The residents of Newton will not be going to the circus after all. Advertisements taken out in this newspaper two weeks ago by Circus Cosmos invited everyone to attend the performances to be held on Acacia Oval on December 3 and 4.

But the Council has decided not to grant permission for the Oval to be used by the circus.

Councillor di Pieri said that the Council does not wish to be seen to condone cruel treatment of animals. ‘The Council has commissioned reports on this issue in the past’, he said, ‘and there has been a great deal of evidence to suggest that the treatment of animals in circuses is not humane.’

Circus animals are kept in cramped cages, a situation no longer tolerated by zoos. As circus sites are often small, especially in cities, lack of space prevents proper exercise and elephants, in particular, are often chained. To protect the public, some animals are forced to wear muzzles, which further curtails their freedom. Training is also less than humane. Bullhooks – long handles with sharp metal hooks, whips and sticks (much like cricket bats) are used to show animals who is boss.

But circuses are also dangerous to people, contends Cr di Pieri. ‘We have reports of many cases of injured trainers. Members of the public have also been attacked by frustrated animals out of control.’

He said it was time to put an end to this barbaric and outdated practice. ‘Gladiatorial combats with animals may have been acceptable in Roman times, and bear-baiting was popular during the Middle Ages, but these forms of entertainment are inappropriate in our more civilised century.’

Since Australia does not have adequate laws to protect animals in circuses, according to Cr di Pieri it is all the more important for councils to make a stand. ‘I’m pleased to say that many local and municipal councils in Australia have already banned visits from circuses that exploit exotic animals. Naturally, I am delighted that our Council has joined their ranks.’

Local veterinarian, Dr Assad, agrees with Cr di Pieri that circuses are detrimental for the health and welfare of animals. She draws attention to the living and working conditions of animals. ‘I am very concerned about animals living and having to travel long distances in cramped conditions. Exposure to constantly changing environments, traffic noise and pollution add further to their discomfort.’ Circuses, argues Dr Assad, subject animals to gruelling routines that are completely ‘at odds with natural behaviour’. ‘Elephants balancing on one foot on small stools or lions jumping through rings of fire are not natural. They are tricks acquired through bribery and bullying. And they have to perform these over and over again, whether they want to or not. Elephants, tigers, bears, dogs and donkeys are intelligent beasts. Yet circuses make them perform the same trick for years. They’re never taught anything new. They remain slaves to a mindless routine.’

A specialist in veterinary care for exotic animals, Dr Assad is consultant to zoos across Australia. She is deeply concerned that exotic circus animals that become ill do not have the same ready access to appropriate care. ‘The best they can hope for is the local vet, used to cats and dogs, but sadly inexperienced in treating an elephant, giraffe or tiger.’

Gemma Brown, a young resident of Newton, has been looking forward to Circus Cosmos: ‘I wanted to see the dancing bear and the lions.’ James Zarkic is also disappointed: ‘We were going to the circus for my birthday.’ Mrs Bolton, mother of twins Carissa and Zak, thinks the Council’s stance is an over-reaction: ‘Where else can I take the kids for some harmless fun?’

Cr di Pieri disagrees. ‘Film and TV enable people to see animals “performing” naturally in the wild. This is more entertaining and educational than watching them perform unnatural tricks in captivity.’

But Cr di Pieri is not against all circuses. ‘If the Flying Fruit Fly Circus, Circus Oz, The Women’s Circus or Cirque du Soleil wanted to have Acacia Oval, the Council would give it to them tomorrow.’

And the difference? They don’t have animals.