

The changing face of dog and cat management in South Australia - a South Australian snapshot

Ken Coventry

BACKGROUND

The South Australian Dog and Cat Management Board was set up as a body corporate in 1995 under the auspices of a new parcel of legislation known as the Dog and Cat Management Act, 1995. The objects of this Act are listed as being:

- to encourage responsible dog and cat ownership;
- to reduce public and environmental nuisance caused by dogs and cats; and
- to promote the effective management of dogs and cats (including through encouragement of the desexing of dogs and cats).

Consequently, the Board sees its primary roles to be operating in an educational capacity to promote responsible pet ownership and in furthering efforts to reduce public and environmental nuisances with an equally important focus acting as a conduit of information between both local and state government, on issues pertinent to effective dog and cat control in South Australia.

To that end, the Board and its staff, with the co-operation and assistance of local councils, government representatives and the general public, have responded to the views and needs of major stakeholders by choosing to deal with issues proactively rather than reactively.

Since its inception, the Board has been involved in many areas where opportunities exist to provide the community with information and assistance regarding responsible dog and cat ownership.

PROACTIVE ROLE OF THE BOARD

Representatives of the Board and staff regularly attend shows and events and we have an ongoing commitment to staff displays at the Royal Adelaide Show, where the public are provided with free showbags containing informative brochures, pamphlets and stickers. In addition, many councils allow their dog management officers to join us. This provides an opportunity for them to talk to the public about any concerns or queries the public may have regarding animal management. Not only has this practice been beneficial from an educational point of view, but has also done much to improve the public profile of dog management officers in our State.

South Australian councils have embraced the Board's approach to education and have supported us in this respect by becoming more accessible to the community through speaking to schoolchildren and working with teachers to provide education at a 'grass-roots' level. The Board has provided the required funds, expertise and liaison to produce a variety of 'tools' to assist councils in their educational endeavours including short informative videos and publications that have proven to be hugely popular such as 'Kids Caring for Dogs and Cats - Volume 1'. It is anticipated that this publication will become an annual event with a definite commitment to producing Volume 2 in the future.

The Board has also developed strong relationships with publishers responsible for producing other publications such as 'The Buzz for Kids' - a newspaper especially developed for kids that can be obtained from all schools, Australia wide. This publication has carried an article about responsible dog or cat management in each issue thus far.

SURVEYS REGARDING DOG AND CAT MANAGEMENT

The Board is also involved in initiatives to facilitate effective animal management. We have recently conducted public and council surveys to determine what issues within the Dog and Cat Management Act required review and/or updating. It was clear to many that at the 5 year interval, there were some areas of our Legislation that needed to be addressed.

Clearly there is no such thing as perfect legislation. It must be reviewed regularly and move with the times ó what works well today may be irrelevant or obsolete tomorrow.

In order to obtain the widest possible opinions, the Board addressed dogs and cats individually. The Board felt that the Magnetic Island cat survey conducted by the Townsville City Council offered a perfect platform for the South Australian survey. Accordingly, as a prelude to a formal review of the Act, the Board commissioned a telephone survey of residents in the Adelaide metropolitan area and selected rural and regional areas. This survey was carried out in November 1999 with a total of 500 telephone interviews being conducted.

Each interview took approximately 12 minutes and was conducted in accordance with market research standards to ensure the validity of the responses.

It was interesting to note that when asked which general neighbourhood issues currently caused the most concern, the majority of those surveyed listed traffic problems, children in the area and problems with neighbours as being of more concern than issues relating to dogs or cats. This mirrors the findings of the Magnetic Island cat survey and helps to confirm the opinions expressed in earlier UAM conferences by Dick Murray (Veterinary Surgeon, Townsville) and Shane Scriggins (Chief Inspector, Townsville City Council).

However whilst a high proportion of responses in our survey indicated dogs and cats were low on the list of neighbourhood priorities, many of the final conclusions drawn related to cat issues. There was an understanding of differences between 'domestic' and 'feral' animals and the feeling was that the 'feral' component definitely needed to be dealt with more effectively.

Microchipping, cat registration, limitations on the number of cats per property and compulsory desexing of cats, were all suggested as means of dealing with cat problems with the vast majority of respondents believing that cat registration was the best way of funding appropriate strategies. Of note, however in relation to cat registration, is the view of the Board that we believed registration of cats would not generate sufficient funds to undertake strategies and programs to effectively deal with the feral cat problem let alone deal with cats wandering at large, un-desexed cats, 'community' cats and other perceived problems.

The responsible cat owners, who *would* register their cats, are far and above outweighed by those who would deny ownership of a cat to avoid costs, limitations and/or restrictions being imposed upon them. Clearly, in order to introduce compulsory registration of cats you must have a suitable form of identification such as microchipping. Having said that, the microchipping industry needs to improve somewhat as issues such as uniformity and compatibility of products must be adequately addressed given the present situation is less than satisfactory.

We felt we needed to proceed with putting the Board's views on amendments and proposals to the Act, to the test with councils and the community. So with powers conferred upon the Board under the Act to form sub-committees, we established a consultative committee for dogs and a consultative committee for cats. They then set about developing a set of discussion papers, which after receiving Board approval, were distributed to councils, the community and other special interest groups. I might add that I chaired the consultative committees with at least one other Board member and the Executive Director joining me as committee members. Any minority opinions were conveyed to the Board for final decision.

The discussion papers were devised in such a way that sought to provoke thought and proposed amendments in many areas of the legislation to do with both dogs and cats. One set of papers dealt with amendments to the legislation in relation to dogs and the other dealt with amendments to the legislation in relation to cats. There was considerable response to these papers given that at the closing date for submissions, we had received some 2,000 responses to approximately 40 questions or statements made in the papers.

A green paper has been completed and forwarded to the Minister for his perusal. We currently await the outcome following a review of the documents by the Minister.

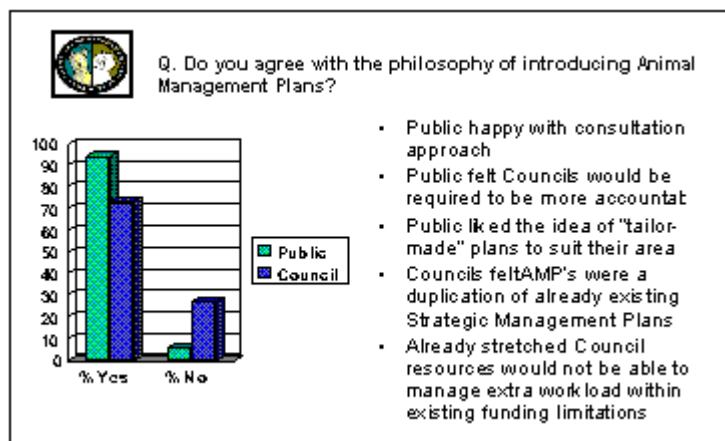
EXAMPLE RESPONSES FROM THE REVIEW

To demonstrate some of the feeling evident from analysis of the responses, we have provided some graphs depicting statistics and some of the stronger opinions noted that have been produced from excerpts of questions or statements made in each of the papers. You may find the consistency or inconsistency of views (as the case may be) held interesting from both a Council and community perspective.

One of the proposed additions to the Act is the requirement to produce Animal Management Plans. It is envisaged that an Animal Management Plan (AMP) would typically involve the community in deciding how and what type of animal management would occur within their council area.

For example, an AMP could contain strategies for dealing with dogs in public places, registration and identification, wandering dogs, faeces, domestic and feral cat management, enforcement, resource allocation and grievance procedures. All of these strategies would be developed and agreed to in consultation with local community members, councils and other special interest groups located within the council area.

This graph depicts both council and public responses to the question "Do you agree with the philosophy of introducing Animal Management Plans?" (or AMPs as we've come to call them). Under proposed amendments, councils would be required to create the Animal Management Plans



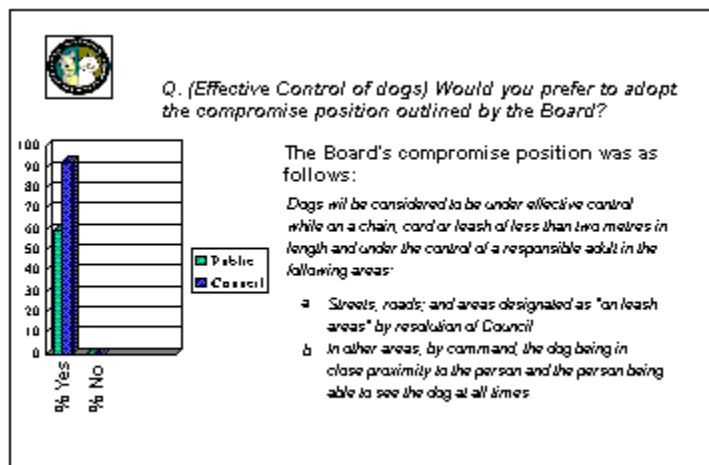
in the same manner as they are currently required to produce Strategic Management Plans under Section 122 of the South Australian Local Government Act, 1999. Under Section 122(6) of the Act, "a Council must adopt a process or processes to ensure that members of the public are given a reasonable opportunity to be involved in the development and review of its strategic management plans". Under the proposed amendments, this would also apply to Animal Management Plans and whilst councils could foresee a significant rise in the associated costs of providing this extra service given the additional resources and time required, councils also knew that there would be no avenue of extra funding available to them through the property rates system.

On the other hand, the public were generally pleased with the proposal mainly due to the fact that they felt they could have some input into the development of the plans through the mandatory consultation process thereby providing an opportunity to have AMPs that were truly unique and sensitive to the particular requirements of their own area. Of course, this ability appeals to people from such diverse areas as your typical residential suburbs where the feeling is that there should be limitations on the number of animals allowed per property, to semi-rural areas zoned as 'animal husbandry' areas, of which we have a few in South Australia, where people ought to be free and able to be involved in breeding activities either for fun and pleasure or profit.

The issue of 'on-lead' and 'off-lead' designated areas provoked quite high emotional responses, particularly given the recent dog attack that occurred on a mother and her two small children in a City of Adelaide public park. The strong theme here was that the public wanted clearly defined (and policed) areas where dogs must be on-lead at all times and other areas where dogs may engage in 'off-leash' activities. It is clear that both are required for the health, safety and well-being of both the animals, the owners and the general public. However for this system to work across boundaries, some consistency in agreement with neighbouring councils on what constitutes a suitable area for 'on-lead' or 'off-lead' activities, and consistency in construction methods are required.

As part of the survey regarding dog legislation, participants were asked to consider three forms of effective control, namely:

1. support for the existing legislation allowing dogs to be off lead as long as they are effectively controlled;



2. dogs on leads at all times unless in an area exempted by a council; or
3. the Board's compromise as set out on next page.

The results outlined in the graph speak for themselves.

MICROCHIPPING

Microchipping is an issue our Board has been pursuing for some time now. We had come to a point where we needed to put our views on the issue to the test through the discussion papers. We asked the question "Do you agree with compulsory microchipping?" and the response was interesting. Clearly the public felt it was a good idea. The perception was that the registration could then be recognised across boundaries. In addition to easier identification of animal ownership when found wandering or injured by reading microchips, some suggested there could also be an argument for a reduction in registration fees and it may also negate the need to pay another registration fee if the dog moves into another council area.

Councils and the Board know through research of the systems currently available, that microchipping development has not progressed as far as is required at this stage. Not all scanners are yet able to read every type of microchip available on the market.

There have been some significant issues identified interstate involving microchipping and the Board holds the view that whilst compulsory microchipping will be inevitable in the future, it is not feasible at this stage. However the Board is philosophically committed to the concept of microchipping and continues to work with organisations in the knowledge that eventually a foolproof system that is truly universal will be able to be devised. When this occurs, the Board

will be more than happy to fully endorse microchipping as a viable identification method in this State.

DANGEROUS DOGS

The Board is interested in pursuing the notion of setting up a State register of dogs deemed to be dangerous, which in turn would facilitate setting up a national register of dogs deemed dangerous. There have been incidents where a dog that is already known to be dangerous in another State, has shown up in South Australia. No-one here knew the dog was dangerous because there is no mechanism in place that automatically informs responsible officers of this fact. I'm sure that applies equally in other States.

CONCLUSION

I have presented a snapshot of some of the issues being considered in South Australia. As a Board we will:

- continue to develop strategies for effective animal management,
- act as a conduit for information and ideas, and
- most importantly, continue to learn from others within our industry.

Survey results and documentation are available from the South Australian Dog and Cat Management Board by e-mailing dcmb@lga.sa.gov.au or by contacting Board staff in Adelaide on (08)8224 2042.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Coventry
Board member
Dog and Cat Management Board of South Australia
16 Hutt St
Adelaide SA 5000
Ph. (08) 8224 2042
Fx. (08) 8224 2060

Ken has been a Board member of the Dog and Cat Management Board since 1995. He is also a Board member of the Murraylands Regional Development Board and a member of the LGA Legislative Review Reference Group. Ken previously spent 13 years as Secretary of the Murraylands Local Government Association.

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