advocacy that delivers legislative change, and community education that improves awareness and welfare outcomes
- reduce the number of surrendered and homeless animals – through increased desexing and microchipping programs, and providing support to people in difficult circumstances
- support our people to do their great work – by building an exceptional workplace culture, and a dedicated network of foster carers, volunteers, and animal specialists.

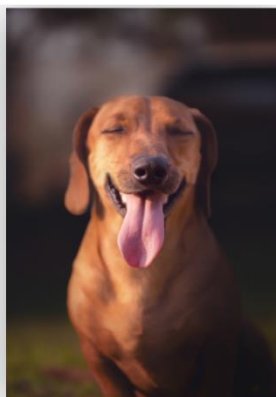
To prevent cruelty to animals by ensuring the enforcement of animal welfare laws.



Through advocacy, to promote the amendment or creation of new animal welfare legislation as necessary.



To develop and promote modern policies using scientific knowledge.



To educate the community with regard to the humane caring for animals humanely.



To engage with relevant stakeholders that enable the improvement of animal welfare.



To sustain an intelligent public opinion in regards to animal welfare.

How we work

- Our Animal Care Centre (ACC) at Devonport is dedicated to caring for, rehabilitating and rehoming animals.
- Our Adoption and Retail Centres (ARCs) in Latrobe, Launceston, and Hobart are our bases in the community. Animals are surrendered and rehomed through these centres; owners can access advice and supplies for their companion animals; and our ARC teams assist with local microchipping and education activities in their communities.
- Our Inspectorate operates under delegated powers from the state government to investigate and prosecute instances of alleged animal cruelty. Inspectors are co-located with DPIPW in Hobart, Launceston, and Devonport, and operate across the state. This team is supported by a call centre equipped to handle reports.
- Our team of dedicated volunteers assists in all our activities. They serve on our board; they care for animals in our ACC and ARCs; they organise fundraising events; and they support us in many other activities. We could not do what we do without these wonderful people.
- Our corporate office is in Launceston. Supporting our frontline teams, a group of dedicated professionals work across many areas – including fundraising and marketing, policy and advocacy, volunteer organisation, project delivery and – last but not least – our administration team who answer the phones and keep the lights on.

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Corporate Office: Level 4, Queen Victoria Tower, 7 High Street, East Launceston 7250

Devonport Animal Care Centre: 108 Tarleton Road, Spreyton, 7310

Latrobe Adoption & Retail Centre: 3/135 Gilbert Street, Latrobe 7307

Launceston Adoption & Retail Centre: 3/207 Invermay Road, 7248

Hobart Adoption & Retail Centre: 55-57 Albert Road, Moonah, 7009

Animal Cruelty Hotline: 1300 139 947; reportit@rspcatas.org.au

