

Community and Companion Animal Wellbeing Strategy 2026–29





Community and Companion Animal Wellbeing Strategy

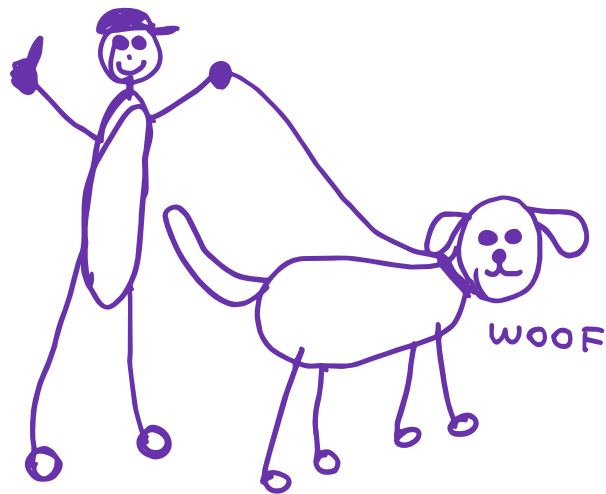


Table of Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Strategic Vision	5
3. Strategic Context	5
4. Social Determinants of Health and Companion Animal Welfare Model	7
5. Strategic Direction	7
6. Strategy Plan	10
7. Implementation and Enablers	12
8. Measuring Success	12
9. Conclusion	12
Appendix One:	14

1. Introduction

Animal Welfare League Queensland (AWLQ) operates within a rapidly evolving animal welfare landscape, where the drivers of companion animal vulnerability are increasingly understood to extend beyond the animal itself. Contemporary evidence demonstrates that animal welfare outcomes are deeply embedded within the social, economic, and environmental conditions of the humans who care for them.

Historically, animal welfare organisations have been structured around a reactive model, responding to crisis through intake, sheltering, and rehoming. While this model remains essential, it does not address the upstream factors that lead to animal relinquishment, compromised welfare, and breakdown of the human-animal bond.

This strategy outlines a shift toward a prevention-focused, evidence and systems-based approach to animal welfare, positioning AWLQ at the forefront of integrating human and animal wellbeing. Drawing on emerging research and sector innovation, the strategy recognises that improving outcomes for animals requires addressing the broader social determinants that shape the capacity of individuals and communities to care for them.

Since 22/23 Total Relinquishment

(Last 3 years)

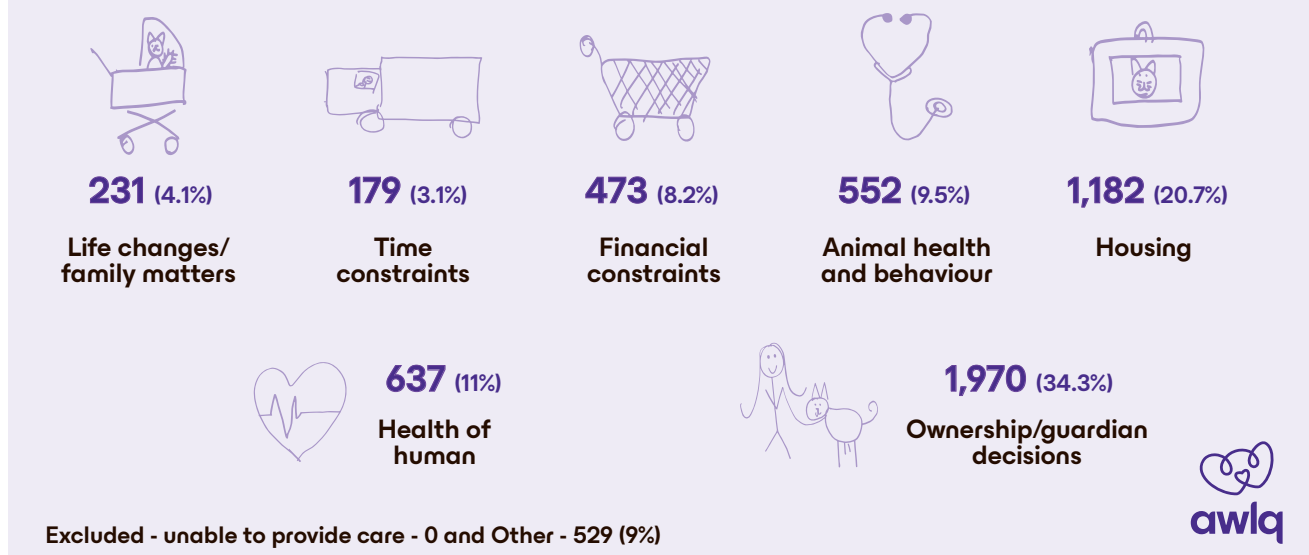


Figure 1: Last three financial years companion animal guardian relinquishment reasons mapped to verified study McDowall et al. (2024)

2. Strategic Vision

AWLQ will lead a contemporary model of animal welfare that prioritises prevention, strengthens the human-animal bond, and addresses the underlying social conditions that influence animal wellbeing.

3. Strategic Context

Evidence from national and international research, including recent Australian data, consistently indicates that the majority of companion animal relinquishment is not

driven by issues inherent to the animal, but rather by human circumstances. Housing instability, financial stress, access to services, health challenges, and social isolation all contribute to the erosion of a guardian's capacity to maintain care [1, 2].

This evidence is reflected within AWLQ's own organisational data (figure 1). Analysis of companion animal relinquishment across the past three financial years, mapped against the verified groups highlighted in a study conducted by McDowall et al.,

(2024), demonstrates that the majority of relinquishment drivers within AWLQ are linked to human circumstances rather than issues inherent to the animal itself.

Ownership/guardian decisions identified as a significant contributor to relinquishment, followed by housing, health of the human guardian, animal health and behaviour challenges, and financial constraints. Collectively, these findings reinforce the interconnected nature of human and animal wellbeing and align with broader Australian research demonstrating that human-factor related issues account for the majority of companion animal relinquishments [2]. These factors align with established Social Determinants of Health (SDH) framework (figure 2), which identify the conditions in which people are born, live, and work as primary drivers of wellbeing [3, 4]. When applied to companion animal contexts, these determinants have direct and measurable impacts on the Five Domains of Animal Welfare (figure 3): nutrition, physical environment, health, behavioural interactions, and mental state [5, 6].

This strategy adopts an the overview of integrated frameworks of One Health [8] (figure 4) and One Welfare [9] (figure 5) that recognises that animal welfare cannot be separated from human wellbeing [10-13]. Many welfare risks are preventable through early and targeted intervention. Sustainable change requires cross-sector collaboration, not isolated service delivery. By embedding this

understanding into organisational practice, AWLQ will transition toward a model that not only responds to need but actively reduces it.

By embedding the validated Social Determinants of Health and Companion Animal Welfare model into organisational practice, AWLQ will transition to a fully evidence-informed approach to animal welfare [1]. This model provides a structured way to identify and respond to the human factors that shape animal outcomes, allowing the organisation to design targeted, effective interventions that reflect the realities of the populations we support.



Figure 2. Healthy People 2030, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [7]

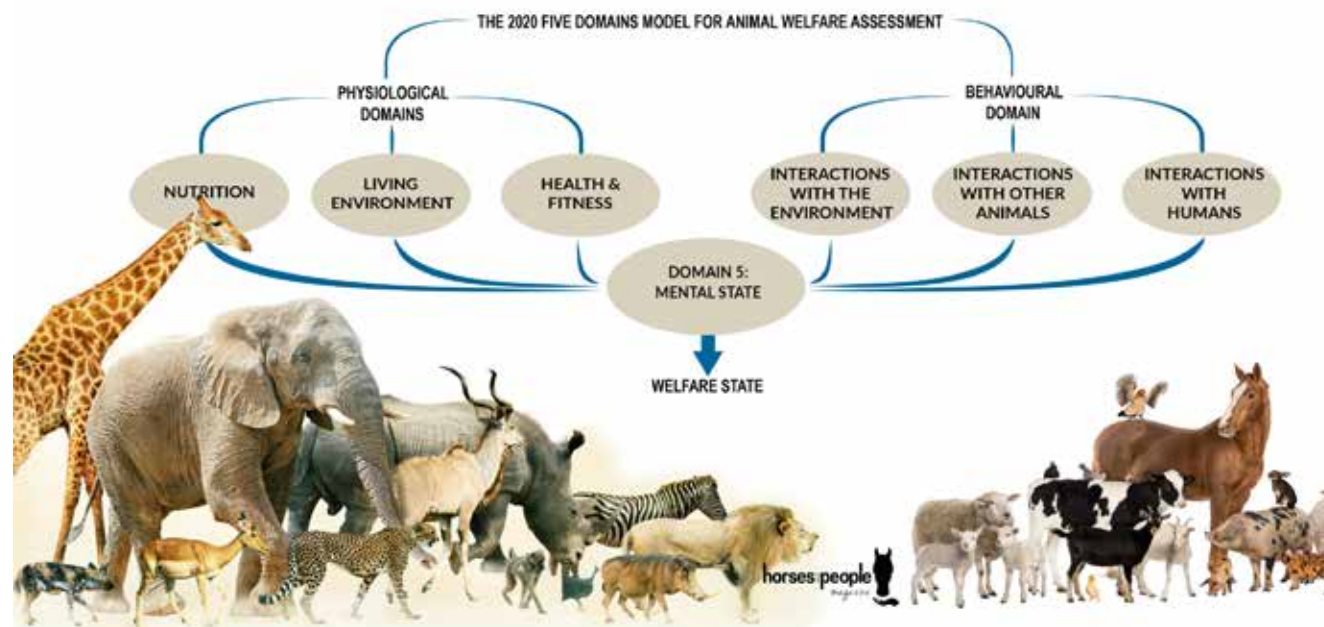


Figure 3. The 2020 Five Domains Model of Animal Welfare (Mellor et al., 2020) [6]



Figure 4: One Health (World Health Organization, 2025 (WHO) [8]



Figure 5: One Welfare (Pinillos et al., 2016) [9]



4. Social Determinants of Health and Companion Animal Welfare model

To translate strategic intent into effective and measurable action, AWLQ will adopt the Social Determinants of Health and Companion Animal Welfare model [1] as the foundational framework guiding this strategy. Please see Appendix One.

This model provides a structured, evidence-based lens through which to understand the relationship between human circumstances and animal welfare outcomes. Building on established public health frameworks, it extends the Social Determinants of Health into the companion animal context, demonstrating how factors such as income, housing, education, healthcare access, and social support directly influence a guardian's capacity to care for their animal [1].

Central to the model is the recognition that these determinants shape five key

dimensions of caregiving capacity: the ability to understand an animal's needs, access appropriate services, provide essential care, engage in positive human- animal interactions, and draw on the necessary time, financial, and social resources. These capacities, in turn, directly influence outcomes across the Five Domains of Animal Welfare: nutrition, physical environment, health, behavioural interactions and mental state [1]. This model is outlined in Appendix One.

Where social and structural conditions limit these capacities, predictable risks to animal welfare emerge. Financial constraints may restrict access to food or veterinary care [14-18]; housing instability may compromise the safety and suitability of the animal's environment [19-22]; and limited knowledge or support may contribute to behavioural challenges and reduced quality of life [20]. When left unaddressed, these pressures can escalate into more severe outcomes, including relinquishment, neglect or euthanasia.

By embedding this model across the organisation, AWLQ will move beyond

reactive responses to presenting issues and instead adopt a proactive, prevention-focused approach that addresses the underlying drivers of vulnerability. This framework enables the organisation to design services that are targeted, equitable, sustainable and responsive to the diverse needs of the communities it serves.

Importantly, the model also establishes a consistent and transparent basis for decision-making, supporting a shift away from assumption-based judgements toward a more nuanced understanding of capacity and context. It reinforces the role of AWLQ not only as a service provider, but as part of a broader system influencing both human and animal wellbeing.

The integration of this framework provides the foundation upon which the following strategic directions are built.



5. Strategic Direction

Prevention and Early Intervention

A central focus of this strategy is the reduction of preventable animal relinquishment through early identification and support of at-risk guardians. Rather than engaging only at the point of relinquishment, AWLQ will expand its role in providing upstream assistance to individuals and families experiencing vulnerability.

This includes the development and scaling of programs that support pet retention in the face of financial hardship, housing instability, health crises and life transitions. Services such as emergency boarding, temporary fostering, and targeted financial assistance will be strengthened and more systematically linked to community referral pathways.

By intervening earlier, AWLQ can reduce intake pressure, minimise distress for both animals and guardians, and preserve the human–animal bond where it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Pet-Inclusive Communities and Systems

The exclusion of animals from housing, healthcare and emergency systems remains

a significant contributor to animal welfare compromise. This strategy recognises the need to move beyond organisational boundaries and influence the broader systems in which people and animals coexist.

AWLQ will play an active role in advocating for and contributing to pet-inclusive policy and practice, particularly within housing, domestic violence services, aged care and emergency management. This includes working with government, community organisations and service providers to ensure that animals are considered within human-focused systems.

Through partnerships and pilot initiatives, AWLQ will explore integrated service models that bring together veterinary care, social support and community engagement. These approaches acknowledge the interdependence of human and animal wellbeing and aim to reduce the structural barriers that place both at risk.

Equitable Access to Veterinary and Welfare Services

Access to veterinary care remains uneven, with financial and geographic barriers limiting the ability of many guardians to meet their animals' health needs.

This strategy supports a shift toward more inclusive and flexible models of care. AWLQ will adopt and expand a Spectrum of Care approach [23, 24], which prioritises

achieving positive welfare outcomes through a range of accessible and context-appropriate interventions, rather than relying solely on gold-standard care that may be unattainable for some.

This will be complemented by the expansion of low-cost and mobile services, as well as the development of service models that align with the diverse capacities of the community. Importantly, this approach will be underpinned by a commitment to non-judgemental engagement, ensuring that individuals are supported rather than excluded based on their circumstances.

Strengthening the Human–Animal Bond

The quality of the human-animal relationship is a critical determinant of welfare outcomes. Behavioural challenges, unmet expectations, and lack of knowledge can contribute to breakdowns in this relationship, often resulting in relinquishment.

AWLQ will invest in programs that support guardians in understanding and responding to their animals' behavioural and emotional needs. This includes the provision of accessible behaviour support services, early intervention for emerging issues, and community education initiatives.

By strengthening the human-animal bond, AWLQ not only improves welfare outcomes but also enhances the resilience of households to withstand periods of stress or change.

Workforce Development and Cultural Transformation

Delivering on this strategy requires a workforce that is equipped to engage with complexity, diversity, and vulnerability. Traditional models of animal welfare have at times been influenced by implicit bias and assumptions about who is “fit” to care for animals.

AWLQ will prioritise workforce development that builds understanding of the social determinants of health, challenges bias and

supports trauma-informed and equity-focused practice. Decision-making frameworks will be refined to ensure consistency, transparency and alignment with evidence-based principles.

This cultural shift is essential to ensuring that services are delivered in a way that is both effective and equitable.

Research, Data, and Impact

To sustain its leadership position, AWLQ will strengthen its capacity as a data-driven and research-informed organisation. This includes

embedding relevant social and demographic indicators into routine data collection, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of the drivers of animal welfare outcomes.

Partnerships with academic institutions will be leveraged to evaluate programs, generate new knowledge, and contribute to the broader evidence base. A structured approach to monitoring and evaluation will support continuous improvement and ensure that resources are directed toward interventions with demonstrated impact.

Our strategic pillars

Six interconnected pillars that guide our work to support people and pets and create lasting change.



Prevention and early intervention

We address the root causes of animal welfare risks by identifying need early and providing timely, practical support to keep people and pets together.

01



Pet-inclusive communities and systems

We advocate for and collaborate with communities and systems to ensure animals are included, supported and protected.

02



Equitable access to veterinary and welfare services

We remove barriers and deliver accessible affordable and appropriate care so every animal has the opportunity to be healthy and well.

03



Strengthening the human-animal bond

We build positive relationships through education, behaviour support and enrichment, creating lifelong bonds and better outcomes

04



Workforce development and cultural transformation

We invest in our people and culture to build capability, foster compassion and drive an evidence-informed, equity-focused organisation

05



Research, data, and impact

We use data and research to learn, improve and demonstrate impact - ensuring our work creates lasting change

06

6. Strategy Plan

The delivery of this strategy will be guided by a structured three-year roadmap, designed to ensure that change is implemented in a deliberate, evidence-informed, and sustainable way. Rather than pursuing rapid or fragmented reform, AWLQ will adopt a phased approach that allows for learning, adaptation and organisational alignment over time.

Each strategic pillar will progress through five key phases: investigation, evaluation, redesign, implementation and stabilisation. These phases provide a consistent methodology for translating strategic intent into practice, while allowing flexibility in timing based on the complexity and readiness of each area.

Phased Approach to Implementation

The roadmap begins with a focused investigation phase, where current systems, service delivery models, and community needs are examined. This phase is critical for

building a clear understanding of existing gaps, strengths, and opportunities, and for engaging key stakeholders across the organisation and broader community.

This is followed by a short but targeted evaluation phase, where insights are analysed and priority areas for action are identified. Importantly, this phase ensures that decisions are grounded in evidence rather than assumption, aligning with AWLQ's commitment to an evidence-informed approach.

The redesign phase then translates these insights into practical solutions. During this stage, programs, services, and systems are co-designed or refined to better reflect the needs of the populations being served, as well as the operational realities of the organisation.

The majority of the three-year period is dedicated to implementation, recognising that meaningful change requires time, capability building and iterative refinement. During this phase, AWLQ will embed new models of service delivery, expand/redesign programs

and strengthen workforce capability to support sustained impact.

Finally, each pillar enters a stabilisation phase, where successful initiatives are embedded into business-as-usual operations. This includes ongoing monitoring, optimisation, and ensuring that outcomes are sustainable over the long term.

Sequencing of Strategic Priorities

While all strategic pillars are interconnected, their implementation has been deliberately staged to reflect organisational readiness and strategic importance.

Four foundational pillars: Prevention and Early Intervention, Pet-Inclusive Communities and Systems, Strengthening the Human-Animal Bond, and Workforce Development and Cultural Transformation, commence in the first quarter of the 2026/27 financial year. These areas establish the core conditions required for broader system change, including workforce capability, community engagement, and early intervention models.



3-Year Strategic Roadmap

Our Strategic Pillars

Prevention and early intervention

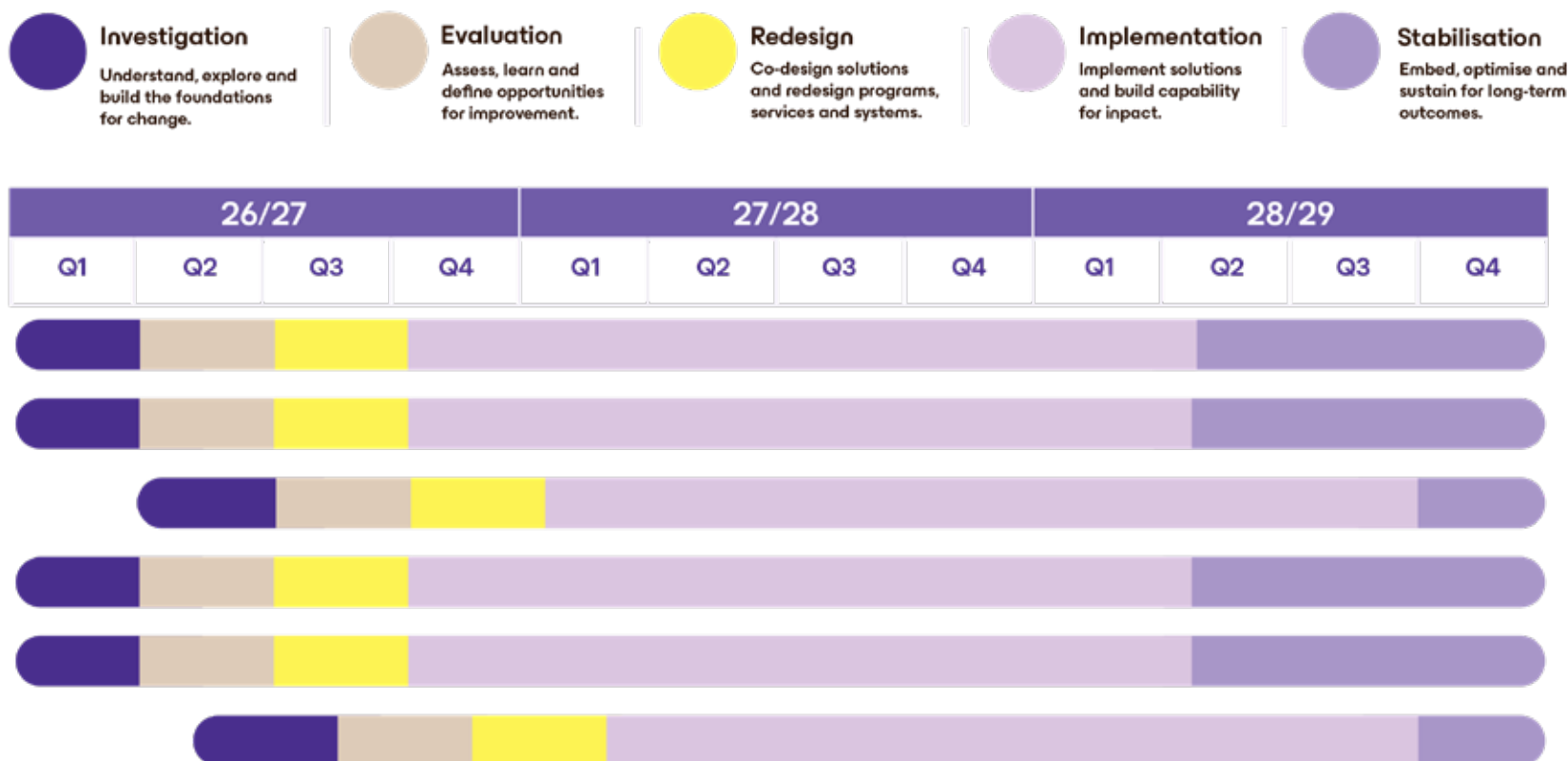
Pet-inclusive communities and systems

Equitable access to veterinary and welfare services

Strengthening the human-animal bond

Workforce development and cultural transformation

Research, data, and impact



How to Read this Roadmap

Each pillar progresses through five key phases. Start dates reflect when focused work in each pillar begins.

The Equitable Access to Veterinary and Welfare Services pillar begins in the second quarter of 2026/27, allowing initial insights and capability development from the foundational pillars to inform the design of more accessible and responsive service models.

The Research, Data, and Impact pillar commences in the third quarter of 2026/27. This timing ensures that data systems and evaluation frameworks are built alongside implementation, enabling AWLQ to measure impact, refine approaches and demonstrate outcomes as the strategy progresses.

From Implementation to Sustainability

A key feature of this roadmap is the extended implementation period across all pillars. This reflects an understanding that systemic change, particularly change that addresses the social determinants of health and animal welfare, cannot be achieved through short-term initiatives.

By the 2028/29 financial year, all pillars transition into a stabilisation phase. At this point, AWLQ will have embedded new ways of working, strengthened partnerships across sectors, and established programs that are both scalable and sustainable.

Strategic Intent

This roadmap is intentionally designed to balance ambition with realism. It avoids the common pitfall of attempting to deliver

widespread change too quickly, instead prioritising sequencing, capability building, and evidence-informed decision-making. Through this approach, AWLQ will not only implement new programs and services, but fundamentally shift how animal welfare is delivered, moving from reactive responses to a proactive, prevention-focused system that supports both people and their animals over the long term.

7. Implementation and Enablers

Successful implementation of this strategy will rely on strong partnerships, sustainable funding, and clear organisational alignment. AWLQ will work collaboratively with government, community organisations, and the veterinary sector to deliver integrated solutions.

Advocacy will play a critical role in addressing systemic barriers, while diversified funding streams, including grants, philanthropy, and social enterprise, will support program sustainability.

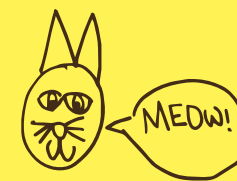
Effective communication will ensure that AWLQ's role as a leader in integrated animal welfare is clearly articulated to stakeholders, partners, and the broader community.

8. Measuring Success

Progress will be assessed through a combination of quantitative and qualitative indicators, including reductions in preventable relinquishment, increased access to services, and improvements in animal welfare outcomes across the Five Domains of Animal Welfare.

Additional measures will include enhanced pet retention within vulnerable populations, strengthened community partnerships, and demonstrated social return on investment.

9. Conclusion

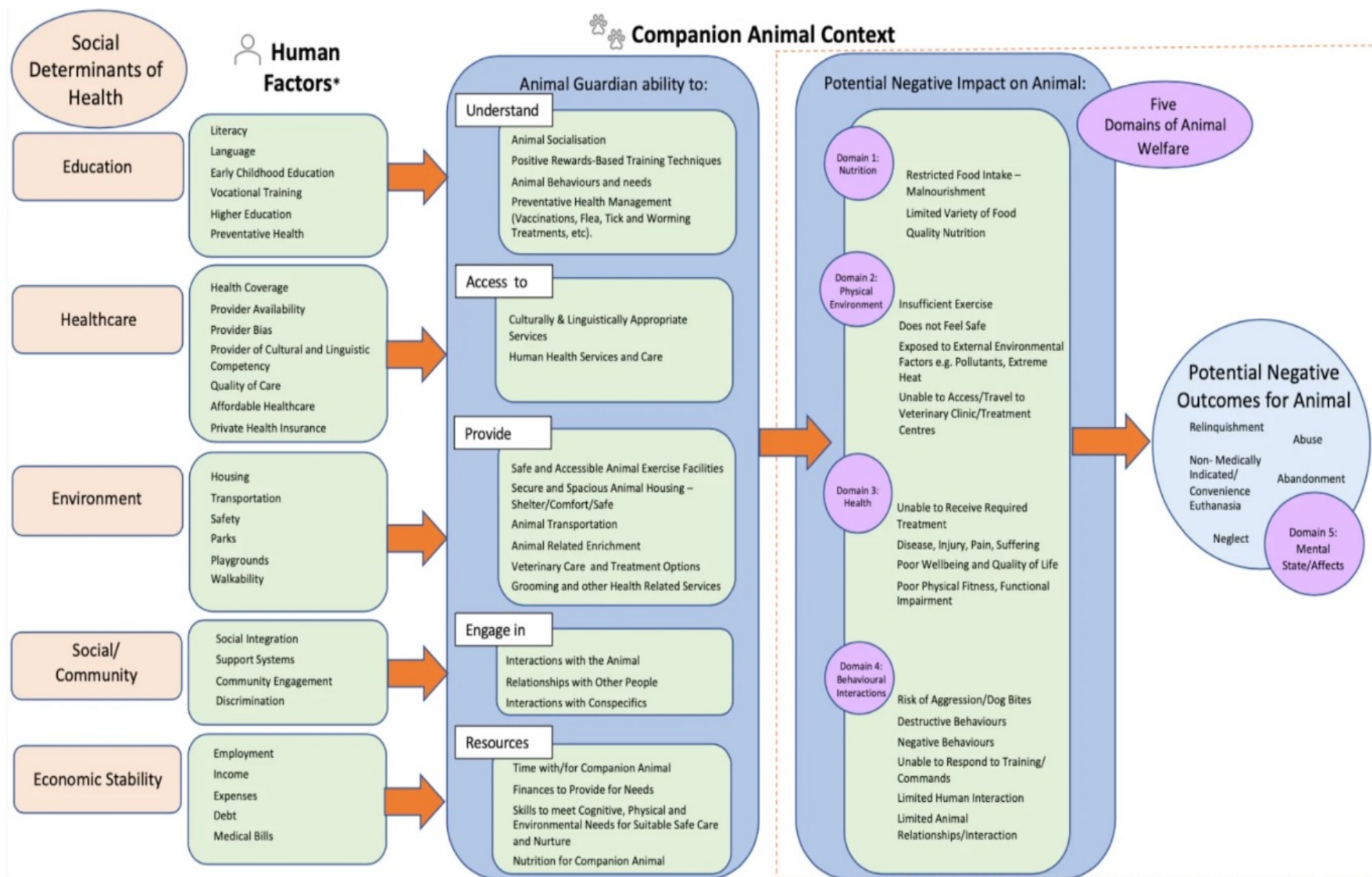


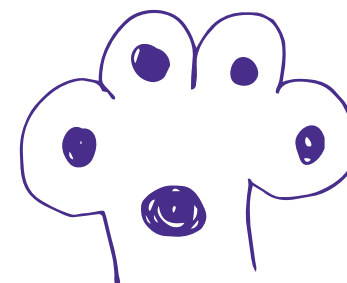
This strategy represents a deliberate shift in how animal welfare is conceptualised and delivered. By recognising the fundamental link between human and animal wellbeing, AWLQ is positioned to move beyond reactive service delivery and toward a model that addresses the root causes of vulnerability.

In doing so, AWLQ will not only improve outcomes for animals but also contribute to healthier, more resilient communities.



Appendix One: Integrated SDH/Five Domains Framework (iSDH-5D) (McDowall et al., 2023)





References:

1. McDowall, S., et al., The Impact of the Social Determinants of Human Health on Companion Animal Welfare. *Animals*, 2023. 13(6): p. 1113.
2. McDowall, S., et al., Association of Socioeconomic Status and Reasons for Companion Animal Relinquishment. *Animals*, 2024. 14(17): p. 2549.
3. Chapman, A.R., The social determinants of health, health equity, and human rights. *Health and human rights*, 2010. 12(2): p. 17-30.
4. Braveman, P., S. Egerter, and D.R. Williams, The social determinants of health: coming of age. *Annual review of public health*, 2011. 32(1): p. 381-398.
5. Mellor, D.J. and N.J. Beausoleil, Extending the 'Five Domains' model for animal welfare assessment to incorporate positive welfare states. *Animal welfare*, 2015. 24(3): p. 241-253.
6. Mellor, D.J., et al., The 2020 five domains model: Including human-animal interactions in assessments of animal welfare. *Animals (Basel)*, 2020. 10(10): p. 1-24.
7. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, O.o.D.P.a.H.P. Healthy People 2030. 2020 17/12/2022]; Available from: <https://health.gov/healthypeople/objectives-and-data/social-determinants-health>.
8. World Health Organization. One Health. 2025 [cited 2025 30th September]; Available from: https://www.who.int/health-topics/one-health#tab=tab_1.
9. Pinillos, R.G., et al., One Welfare – a platform for improving human and animal welfare. *Veterinary record*, 2016. 179(16): p. 412-413.
10. Pinillos, R.G., One welfare : a framework to improve animal welfare and human well-being. 2018, Wallingford, Oxfordshire, UK :: CAB International.
11. Gibbs, E.P.J., The evolution of One Health: a decade of progress and challenges for the future. *Veterinary record*, 2014. 174(4): p. 85-91.
12. Conti, L.A. and P.M. Rabinowitz, One health initiative. *Infektološki glasnik*, 2011. 31(4): p. 176-178.
13. Card, C., T. Epp, and M. Lem, Exploring the Social Determinants of Animal Health. *Journal of veterinary medical education*, 2018. 45(4): p. 437-447.
14. Spencer, T., et al., Factors that Influence Intake to One Municipal Animal Control Facility in Florida: A Qualitative Study. *Animals (Basel)*, 2017. 7(7): p. 48.
15. Park, R.M., M.E. Gruen, and K. Royal, Association between dog owner demographics and decision to seek veterinary care. *Veterinary sciences*, 2021. 8(1): p. 1-19.
16. LaVallee, E., M.K. Mueller, and E. McCobb, A Systematic Review of the Literature Addressing Veterinary Care for Underserved Communities. *Journal of applied animal welfare science*, 2017. 20(4): p. 381-394.
17. Lem, M., Barriers to accessible veterinary care. *Canadian veterinary journal*, 2019. 60(8): p. 891-893.
18. Dolan, E.D., et al., Risk factors for dog relinquishment to a Los Angeles municipal animal shelter. *Animals (Basel)*, 2015. 5(4): p. 1311-1328.
19. Shore, E.R., C.L. Petersen, and D.K. Douglas, Moving As a Reason for Pet Relinquishment: A Closer Look. *Journal of applied animal welfare science*, 2003. 6(1): p. 39-52.
20. Russo, A., S. Dowling-Guyer, and E. McCobb, Community Programming for Companion Dog Retention: A Survey of Animal Welfare Organizations. *Journal of applied animal welfare science*, 2021. ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print): p. 1-15.
21. Irvine, L., K.N. Kahl, and J.M. Smith, Confrontations and Donations: Encounters between Homeless Pet Owners and the Public. *Sociological quarterly*, 2012. 53(1): p. 25-43.
22. Power, E.R., Renting with pets: a pathway to housing insecurity? *Housing studies*, 2017. 32(3): p. 336-360.
23. Brown, C.R., et al., Spectrum of care: more than treatment options. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 2021. 259(7): p. 712-717.
24. McDowall, S., et al., Exploring Social Determinants of Health in Veterinary Technology: A Workshop Approach to Enhancing Companion Animal Welfare and Student Awareness. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*, 2025: p. e20240157.



awlaq.org.au