

DATE 31 October 2024

RSPCA NSW welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the consultation draft of the Service List which attaches to the new Aged Care Rules under the *New Aged Care Act 2024* (Cth) (the Act). We are committed to advocating for policies that recognise the essential role pets play in the lives of older Australians.

RSPCA NSW recognises the critical role pets play in enhancing the well-being of older people, offering companionship and emotional support, promoting physical activity, providing a sense of purpose, a point of connection with their community and encouraging social inclusion, which in turn acts as an important pathway for referral to vital support services.

We advocate for integrating pet ownership within the Aged Care Rules (Service List) and highlight the need to promote and prioritise pet companionship in both home environments and residential care settings for older people. We refer particularly to the benefits to older people and their beloved pets in maintaining and supporting (including financially) those relationships as people age.

Failure to Recognise Pets in Aged Care Service List

Rule 26 prescribes 22 service types for the purposes of implementing s8(2) of the Act. However, the service list does not prescribe any support for older Australians for pet ownership and care. In fact, it excludes assistance with pet care from the general house cleaning service type (see rule 36 consultation draft) and otherwise fails to refer to assistance with companion animals at all.

This failure overlooks the large proportion of older people who care for companion animals and the significant contribution pets make to older people's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. 59% of Australians aged 50-69 and 45% over 70 have pets.¹ Pets provide companionship, encourage physical activity, and enhance social inclusion, which are all critical factors in promoting a higher quality of life for older Australians.

However, older people can face challenges when caring for their animal companions. Cleaning litter trays, walking dogs, cleaning food bowls, and performing necessary animal husbandry such as grooming all become increasingly difficult as mobility and vision limitations progress, which can contribute to worsening conditions in the home and poor human and animal welfare.² Older pet owners also worry about what will happen to their animals if they are suddenly hospitalised,

¹ AMA 2016. Pet Ownership in Australia. Animal Medicines Australia. Available online: <https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/report/pet-ownership-in-australia-2016/> (Accessed 25th August 2022)

² Ebenstein, H., & Wortham, J. (2001). The Value of Pets in Geriatric Practice: A Program Example. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 35(2), 99–115. https://doi.org/10.1300/J083v35n02_07

while pet owners undergoing medical treatment can experience distress and compromise their recovery, even leaving the hospital prematurely due to concerns about animals left at home³. In addition, caring for the pets of elderly pet owners can place extra time, energy, and monetary burdens on caregivers who may lack appropriate training and resources to care for their clients or loved ones' animals. Despite senior pet owners' challenges, giving up their animals is often unthinkable. They are genuinely valued as family members. Ultimately, the fear of losing their animals or their home can lead to distrust of outsiders and increasing social isolation for older people struggling to cope.

It is essential to acknowledge that many of the costs included under these new rules aim to meet similar objectives, such as "meeting the individual's need for social contact or company." A large body of literature demonstrates that caring for pets delivers these same outcomes and often provides a sense of connection and emotional support equal to or greater than other services.⁴ By excluding pet care, the service list fails to meet the statutory objective of providing a comprehensive, person-centred approach to aged care.

Incorporating Pet Ownership in Aged Care

We strongly advocate for including services that support older people in maintaining pet ownership. Pets can be a primary source of emotional support and companionship, reducing the need for other costly interventions to address loneliness, depression, or inactivity.

To this end, we recommend the following be added to the Service List:

- **Pet Care Support Services:** Under rule 36 - Domestic assistance, pet care should be included alongside services like home maintenance, meal preparation, and personal care. This can include feeding pets, assisting with basic pet care, and transporting to and from veterinary appointments as needed. Many older Australians delay accessing necessary medical or residential care out of fear of being separated from their beloved pets. Including pet support in aged care services would help alleviate this concern.
- **Funding for Pet Care in Residential Aged Care:** Under Division 8 – Residential Care Services, funding should be allocated to aged care facilities to create pet-friendly environments. This includes staff training, infrastructure modifications, and policies that allow pets to live with their owners in residential care. Retaining a pet in a residential care setting has been shown to improve residents' emotional and mental well-being.

³ Ebenstein, H., & Wortham, J. (2001). The Value of Pets in Geriatric Practice: A Program Example. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 35(2), 99–115. https://doi.org/10.1300/J083v35n02_07

⁴ L Wood, K Martin, H Christian, A Nathan, C Lauritsen, S Houghton, I Kawachi and S McCune, 'The pet factor – companion animals as a conduit for getting to know people, friendship formation and social support' (2015) 10(4) *Plos One*.

Broader Inclusion of Companion Animal Benefits

RSPCA NSW repeats our submission, that the Department reconsider the exclusion of pets from the service coverage list and instead include services that promote pet companionship, given the clear and well-documented health benefits. Pets are proven to reduce stress, lower blood pressure, and promote mental well-being, directly reducing the need for more intensive care services. Including pet support services under categories such as Therapeutic Services for Independent Living and Social Support would further reinforce the holistic, person-centred care approach the new Act aims to deliver.

Research and Support Programs for Pet Ownership in Aged Care

RSPCA NSW encourages the government to allocate funding for research investigating the benefits of pet ownership for older Australians and developing programs that provide practical support for pet owners. In previous consultations, we highlighted how pets act as social catalysts, help reduce loneliness, and foster social interactions, particularly for individuals who may be isolated. Providing funding and resources for animal welfare organisations like RSPCA NSW to support older Australians and their pets would significantly enhance the effectiveness of aged care services.

Background and Rationale

The Aged Care Rules (Service List) needs to recognise the significance of pets in the lives of older Australians and respond to the support needed in order to maintain pet companionship. Research consistently demonstrates the benefits of pet ownership for older people, including reduced loneliness, enhanced physical health, and improved mental well-being. For instance, studies indicate that interacting with pets can lower blood pressure, decrease loneliness, and extend life expectancy.

The RSPCA NSW Aged Care SROI Report 2023 demonstrates how concerns about their animal companions' well-being and safety can hinder older people from accessing appropriate accommodation and health services.⁵ However, the Aged Care Rules (Service List) show a policy gap where pet-owning older people's needs still need to be fully addressed, potentially impacting their ability to maintain this crucial source of support and companionship.

Evidence on Benefits of Pets for Older People

- 1. Physical Health Benefits:** Pets encourage more physical activity in older people, which can lead to reduced blood pressure, lower cholesterol levels, and decreased triglyceride levels, contributing to better overall cardiovascular health and reduced doctor visits.⁶

⁵ G Ma, J Ravulo, and U McGeown, 'RSPCA NSW Aged Care Social Return on Investment Report' (2023), (online) <https://www.rspcansw.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/SROI-Report-Aged-Care-digital.pdf>

⁶ B Heady, F Na and R Zheng 'Pet dogs benefit owners' health: a 'natural' experiment in China' (2008) 87(3) *Social Indicators Research*, 481.

- 2. Mental Health Benefits:** Interaction with pets has been shown to lower cortisol levels, a stress-related hormone, and increase serotonin levels, a feel-good chemical in the brain. This can improve overall mental health, reducing loneliness and depression.⁷
- 3. Social Benefits:** Pets can act as social catalysts, encouraging interactions among people, which is particularly beneficial for older people who may experience social isolation. Pets provide companionship, reducing loneliness and social anxiety.⁸

Case Studies and Program Insights

The RSPCA NSW Aged Care SROI Report 2023 unequivocally demonstrates the importance of pets in enhancing the well-being and health of older people.⁹ By providing a detailed analysis of the emotional, social, and physical benefits pets offer to older people and the support required to overcome care challenges, the report underscores the need for programs like the [RSPCA NSW Aged Care Program](#). Such initiatives ensure the welfare of older people and their pets and contribute significantly to societal health and well-being.

The Report demonstrates that:

- **Pets provide emotional support and companionship:** For many older people, pets are not just animals but family members who offer unconditional love and support. The report highlights that pets play a critical role in alleviating loneliness and social isolation among older people, conditions linked to significant health risks like depression and cardiovascular disease. Pets help older people maintain a sense of purpose and joy in their daily lives by offering companionship and someone to nurture and care for. An older person's animal often gives them a reason to stay alive.
- **Pets provide physical health benefits:** Engaging with pets encourages older people to stay active and engage in physical activity, whether through walking a dog or simply caring for a pet at home. This activity improves their physical health by maintaining mobility, reducing the risk of chronic diseases, and promoting mental health by decreasing stress and anxiety levels.

Challenges in Pet Care

Despite the benefits, the report acknowledges the challenges older people face in pet care, such as physical limitations that make it difficult to perform routine tasks like walking a dog or cleaning. There is also the concern of what happens to their pets should they become incapacitated or pass away; which frequently results in the decision to forgo pet companionship altogether.

⁷ AR McConnell, CM Brown, TM Shoda, LE Stayton and CE Martin 'Friends with benefits: on the positive consequences of pet ownership' (2011) 101(6) *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1239.

⁸ L Wood, K Martin, H Christian, A Nathan, C Lauritsen, S Houghton, I Kawachi and S McCune, (n4).

⁹ G Ma, J Ravulo, and U McGeown, (n 5).

To address these challenges, the RSPCA NSW Aged Care Program provides crucial support to older people, enabling them to care for their pets despite physical and financial constraints. The program offers veterinary care, emergency boarding, and in-home support, ensuring the health and welfare of older people and their pets.

In addition, RSPCA NSW has created the Home Ever After Program, a future care plan for people's beloved pets should something happen to them. Having a plan in place provides excellent peace of mind and secures the future well-being of their pet.

Impact and Outcomes

The report's findings are clear: the RSPCA NSW Aged Care Program significantly improves older people's and their pets' lives. The program generates \$5.77 in social value for every dollar invested, reflecting its positive impact on older people's mental health, physical well-being, and social inclusion. It helps older people maintain cherished relationships with their pets and reduces the burden on animal shelters and healthcare systems.

The report includes heartfelt testimonials from older people involved in the program, highlighting pets' critical role in their lives. Many express that their pets are their primary source of companionship and support, reinforcing the program's importance in keeping these companions together.

Conclusion

The current approach to excluding pet care from the Aged Care Rules (Service List) is inconsistent with the overarching goal of the new Aged Care Act, which seeks to provide high-quality, person-centred care.

RSPCA NSW strongly urges the Department to recognise pets' significant role in older Australians' lives by incorporating pet support services into the new Aged Care Rules (Service List). We look forward to further engagement on this important matter and welcome any opportunity to provide additional feedback or clarification.

RSPCA NSW's submission underscores pets' critical role in enhancing older people's well-being. By integrating support for pet ownership into the Aged Care Rules (Service List), we can make a significant step towards a more compassionate, holistic approach to aged care. We urge the federal government to consider these recommendations to improve the lives of older people and their cherished pets.