

From Research to Regulation to Headlines

How Mars funded PIAS studied pet ownership, argued for policy change and supplied the news

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The Petcare Information and Advisory Service (PIAS) did more than provide pet-care tips. Mars funded an organisation that commissioned research, argued for changes to housing and public space, supplied stories to journalists and recruited respected voices to carry the message. The surviving record shows how those activities fitted together. [1–5]

A major seller of pet food financed a programme that enlarged and protected the market for pet ownership while inviting the public to treat its advice as an autonomous community service. This was planned, paid-for persuasion, carried through institutions the public had reason to trust. On PIAS's own documents, its methods and consequences demand scrutiny.

The brief was wider than pet care

In January 1993 PIAS published *Pets in Urban Areas*, a report it had commissioned from planning consultants Harlock Jackson, with architects Goad Fink and animal behaviourist Dr Robert Holmes. The report identified smaller homes and gardens as possible deterrents to owning pets. It was written for homeowners, architects, developers, councils and the authorities approving housing and subdivision plans. Its stated aim was to integrate pets into new residential development. [1]

PIAS described its own purposes in the report: encourage pet ownership, provide care advice, educate owners, undertake research and ensure information reached legislators and the media. It also listed national school talks, pet-care videos, pamphlets and school “fun” shows. Its account of Selectapet said the computerised service had been used as many as one million times since 1985 and was used by local government and animal-control councils. These are PIAS's claims, not independently audited usage figures. [1]

The report recognised barking, biting, aggression, roaming, faeces and damage to wildlife. Yet its governing assumption was that the barriers to continued pet ownership could largely be managed by breed selection, education, design and access to public space. It argued that leashed dogs should be admitted to urban parks and cited the pet-food manufacturers' preference for education and peer pressure over restrictive legislation. [1]

Here the commercial question is unavoidable. A Mars funded body was not just advising existing owners. It was advancing an account of what councils and designers should do when housing trends threatened future ownership. The resulting demand for food, veterinary services and other products was a foreseeable consequence. The report does not show Mars directing individual planning decisions; it shows the programme's chosen policy direction.

Research became a defence of the market

The 2006 National People and Pets Survey compared Roy Morgan interviews conducted in 1994 and 2006. At its conclusion, it said the study had been undertaken to provide data supporting the popularity and place of pets in society. Urban consolidation, environmental concerns, lifestyle changes and legislation

were presented as threats. Policy-makers were urged to accommodate pet ownership and avoid disadvantaging the “responsible majority”. The report named Mars Petcare as PIAS’s funder. [2]

Its methods deserve particular scrutiny. PIAS supplied Roy Morgan with the estimate that 53 per cent of Australian households owned a dog or cat. That estimate was then used to set a quota of 530 pet owners in a planned sample of 1,000 people. The survey disclosed the procedure. The sample therefore cannot itself be cited as an independent measurement that 53 per cent of households owned a dog or cat. A substantial share of its favourable findings also rested on owners’ reports about their own conduct. [2]

One adverse result survived the reassuring narrative: the proportion of dog owners saying their dog rarely or never displayed undesirable behaviour fell from 84 per cent in 1994 to 77 per cent in 2006. The authors called this statistically significant, then offered possible explanations, including more time alone for dogs or stricter community standards. They did not demonstrate that PIAS caused the improvements elsewhere in the survey; indeed, they expressly said the reasons for the favourable results could not be known precisely. [2]

This matters because the research was asked to do two jobs. It measured selected aspects of ownership, then furnished an argument against constraints on ownership. A survey can contain useful observations and still serve an advocacy programme. Its sponsor, assumptions, limits and subsequent uses belong in plain sight.

The planning message entered public institutions

In 2010 PIAS produced *Pets in the City*. It said PIAS had commissioned a research agency to study ownership in higher-density housing, then turned the findings into a guide for people who owned pets or wanted one. The guide included advice on negotiating strata rules and rental permission and making smaller homes work for dogs and cats. A copy remains available from a Sydney council website. [3]

The Cat Protection Society of NSW reported attending its launch on 17 August 2010. Sydney Lord Mayor Clover Moore spoke there. The Society adopted the research in its own account of housing barriers and urged readers to write to MPs and seek changes to pet rules. This documents the reach of the PIAS material through an independent welfare organisation and a civic launch. It does not establish that the Lord Mayor or the Society endorsed Mars’s commercial interests. [4]

At the back of the guide, PIAS again called itself autonomous and non-commercial while identifying Mars Petcare as its funder. The guide also disclaimed warranties concerning the accuracy, reliability and completeness of its material and directed readers to make their own enquiries. The juxtaposition is stark: PIAS sought public authority for its research and advice while attempting to limit responsibility for that advice. [3]

A ready-made news story carried the argument onward

A surviving PIAS release dated 9 November 2009 shows the next channel. “Pets are the retiring type” joined a proposed change in retirement-community policy to quotations from a Council on the Ageing chief executive, an animal behaviourist, a university researcher and an aged-care manager. It offered interview contacts, repeated a stock “nation of pet lovers” paragraph, and disclosed Mars funding near the end. Media enquiries went to an address at Tango Public Relations. This is a contemporaneous release reproduced on a press-release site, not an independently reported article. [5]

The format matters. The release supplied a news angle, research claims, credible people, quotable sentences and contact details in one package. Search-indexed PetNet files show similar releases aimed at families, pregnant women and apartment dwellers, including “Purrfect pets for little people” in April 2011 and “Dog ownership = active mums” in June 2012. Those legacy PetNet links now lead to a parked domain, so complete copies should be checked against the recovered archive before their detailed claims are republished. [6]

No internal communications are needed to establish that PIAS deliberately prepared material for media use. Its 1993 charter said legislators and media were intended recipients; its 2009 release displays the method. What remains unknown is how Mars set budgets and priorities, reviewed copy, measured coverage and judged the commercial returns.

The public-interest charge

Taken together, these records show a continuous operating pattern: identify a barrier to pet ownership; commission research; turn the result into a policy argument; enlist civic, professional and welfare voices; supply a story to journalists; and describe the resulting accommodation of pets as social progress. Mars funded PIAS while selling into the pet-owning households the programme sought to sustain. [1–5]

That is a serious conflict of interest. The moral charge is sharper still. Dogs and cats bear the consequences when acquisition is encouraged without a full reckoning of diet, disease, behaviour, abandonment and the burdens imposed on households and communities. In my view, a sponsor cannot claim the prestige of science and public service while treating those costs as somebody else’s problem. The 1993 report recorded several of the harms. Its central question remained how to preserve ownership despite them. [1]

The documents support a powerful inference of market protection and managed persuasion. They do not, by themselves, prove that a named employee or family member knowingly made a false statement, that a particular journalist was “roped in”, or that any offence was committed. Such findings require the commissioning briefs, internal correspondence, financial records and evidence about individual claims. That is why the records must be opened.

Open the files and test the claims

Mars, PIAS’s former officers, research contractors and relevant institutions should disclose the full PIAS budgets and governance records; the commissioning briefs and underlying data for the planning and Roy Morgan work; the complete register of studies, including adverse or unpublished work; media contracts, releases, distribution lists and coverage reports; and assessments of effects on pet acquisition, regulation and sales. They should also account for custody of the archive after PIAS’s operations ended.

If the programme was the public service it claimed to be, its advice should stand up to permanent public examination. The recovered fragments already show the machinery. The missing records will show who designed it, what they knew about its costs, and whether its claims were corrected when the evidence changed.

Sources and evidence status

[1] **Harlock Jackson et al, January 1993, Pets in Urban Areas.** Contemporaneous PIAS-commissioned report. The old PetNet URL may now redirect; search-indexed PDF text survives. See especially report pp 5–10, 31.
<https://petnet.com.au/publications/10438.pdf>

[2] **National People and Pets Survey 2006.** PIAS/Roy Morgan report, pp 8, 14, 20 and 23. Search-indexed PDF text survives; the former domain may redirect. <https://petnet.com.au/files/publications/10410.pdf>

[3] **PIAS, Pets in the City, 2010.** Full 100-page guide retained by Inner West Council, including its opening explanation and final funding and disclaimer page. https://www.innerwest.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/page-documents/pets_in_the_city.pdf

[4] **Cat Protection Society of NSW, Pets in the City, 7 June 2011.** First-hand account of the 17 August 2010 launch and the Society's own policy response. <https://catprotection.org.au/pets-in-the-city/>

[5] **PIAS, Pets are the retiring type, 9 November 2009.** Complete PIAS media release preserved by a press-release distributor; evidence of the release, not independent verification of its research claims.
<https://conservation.newsarticles.net.au/Animals/Pets-Are-The-Retiring-Type.htm>

[6] **PIAS, Purrfect pets for little people, April 2011; Dog ownership = active mums, 21 June 2012.** Former PetNet PDF path for the first release. The second path is https://petnet.com.au/files/sites/default/files/media_release_dog_ownership_active_mums.pdf. Both presently redirect; details require comparison with the recovered files. https://petnet.com.au/files/sites/default/files/2011_04-_purrfect_pets_for_little_people.pdf