

Community solutions and cost benefits

Doug Kenny

In the 15 minutes available, I want to give you a perspective on: -

- why a dog owner association,
- our roles,
- philosophies,
- what strategies, actions and achievements,
- what costs/benefits,
- future plans, wish list and dreams.

WHY A DOG OWNERS ASSOCIATION?

Why not another dog obedience club? There are a number of significant differences that we see as very important – not in any way denigrating the role of obedience clubs but rather identifying some different needs in the dog-owning community.

Let us look at some of these needs and how our association addresses them.

OUR ROLES

Political

Holdfast Bay Dog Owners' Association (HBDOA) was originally formed as a political lobby group and today this role is clearly even more necessary than it was a decade ago.

Just over 10 years ago, a small group of dog owners in the then Brighton Council area, decided to get together to lobby Council for more reasonable by-laws re dog access to beaches in the area. They called themselves the Brighton Dog Owners' Association – this name was changed some years later after Brighton & Glenelg Councils merged to become City of Holdfast Bay.

This little group got very little joy from their dealings with the then Council and formed the impression that the only interest the Council had in dogs was collecting fees and fining the owners.

Following the merger of the two Councils, things initially looked even worse and, about 4 years ago; a crisis meeting was called by the Association to gather greater support from the dog-owner community. This meeting was reasonably well attended, including a representative from Council.

About then the prevailing negative situation started to take on a more positive feel and good things started to happen – and, I am pleased to say, are continuing to happen. The relationship between HBDOA and Council today is a very positive and mutually beneficial one.

Our lobbying activities today are more directed towards ensuring a dog-owner voice in the seemingly endless attempts of government to put together effective legislation acceptable to the whole community.

Dog owners are not in any way a minority group – in Holdfast Bay there are 16,610 households and 4000 dogs.

It is arguable that we are the biggest single interest group in any community. What voice would this sector of the community have if not for organisations such as ourselves and the Charles Sturt Dog Owners' Association?

We value our good relationship with the SA Dog & Cat Management Board who have ensured our ongoing input (and the input of our good friends Charles Sturt Dog Owners' Association) to their efforts to produce draft legislation for the SA government. Our role is a two way street:

- we represent dog owners in respect to dealing with local council and government
- we provide a communication channel between council and the dog owning community.

Our facilities

HBDOA is very grateful to City of Holdfast Bay for providing us with the opportunity to lease (at nominal cost) the clubhouse and grounds of a defunct women's bowling club. We have an extensive clubhouse – air-conditioned, with kitchen facilities, toilets, etc. We run our puppy classes indoors – out of the heat in summer and out of the rain in winter. Our grounds are fully fenced, immaculate lawns and little shelters with seats around the perimeter. Our good friend Phillip Kirkpatrick played no small part in making this happen.

TRAINING/EDUCATION EMPHASIS AND PHILOSOPHIES

There was no training program when the association was first formed: this was started as a means of demonstrating to Council that we were not just words but serious action as well. We have been running training programs now for some 5 years. It is in this area where the differences between HBDOA and an obedience club become most apparent.

Companionship

We recognise that a good proportion of dog owners do not want to get into competition – they just want a dog that is well behaved and controllable – a dog they can enjoy – a companion.

Some dogs in our training classes do go on to competition and our recently revised program provides this option for all participants.

Positive reinforcement

HBDOA is committed to positive training:

- we have a firm policy against check chains
- one of our instructors has virtually completed the Canine Good Citizen course, another is well advanced with the course and two more will be enrolling this year
- we encourage this and provide financial assistance for CGC training.

Puppy training starts at 8 weeks

Many obedience clubs will not take puppies into training until they have had their second injection. We subscribe to the view held by some animal behaviourists that there is a window of opportunity in the 8 to 16 weeks age bracket.

Our results in applying this philosophy are quite remarkable. As one of the puppy school instructors, and having trained 3 dogs over 20 years using traditional attitudes, I continue to be amazed and delighted with what you can teach an 8 week old pup in 30 minutes. This has created a bit of a problem in that puppies going in to a basic class, become bored because they can do all the things taught in a standard basic class.

Another policy we have is that when somebody phones to ask "When can my puppy start training?" – the answer is always, "Next Sunday at 9am". We are fiercely determined to not waste that window of opportunity in training young puppies. This makes its own problems but the benefits far outweigh the problems.

Dog owner education

We hold information nights every 3 months at which we have guest speakers on all aspects of dog ownership – several people at this conference have been kind enough to assist us in this respect.

Unfortunately these functions are not always as well attended as we would like but we are working on that.

PHILOSOPHIES

I have already touched on a number of philosophies that we hold dear:

- positive training
- puppy training start at 8 weeks
- continuous enrolment of puppies

Some other aspects are: -

- Dog-owner organisations and Councils *can and should* work together – the benefits of such a positive relationship can be dramatic.
- Education, training and open communication, mixed with a good serve of common-sense; are essential ingredients in any receipt for achieving harmony between dog-owners and the wider community.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Reduction in 'dog incidents'

HBDOA and Holdfast Bay council take some pride in the fact that reported dog incidents in our area have dropped:

- attacks by dogs dropped from 17 in 2000/2001 to 5 in 2001/2002
- barking problems from 21 in 2000/2001 to 10 in 2001/2002.

Obviously it would be naive to attribute all of this to our joint positive efforts but we confidently believe that our community visibility, combined with our education and training programs, has been a major factor.

It is also significant that the beach access by-laws of Holdfast Bay look likely to be adopted by all seaside councils in metropolitan Adelaide.

Lots of adult dogs (and owners) trained

To best of my knowledge, there is no other dog-training facility in Holdfast Bay area. We are enrolling about 250 dogs per year. Our scope to do more is only limited by availability of appropriate trainers.

- 75% of these complete the basic course
- 50% go on to intermediate courses
- 20% continue on to advanced level.

The good news is that even those who drop out of basic training, are generally leaving with a reasonably controllable dog. The challenge for us is to increase the participation past basic.

Puppy training a big success story

We have had fantastic success with starting puppy training at 8 weeks. Sure it means extra work for us to disinfect the training area before each class but the results just are so gratifying. I personally believe that the benefits of this policy are only just starting to be felt and that it will play a major role in creating a generation of well-behaved dogs.

Having trained 3 dogs to grade 5 level over the past 20 years, I still find it hard to believe how much you can teach an 8 or 10 week puppy in as little as half an hour. As one of the puppy school instructors, I have to say I get a real buzz from seeing those little (and not so little) pups develop so quickly and so positively.

Council and dog-owners working together

HBDOA is extremely grateful to The Holdfast Bay Council for the way in which they now provide positive, tangible support of our operations. The road to achieving this goal has been, at times, bumpy for all involved.

The results being achieved more than justify any temporary discomfort and I think Phil Kirkpatrick would agree that Council acknowledge and enjoy the mutual benefits of this relationship.

It is probably a good time for me to publicly embarrass Phillip Kirkpatrick by thanking him for all the work he personally has done to make this important relationship work. Also, we are not unaware that Phil could not devote all the time and resources to HBDOA without the support of his employers – the Holdfast Bay Council. Our thanks to Council for the level of support we receive from them.

WISH-LIST – DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE

Our experience confirms that there is a place for dog-owner associations. We are delighted to be associated with the Charles Sturt Dog Owners Association in Adelaide and also with the Kingborough Dog owners in Tasmania.

We are aware of a move to start another dog owner association in the Marion Council area in Adelaide. It seems a logical next step to us for a state dog-owner body to be formed in South Australia and, if this can succeed, an equally logical next step is for a national body.

I would like to see a session at all UAM conferences for dog owner association representatives to meet and discuss matters specific to such bodies. I have a long association with organising conferences in the computer industry (I was president of the IBM Users Group for Australasia for many years and we held such special interest group meetings as a regular of our conferences).

COMMUNITY SOLUTIONS & COST BENEFITS

Coming back to the title of our joint presentation, what is this all about?

It is about communities (in the wider sense) working together to achieve that which could not be achieved by either party acting alone. The Council could not do it alone – nor could HBDOA do it without Council support.

What we have is undoubtedly a community solution – the costs become almost irrelevant – it is a classic example of the old story of 'What are the costs of doing something?' versus 'What are the costs of *not* doing something?'

I like to think we are an example of how Councils and dog can *work together*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Doug is at this conference as Vice President of the Holdfast Bay Dog Owners Association (HBDOA). He has been on the committee of HBDOA for some 4 years and has been very directly involved in helping to set up dog training programs in HBDOA. Some of his experiences in this role will be related in his presentation.

For the past year or so, Doug has been one of the puppy school instructors at HBDOA and, again, will touch on this in his talk.

He has been very much involved in community activities including some 23 years at commissioner level in Scouts Australia, 15 years as Chairman of the Glenelg Tennis Association junior committee plus many school, church, etc committees

Today Doug's only committee activity is HBDOA – his business role is to run his own computer business and try very hard to keep up with never ending change.