

About this advice

Given the COVID-19 pandemic it is more important than ever that local councils and State agencies work together effectively to deliver essential services. This pandemic is continuing to have unprecedented direct and indirect impacts on communities and service delivery. For regulators, this is likely to have significant impacts on staff, facilities and operations.

The following general advice is to help councils identify how best to ensure the health, safety and welfare of people and animals and to continue to impound animals and articles as needed. Importantly, this advice should not be followed if it would be contrary to the Public Health Orders or advice from NSW Health or another relevant NSW Government agency.

Health advice on COVID-19, pets and other animals

Members of the public are uncertain about the impact of COVID-19 on their pets. In some areas, this may affect willingness to foster and adopt cats and dogs and increase the likelihood of pets being surrendered to pounds and shelters. Councils should be aware of the following current advice and take steps to convey it to their local communities:

- There is no evidence to suggest that any animals (livestock, pets or wildlife) in Australia might be a source of infection with this new coronavirus
- While this virus seems to have emerged from an unknown animal source in China, it is now spreading from person-to-person and contact with people is the main route of infection
- The best way to reduce risk is to practice effective hygiene controls
- It is always a good idea to wash hands with soap and water (or use an alcohol-based sanitiser) before and after contact with animals
- If a person does test positive with COVID-19, the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) recommends minimising close contact with pets (such as avoiding hugging, face-to-face contact or sleeping on your bed) and using good hand hygiene practices around animals, including washing hands before and after handling animals, and
- If a person owns or cares for an animal that needs veterinary attention and that person is in quarantine or isolation they should be advised to make telephone contact with their local veterinarian for advice about what to do.

Advice for council pounds and shelters

1. *Immediate action*

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in NSW is increasing. All employers and workers must act now to manage the spread of this virus among workers and others within the work environment. Cleaning and personal hygiene practices should be increased and promoted to reduce the spread of the virus.

During uncertain times it is important that animal owners and carers, including council pounds and shelters, take appropriate steps to ensure the continued welfare of their animals. It is your responsibility to protect the welfare of animals in your care at all times.

All animal owners and carers, including those responsible for animal holding facilities, are responsible for ensuring animal welfare standards are maintained. Staff and volunteers should practice good hygiene practices, including hand hygiene before and after handling animals and their food. Implement precautionary measures such as prohibiting unnecessary visitors to your facilities.

It is important that council pounds and shelters are able to continue to care for animals, while managing risks to staff, volunteers and the general public. Councils are encouraged to continue to work with rehoming organisations and volunteers to care for animals, where that can be undertaken consistent with NSW Health advice. The Office of Local Government (OLG) is aware, however, that the COVID-19 pandemic may impact staff, facilities and usual operational arrangements. Given this, councils that have not yet done so should put in place measures to:

- Manage risks to staff and volunteers, including by reducing face-to-face contact at pounds and shelters
- Promote fostering and adoption of animals to reduce animals held at facilities
- Assess food, medications and other supplies on hand and whether they can continue to be accessed and provided if there is an interruption to availability
- Communicate regularly with vets and Local Land Services (LLS) to identify issues, and
- Collaborate with other councils, shelters and groups to share resources, if needed.

2. *Business continuity planning*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, councils are implementing Business Continuity Plans and identifying services (such as animal shelters) that may need to be maintained. Councils are also putting in place measures to ensure they comply with Public Health Orders and other advice from NSW Health.

It is important to plan ahead and consider a range of factors that will reduce the risk of animal welfare issues that may occur during a pandemic. Being prepared is key to minimising any animal welfare impacts that may arise.

Contingency plans for pounds and shelters should consider how best to respond to potential future changes. Consider different scenarios and staffing levels required to care for animals and alternative approaches to staffing so that care can be maintained if there is absenteeism in the short, medium and longer term. Issues to consider include:

- Potential reductions in staff and volunteers due to social distancing and isolation
- Potential increases in the number of animals surrendered over coming months, and
- Likely reduced capacity at private and charitable animal shelters and kennels.

A contingency plan should also consider what you will do if you are unable to continue caring for your animals. Practising your plan will assist in refining actions before they are activated.

Compliance and enforcement officers

Local government compliance and enforcement officers and staff that perform related roles in councils should review OLG's *General advice to councils on undertaking regulatory functions during the COVID-19 pandemic*. This sets out general advice and considerations that councils should consider as regulators at this time.

In general, it is recommended that local government compliance and enforcement officers take care in undertaking their roles to consider how best to protect public health and safety in all of the circumstances, including in choosing how to exercise discretion. Council compliance and enforcement teams may wish to consider:

- How best to ensure an appropriate response can be made to dog attacks as well as maintaining controls for restricted and dangerous dogs
- Using social media and websites to provide up to date information to pet owners

- Modifying impounding procedures of all animals and articles under relevant laws, where possible, to ensure the safety and welfare of animals, staff and volunteers, and
- Suspending face to face community outreach and education programs.

Emergency management arrangements

The Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and LLS lead the NSW Government's coordination and assistance in relation to animals as part of emergency management. These arrangements capture livestock and wildlife as well as companion animals.

In a pandemic, DPI and LLS support NSW Health (the designated combat agency) to:

- Assist primary producers, animal holding establishments and the community to be prepared for pandemic outbreaks
- Coordinate rescue committees, evacuation and emergency care for animals
- Coordinate assessment, humane destruction and disposal of affected animals, and
- Support recovery arrangements including providing impact damage assessments and contributing to recovery centres and committees.

Where to go for further information

Councils should also monitor the [Commonwealth Department of Health](#) and [NSW Health](#) or [World Health Organization](#) websites for the latest information, as advice changes.

Contacts for specific queries are:

- **Health** – contact the National Coronavirus Health Information Line 1800 020 080
- **Industry and biosecurity related inquiries** – contact the Department of Primary Industries at covidinfo@dpi.nsw.gov.au, and
- **Companion animal functions** - contact the Office of Local Government on 1300 134 460 Monday to Friday (9am-4.30pm) or email pets@olg.nsw.gov.au.

Alternatively, contact your OLG Council Engagement Manager on 02 4428 4100 or olg@olg.nsw.gov.au for further advice.