

DISCUSSION PAPER

Litchfield Council Animal Management Plan

2019 - 2023



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1. INTRODUCTION

Litchfield Council is preparing a four-year Animal Management Plan (2019 – 2023), which will guide its management of domestic dogs and other animals within the municipality. We are interested in hearing from you on what you feel the key issues are and what actions you'd like to see taken by Council.

Council is committed to ensuring that our community's safety and amenity is upheld and protected, and that Litchfield is the best place to live in the Top End.

You can share your views with us online via the 'Your Say Litchfield' website at yoursay.litchfield.nt.gov.au, in person, or by mail to PO Box 446, Humpty Doo, NT 0836. Your input will assist Council to develop a draft Plan which will be available for public comment later this year.

Please take the time to read the discussion paper before telling us what you think, or simply respond to the questions outlined below.

2. BACKGROUND

The development and implementation of an Animal Management Plan will provide Council with a strategic framework to effectively manage the increasing number of domestic dogs within our community. The Plan will also outline how other animals, such as wild dogs and livestock, are managed.

The purpose of the Animal Management Plan is to:

- Outline the programs, services and strategies which the Council intends to pursue;
- Ensure that people are aware of Council's Dog Management By-laws and encourage compliance with the By-laws;
- Promote and encourage the responsible ownership of dogs;
- Ensure that authorised officers are appropriately trained;
- Minimise the risk of attack by dogs on people and animals;
- Address over-population and high euthanasia rates for dogs;
- Encourage the identification, registration and de-sexing of dogs;
- Minimise the potential for dogs to create a nuisance; and
- Provide for the periodic review of any program, service or strategy outlined in the plan.

Council believes that a long-term Animal Management Plan is vital to ensure the effective management of animals within our community.

3. KEY FACTS

3.1 Population (people and dogs)

Our municipality encompasses a unique rural living environment and, in addition to dogs, many residents keep poultry, horses, cattle and other livestock for recreational, commercial and hobby purposes on their properties.

With a population of approximately 25,300 residents living in 8,300 properties, it is estimated that there are at least 6,700 domestic dogs living in our community. This figure is based on the current national average of 38% of households owning 1.3 dogs and, taking into consideration that many of Litchfield's residents own multiple dogs, we estimate that as many as 45% of households in the municipality could own 1.8 dogs.

3.2 By-laws

Council implemented new dog management by-laws in July 2017, with some significant changes being introduced aimed at assisting Council to more effectively manage the increasing number of dogs within the municipality.

Litchfield Council's Dog Management By-laws require dog owners to microchip and register their dogs and to ensure they are appropriately contained on their property. Dog registration is the most efficient way for Council to deal with problem dogs and irresponsible dog owners by enabling conditions to be placed on registration, or cancellation of registration in some cases, resulting in removal of the dog from the municipality. Since the implementation of dog registration, Council Rangers have removed two dogs from the municipality for non-registration. The owner of the dogs was provided the opportunity to register or voluntarily remove the dogs from the municipality but failed to do either, so Rangers obtained a warrant from the Court to enter the property and seized the dogs.

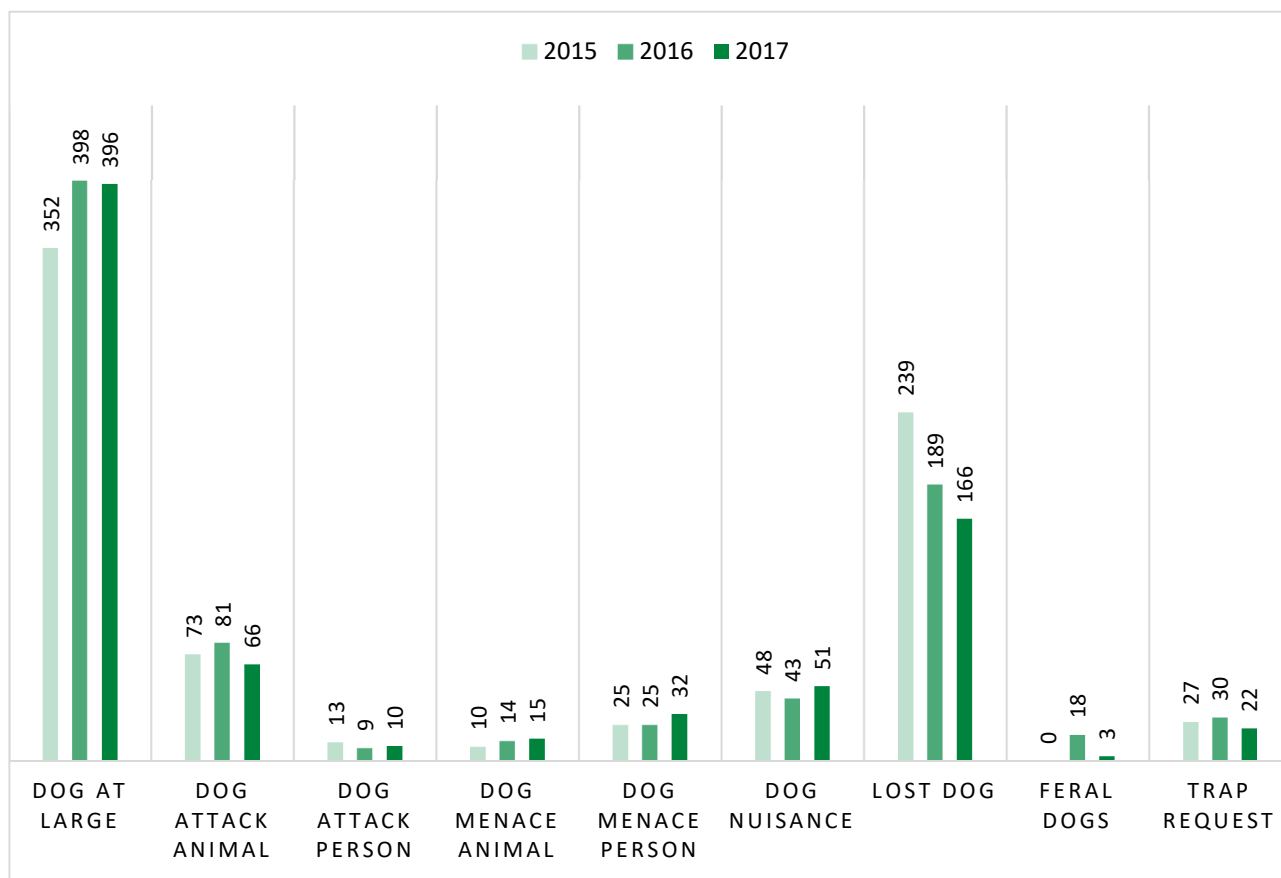
The By-laws provide Council with the ability to declare a dog dangerous, with strict conditions placed on the dog's registration to reduce the likelihood of the dog attacking again. Since implementation of the new Dog Management By-laws, Council has declared two dogs to be Dangerous Dogs. One of these dogs is now deceased and the other dog was required to be removed from the municipality as the conditions of registration were breached. This dog now resides in Darwin as a Declared Dangerous Dog.

All dogs are required to be on a suitable leash when in a public area and although there are currently no designated dog exercise or restriction areas within the municipality, the By-laws allow Council to declare such areas if the need is identified in the future.

The By-laws also provide Council with the ability to determine a maximum number of dogs that are permitted to be kept on a property (or properties) without a licence.

3.3 Customer Request Statistics

The chart below shows the number and type of animal-related requests received from members of the public over the past three years.



It is important that roaming dogs, nuisance dogs, dog attacks and all incidents involving dogs that occur in our community are reported to Council, especially where dogs are repeatedly roaming. This enables Council Rangers to speak with the dog owners and to assist them in resolving any containment and/or dog behaviour issues which may be placing the dog and the community at risk.

3.4 Resourcing

Litchfield Council's Animal Management Team (Regulatory Services) currently consists of a Regulatory Services Manager and two full time Rangers. Administrative support in the processing of dog registration payments is provided by Customer Service staff. The Team investigate complaints, manage the Council's pound facility, conduct patrols, provide a microchipping service and respond to all animal related enquiries. The three full-time staff in the Animal Management Team work Monday to Friday 8.15am to 4.30pm.

Additional resources would be required to enable Council to provide this service outside of Council's normal hours of operation. Council's Enterprise Agreement specifies that all time worked on a Saturday and/or Sunday shall be paid at the rate of double time and at a rate of double time and a half for hours worked on a public holiday. The agreement also specifies that employees should receive a ten-hour break after completing overtime and before commencing their next ordinary

shift. If this is not possible, the employee must then be paid at the normal overtime rate of time and a half.

For safety reasons, Rangers working after hours would be required to work in pairs, and Council would have to employ a minimum of two additional Rangers to facilitate this so two Rangers could be rostered on as 'on-call' for each seven-day period. It is estimated that it would cost Council an additional \$200,000 per year to provide an after-hours animal management service.

The net operating cost to run Council's Regulatory Services Team for the 2016/17 financial year was \$370,049, and with an increase in revenue (mainly due to the introduction of dog registration), the net operating cost for Regulatory Services in the 2017/18 financial year has been reduced to approximately \$305,000.

Below is a comparison table with data from our neighbouring councils, Darwin and Palmerston.

Resourcing Comparison Table 2016/17

COUNCIL	Area Km²	Population	Reg'd Dogs	No. of Staff	2016/17 Expenditure	2016/17 Income	2016/17 Total Net Cost
Litchfield	3100	25,262	5,200	3	408,048	37,999	370,049
Palmerston	56	33,695	5,988	7.5	700,000	325,000	375,000
Darwin	112	84,468	9,584	27	4,246,000	2,621,000	1,625,000

The data provided in the comparison table represents the entire Regulatory Services section of each of the Councils. Darwin Council's Regulatory Services section is responsible for CBD and Suburban Parking, Untidy Allotments, Abandoned Vehicles, Illegal Camping and Animal Management. Palmerston Council's Regulatory Services section mainly deal with animal related complaints, with a small percentage of their resources allocated to Parking Enforcement, Abandoned Vehicles and Untidy Allotments. Apart from approximately 30 Abandoned Vehicle customer requests each year, Litchfield Council's Regulatory Services Team deal predominantly with Animal Management issues.

The budgeted net operating cost of Litchfield Council's Regulatory Services section for the coming year will decrease further, being forecast at \$294,864 in Council's 2018/19 budget.

3.5 Staff Training and Development

Council is committed to ensuring that Rangers are appropriately trained and equipped to carry out their duties safely, appropriately and in accordance with legislative requirements. Rangers are required to have an understanding of legislation and investigative processes, as well as sound animal handling skills, including dangerous dog handling.

Over the past two years, Rangers have successfully completed the Certificate IV in Government Investigations which they studied externally, and which was fully funded by Council. Rangers also attended an Animal Management Officer workshop in Darwin, a Dangerous Dog Handling workshop and training in Effective Conflict Resolution.

The Regulatory Services Manager and one Ranger attend the Australian Institute of Animal Management (AIAM) Workshop and Conference which is held annually. This is a fantastic opportunity for Council's Animal Management staff to network with other animal management professionals from across the country and to gain valuable insight into animal management practices within other Council areas throughout Australia. Council's current Regulatory Services Manager sits on the AIAM Committee as the only representative from the Northern Territory.

Council allocated \$5,000 in its 2017/18 budget for training and development of Regulatory Services staff and has provided the same amount of funding in its 2018/19 budget.

3.6 Recent Initiatives

Free Dog Registration

Changes to the Litchfield Council Dog Management By-laws saw the introduction of dog registration in August 2017. Free dog registration was provided to all dog owners who registered their dogs prior to 15 December 2017.

Dog Awareness Program for Schools

Council's Animal Management Team have presented a Dog Awareness Program to primary school students at Sattler Christian College and Bees Creek Primary School over the past two years. The program is aimed at increasing awareness about dog aggression, encouraging responsible dog ownership, dog behaviour and dog health and wellbeing in general.



The program is offered to nine Litchfield Primary Schools each year, with Sattler Christian College and Bees Creek Primary School being the only schools to participate so far.

De-sexing Initiative

Over the past two years, Council has provided two hundred de-sexing vouchers, valued at \$100 each, to dog owners within the municipality. This initiative was aimed at encouraging residents to de-sex their dogs and promoting the importance of de-sexing as a part of responsible pet ownership.

The de-sexing of dogs results in a range of well-known benefits for dogs and their owners, including specific health benefits for dogs, improvement in the sociability of dogs, and a reduction in unwanted litters. Recent research and animal behaviour studies indicate that:

- De-sexed dogs are less aggressive;
- De-sexed dogs are less likely to wander from home;
- De-sexed dogs are less likely to display nuisance behaviours; and
- Initiatives that encourage the de-sexing of dogs are more likely to directly reduce the risk of dog attacks than public education alone.

Council’s pound statistics support this research, with 80% of the dogs found wandering and impounded by Council in the past year, not being de-sexed. Increasing the number of de-sexed dogs within the community will assist in reducing the number of wandering dogs, dog attacks and nuisance dogs, and also help to reduce the number of unwanted dogs that are either dumped or left unclaimed in Council’s pound.

As a further incentive for dog owners to de-sex their dogs, the registration fees for de-sexed dogs are heavily discounted.

Free Microchipping

In 2016/17, Council provided free microchipping for the months of September and January as well as distributing vouchers to dog owners for free microchips at the Fred’s Pass Show and Woofstock, an annual festival held for dogs in Darwin. Almost 400 free microchips have been provided by Council to dogs within the Litchfield municipality over the past two years.

4. DISCUSSION

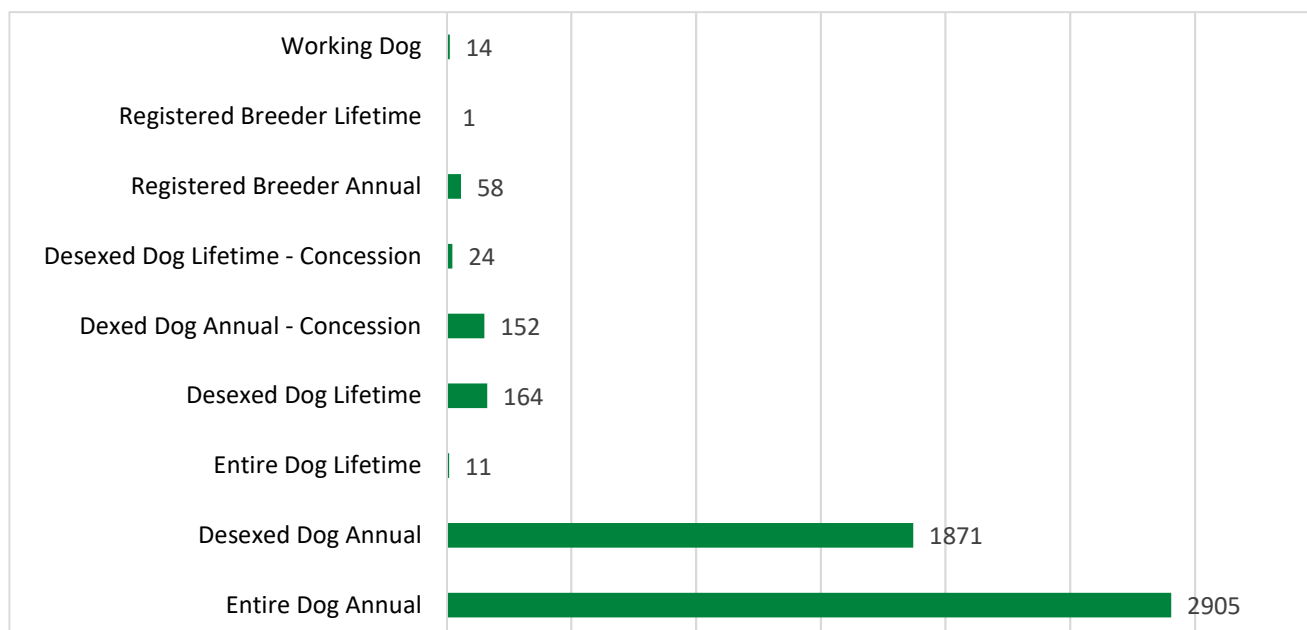
4.1 Registration and identification

All dogs that are kept in the Litchfield Municipality for 3 months or more are required by law to be microchipped and registered with Council. Registration is the quickest way for Rangers to re-unite lost dogs with their owners, as contact details linked to microchips are often out of date.

Annual and Lifetime registration options are available, and Council provides significant fee discounts for dogs that are de-sexed to encourage responsible dog ownership within our community.

Council also provides the first year of annual dog registration free for Litchfield residents who adopt a dog from Paws Darwin or RSPCA Darwin.

In 2017/18 the following registrations by dog category occurred:



Registration fees partially off-set the cost of Council’s Animal Management service, including proactive patrols, responsible pet ownership education and investigation of dog attacks, roaming dogs and nuisance dogs, which go a long way to ensuring the safety and amenity of our community. Of the 8,047 dogs on Council’s microchip database, 2,760 of these have been recorded as deceased or having left the municipality, 3,025 have been registered with Council, and owners of the remaining 2,262 dogs (which are deemed to be registered as they are listed on Council’s microchip database but have not yet been issued with a Council registration tag) will be required to renew their registration prior to the end of the registration period on 31 August 2018.

We are aware that not all dog owners register their pets and it is estimated that there are at least an additional 2,000 unregistered dogs within our community. Securing initial and annual registrations will be an ongoing challenge for Council.

Question 1

What activities/incentives do you think Council could include in its Animal Management Plan to encourage people to microchip and register their dogs?

4.2 Roaming dogs

Dogs are required to be confined to their home property except in the company of their owner (or handler), and on a suitable lead, in public places.

The risks associated with dogs in public places (whether with their owner or wandering at large) include dog attacks on people and other animals and impacts to the enjoyment and safety of other people. There are also welfare concerns for dogs that are wandering at large.

One of the biggest challenges for Council, and for some dog owners in the rural area, is containment. With many large, rural properties only having three strand or pig mesh fencing, other methods of containment are often required to prevent dogs from escaping. Council Rangers are available to provide advice and assistance to dog owners about containment.

The table below compares the number of dogs impounded by Litchfield, Palmerston and Darwin councils for the 2016/17 financial year.

Council	LITCHFIELD	PALMERSTON	DARWIN
Registered Dogs	5200	5988	9584
Dogs Impounded 2016/17	355	737	828

It is important that roaming dogs are reported to Council so that Rangers can speak with dog owners and assist them in resolving any containment and or behavioural issues.

Council is aware that social media sites are being increasingly used to reunite lost pets with their owners, however, the use of social media sites can present certain risks that should be taken into consideration.

- How do you know the person claiming ownership of the pet is the owner? Animal ownership can only be 100% verified by checking the animal's registration and microchip details.
- Is the animal's welfare at risk? Wandering animals are commonly at risk of road trauma and the animal may be regularly escaping with the owner not taking any action to prevent this.
- What is the animals' history? Whilst the animal may appear good natured, it may pose a risk to other animals or people.

We understand that people would prefer to re-unite lost and found dogs with their owners without involving Council, but where dogs are repeatedly escaping their property and roaming, they are at risk of being injured or stolen and threatening the safety of others in our community.

All dogs that are found wandering and impounded by Council are required to be microchipped and registered with Council prior to being released to their owner. When Rangers pick up a dog that is registered with Council, they will attempt to return the dog to its owner immediately without the dog having to be impounded. Owners of registered dogs that are impounded are not required to pay a pound release fee the first time that their dog is impounded by Council.

Question 2

What activities do you think Council could include in its Animal Management Plan to help reduce the number of roaming dogs in our community?

Question 3

What activities do you think Council could include in its Animal Management Plan to encourage people to report roaming dogs to Council?

4.3 Unwanted animals

The number of dogs impounded by Council in 2017 was 347, with 126 of these dogs not being collected by their owner. Of these 126 unclaimed dogs, 92 were transferred to PAWS Darwin for re-homing, 22 went to the RSPCA for re-homing and 12 were required to be euthanised.

Council is committed to ensuring that dogs are not euthanised unnecessarily, that surrendered dogs can be rehomed, if appropriate, and that dogs are not left unclaimed in Council's pound.

One of the most common myths about calling the Rangers to pick up a stray dog or dropping a lost dog off at the Council pound, is that the dog will be put down. Council Rangers work very hard to identify and locate the owners of all impounded dogs and, if no owner comes forward, dogs are offered to Paws Darwin or the RSPCA for re-homing.

Council recently introduced a Disposal of Surrendered and Unclaimed Dogs Policy to ensure that dogs are disposed of appropriately, with euthanasia only considered as an acceptable disposal option under the following circumstances:

- A dog is surrendered to Council for the purposes of euthanasia;
- A dog is vicious, dangerous, feral, unmanageable or likely to cause harm due to its behaviour or temperament;
- A dog is diseased as determined by a veterinary surgeon; or
- A dog is unable to be taken by any re-homing organisation after being impounded for the prescribed period.

In cases where euthanasia is required, it must be carried out by a registered veterinarian.

Council would like to see an increase in the number of impounded dogs collected by their owners, not only because it is a better outcome for the dogs, but it will also reduce the cost to Council for disposal, relieve some pressure from re-homing organisations, and assist Council in maintaining its low euthanasia rate.

Question 4

What activities do you think Council could include in its Animal Management Plan to reduce the number of unwanted dogs that are surrendered, dumped or left unclaimed in the Council pound?

4.4 Nuisance barking

Nuisance barking is generally less of an issue for residents in the rural area due to the size of the properties. In 2017 there were a total of 51 barking complaints registered with Council, which were all resolved without Council taking any formal enforcement action against the dog owners, such as cancellation of registration or placing conditions on registration.

Council Rangers mediate most of these issues to resolution by providing education and tools for reducing any identified nuisance behaviour. Council has anti-bark collars available for hire to assist residents in preventing nuisance barking.

4.5 Dog attacks

There was a total of 76 reported dog attacks reported to Council in 2017, with 66 of those being attacks against other animals such as chickens, small livestock or other dogs, and the remaining 10 being attacks on people.

Research shows that dog aggression most often occurs through fear and anxiety which can be associated with poor socialisation. To increase socialisation of dogs, Council encourages dog owners to attend puppy school or dog obedience and socialisation classes with their dogs. Rangers may

require owners of dogs that are involved in dog attack or menace incidents to attend one or more dog obedience classes to address behavioural issues and reduce the likelihood of repeat offences.

Rangers proactively provide education and advice on the effective control and containment of dogs to prevent attacks. When a reported dog attack is proven, Council Rangers may issue infringements to the owner of the offending dog, and/or declare the dog to be dangerous. In vicious, unprovoked attacks, where a dog is identified as a serious threat to the community, the Council or a Magistrate may order that a dog be destroyed.

Question 5

What activities do you think Council could include in its Animal Management Plan to help minimise the risk of dog attacks occurring in our community?

4.6 Dog exercise and restriction areas

Council recognises the benefits of dog walking and socialisation, which, in the future, may include the need for public areas where dogs can be exercised off lead. However, there are challenges in the provision of off-lead dog exercise areas. These challenges include:

- effective control of dogs in off lead areas;
- ensuring people remove their dog's waste from public areas and dog exercise areas;
- managing the growth in our municipality's population and corresponding demands on public open space by all members of the community, including dog owners; and
- identifying public areas that are suitable for designated off lead dog exercise areas.

Question 6

Do you think there is a need for one or more designated dog exercise areas within the municipality?

Question 7

Are there public areas in the Litchfield municipality where you think dogs should not be allowed?

4.7 Education about responsible pet ownership and other matters

Educating the community about responsible pet ownership underpins the provision of the Litchfield Council's Animal Management program. We undertake a range of activities to encourage responsible dog ownership, including:

- Information sheets and brochures are published on our website and available at the council office;
- Provision of a low-cost microchipping service;
- Our 'Dog Awareness Program' for children is offered to all local primary schools annually and delivered by Council Rangers; and
- Rangers are in attendance at key community events such as the Fred's Pass Show;
- Council's social media accounts are frequently used to provide helpful information such as keeping pets safe in storms and hot weather.

Question 8

What other activities do you think Council could include in its Animal Management Plan to educate the public and encourage people to be responsible dog owners?

4.8 Wild Dogs

Wild dogs in our community can have a number of adverse impacts. They may attack livestock and domestic pets, prey on native species, spread disease, dilute 'dingo' genetics, threaten human safety and potentially impact the general enjoyment of rural residential properties.

It is difficult to accurately determine the full economic, environmental and social impact of wild dogs on the community, as many people do not report sightings or incidents involving wild dogs to Council. On the other hand, people often assume that wild dogs may be responsible for the loss of pets, stock or poultry when it is wandering domestic dogs that are the culprit.

Landholders, residents, local and Northern Territory government agencies share the responsibility of managing pest animals on their respective lands, and a cooperative approach is required to effectively manage the wild dog population in the area.

- The Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory are responsible for management of land and marine protected areas across the Territory;
- The Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Logistics have a responsibility to manage pest animals, including wild dogs, that are inhabiting Crown land; and
- Landholders have a responsibility to take preventative measures against wild dogs and to ensure that their domestic dogs are contained.

A wild dog fact sheet is available on the Litchfield Council website and large dog traps are available for hire from Council if required.

Question 9

What activities do you think Council could include in the Animal Management Plan to help reduce the impact that wild dogs have in our community?

4.9 Livestock and other animals

Council does not currently have any By-laws in place to manage and/or regulate any animals apart from dogs.

If you are having issues with feral cats, Council has cat traps available for hire. Any trapped cats that appear to be domestic or owned should be taken to the nearest Vet or brought in to Council to be scanned for a microchip. Council does not have any facilities to impound or dispose of cats, whether feral or domestic. If you trap a feral cat, it should be disposed of humanely and in accordance with the Animal Welfare Act. If a trapped cat is identified as a domestic cat it should be taken to the RSPCA Darwin or any of the local animal re-homing shelters.

In accordance with the NT Government's Livestock Biosecurity requirements, you must have a property identification code for your property if you keep poultry, pigeons or other livestock, regardless of the size of your property, the number of animals you have, or if they are pets. Information brochures regarding property identification codes and the keeping of livestock are available at the Council office.

Where livestock or other animals, whether native, feral or owned, wander onto a road and pose a traffic hazard, the NT Police should be contacted immediately.

5. NEXT STEPS

You can share your views with Council online via the 'Your Say Litchfield' website at yoursay.litchfield.nt.gov.au. You may wish to prepare a written submission or complete the questionnaire which can be mailed to PO Box 446, Humpty Doo, NT 0836 or hand delivered to the Council office located at 7 Bees Creek Road, Fred's Pass.

Once the consultation period is over, the survey results and submissions will be considered by Council in preparation of its draft Animal Management Plan, which will be released for public comment once completed.