

Minister for Local Government – Questions on Notice

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The CHAIR: The last \$5 million came from the Office of Local Government, and generally because a lot of these rescue organisations are actually collecting animals from pounds, it has historically been considered an Office of Local Government issue rather than an animal welfare issue because it's not an animal cruelty issue. It's a rehoming issue.

Mr RON HOENIG: The Office of Local Government's function seems to be effectively being the acquitter of the grants as distinct from much else. In any event, I will take it on notice and I will chase down what has happened to it because I have a lot of faith in these organisations who perform fabulous functions and who are successful beyond what people would imagine them to be.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

The \$5 million grant referred to was administered by the Office of Local Government and was a one-off competitive grant distributed to 62 organisations. Any additional funding would need to be a part of a new funding decision to be made by the Government.

Representations made by the Chair on behalf of rehoming organisations was considered by the Government during of the 2024/25 budget process. I reiterate my comments during the hearing that as part of the Government's broader animal welfare reform agenda, options for more consistent and sustainable funding opportunities for rehoming organisations will be considered.

I am advised the Government is currently considering applications for a grant to assist research animal rehoming organisations as per the grant guidelines.

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I suppose the summary of that public inquiry was set out by Justice Robson as to a number of the findings that proposed that there be an urgent public inquiry. I determined that there should be a public inquiry under the Act. I gave consideration as to whether or not to defer the election and whether I should suspend the council. I had the power to do that immediately. In fact, that was probably my initial view. I reflected on that overnight because of the significance of that decision-making and I decided that I would give notice of it.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: What were those dates, Minister, when you reflected overnight?

Mr RON HOENIG: It would have been the date before I made the decision. The report was provided to me in form the night before I made the decision. At that stage, I didn't have a briefing note or Mr Whitworth's briefing note.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: When did you first receive the report?

Mr RON HOENIG: That day.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Which was?

Mr RON HOENIG: The day I read it and the date that I came to a preliminary view.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Can you take it on notice as to when you first received that report?

Mr RON HOENIG: I can, yes.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

My office was first provided with a copy of the interim report into Liverpool Council on 10 July 2024.

Pages 8-9

Dr AMANDA COHN: I just have one last question about Cootamundra-Gundagai. I promise we'll move on to other issues. According to your own ministerial diary disclosures, your last meeting with them was in October last year. Have you had further meetings with them or, otherwise, how could you have consulted them about that decision not to postpone the election?

Mr RON HOENIG: If they're not meeting with me as part of a joint organisation or something—for example, the mayor of Cootamundra-Gundagai, I would have met him at a country Labor Party conference—they would be talking to my staff, meeting with my office or having discussions with the Office of Local Government. Also, I've been in regular contact with the member for Cootamundra, whose objective is the same as the council's.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I appreciate you might need to take it on notice. Your wording just then was that they "would have". Did the elected council of Cootamundra-Gundagai meet with your staff this year?

Mr RON HOENIG: I would have to take that on notice; I couldn't tell you offhand. But there's no doubt that Cootamundra-Gundagai and our interactions with them, if they haven't been with me personally, or with me personally and together with the member for Cootamundra, that would have been with either members of my staff and them, or certainly the Office of the Local Government, Mr Whitworth and them. Cootamundra-Gundagai has taken a very substantial portion of all our time since the election.

ANSWER:

I am advised that since becoming the Minister there have been various contacts between Cootamundra-Gundagai Regional Council and both my office and the Office of Local Government, including during the period referenced in the question.

In accordance with the Premier's Memorandum 2015-05, all Ministers publish extracts from their diaries summarising details of scheduled meetings held with stakeholders, external organisations, third-party lobbyists and individuals.

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The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: You mentioned the benefit of the briefing note that was provided to you by Mr Whitworth. Were you aware that a briefing note that Mr Whitworth circulated at 11.27 a.m. on that day, before the final briefing that was prepared, stated that "there is no compelling evidence to suggest that councillors were explicitly involved in the poor governance and recruitment decisions being exercised by the council" and that "on this basis, OLG is not recommending the suspension of councillors to the Minister under section 438W of the Act"?

Mr RON HOENIG: No, I wasn't aware of that.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Was your office aware of that?

Mr RON HOENIG: I don't know. I'd have to find out.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Will you take that on notice?

Mr RON HOENIG: I can take that on notice. As I said, I isolated myself in the decision-making process. I am not sure I would have agreed with that, bearing in mind the contents of the report anyway, even if I'd known about it.

ANSWER:

I am advised my office was also not aware.

Pages 15-16

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Minister, was it envisaged that the report would be tabled before the Parliament?

Mr RON HOENIG: Yes, I think their plan was to table it. I could have tabled it in Parliament if Parliament had been sitting. But tabling a report doesn't change the procedural fairness stature of the report either.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: Was it ever attempted to be tabled before the Parliament?

Mr RON HOENIG: I don't know if it actually was or not, but they were certainly told by the Clerk when they made inquiries that it could not be done.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: So the Clerk gave advice that it couldn't be tabled? That's the reason why it wasn't tabled.

Mr RON HOENIG: The Clerk gave advice to either the Office of Local Government or people in my office. I knew it couldn't be.

The Hon. SCOTT FARLOW: So you never signed a letter forwarding it to the Clerk, then?

Mr RON HOENIG: I don't think so. I would need to check though, Mr Farlow.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

Letters to the Clerks were drafted but not submitted following enquiries made by my office in relation to the standing orders and tabling procedures.

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Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: But I think it depends, right? At the moment it's 12 weeks from birth or from it being sold to you. I know from talking with you at previous estimates, and from answers we had given to us from supplementary questions, that there is a move to try to streamline that registration process from the point of sale, and that's really great. But when you have rescue organisations, which, as we've been discussing, are really poorly funded, being faced with—they've just found a one-year-old cat they want to adopt and take off the streets, but it's going to cost them \$96 a year to register it now because it's over, clearly that's unfair and was not intended by these changes. Is that something you would consider urgently addressing to allow them to register more of these?

Mr RON HOENIG: I think that's something we'd better look at, because you can't impose upon them that sort of fee, can you? We might have to have a look at that.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: That's great. In 2021 the Coalition Government had a free lifetime pet registration for people who adopt a dog or a cat from councils or an animal shelter or rehoming organisation. I don't know when that initiative ended, but I'm wondering if that's something you would consider bringing back.

Mr RON HOENIG: I'll find out. Did it end?

DOUGLAS WALTHER: I'm not sure. We'll have to take that one on notice. To the earlier question, my understanding—and I'll correct it on notice if I'm incorrect—is that rehoming organisations have a 12-month exemption for the un-desexed cats. But I'll confirm that for the afternoon session.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

Members of the public are exempt from paying a registration fee when purchasing a desexed companion animal acquired from a designated rehoming organisation (including council pounds). An organisation can apply to the Office of Local Government to be a designated rehoming organisation. Approved rehoming organisations are eligible for free registration of animals for 12 months, noting that they need to pay registration fees if animals are not rehomed after 12 months.

Pages 25-26

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: I think we have spoken with both the RSPCA and the AWL about some of that. I think that pales in comparison to what they have in Victoria, though, which is effectively a crisis hotline which you can call and you don't fall through the gaps, where someone's taking of your animal for you. You've mentioned Lucy's Project, which I know they've been advocating around this for a while. Are you giving them money for a statewide program?

BRETT WHITWORTH: That was part of those ad hoc one-off grants. They have a range of projects that they're pursuing with that funding.

Ms ABIGAIL BOYD: Perhaps you could come back to me on notice on that to let me know exactly how much funding is going where and how many beds we have for animals in different places. It would be useful to understand how that compares with Victoria.

BRETT WHITWORTH: Okay—if that's something within our remit, as well.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

In 2023 the then Department of Planning and Environment distributed \$33.6 million in grants to non-government animal welfare organisations to improve companion animal welfare outcomes in NSW.

This included \$750,000 to Lucy's Project, to strengthen support services available to people with animals experiencing domestic and family violence.

RSPCA also used \$0.5m of their \$20.5 million grant from OLG towards helping domestic violence clients via the Inspectorate and our complementary Community, Outreach and Education Programs.

I am advised that if council received NSW Government funds for animals impacted by DFV, those records are not administered by OLG. OLG does not receive any detailed reporting on number of beds for animals at different locations.

Pages 26-27

The CHAIR: I have some follow-up questions in regard to domestic violence as well. I'm wondering if you're aware of any funding, Minister, provided to local councils specifically to provide any accommodation in council-run facilities for animals impacted by domestic and family violence.

Mr RON HOENIG: I don't know. Mr Whitworth?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I'm happy take that on notice, because there are several components to the different grants that exist. As Mr Walther said, the Animal Welfare League does have a component of its \$5.5 million. Lucy's Project does have a component. My brain is tingling around there are other parts within government where they're focusing on the individual and recognising that part of the individual being removed from a place of harm also involves their pet. We'd like to take that on notice, please.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

The Office of Local Government is not aware of any funding provided to councils specifically for this purpose.

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The CHAIR: Do you think that, with the new funding that OLG has received, this is an area where there might be some greater involvement, particularly around councils being able to house some of these animals?

Mr RON HOENIG: I don't know. I'd have to take that on notice. It's certainly a worthwhile suggestion.

The CHAIR: You need time to think about it?

Mr RON HOENIG: Yes.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

The money provided to OLG was allocated for a specific purpose. Any additional funding for this would need to be part of a new funding decision by the Government.

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The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Do you know, at present, the number of staff who would be working from home?

KIERSTEN FISHBURN: I would have to take that on notice. It would be different from agency to agency as well. I couldn't give you a direct figure.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

As outlined in the NSW Government Sector workplace presence Circular the default arrangement is to work principally in an approved workplace, office, or related work site. Government sector agencies are expected to have flexible work policies that meet reasonable requests of employees.

Under the former Government, work from home arrangements were not required to be centrally recorded.

Pages 41-42

The CHAIR: I wasn't asking so much about the bill. I understand that you can't really answer questions about how that bill will look. It's more about the Pet Registry section of it. I'm glad to hear that there have already been discussions between the two offices into how that will work. Where will the funding for that come through? Is that an OLG funding issue or is that a DPI funding issue?

BRETT WHITWORTH: I think that the connection point between puppy farms and the Pet Registry is the breeders and the breeder identification number. That's the connection point, and there are already processes around the breeder identification numbers. I would like to take that on notice, but my feeling is that, because it's already part of the system, it's already—

ANSWER:

This question was subsequently answered in the hearing by Douglas Walther. See page 42 of the transcript.

DOUGLAS WALTHER: Yes, there won't be any additional funding required if the legislation results in a cap of total numbers per breeder. The breeder portal records the BIN, and that could be worked into that functionality. If the legislation has greater requirements of the Pet Registry, we would have to assess that.

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The CHAIR: With the 2022-23 statistics, I note that those 10 councils are still "no report". Is it safe to assume that they still haven't provided that data since you followed it up?

KARIN BISHOP: I'll take that on notice and double-check.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

The 10 Councils have not provided this data as at September 2024. The Office of Local Government will be writing to Councils to request this information.

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The CHAIR: You said that some of these councils from the previous round had said that they didn't realise you were still collecting that data. Were there any other explanations given, particularly by some of the larger councils like Strathfield council, as to why they haven't necessarily provided this?

BRETT WHITWORTH: We're probably starting to speculate. I would prefer to take that one on notice.

The CHAIR: I'm happy for you to take it on notice. It was more about if they have given you an explanation as to why.

BRETT WHITWORTH: We are happy to provide a compilation of the responses that they have provided.

ANSWER:

I am advised:

Bayside Council outsource their pound service. Both Council and the pound thought the other was completing the return.

Strathfield Council outsource their pound service and have had trouble obtaining the data.

Lane Cove Council has not provided a reason.

Bellingen, Brewarrina, Nambucca, Singleton, Tamworth, Temora and Uralla Councils do not have a dedicated resource. OLG has suggested they complete monthly returns to reduce burden and increase compliance.