

Government Manifesto

2026





Contents

Executive Summary	3
About Lort Smith Animal Hospital	4
One Health, One Welfare and the Five Domains of animal welfare	6
Lort Smith's Priorities	7
1. Assistance to people in financial need	8
2. Responsible pet care and welfare	10
3. Emergency Boarding Program	11
4. Integration of human social services into the veterinary care sector	13
5. Animal-assisted outreach – pet therapy and adoption dogs	14



Executive Summary

With approximately 73% of Australian households now including a pet, the human-animal bond has become an increasingly important part of family life, mental wellbeing and community health. Lort Smith's work reflects internationally recognised frameworks such as One Health and One Welfare, which acknowledge the interconnection between human health, animal welfare and the broader environment.

However, rising cost-of-living pressures are placing increasing strain on both people and animal welfare organisations. Many pet owners experiencing financial hardship delay veterinary care or face the distressing possibility of surrendering beloved animals.

To respond to these growing community needs, Lort Smith is seeking government partnership and investment in six priority areas:

- 1. Assistance to people experiencing hardship and financial difficulties**, so they can access essential veterinary care and keep their pets.
- 2. Education of the pet loving public on responsible pet care practices**, aligned with modern animal welfare principles such as the Five Domains model.
- 3. Growth and sustainability of our Emergency Boarding Program**, to support people with pets who are facing crisis, including family violence and homelessness.
- 4. Integration of human social services into the veterinary care sector**, undertaking research into veterinary social work to support both clients and veterinary professionals.
- 5. Expansion of our animal assisted community outreach services**, including pet therapy and innovative rehabilitation programs linking adoption dogs with young people in the justice system.

Together, these initiatives recognise that **supporting the wellbeing of pets directly supports the wellbeing of people**. With the right investment and collaboration, Lort Smith can expand its impact, keeping pets and people together, reducing pressure on animal shelters, improving community health outcomes, and strengthening the role of companion animals in Victorian society.



About Lort Smith Animal Hospital

Lort Smith is the largest not for profit animal hospital in Australia. Since 1936 we have provided quality and compassionate vet care to hundreds of thousands of pets in need, extending that care to the people who love them.

Alongside our animal hospital in North Melbourne and our clinic and adoption centre in Campbellfield, we deliver essential programs that protect and celebrate the power of the human-animal bond. Providing temporary foster care for pets while their people navigate crisis and hardship, and bringing comfort and healing into healthcare facilities, schools and youth justice services.



Lort Smith Animal Hospital - North Melbourne

Lort Smith's iconic North Melbourne Animal Hospital provides general and emergency veterinary care for all pets, while making sure our services are accessible to all through generously discounted services for clients holding concession cards.



Our Purpose

To keep pets and people together by providing accessible compassionate care and championing the powerful impact of the human-animal bond.

Lort Smith Adoption Centre and Clinic - Campbellfield

Lort Smith Campbellfield is more than just an adoption centre and veterinary clinic, it's a purpose-built facility designed with pets' well-being in mind. With a focus on holistic care, our team of vets and nurses offers high-quality and affordable pet care services to the whole of community.

Emergency Boarding program

In times of crisis and hardship, our Emergency Boarding program provides short-term accommodation and foster care for pets belonging to individuals facing domestic violence, emergency hospitalisation, or homelessness.

Pet Therapy program

For over 35 years, the Pet Therapy program has been bringing comfort and relief to those in need across Melbourne. Our specially assessed dogs, accompanied by dedicated volunteers, visit hospitals, care facilities, and justice settings, offering support during times of illness, adversity, and loneliness.

Good Shepherd

As a partner of Lort Smith, Good Shepherd offers No Interest Loans (NILs) to individuals on low incomes, providing financial assistance of up to \$2,000 for veterinary costs.

Compassionate Care Fund

In addition to Good Shepherd no interest loans, eligible individuals with concession cards can access further financial help of up to an additional \$2,000 to access vital veterinary care during emergencies, from funds raised through our Pet Care Crisis Appeal.

One Health, One Welfare and the Five Domains of animal welfare

One Health and One Welfare are global movements that recognise the interconnectedness of people, animals and ecosystems.

The One Health approach recognises that the health of people, animals and the environment are closely connected. It brings together different sectors and professions to work at all levels to improve wellbeing for all. By looking at health as a shared responsibility, One Health helps prevent disease, manage risks, and protect the environments we all depend on.

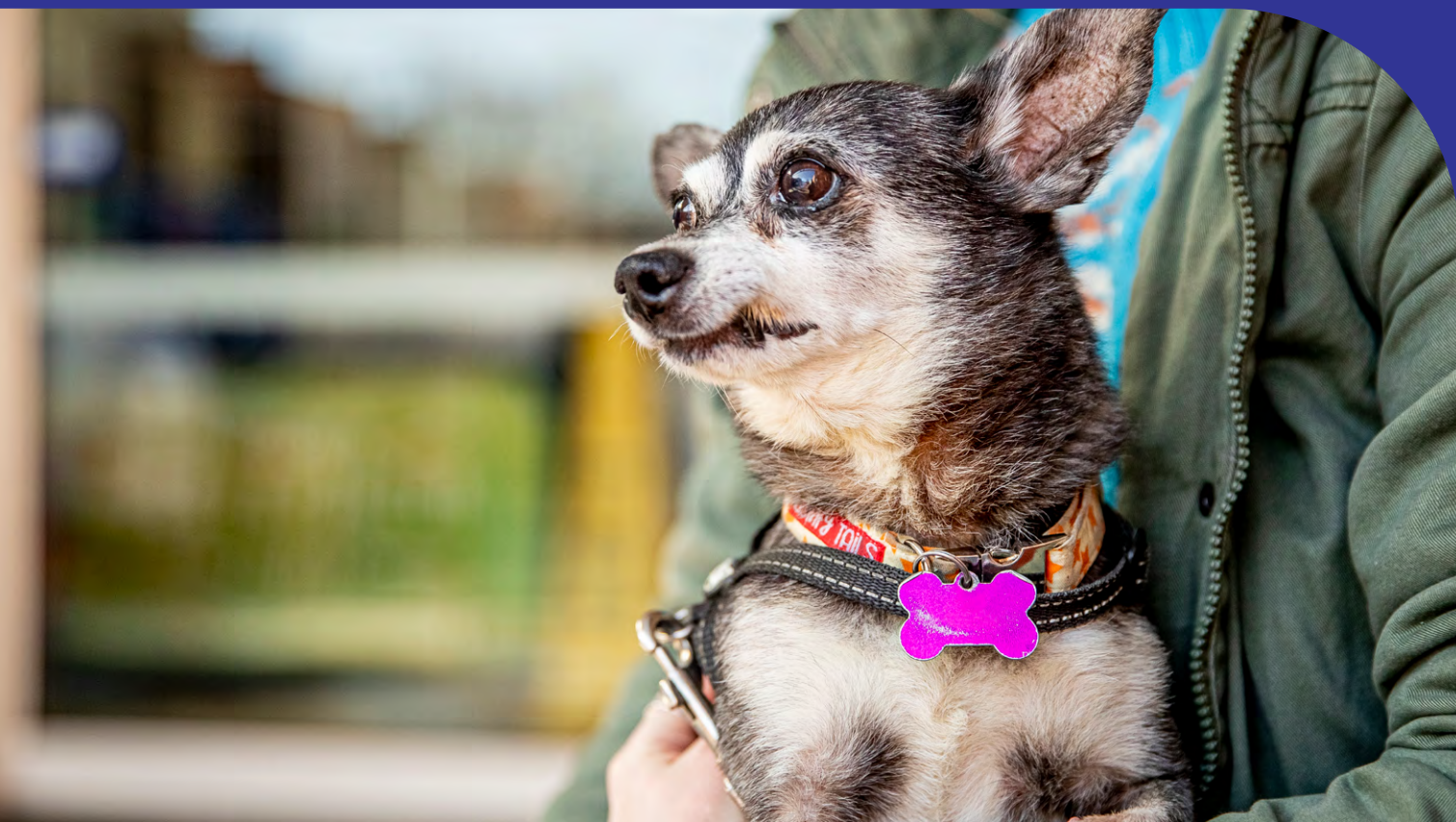
One Welfare shares these principles and extends the focus to welfare and well-being, recognising the importance of quality of life and that human wellbeing is linked to animal welfare, as well as environment.

Lort Smith's work embodies these two principles. We work in partnership with human health and welfare services for the benefits of human family members, while caring for and providing health and welfare services for their pets.

With 73% of households now including a pet, recognising the special bond between pets and their people and taking a holistic approach to supporting their health and their well-being has never been so important.¹

The Five Domains Model of animal care helps us look at an animal's wellbeing in a practical, structured way. It focuses on how an animal is feeling, as well as their physical needs. The model considers four key areas - nutrition, environment, health and behaviour, and how these together influence an animal's overall mental and emotional state. By looking at all of these areas, we can better understand and support an animal's quality of life.

¹. Animal Medicines Australia, national survey of pets and people, 2025



Lort Smith's Priorities:

Lort Smith is a not-for-profit organisation funded through philanthropic donations, bequests, grants and revenue generated by our (full) fees for services. Lort Smith is seeking commitment and support in the following areas:

1. Assistance to people experiencing hardship and financial difficulties
2. Education of the pet loving public on responsible pet care practices
3. Growth and sustainability of our Emergency Boarding Program
4. Integration of human social services into the veterinary care sector
5. Expansion of our animal assisted community outreach services



1.

Assistance to people in financial need

Lort Smith is seeking:

- A commitment for social policy to recognise pets as an essential part of family wellbeing within human social settings. Such as housing and crisis response. That pets should be included in planning processes across homelessness, family violence and health services.
- An injection of funding so that we can directly help people with pets who are experiencing financial hardship and crisis to care for and keep their pets.

Pets are a source of comfort and connection. They provide companionship, alleviate loneliness, and can support improved mental and physical health (such as improvements in mood and cardiovascular health)². According to Victoria's 2023 Pet Census, the vast majority of Victorian pet owners (98%) believe that their lives are better because of their pet³.

Many disadvantaged and marginalised members of our community have strong relationships with their pets. It is estimated that around 55% of low-income households have a pet, with the most common reason being for companionship.⁴ Many people experiencing homelessness also have companion animals.

People going through financial difficulties respond in various ways when they face challenges in providing for their pets. Some will delay seeking veterinary care, skip regular check-ups and vaccinations, feed their animals less, or cease giving their animal medication.⁵ In its latest pet survey, Animal Medicines Australia found that surrendering pets to rescue centres was most common amongst financially vulnerable people, and that 12 per cent of pet owners had sought financial assistance for veterinary care costs in the previous 12 months⁶. Other research has shown that people will often preference the well-being of their pets over their own. They may cut their human food budgets, reduce their own food intake or even skip meals so that their pets can eat⁷.

For many families with pets, making a decision that is financially necessary, but at the detriment of their pet's health and wellbeing create strong feelings of guilt. Surrendering a much-loved pet because of the inability to meet its needs is a heart-breaking decision of last resort. Each rise in the cost of living in Australia puts more people and their pets at risk, and each animal surrendered to a welfare organisation increases pressure on already-strained resources.

It is in everyone's interests to keep animals with the people who love them. At Lort Smith, we are committed to making sure people in need can care for their pets' everyday health and welfare or when an emergency happens. We need additional resources to be able to respond to the increasing demand for our services.

2. Hussien, S.M., Soliman, W.S., and Khalifa, A.A. (2021). Benefits of pet ownership, a review based on health perspectives. *Journal of Internal Medicine and Emergency Research*, 2021, 2(1), 1-9.
3. Animal Welfare Victoria. Victorian Pet Census Survey Findings Report Final October 2023. https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/livestock-and-animals/animal-welfare-victoria/animal-welfare/victorian-pet-census/Victorian-Pet-Census_Report.pdf
4. Victorian Pet Census reported that 54% of households with incomes below \$60,000 had pets. Foodbank found that 56% of food insecure households had pets. *Foodbank Paws In Need - Pet Hunger Report*. <https://reports.foodbank.org.au/paws-in-need>
5. Animal Medicines Australia. *Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people 2025 survey*. https://animalmedicinesaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/SNR-2403006-Pet-Ownership-Study-2025-Designed_F3.pdf.
6. Animal Medicines Australia. *Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people 2025 survey*. Ibid.
7. FoodBank Paws In Need - Pet Hunger Report. Ibid.



Case Study:

Maybe cats do have nine lives

Pierina realised something was wrong when her eight-floor apartment balcony door was accidentally left open. Her heart dropped when she saw one of her cats, Nube, sitting outside, but the other, Zack, had vanished. Recently settled in Australia, her two cats are her family. Pierina tried to keep her feelings of panic in check while she searched everywhere, knocking on neighbours' doors, searched all the common areas and walking up and down the building all night, but with no luck.

In the morning the building cleaner had news for her. A cat had been seen hiding in a bush. It was Zack, he had fallen eight storeys off the balcony.

Luckily, Pierina was able to rush Zack to our Emergency Department in North Melbourne. Against all odds, he hadn't injured his head or pelvis, but his right hind leg was badly damaged. He had fractured four bones in his leg and suffered severe ligament damage. Despite our best efforts, the leg was too badly injured and had to be amputated.

Pierina doesn't yet have permanent residency, so couldn't apply for loans. The thought of losing Zack was heart-breaking. Lort Smith covered the costs of the surgery he so desperately needed. Without Lort Smith Pierina says she would have had to have given him up or worse. Pierina was so grateful, she told us it would have broken her heart to have no other choice but to lose him, and how amazing it is that they get to stay together.



2.

Responsible pet care and welfare

Lort Smith is seeking:

- Funding for a government resourced public education campaign on responsible pet care and pet wellbeing in line with the principles of the Five Domains.

To date, public campaigns on pet care have centred on more functional responsible pet ownership messaging, based on the Five Freedoms model of animal welfare. This approach fails to include important consideration for an animal's overall sense of wellbeing. The role of pets as part of family life has changed exponentially over recent times, their wellbeing has become paramount.

The Five Domains Model of animal welfare provides a framework for ensuring the wellbeing of individual animals and has recently been integrated into Victoria's Animal Welfare Action Plan. It sets out how an animal's nutrition, the environment in which it lives, its health status and expression of behaviour combine to produce positive or negative mental states for the animal. When these are correctly balanced, they provide mental wellbeing outcomes for the animal.⁸

We believe that people who have or are considering a pet as part of their family should be supported to make informed and responsible decisions regarding acquiring and caring for pets based on these principles.

Lort Smith is seeking financial support to take proactive measures to educate and inform on digital platforms where people are known to seek information, as well as written resources presented in a creative and engaging format. Such resources should be accessible to all demographics and be culturally respectful and appropriate for Victoria's multicultural context.

⁸ Animal Health Australia. *Five Welfare Domains*. https://animalhealthaustralia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/Five-Welfare-Domains.pdf

3.



Emergency Boarding Program

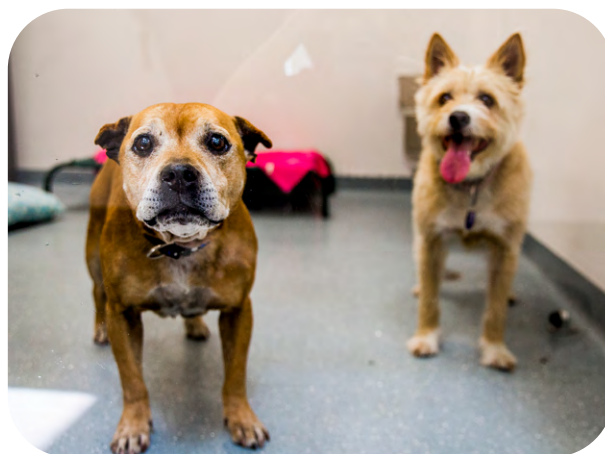
Lort Smith is seeking:

- Formal recognition of companion animals within state crisis, health and family violence frameworks (including funding guidelines and service models).
- Funding to expand our emergency boarding capacity and capabilities

Concern for the welfare of pets is a well-documented barrier to people leaving family violence, accessing mental healthcare, or accepting crisis accommodation options. For many victim-survivors, people experiencing homelessness, or accessing residential rehabilitation services, pets are family, and fear for their safety can keep people in dangerous or deteriorating situations.

Lort Smith's Emergency Boarding Program provides critical, short-term care for pets when their people experience crisis. Either within our adoption facility or with our trusted foster-care families. Demand from our partner health, family violence and homelessness agencies already exceeds our capacity to be able to manage the numbers of human services patients and clients needing to use our services.

Lort Smith is seeking financial support to substantially expand our current capacity to manage intake processes and the care and liaison required to run a successful program that provides significant outcomes across both human and animal welfare.



3. Emergency Boarding Program *continued...*



Case Study

Friends Reunited

(names are changed for privacy)

Maisie is a beautiful 15-year-old senior cat whose person, Debra, suddenly found herself facing homelessness because of family violence. After 15 years together, and at a time when there were no other constants, the thought of surrendering Maisie was unbearable. But Debra didn't see any other option or way out.

But there was another option. Maisie was lucky and was able to be transported to Lort Smith. She needed urgent dental treatment and pain relief and had seven teeth extracted. Debra was

heartbroken that she hadn't realised Maisie was in pain, but our vet team reassured her that this is very common in older cats and what matters is that she had gotten help when it counted.

Lort Smith covered the cost of the extensive dental work, pain relief and diagnostic work to ensure there were no other underlying health concerns. After a month, Maisie was lovingly reunited with Debra, now in safe and pet-friendly long-term accommodation. The reunion between Maisie and Debra was gentle, and full of tears of joy.

4.



Integration of human social services into the veterinary care sector

Lort Smith is seeking:

- Funding to undertake a social impact study, exploring how veterinary social workers support the mental health of veterinary professionals, while also improving outcomes for people experiencing hardship and crisis, and their pets.

The veterinary workforce faces many challenges. While veterinary professionals do find the work rewarding, it is also very demanding. Veterinary staff can be deeply affected by repeated exposure to trauma and the suffering of animals and their owners, compounding the effects of high workloads, long hours and dealing with difficult or struggling pet owners.

Problems with difficult clients can increase in times of financial hardship, with such hardship also leading to delays in seeking veterinary attention for sick animals and exacerbating animal suffering. Research has shown that veterinary professionals can experience chronic stress, leading to burnout and compassion fatigue, with many people responding by leaving veterinary practice altogether. The veterinary sector overall has a high attrition rate⁹ and a suicide rate twice that of the general population.¹⁰ This is alongside a global shortage of qualified veterinary professionals.

Veterinary professionals are not trained for many of the human interactions they can face on a day-to-day basis, particularly where these relate to people who are struggling and in need of financial or social welfare supports. The field of veterinary social work is an emerging area in Australia, and involves specially trained social workers being employed in veterinary settings to liaise between pet families, veterinary teams and welfare services. Reports of the benefits of employing veterinary social workers on veterinary staff are emerging but more research is required to establish whether this engagement translates into improved mental health outcomes for staff.

We seek funding for a veterinary social worker placement and comprehensive impact study in partnership with Monash University's Department of Social Work. The purpose is to examine the benefits for veterinary professionals' mental health and wellbeing, as well as measuring the outcomes and impacts on low-socioeconomic clients experiencing hardship or crisis, and their pets.

9. Hilton, K.R., Burke, K.J. and Signal, T (2023). Mental health in the veterinary profession: an individual or organisational focus? *Australian Veterinary Journal*, Vol 101, No 1-2 January-February 2023, p41-48.

10. Griffith University News article, August 2025. <https://news.griffith.edu.au/2025/08/26/study-probes-why-australian-veterinarians-are-at-nearly-double-the-risk-of-suicide>



5.

Animal-assisted outreach – pet therapy and adoption dogs

Lort Smith is seeking:

- Financial support to run, track and measure the social return on investment of a Lort Smith led pilot program, Pup Mates.

Various programs operate overseas pairing adoption dogs with individuals within the justice system, with reports of positive outcomes for the animals in terms of adoptability and rehoming, and for the individuals which include improvements in mental health, self-esteem and confidence.^{11,12}

¹¹. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/apr/19/pets-in-prison-the-rescue-dogs-teaching-californian-inmates-trust-and-responsibility>

¹². Sadler, D. (2024). 'It saved my life'.



Our existing pet therapy program has been running for over 30 years as part of our community outreach services. Volunteers take their specially assessed dogs into hospitals, residential care settings and youth justice services. Providing comfort and relief to people experiencing illness, adversity, loneliness and the long-term impacts of trauma. Evidence suggests interaction with dogs can reduce stress and anxiety and reduce loneliness. And lead to improvements in behaviour, confidence, social skills, mental health and general wellbeing.

Lort Smith is seeking financial support to trial expansion of our community outreach programs within the youth justice system.

Carefully matching dogs for adoption with young people. The young person would have responsibility for exercising, socialising and helping the dogs to learn basic manners. The program is designed to teach the young people new skills to help with their rehabilitation and reduce their risk of reoffending while improving the adoptability of the dog and creating space in the shelter.

Case Study:

The power of the bond we share with our animals

(names are changed for privacy)

Adam* was a young person in custody who had become increasingly withdrawn and disengaged. Like many in the youth justice system, his confidence had been shaken through his life experiences, making it difficult for him to connect with others or participate in programs.

When Lort Smith's Pet Therapy teams began visiting his unit, staff noticed a shift. Adam was drawn to the dogs from the start. What began as quiet observation soon turned into small moments of interactions, asking questions, and gradually building rapport with the volunteers.

As part of Lort Smith's work with Youth Justice, Adam was invited to take part in a series of hands-on short sessions alongside a dog trainer, volunteer and Therapy dog. He chose to work one-on-one with Maisy, a rescue Staffy with plenty of energy and enthusiasm. Together, they worked on simple training exercises, with Adam learning how to read Maisy's behaviour and respond calmly and consistently. Youth justice staff commented that he showed a level of focus and engagement they hadn't seen before.

The connection Adam formed with the dog became a steady foundation for his participation. Through these interactions, he remained present, motivated and open to learning. One volunteer reflected on "the warmth and genuine connection that he developed over time," describing the experience as both meaningful and rewarding to witness.

For Adam, the program offered more than practical skills. It created a space where he could experience trust, responsibility and a sense of achievement.

Adam's experience highlights how the human-animal bond can support young people to feel safe, build trust, and take important first steps towards engagement, learning and connection.



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