Let’s protect our environment: Responsible cat ownership and Auckland Council’s management options

Participatory forum feedback report



6 December 2024

Report prepared by participants

Executive summary

The goal of this Participatory Forum was to provide **informed** feedback on responsible cat ownership and potential cat management interventions to support native wildlife conservation in the region, from a **representative** group of Auckland residents.

Over the course of two sessions, participants heard from subject matter experts and debated what it meant to be a responsible cat owner, and what controls the council could potentially introduce to reduce the impact of cat predation on our native wildlife.

This report has been written by the participants and summarises the group's feedback.

In general, the group felt that the idea of responsible cat ownership could and should go beyond the traditional view that it consists of simply providing food, shelter, and veterinary care. There was widespread support for micro-chipping and desexing, for example.

The forum also showed broad support for greater control of cats in and near ecologically sensitive areas. We understand cat owners could simultaneously be in favour of protecting endangered wildlife and not want to restrict their own cats' traditional freedom to hunt 'because it is in their nature'. However, when holding the bigger picture firmly in view, the forum participants – selected for their diverse backgrounds and views – strongly supported greater control in the identified refuge areas.

In summary there was widespread support for all of the potential council interventions discussed, although various cost and practicality issues prompted more diversity of views. Support was particularly strong for more controls near ecologically sensitive areas.

The strength of support for these initiatives even indicated for some of this informed group that the proposed measures were too conservative, that controls could have gone further, or further afield. For example, many felt that preventing visitors taking their cats to offshore islands was such an obviously sensible move they wondered why it was even being asked as a question.

The group also reflected on the benefits of hearing the facts and discussing the issues, and there was discussion around the need for wider education on this topic.

The wide support for the proposed measures from this representative forum exercise pointed to the benefit of greater public education to frame the debate in its proper context: that the council could and should take practical steps to protect the diminishing populations of native species in the region. Efforts to change the view of what it meant to be a responsible cat owner were also widely supported.

The need for a long-term strategy was raised and there were many suggestions for additional measures, that could be adopted over time.

Background, objectives and process

Auckland Council conducted a Participatory Forum with members of the general public to augment its wider community engagement and consultation activities on the Let's Protect our Environment topic.

The broader consultation asked for input on how the region could protect our natural environment and primary industries in the future from introduced plants, animals and diseases that can cause harm. The Participatory Forum was focussed specifically on the topic of responsible cat ownership, and the council's potential interventions.

The goal of this Participatory Forum was to provide **informed** feedback on responsible cat management and potential cat management interventions, from a **demographically representative** group of Auckland residents.

An independent research recruitment agency selected 40 participants (38 ended up participating) with a demographic profile that matched the 2018 Census profile for Auckland.

In addition to ensuring demographic representation, the participant profile also ensured a representative mix of cat owners, and people who had taken part in environmental or conservation activities (noting that these were not mutually exclusive). This was to ensure a representative mix of potential attitudes to the topic, including seeking views from cat owners and non-owners. From the recruitment profile and a show of hands at the forum, slightly over half of the participants had a cat in the house or were cat owners.

This representative group of Auckland residents participated in two forum sessions, that involved:

- Presentations and information sharing from council subject matter experts (from the Natural Environment Specialist Services team) to enhance participants' understanding of the background, issues, and potential council interventions.
- Presentations and information sharing from external subject matter experts, who provided alternative views on the issues and potential options. This was to ensure participants received a balanced and well rounded understanding. The external speakers were from the SPCA, and University of Auckland's School of Biological Sciences.
- Discussion in small table groups, with Q&A assistance from council subject matter experts on request (quotes below are attributed to the respective table groups, identified by colour – blue, green, red, orange and pink).
- Summarising, collating and theming feedback in groups.
- Analysis, report writing, and peer review conducted by a small group of the participatory forum participants.

There was very high attendance at each session. 38 people attended the first session, and 37 attended the second. The tables and charts below are based on feedback from the second session, i.e. 37 participants.

The Participatory Forum sessions were run by an independent facilitator. His role was to ensure participants had an opportunity to hear balanced information from subject matter experts, share their views constructively, listen to each other's views, and provide informed feedback on these complex and sensitive topics.

The Participatory Forum sessions included:

- Session 1 – Saturday 9 November: Whakawhanaungatanga; Introduction to the topic, the pressures facing our natural environment and council's role in biodiversity and biosecurity; Introduction to the issue of cat predation and potential options; Discussion around responsible cat ownership and potential council interventions; Report back session to share views with the group.
- Session 2 – Saturday 16 November: Questions from the first session answered; Independent speakers from SPCA and University of Auckland; Discussions and deliberations in small groups on each of the questions in the feedback form; Report back session to share views with the group.

Context and initial feedback themes

Presentations by the subject matter experts made a deep impression on participants and certainly focused our attention on the background, issues and options.

Presentation of facts such as the number of species that had gone extinct, or were threatened; the density of cats in bush areas; and the lack of regulation in New Zealand compared with other nations – especially when we have such a sensitive and unique fauna – seemed to land with people and really set a platform for the debate.

Facts that the group tended to find particularly compelling included:

- The number of endemic species that have gone extinct, are threatened or at risk of extinction
- The potential impact of cats alongside other threats such as rodents
- The impact of Toxoplasma gondii
- The practices used by councils around New Zealand in managing the threat to native species caused by cats
- New Zealand's cat ownership statistics
- That the 'chip and snip' campaign is funded by donations to SPCA
- 'Catios' and 'indoor cats' were more common overseas
- The distance cats can range outdoors.

In group discussion, there was general acceptance that, given the threat to our unique fauna, 'responsible cat ownership' carried obligations that went beyond just ensuring cats were fed, watered and housed (when they wanted to be).

"Statistics shared were scary…we need to do better to protect our environment" – Green group

The forum as a whole felt that given the impact cats can have on our native species, some controls should be introduced by the council to provide some protection in remaining refuge areas.

There was strong agreement on the need for microchipping and desexing cats, especially on gulf islands and within 1km of sensitive mainland areas. People were also surprised and even shocked that people were taking cats on holiday to the Hauraki Gulf islands and that there was currently no by-law or other rule to prevent it.

The facts of predation appeared, to many participants, to make the council's proposed interventions seem limited in scope, even inadequate. Accepting that you have to start somewhere, suggestions in discussions indicated a number of people were ready to move on and expand restrictions. For example, some questioned why the topics only considered bringing in rules around the densest native bird areas. Why only suggest 1km barriers when data showed cats roamed further? Why wasn't the whole of the Waitakere Ranges, for example, being considered?

However, there was also some dissent noted on desexing cats across all of Auckland as shown in the tables and charts below.

There was considerable support for greater education. Participants noted that educating everyone in Auckland about cats is a big job but the effort could be targeted. Some suggested developing resources for schools to socialise the need for a new, more proactive version of responsible cat ownership, and the concept of 'catios'. That meant this new approach could start immediately with the next generation of cats and their owners, bringing about a sea change in public attitudes in a cat's lifetime, around 15 years.

That toxoplasmosis contributed to the deaths of Hector's and Maui dolphins surprised and shocked many. It provides a ready opportunity to generate discussion and raise the need for a new approach; actually creating a cat management framework.

Although indoor cats and cat curfews are not uncommon overseas, ideas such as keeping cats indoors and fencing properties to contain cats were less well supported. Some thought those measures were impractical such as when there are trees near fences.

It was suggested that as cats hunt rats and mice at night, a night-time curfew might increase pressure on birds during the daytime, but there was no specific data to support this either way. Diet data from cats active in rural areas showed birds were already the largest portion of their diet, and it is known cats will hunt whenever they have the opportunity.

Microchipping

There was strong support for the idea that cats should be both microchipped and desexed.

While there was near universal support for microchipping as a means of identifying and dealing with lost and feral cats it was less well understood how this would be used in practice. It is assumed policies and resources would also be developed to use this information for better management of lost and stray cats.

It appeared there was support for using it to increase accountability, as opposed to the idea that having a chip simply identified a stray cat as owned, meaning no further action was necessary.

Registration

The group felt there was little point chipping a cat if there was nowhere to look up that record.

There was surprise that there were two databases, one for dogs only (in fact, nationally, many more than two databases given each council has to have a dog register) and that the cats would have to go on the charity-run national companion register, or a new purpose-built register.

There was a suggestion adding cats to the council's existing dog register would be a more acceptable low-cost option to owners. Others noted that the dog register was built to meet regulation for dangerous animals and reconfiguring it would be expensive. The lack of a national strategy was seen as a handicap here.

Desexing

Support for desexing was strong across all of the geographic areas included in the feedback form – although slightly less for cats across the whole of the Auckland region, compared to near ecologically sensitive areas.

This control of cat population growth was widely recognised as a key measure in protecting native species, especially in identified sensitive areas.

The health benefits for desexed cats were also welcomed although the compulsion element provoked some opposition in specific circumstances.

The pros and cons about how and where it should be applied were vigorously debated. See the comments under this question below.

Funding

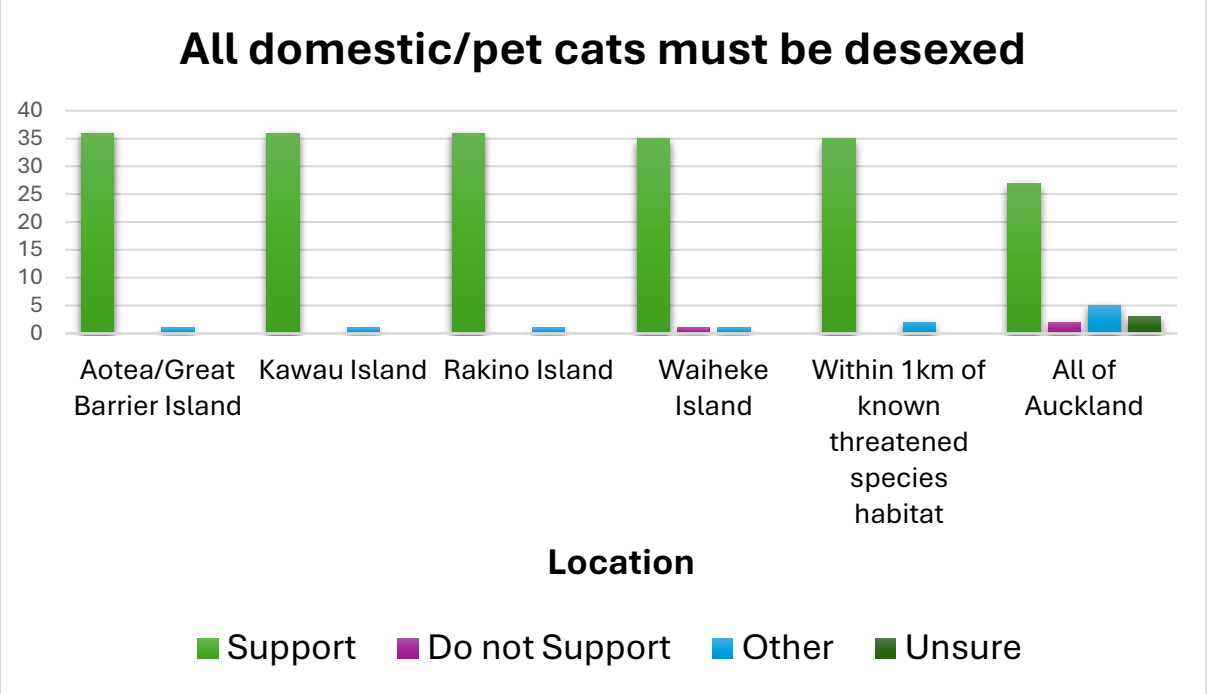
Somewhat over half the group supported additional funding for desexing for those who couldn't afford it, although there was notable disagreement on this topic, as described below. The issue of how to fund this wasn't worked through.

Feedback on questions in the feedback form

As outlined above, in general there was broad support for all of the potential council interventions discussed, although various cost issues prompted more diversity of views.

1. All domestic/pet cats must be desexed – support / oppose, by region.

Location	Support	Do not Support	Other	Unsure
Aotea/Great Barrier Island	36	0	1	0
Kawau Island	36	0	1	0
Rakino Island	36	0	1	0
Waiheke Island	35	1	1	0
Within 1km of known threatened species habitat	35	0	2	0
All of Auckland	27	2	5	3



The data illustrates strong support for the desexing of all domestic and pet cats across the named islands. This trend is consistent even within 1km of known threatened species habitats, reflecting heightened awareness of the ecological risks posed by non-desexed cats. However, support slightly decreases when considering all of Auckland, with an increase in participants who are unsure or oppose the measure.

Mandatory desexing was broadly supported as the primary means of controlling cat population growth and reducing predation by stray and feral cats. This control of population growth was widely recognised as essential to protecting native species, particularly in biodiverse areas like islands, and habitats near urban and rural interfaces.

Early desexing would also lead to improved cat welfare, less aggression and injury, fewer hormonal problems, and longer life. It was agreed that these changes contribute positively to cat welfare while reducing nuisance factors in neighbourhoods.

Desexing and a reduction in the population of stray and feral cats also reinforces the concept that the region supports responsible cat ownership. Breeders would have to be registered.

The group recognised it was necessary to break the cycle of unwanted cat breeding explained by the SPCA. It would reduce the number of cats handed to the SPCA, and pressure on shelters. It would also lead to a reduction of the burden of toxoplasmosis, and reduce the costs of cat management long-term.

The sensitive areas named were recognised as priority zones. Groups discussed expansion into wider areas as part of a phased approach but what should happen on rural margins was contentious. Rural residents also pointed to the lack of nearby veterinary services, making compliance more difficult.

Others suggested that having a uniform rule across Auckland would simplify enforcement.

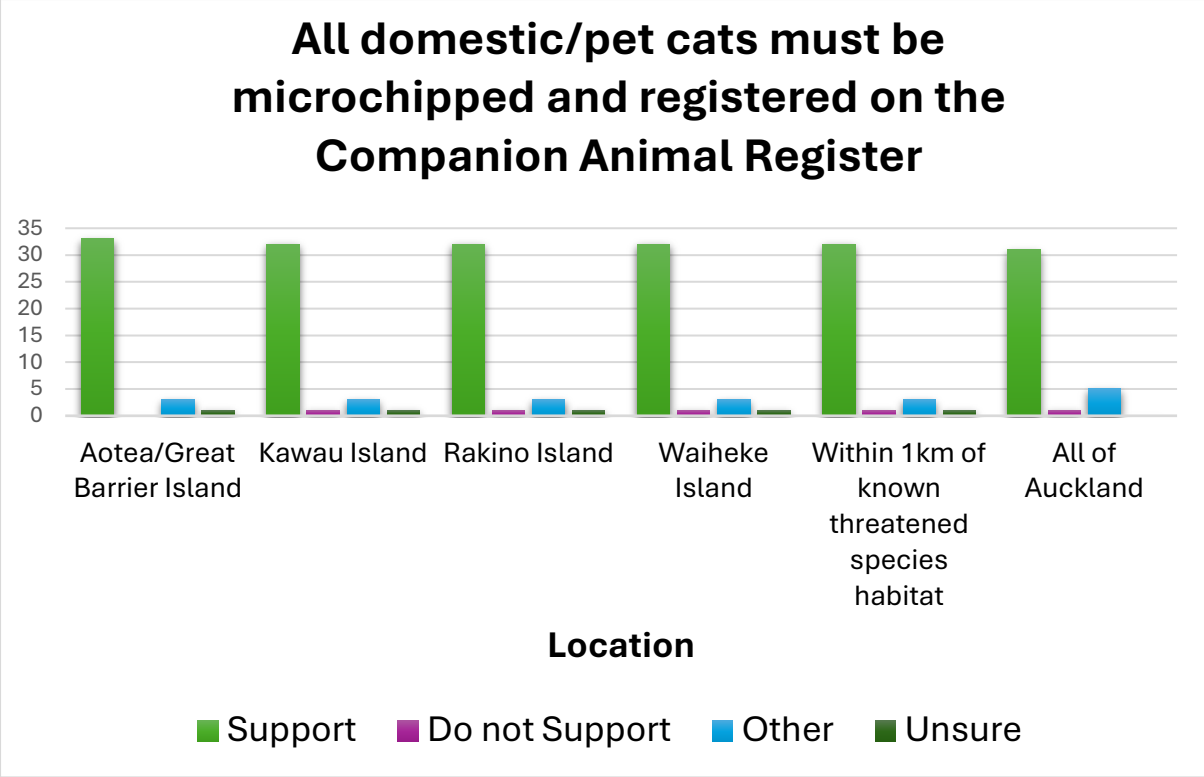
Some felt mandatory desexing could have ecological consequences in form of increasing rat populations, prompting a comment that it should be applied to urban cats, but not rural. Some argued cats helped control rats and mice in those areas, while others mentioned that human control of rats and mice led to increased predation of birds.

Those opposed raised the cost of desexing on people with less income and the cost of policing, the negative impact of penalties. This led into discussion on financial support discussed separately below. One person mentioned that it could affect cat biodiversity; others that it was interfering with the balance of nature, and that it could have unexpected ecological consequences.

Finally, there was a minor but vocal resistance to desexing on ethical grounds, with some participants arguing against interference in natural reproductive cycles.

2. All domestic/pet cats must be microchipped and registered on the Companion Animal Register – support / oppose, by region.

Location	Support	Do not Support	Other	Unsure
Aotea/Great Barrier Island	33	0	3	1
Kawau Island	32	1	3	1
Rakino Island	32	1	3	1
Waiheke Island	32	1	3	1
Within 1km of known threatened species habitat	32	1	3	1
All of Auckland	31	1	5	0



The data highlights widespread support for the microchipping and registration of all domestic and pet cats on the Companion Animal Register across all surveyed locations.

These findings suggest a general consensus on the importance of microchipping as a tool for managing lost and stray cats. Participants recognised the necessity of these measures to enhance accountability and facilitate the management of domestic cat populations across Auckland.

While support remains strong for all of Auckland, a slightly higher proportion of individuals are unsure compared to the island locations. It indicates the need for further engagement or clarification in urban areas to address uncertainties.

Microchipping was regarded as a straightforward solution to the issue of lost or stray cats. Participants highlighted its utility in reuniting cats with their owners quickly while also assisting in population tracking efforts. The ability to identify owned cats was seen as crucial for separating domestic pets from feral populations during enforcement activities or conservation initiatives.

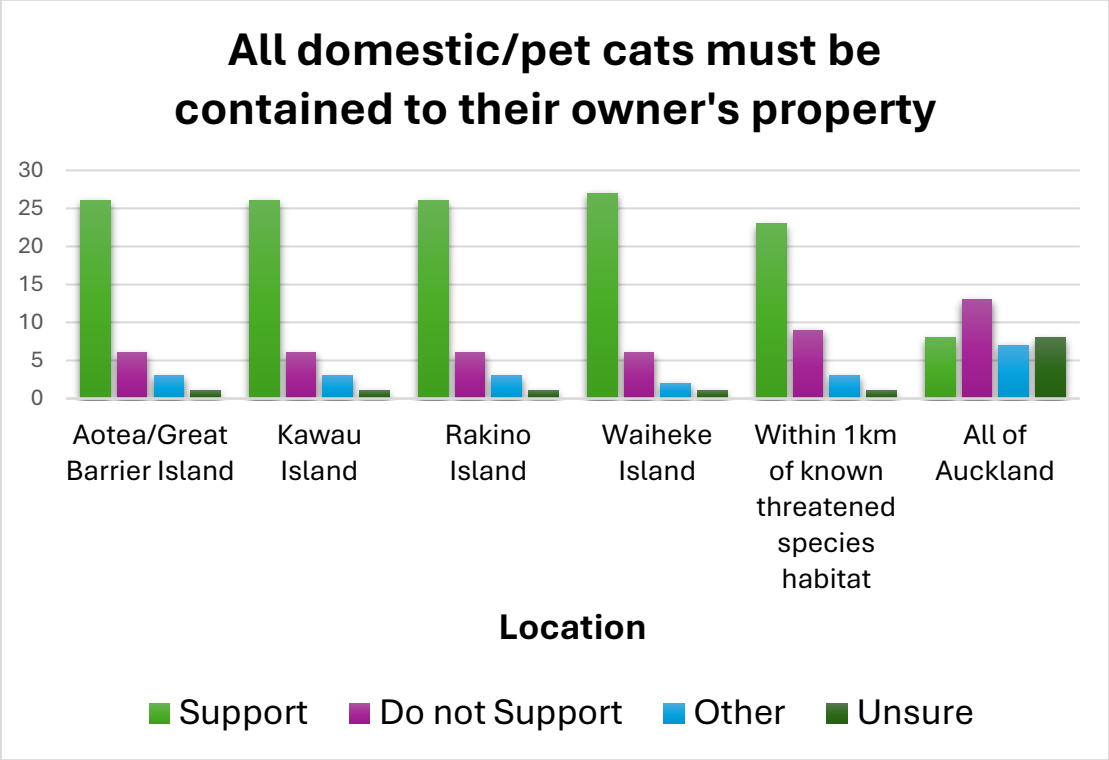
Education on the benefits of microchipping and registration was often mentioned here as a means of encouraging as well as compelling compliance.

Enforcement of microchipping and registration was both an opportunity and a challenge and there was support for incentives before penalties were applied.

A staged approach introducing a range of additional measures over 15 years was widely suggested. Suggestions included education courses and community service cards giving discounts on registration.

3. All domestic/pet cats must be contained to their owner's property – support / oppose, by region.

Location	Support	Do not Support	Other	Unsure	Abstained from commenting
Aotea/Great Barrier Island	26	6	3	1	1
Kawau Island	26	6	3	1	1
Rakino Island	26	6	3	1	1
Waiheke Island	27	6	2	1	1
Within 1km of known threatened species habitat	23	9	3	1	1
All of Auckland	8	13	7	8	1



The data indicates varying levels of support for the containment of domestic and pet cats to their owner's property. While island locations such as Aotea/Great Barrier Island, Kawau Island, Rakino Island, and Waiheke Island show moderate support for the measure, there is a noticeable minority opposing it, along with a small number of participants who are unsure or suggest alternative views. Support decreased within 1km of known threatened species habitats, with a notable rise in opposition. In Auckland as a whole, support is much lower, with opposition surpassing those in favour and a considerable portion of participants unsure.

These findings suggest that while containment measures may gain traction in ecologically sensitive or less urbanised areas, they would face significant resistance and uncertainty in urban contexts.

This was more vigorously debated than other measures. Some viewed it as essential to protect endangered species in or near sensitive area, and a measure that would provide immediate relief. Others questioned practicality, cost and the impact on cat welfare, several saying cats need fresh air, sun, and freedom. They wanted evidence to be convinced indoor cats were happy.

Others raised the cost of cat-proof fencing, that trees would need to be cut, the implications for property renters, and they asked how it would be policed. Residents of rural areas including Waiheke and the Waitakere Ranges highlighted the near impossibility of fencing sections with lots of bush.

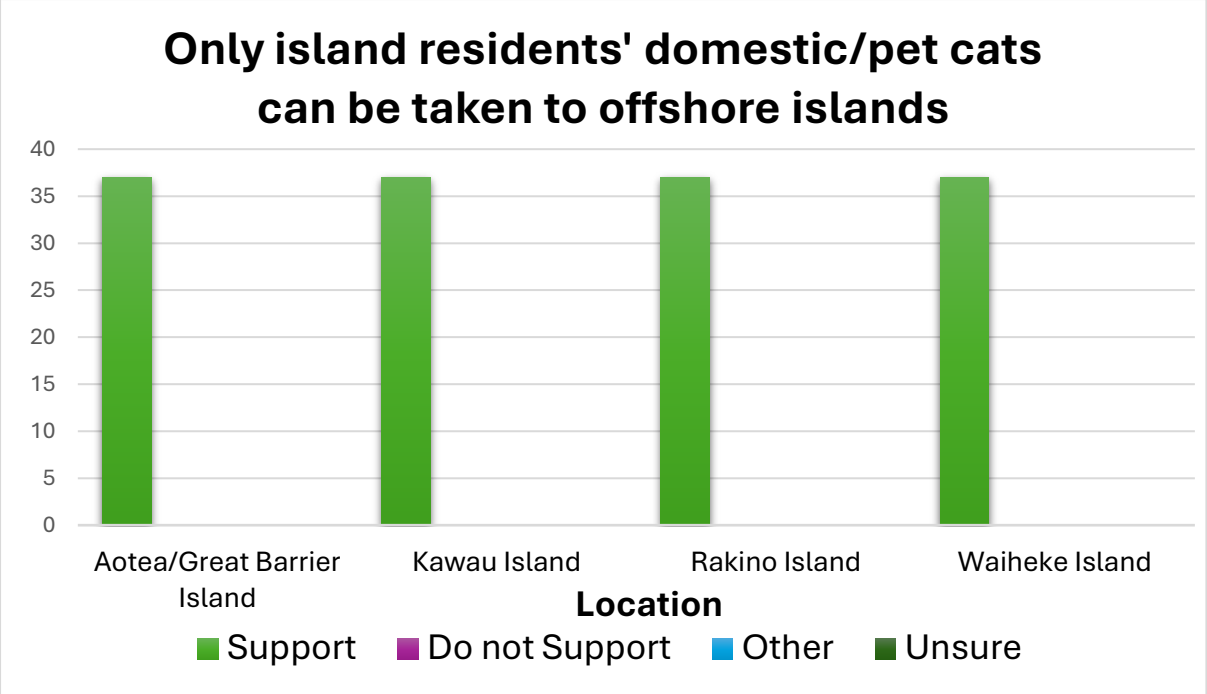
"Concerned about keeping cats inside: 'It's not natural for them'" – Pink group

Some thought it was 'too soon' to require containment but it could be introduced later when the idea had been more widely accepted. Current cats (and their owners) would not adjust. Conditioning existing cats to an indoor life was also considered too stressful, again prompting suggestions of staged restrictions over time, allowing for raising younger cats with different norms.

Again, education workshops on responsible cat ownership were seen as a means to build support for indoor cats, enrichment/displacement activities and promotion of catios. Financial support for fencing and catios was also suggested.

4. Only island residents' domestic/pet cats can be taken to offshore islands – support / oppose, by island.

Location	Support	Do not Support	Other	Unsure
Aotea/Great Barrier Island	37	0	0	0
Kawau Island	37	0	0	0
Rakino Island	37	0	0	0
Waiheke Island	37	0	0	0



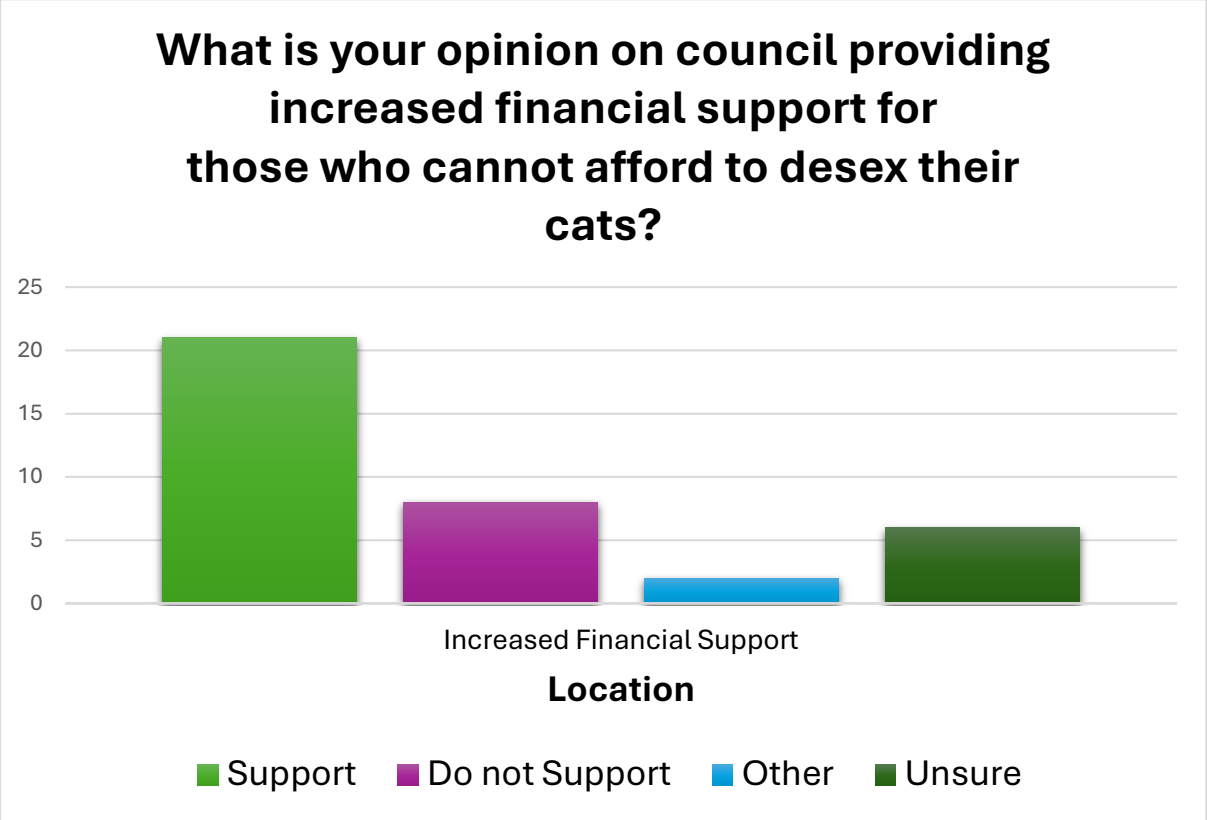
The data demonstrates unanimous support for restricting the transportation of domestic and pet cats to offshore islands to island residents only. There was no opposition, uncertainty, or alternative suggestions recorded. This strong consensus highlights widespread recognition of the importance of protecting the ecological integrity of offshore islands, reflecting shared concerns about the risks that non-native animals pose to these sensitive environments.

A number of people questioned why people living on gulf islands should have an exemption from measures designed to protect the wildlife in those vulnerable areas. Why did they get a free pass? These participants felt that perhaps island residents should also accept and abide by rules designed to protect rare and endangered native species – presumably one of the attractions of living there – especially when these islands are the last remaining 'lifeboats' of birds not found anywhere else in the world.

The idea of phasing out cats entirely on these islands was also supported by many. Some suggested a 'sinking lid' policy on cats should be applied to island cats; those cats would not have to be 'surrendered' but there should be no additional or replacement cats allowed to live on Auckland's islands.

5. What is your opinion on council providing increased financial support for those who cannot afford to desex their cats? – support / oppose.

Support	Do not Support	Other	Unsure
21	8	2	6



The data reveals that somewhat over half (21) support the idea of Auckland Council providing increased financial support to those who cannot afford to desex their cats. However, a notable minority (8) oppose this initiative, while a smaller group (6) remain unsure. A minimal number (2) offered alternative perspectives. As above there was widespread recognition of the benefits of desexing, but the challenge was around how to fund this, with some resistance and uncertainty to the council providing additional funding. Partnerships with non-profits and veterinary clinics were suggested.

Participants highlighted cost as a significant barrier to compliance particularly for low-income households. There were questions in the discussion about enforcement, proof of desexing, total cost, extent of subsidy, impact on rates, scale of charges depending on income, whether this was the most effective use of spending to protect sensitive areas. Others thought the benefit of desexing would outweigh this initial investment.

Some thought all owners must accept this cost as part of being a responsible cat owner.

Some people suggested licencing for cats, the same as dogs. This would provide funds as dog licences do for animal control. Several people thought this a step too far; cats were different to

dogs, cat owners shouldn't have to pay for registration, let alone annual licensing. Dogs could be dangerous to people, while cats aren't.

There was also some opposition to increasing costs on cat owners, while others suggested cat owners should accept that if they can't afford to have a cat desexed, they can't afford a cat.

However, there was broad agreement on targeted subsidies to ensure equitability and effectiveness in both lower socio-economic and ecological hotspot areas. Promotion and education would also be required.

One group noted that existing funding was fairly minimal, so it would not be difficult to provide additional funding. The group pressed council representatives on costs and were told this was $40K which could be increased to $80K with support from the SPCA and local boards. The group changed its position to supporting additional funding as it felt current funding was inadequate.

Again, developing a long-term strategy was suggested, including aligning with and seeking funding in support the national Predator Free 2050 national strategy. This prompted some to ask what the end goal was. Were cats going to be phased out entirely over future decades? There was no suggestion that anyone wanted this – but there was broad recognition that attitudes around responsible cat ownership would likely change over the coming years.

6. Do you have comments or suggestions for managing cats to protect both wildlife and cats in Auckland?

What are some things Aucklanders can do to help protect our environment?

Many of these ideas were recorded but were not fully debated or accepted in the groups. Some groups noted opposition to some ideas.

- Report/log issues on a Cat app
- Share new knowledge in peer groups - Discuss predation, catios, indoor cats, toxoplasmosis and dolphins
- Encourage others to take part in survey

What are some things Auckland Council can do to help protect our environment?

- Education on cats as a threat to unique wildlife, and socialise a new norm for responsible cat ownership
- Create resources on website and especially for primary schools on this issue and public events like dogs in the park days
- Education on toxoplasmosis and its threat to Hector's and Maui dolphins
- Review other council's rules and practices especially on cat trapping to create de facto national standards
- Escalating warnings/penalties for cats caught in protected areas. There was general support for a hard line on cats trapped in ecologically sensitive areas, e.g. desexing any cats trapped; they should be kept for reclaim or disposal, not just released if they looked 'owned', as at present.
- Animal control to pick up stray cats as well as dogs for reclaim or eventual euthanasia (as in Germany)
- Fines could marginalise and alienate people

- Mandatory desexing for unchipped strays
- Set up mobile desexing units
- Promote, socialise catios, suggest to Men's Sheds to design and build
- Implement different rules for different areas and focus on areas with low cat chipping/desexing for support
- Multi-lingual info on registration and desexing
- Licence cats as per dogs to help fund desexing (opinion divided)
- Licence breeders
- Develop owners' courses or workshops that attract lower licencing or registration fees or other incentives
- Trial cat curfews to reduce opportunity for predation to collect data/ test assumptions (low support)
- Develop short, medium and long-term plans
- Council to provide humane cat traps
- Cut cost of desexing in half by only requiring desexing of one sex

What does it mean to be a responsible cat owner?

- Microchipping and registering
- Learning that chipping does *not* mean that a cat can be found more easily so it is now free to roam
- Being able to afford desexing / having the capacity to meet your responsibilities
- Bells and clown collars (some opposed)
- Spending time exercising/entertaining cats
- Provide places to hide and scratch
- Consider indoor options / secure fencing before getting a cat (some didn't agree with the indoor cat concept and few supported fencing on cost grounds)
- Not taking your cat on holiday
- Discourage roaming
- Not flushing cat poo – save the dolphins!

Reflections on the process and next steps

Participants reflected that hearing the facts and discussing the issues led to strong support for a range of interventions to require responsible cat ownership and limit the impact of cat predation on native species – almost certainly stronger support than would otherwise be the case without knowledge of the issues and impacts.

The exercise pointed starkly to the likely impact of greater public education to frame the debate: that common sense controls over cats were beneficial and overdue. The group recommends that to avoid the perception it was simply picking on free-spirited cats, the council has to explain that the proposed controls are practical measures to roll back the threat to our unique native wildlife, before it is too late. Any efforts to change the view of what it meant to be a responsible cat owner would clearly help.

While we can't be certain of this extrapolation, perhaps the forum also indicated that, with the right framing, the rate of change and acceptance of other measures could be swifter and more comprehensive than these tentative first steps indicate.

Feedback on question wording in the feedback form

In addition to the feedback noted above, the group also provided feedback on the way in which some of the questions were worded:

Must?

Some groups questioned what was meant by the word 'must'. What was being proposed to ensure this happened. They could have very different views depending on how this was supposed to be achieved.

The 'other' conundrum

In trying to analyse the group's findings we may have identified a problem with 'other' as an answer option, along with 'Yes', 'No' and 'Don't Know'.

We could not identify what respondents actually wanted or supported when they ticked the 'other' box. It could mean they supported the proposition but wanted it to go further; or the opposite, that they disagreed but had an alternative proposal.

Similarly, people who supported the idea but also wanted it to go further could also have answered 'yes'. Perhaps in future, the 'Other' column could be replaced with two columns to capture the following groupings: a) people in support of the proposition who would also support stronger measures, or b) people who don't support the idea who have an alternative suggestion.

Positive negatives

We note here some potential confusion or ambiguity. We had an issue with the question 'only island residents' domestic/pet cats can be taken to offshore islands'. The group felt that was confusingly worded as it seemed to open the question of island residents being allowed to take cats to other islands. People opposed to that idea might answer 'no' when, if they agreed with the intended proposition (stopping *visitors* taking their cats to those islands), they should answer 'yes'. During the forum, this question was clarified so that people's actual preferences were captured correctly, however the group felt that the wider consultation data on this question, framed as it was put to us, might be misleading, delivering a diluted result.