

Striving for best practice — local government and animal welfare working together towards common goals in animal management

Greg Thomson

As you have just heard from my well-respected colleague [Michael Cartwright](#), the various bodies all striving towards better animal management within South Australia do work as closely, collectively and cooperatively as can be achieved.

Michael has presented to you the theoretical aspects of some of the work undertaken, particularly in recent times. I now wish to present to you some very practical applications, particularly from the perspective of the Animal Welfare League (AWL) of South Australia, as to the way in which we have undertaken our cooperation with the aim of working towards better animal management. I believe this has established us as a benchmark within this field.

Let's put it this way. The feedback I receive from many of our colleagues interstate leads me to believe that we are doing it the right way and that, compared to some, we are many steps ahead in our field.

One of the most disappointing statements that I was presented with at the Urban Animal Management Conference last year, when in conversation with an officer from one of the local councils from Western Australia, was that this person had absolutely no dealings with the local animal welfare shelter in Perth. As a matter of fact, the statement made was quite derogatory. It led me to reflect on some of the initiatives that we have undertaken in South Australia and our liaison with local government organisations.

Historically, and our records show this, the Animal Welfare League of South Australia has always undertaken, to the best of its ability, a very positive communication process with other organisations and local government authorities. Whilst this has not always been reciprocal it has, I believe, established a base for the rapport that is working well today.

For many years now the Animal Welfare League of South Australia has undertaken the role of what we colloquially quote as being 'the designated pound' for a number of councils within the Adelaide metropolitan area and near surrounds. This in effect is still a relatively true statement. Being situated in the northern suburbs area of Adelaide and having the RSPCA shelter situated in the southern suburbs area, it is quite fitting that on a cooperative basis we undertake the role of receipt and handling of both cats and dogs on behalf of councils.

Let's face it — we are here, our facilities are well established and it certainly alleviates the need for councils to undertake the cost of establishing and maintaining their own pounds when the facilities are available, our staff are professional in their work and certainly more in number. This is highlighted by the fact that two of our large councils have recognised staff within the organisation as being designated officers. They are therefore able to aid in the role of both council and the organisation when we are dealing with a problem that we refer to as receiving strays from the public. The result of this initiative has been that conflict between members of the community, the League and the particular local government authority is lessened. We are able to process the animals and often return them to their owner more rapidly than if we were to refer back to council before action could be taken.

Certainly, in line with the dog and cat management act, we are entitled to receive remuneration for this service provision. However even in this respect we have undertaken with a number of councils to implement a contract of service agreement whereby, depending on the service they provide and the service we provide, we will levy fees at an agreed rate more applicable to the service provision. An example I can give is that two councils in particular have their own pound. They maintain the animal for the first 72 hours as per the dog and cat management act. From there, rather than destroy, they will then transport the animals to our care where we will undertake to assess, vet check, desex if necessary, heartworm, test, groom, vaccinate and rehome. The lodgement fee for these councils has been agreed at a far less rate than the normal lodgement fee.

Add to this a most recent agreement formed — and a first for us, as well as probably any council utilising our services. With another council in our immediate vicinity we have undertaken to not only come to formal agreement with regard to animal handling but also undertake an administration role in the registration of dogs either sold or returned to the public within their council area.

As far as the administration tasks undertaken by us are concerned, they are minimal in time consumption for the staff of the Animal Welfare League. They also aid both the Animal Welfare League and the local council by ensuring that these dogs are registered and thus traceable from the moment they leave our care.

The Animal Welfare League of South Australia also participates actively at policy level. In the dog and cat management area the dog and cat management board have two sub-committees which are of advisory capacity. Not only the Animal Welfare League, but other organisations such as RSPCA, South Australian Canine Association, CATS Incorporated, local veterinary representatives and indeed local government representatives are constituents of these two sub-committees.

This has led to a number of initiatives being undertaken, one of which has been a review of the role all organisations play in animal management, particularly with dogs. The result of this, for the Animal Welfare League of South Australia and RSPCA in particular, has been a joint consultative document entitled 'Code of Practice for the Handling of Small Companion Animals in Shelters'. This is a best practice, quality assurance document in its purest form and sets standards for our organisations in the handling and management of dogs and cats.

The topics covered in this document include:

- care and management;
- examination, treatment and euthanasia;
- food storage;
- waste;
- staffing;
- rehousing and adoption; and
- responsible pet ownership.

For those of you au fait with quality assurance practices I am sure you will find that, if interested, this could quite easily be adapted for use within your facility thus ensuring a further step towards best practice management. This document does not have copyright and we welcome its use in other shelters.

Michael has indicated to you the area of promotion in the yellow pages talking guides. From our perspective this has been one of the most positive achievements. On a shared basis we have undertaken to monopolise an area that we have been pushing since the year dot, that is, better animal management and responsible animal ownership within the community.

I said monopolise and I mean that in its truest sense. When approached by the representative from Pacific Access with regard to the yellow pages talking guides, I saw this as a golden opportunity. The three organisations who could be seen to have the most community calls on pet ownership, particularly in the dog and cat ownership area, could utilise a medium whereby, for minimal monetary input by each member, we could provide a greater source of community education and information availability than has ever been undertaken. To say this has been a success for us all is an understatement. Due to the information provided it has, for the Animal Welfare League of South Australia and I am sure for our counterparts, certainly cut down what would normally be time consuming phone calls throughout the day. Why monopolise? In simple terms, as the saying goes 'possession is 9/10ths of the law' and our belief in this case is that, if you own it, you can control it.

You have all heard the saying 'why reinvent the wheel?'. However in some cases the wheel, in order to create an improved service delivery, needs to be reinvented. This, I believe, was true in the case at the Animal Welfare League of South Australia when it came to the status and professionalism of the staff employed.

In 1995 the management council of the Animal Welfare League undertook a very bold step indeed when they introduced to the organisation their first ever Strategic Plan. The main emphasis was the improved provision of service, care, accountability, commitment, education and advocacy, not only for the animals which frequent the League, but also putting into place the foundation stones for future animal management within the community.

With the introduction of this strategic plan to the organisation, a myriad of sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant changes began to occur. Certainly the true believers in this process have remained within the organisation and certainly some of the personnel who were less flexible in attitude chose to pursue other forms of employment. However what has occurred is that a changing role within the organisation as far as its status within the community has come to the fore.

When personnel within your organisation want to see that organisation held in high esteem within community, and indeed held in high esteem by peers, then I believe that best practice and best practice management is coming to fruition.

As with Michael, I leave you all with a challenge. You have within your grasp principles and practical achievements that can well be adopted within any pet management facility within Australia.

My challenge to you is if you think you can operate on a sole basis, think again — you will find life a constant battle. If you utilise your peers and those that are willing to cooperate and assist, you will be well on the way to practicing better overall animal management.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Greg Thomson

Animal Welfare League of South Australia Incorporated

1-19 Cormack Rd

Wingfield SA 5013

Ph. 08 8268 4188

Fx. 08 8268 9545

Email. animwelf@arcom.com.au

Greg has been General Manager of the Animal Welfare League of South Australia Incorporated since 1995. Prior to that, he worked in the health industry in both NSW and SA for some 28 years. He worked primarily in the psychiatric, mental health and community health areas and prior to moving into his current position, managed a community health service for some 70,000 square kilometres of rural NSW. Over the years he has developed a keen interest in quality assurance processes, best practice methods and networking.

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