

'Off-leash' areas - exercising principles of good governance in urban animal management

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ABSTRACT

While some dog owners see 'off-leash dog exercise areas' as a mandatory basic requirement for pet socialisation, it is more importantly a 'whole community' issue that should be considered in the context of 'whole community'.

Providing 'off-leash areas' is not a simple process, and it should not be considered so. 'Off-leash areas' engender several emotional responses. These responses include appreciation, hostility, fear, anger, passive acceptance and anxiety depending on whom you talk to. The needs of pets, pet owners and everybody else seeking access to that same public open space are all factors that require equal consideration.

A recent review of 'off-leash areas' in Townsville involved the collection and analysis of baseline community opinion data. This research assessed the perceived need for 'off-leash dog exercise areas' and measured the impact on local residents, users and the community in general.

GOVERNANCE

Effective governance is essential in ensuring that animal management stays in step with community expectations. At the end of the day, animal management has to provide a service that the community wants, at a price the community is prepared to pay and in accordance with a resource strategy that is acceptable to the Council.

Possibly one of the greatest benefits of good governance is that it helps to prevent government by vocal minority driven policy. Animal management is always something of a juggling act - it is about balancing interests and taking best pathways in the context of whole community perspective. Community perspective is often at variance to vested vocal minority interest. You never hear the majority opinion unless you actively go and ask for it.

Trying to deliver competent animal management services to the community is a total waste of time unless the governance issue is clearly understood. The principles of good governance have to be locked-in to underpin every animal management undertaking, especially new initiatives.

Governance includes Council having the initiative to undertake customer surveys to establish the communities needs and wants, as well as their perceptions and satisfaction levels with service delivery. What follows from these surveys is a window of opportunity. An opportunity to see the business from your customers perspective. Surprisingly, the results you are delivered are often the results you were least expecting.

That's positive because it enables the organisation to refocus. It provides a chance to critically examine the level and quality of service, then gauge its effectiveness in respect of quality and responsiveness, and most importantly calculate the level of community support.

Good governance is at the heart of any attempt at making a worthwhile transition from where animal management has been for the past three decades to where it needs to go from here. Governments, both state and local throughout Australia, are struggling to understand the pace of change in municipal animal management. What was previously an unrecognised municipal service, is quickly emerging to become a very major issue and animal management is an issue that affects the majority of all the community.

The provision of 'off-leash areas' has in the past been a perfect example of mediocre governance. The lobby for 'off-leash areas' is very real, and local government has not been slow in responding but there is a strong vocal minority element in this. Their very presence throughout capital and regional cities across Australia is evident. The push to provide 'public open space' to meet this group's demand is almost as incomprehensible as the thought process of those that demand more without considering the needs of all public open space users.

Local Government is slowly starting to acknowledge the importance of 'public open space' to everyone in the community. 'Public open space' provides an excellent opportunity for social interaction and recreational activity. Access to public open space is an issue that needs to be properly considered, and the needs of all users (*including people with dogs*) taken into account.

Municipalities should also acknowledge that different people and different groups of people use public open space, and that when planning for its use, all users should be taken into consideration and have opportunity to comment. Townsville bears a similar trend to the majority of Australian towns and cities in that at least 50% of residences house at least one (1) dog. These dogs (with their owners) benefit significantly from exercise, and public open space is usually where they go. This group (dog owners) is probably the largest single public open space user group.

In assuming a pro pet, good governance approach to animal management, municipalities need to recognise the legitimacy of the case for dog access to public space. There are four levels of dog access appropriate to the open space issue:

- **No dogs allowed**

Dog access denied for reasons of public amenity, safety and health. There are some areas where a Local Government may consider dog access unacceptable, and there are others which may be considered as inappropriate for dog access due to the amount and type of people have access to that area.

- **On-leash areas**

On-leash areas represent the middle ground. It allows non-dog owners and others (young and old, large or small, fit or infirm) to access parks where dogs are exercised without concern for dogs running uncontrolled in the area and causing nuisance, intrusion, anxiety and fear of accident, injury or aggression. Leash restraint allows and provides a controlled environment for common usage of public open space. It provides for greater and more comfortable usage of the same (limited) public open space by more people. It facilitates greater levels of comfortable access for people with dogs and for people without.

The basic idea of leash restraint in public open space is to make it that people with dogs are welcome rather than resented.

This level of public open space access is dependent upon dog owners demonstrating common sense, consideration and competence by keeping their dog leashed at all times. This level of access would seem the most appropriate for the majority of the public open space available anywhere in Australia. On leash areas provide appropriate context for training and socialisation of dogs and expands the range of accessible environmental enrichment. Animal behaviourists consider on leash exercise to be entirely satisfactory and highly effective for most dogs. It is more important that dogs should get out regularly than get out and run loose. Where dog owners have 'as of right' access to municipal public open space, they should be obliged to respect the privilege and comply with community expectations regarding leash restraint.

- **Off-leash areas**

Off-leash areas provide an option for dog owners to exercise their dogs in a way not possible on the leash and give the dog the option to run and play as it feels. The problem for these areas is the greater potential for injury to people and animals from attack and the potential for damage to the environment. Dogs in these areas should be 'under effective owner control at all times'. Off-leash areas are a significant risk management issue for Council.

The key to successful management of dog access in open space is planning. In order that whole community has the opportunity to understand and input dog access proposals, it is essential that this process be seen as fair and equitable and acceptable to the majority.

In planning open space, Councils need to consider what level of dog access is appropriate and set up the area accordingly. Off-leash areas need special set up including the promotion, publicity and recommendations for appropriate usage.

- **At home**

In the home environment, the majority of Local Governments require only that dogs be prevented at all times from having unsupervised access to public open space (footpaths, roadways and adjacent parks). In other words, the Council requires a secure fence and behind that fence it is the owner's responsibility to determine what level of control is appropriate. People who feel they need either unsupervised or 'as of right' free running exercise for their dogs, need to have a big back yard.

Public open space that allows for dogs must combine the needs of a general public amenity with those of dog/owner exercise. If dog owners wish to be welcome in public open space and indeed, continue to enjoy the privilege of having that access, they need to 'do the right things'.

To help achieve a 'do the right thing' attitude on the part of dog owners who exercise their pets in public open space, there are four main areas that need to be addressed.

1. *Instruction/Signage* - Effective signage that is well positioned and well maintained and draws direct attention to dog handling responsibilities must be in place in all areas where dogs are allowed. This constant reminder to all users of the area of the responsibilities placed on dog owners improves compliance with the relevant local laws. Signage, while not wanting to be environmentally degrading, does need to be 'in your face' enough that nobody can pretend they didn't understand their responsibilities and obligations while exercising their dogs in that public place.
2. *Litter Bins/Bag Dispensers* - By making compliance that much easier while strongly symbolising the need for compliance, litter bins/bag dispensers are a must if Council wishes dog owners to clean up faecal litter. Council can not reasonably expect to be able to enforce dog litter laws unless regularly serviced dispensers are provided and unless regularly serviced bins are also available in sufficient numbers to be within sight of *all* parts of the areas where 'scoop laws' are enforced.
3. *Promotion/Publicity* - Understanding the reasons and benefits are important in encouraging people to comply with any code of conduct. The need for *very* active (and continual) promotional work in marketing the Council's best pathways to best outcomes for dog owner compliance in public open space is real.
4. *Designated 'Off-leash' areas* - People are always more likely to comply with regulations if they feel that those regulations allow them to exercise a degree of personal options (as well as, in this instance, to exercise their dogs). There is strong anecdotal evidence to support the notion that dog owners are more likely to comply with leash restraint requirements in public open space if the 'off-leash' option is available somewhere for them should they feel the need to use it.

Item 4. above is the theme of this paper. It is an issue much more complex than might be appreciated at first glance. In late 1998 the Townsville City Council requested its Regional Pet Management Technical Committee to investigate the feasibility of providing 'off-leash areas' in the Townsville region. The Committee gave this matter very careful consideration for the following reason:

- local government for very good reasons has strict policies, laws and enforcement procedures designed to ensure that people keep their dogs behind fences at home and on leash when in public places;
- Council has a duty to the community, for reasons of health, safety and public amenity to ensure dogs are restrained appropriately at all times;
- off-leash exercise areas create in themselves, a policy contradiction for Council;

- they invite people to participate in an environment where dogs are actually *intended* to be less controlled than the general rules permit; and
- if leash and fence laws are valid, can Council endorse something completely contrary to the principles they stand for?

The group looked at this conundrum by firstly reviewing the positives and negatives involved in an objective manner and their conclusions were as follows:

Factors **in favour** of 'off-leash areas'-

- public perception that they are now commonplace in other municipalities and that Council should provide them here also;
- anecdotal evidence suggests that general leash law compliance can be considerably improved if off-leash options are available; and
- the dedicated/passionate/conscientious protagonists of 'off-leash exercise' type owner can probably be best managed by the provision of dedicated facilities where the risks need only be shared by other like minded people while quarantined from other public open space users.

Factors **against** included

- costs involved in properly/safely setting up off-leash areas;
- conflict between different public open space user groups;
- public liability risk for the Council; and
- possible conflict with current locality management strategies and jurisdiction.

At the National Urban Animal Management conference held in August 1999 on the Gold Coast the issue of 'off-leash areas' was raised as a point of discussion. Two members of the Townsville City Council Regional Pet Management Technical Committee who participated in that discussion group (*Scriggins & Murray*), felt that many Councils - some already well down the off-leash track, had not given the subject as much thought as they should have.

The issues that concerned everyone at this meeting included:

- liability and risk;
- the definition of effective control and how it applies in these areas;
- land tenure;
- cost of installation, who pays?
- compliance;
- appropriate locations;
- community consultation; and
- environmental impact assessments.

After the arduous process of reviewing the 'pros' and 'cons' of providing 'off-leash' exercise areas, the Regional Pet Management Technical Committee recommended to the Townsville City Council, that they the Council should commit to trialing an 'off-leash' dog exercise area. The Committee asked the Council to carry out the trial in an ambience of detailed community consultation.

The Committee made its opinion clear to the Council that there were going to be risks and costs involved even with the trial. Because of this the Committee stressed again the merit of and the need for community surveys, both before and after the trial. If ever there was an issue that needed before all else, to be handled in the context of the best principles of good governance, this was it.

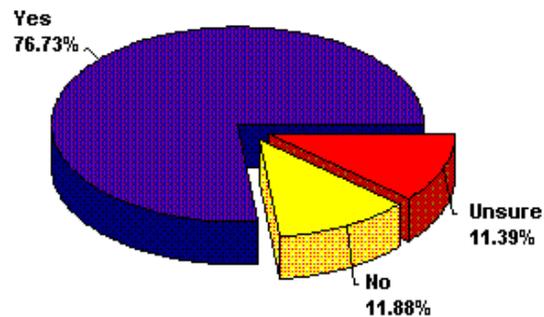
STUDY (A) PRE-TRIAL SURVEY

In response to the Regional Pet Management Technical Committees recommendation for a broad based community consultation process to the issue of providing 'off-leash areas', the Townsville City Council commissioned the AEC Group Ltd, based in Townsville, to undertake a community survey. The survey was to be used to assess the attitudes and opinion of Townsville residents on the proposal to trial 'off-leash areas' in the city.

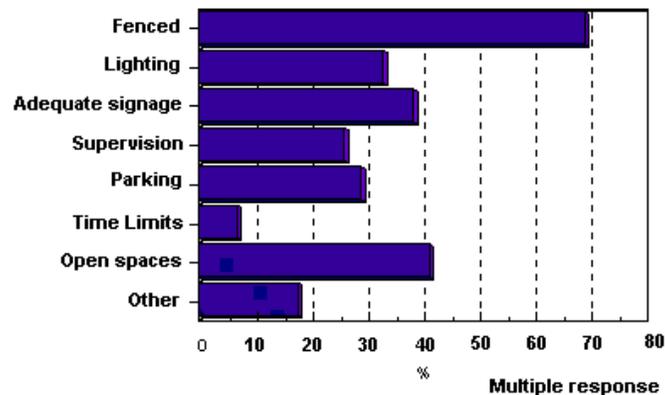
In order to determine the attitudes and opinions of Townsville residents regarding Council's initiative of trialing an 'off-leash areas for dogs' a survey of residents was conducted during September 1999. A total of 202 Townsville residents were surveyed using CATI (Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing) techniques. Selected post-codes and suburbs of the Townsville area were used as the basis for phone number extrapolation from an electronic phone number database. The survey was designed in consultation with the Animal Management Unit of the Townsville City Council. The principal data source in this report was raw data collected by survey

Survey results (a) all respondents

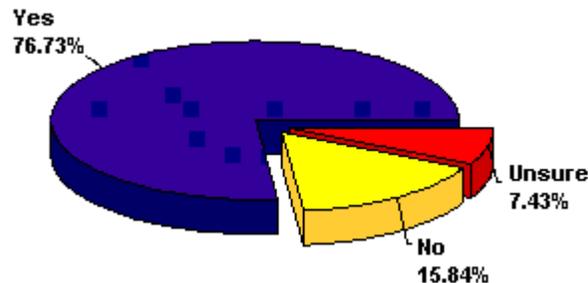
Q - Are you in favour of off-leash areas for dogs?



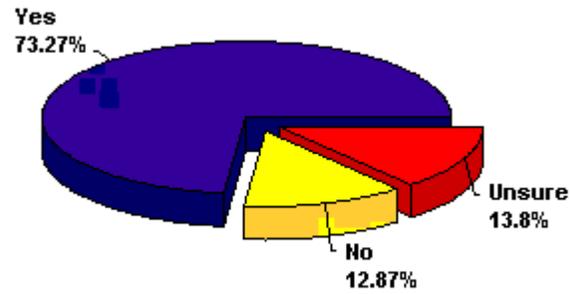
Q - If you were to choose a site for a 'free run area', what would be your three most important requirements?



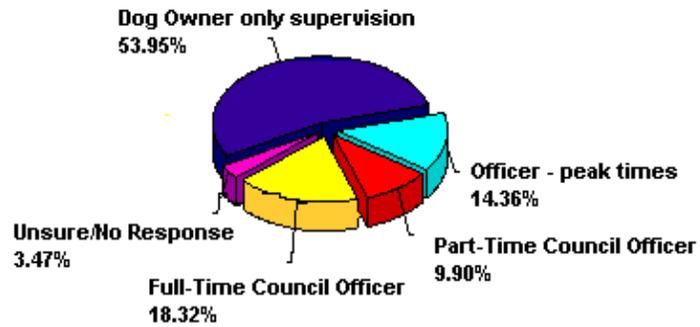
Q - Is the Pallarenda/Rowes Bay site acceptable?



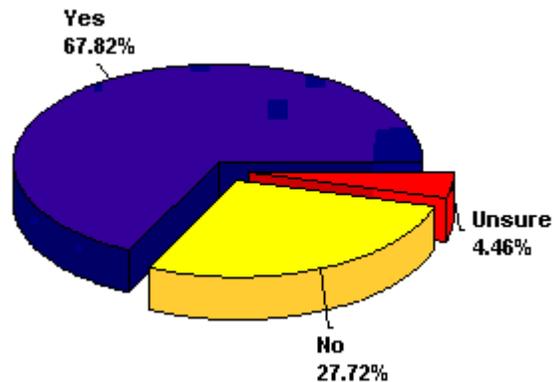
Q - Is the Philp Street Sports field site acceptable?



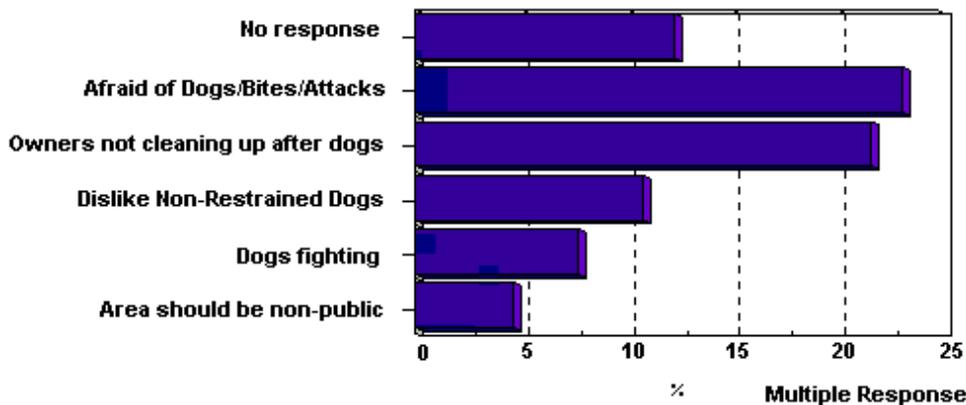
Q - If council were able to offer a supervised area option, what degree of supervision would you require?



Q - Are you willing to share open public spaces with dogs? (eg parks, beaches)

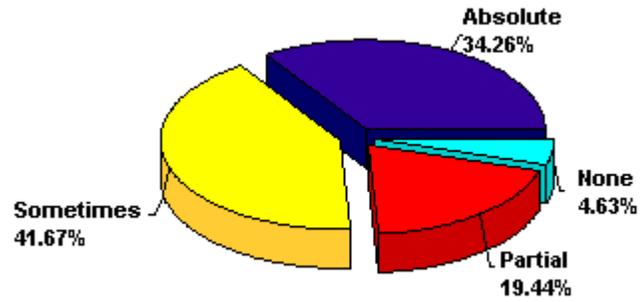


Q - What are your concerns with sharing open spaces with dogs

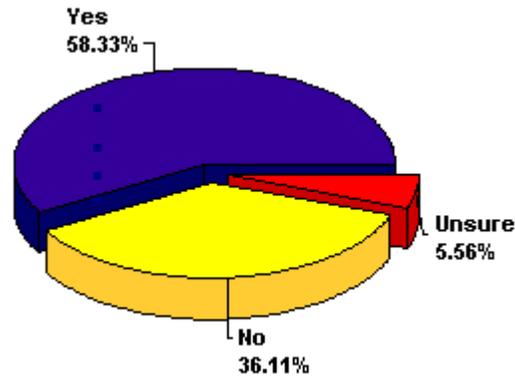


Survey results (b) dog owners

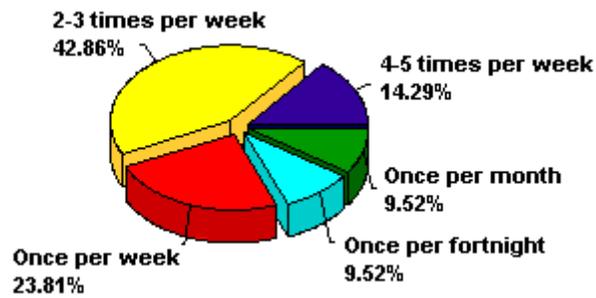
Q - What degree of obedience do you currently have with you dog? (It was the opinion of the Regional Pet Management Technical Committee that dog owners are 'naively optimistic' with regard to the obedience of their dogs. Furthermore, it was the view of the committee that the status of 'absolute obedience' should be approximately one-third of the results presented.)



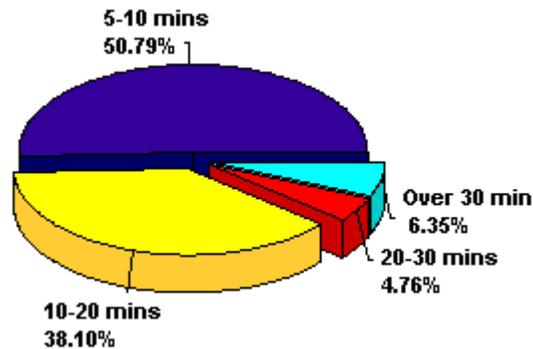
Q - Would you make use of these free run areas?



Q - How often would you utilise these free fun areas?

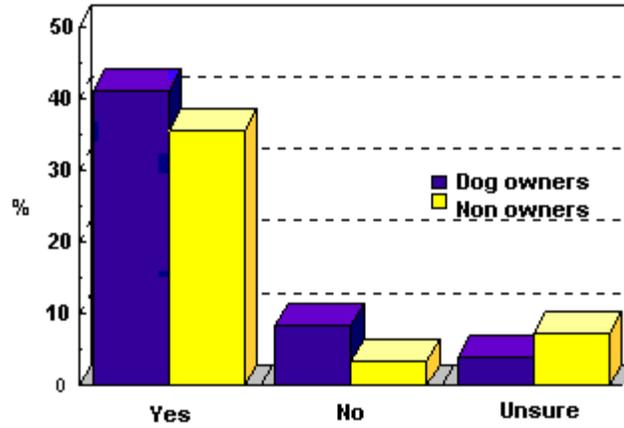


Q - How much time are you willing to spend travelling to these free run areas?

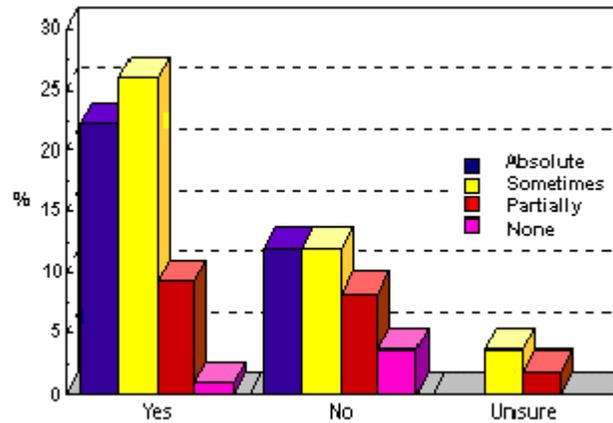


IMPORTANT CROSS TABULATIONS

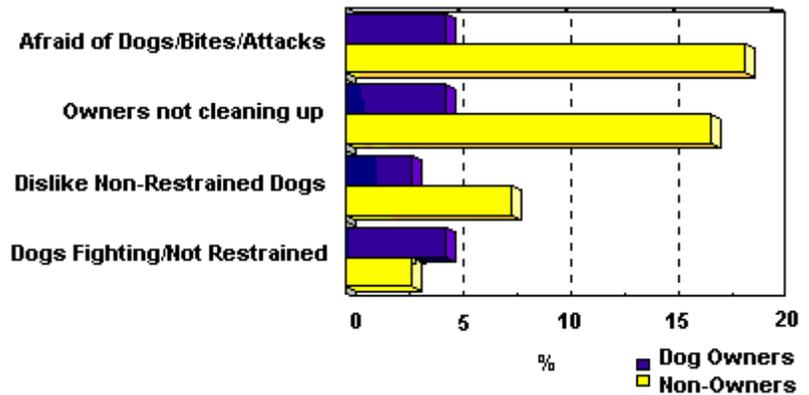
1. Dog ownership by in favour of off-leash areas



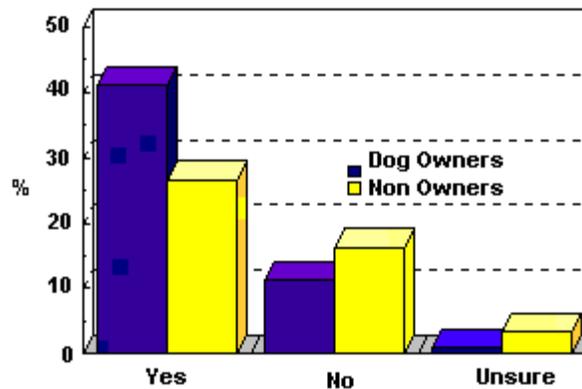
2. Current degree of obedience by usage of free run areas (this was an area of concern given the potential risk of attacks and possible litigation arising from disobedient dogs being let loose in 'off-leash areas' ... and ... these owner assessments of obedience are probably naively optimistic).



3. Concerns regarding sharing of open spaces by dog ownership (main concerns)



4. Dog ownership by willingness to share open spaces with dogs



The above results were presented as part of the consultation process to representatives from key stakeholder

from these organisations indicated that they were in favour of the 'off-leash areas', however, some issues were raised. The most notable issues were:

- disposal bags - are they going to be biodegradable?
- water - are drinking troughs (or water) going to be available?
- penalties - is there going to be an amnesty period for penalties for dogs found off the leash close to these areas (similar to red light cameras when they were introduced)?
- community awareness - how is the community, particularly dog owners, going to be made aware of these areas and the rules of use, and penalties for misuse?
- signage - are there going to be signs to make owners aware that they are responsible for their dog's actions?
- fencing - are the areas going to be fenced properly?

[Part 2 of paper](#)

[Appendices A, B, C](#)

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