

Leash laws - proof that they are a community expectation and a safety benefit

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BACKGROUND

As in most states, South Australian local governments have the responsibility for animal management in their communities, particularly the control of the unwanted behaviour of dogs under the provisions of the Dog and Cat Management Act 1995. These controls include the registration of dogs as a measure to reduce wandering, to return pets to their owners and to apply penalties where this behaviour occurs through owners' negligence. There are also provisions for the control of prescribed breeds, barking or nuisance behaviours, inappropriate placement of dogs (e.g. schools and food shops), dog harassment and dog attack.

In 1998, the City of Salisbury had been applying the Act for 3 years. In the process of reporting animal management service performance to Council, a disturbing statistic was revealed. Either the incidence of dog attack or the reporting of attack to Council had been continually increasing during the period in which the Act had been operational. Either way, the incidence of dog attack was considered unacceptable. This fact when brought to the attention of senior staff and Council itself launched a 3 year program of research, studies and consultation with the goal of discovering and applying the most effective measures to minimise dog attack in the City.

THE RESEARCH AND STUDIES

The research and studies undertaken concerning dog attack and effective measures for reduction were as follows:

- study of the patterns in dog attacks in the City of Salisbury,
- peer search for experience among Councils,
- literature review on incidence of dog attack, its effects and appropriate measures for attack minimisation,
- studies and consultations on the views of animal care professionals and community attitudes to proposed controls and allocation of new resources.

Patterns in dog attacks in Salisbury

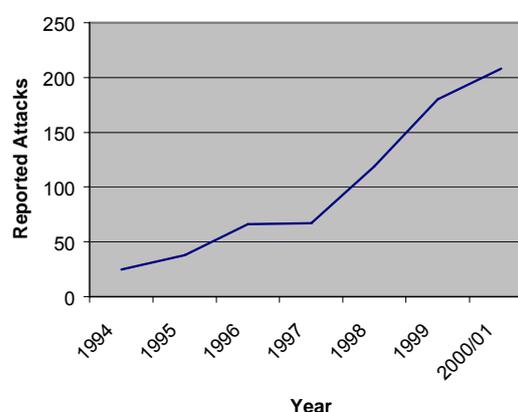
This study was undertaken in 1998 and it was designed to provide information on the trends in dog attack in the City of Salisbury. The methodology used was a simple enumeration of records maintained by Council officers in the investigation of reported dog attacks. The following were the findings:

- the incidence of reported dog attack increased by more than 170% between 1994 and 1997,
- no single breed was notably represented in attacks beyond their representation in the dog population,
- an unregistered dog is twice as likely to be involved in attack compared to a registered dog,

- approximately 57% of reported attacks occurred in public places – it was recognised that most private property attacks are unlikely to be reported to Council,
- 58% of reported attacks were on humans and of these 58% were serious enough to warrant medical treatment.

The main findings of this study were updated in 2001 and the upward trend in the incidence of reported dog attack was even more pronounced as seen in Chart 1.

Chart 1
Reported Dog Attacks, 1994 -2001



Peer study – other local governments

This study was not comprehensive, being largely reliant on the results of enquiries directed at the South Australian Local Government Association and the Dog and Cat Management Board and the memories of officers in those organisations. While it did reveal that at least one local government in South Australia was considering a comprehensive control to reduce dog attack in public places, there appeared to be very little activity in this area in the state in 1998.

However, it was discovered that a number of Councils in Queensland and Victoria had adopted leashing controls in all public places including streets and roads and the City of Brisbane and the City of Townsville in Queensland had installed purpose built enclosed exercise parks to provide safe unleashed exercise opportunities.

Overall, this research revealed that:

- Councils active in reducing dog attack were looking to leashing controls as the simplest method.
- There was an emergent belief that there are benefits to dogs, their owners and their communities in the availability of unleashed exercise activity opportunities and the safe method of provision was enclosed dog parks.
- In South Australia only a handful of Councils were even giving consideration to these matters.

Literature review

A search for contemporary material relevant to the issue of reduction of the incidence of dog attack in the Australian context revealed three immediately pertinent references. These consisted of:

Conference Papers, Urban Animal Management Conferences, 1996 – 97

'The Public Health Impact of Dog Attacks in a Major Australian City', Peter G Thompson, Medical Journal of Australia, Vol 167, no 3, August 1997

'Public Open Space and Dogs', Harlock Jackson (consultants) and Prof J K Blackshaw, August 1995

Thompson's paper related to a comprehensive study of the incidence and effect of dog attack in Adelaide, drawing on medical records in particular. He found that more than half of dog attacks reported through the medical system occurred in public places and he posits that "It is reasonable to assume that if the dogs had been restrained, these attacks could not have occurred" (Thompson, 1997, p132). Harlock Jackson and Bradshaw present substantial proposals for separating open space for dog exercise from the general public to maximise safety but also state that there is no evidence that exercise on a leash is in any way inferior to free running exercise – "some animal behaviourists further believe that dogs don't need to be exercised off-leash, that they are perfectly happy to be on a lead and that they can be exercised just as well on the leash as they can off the leash" (Harlock Jackson 1995).

Thompson also presented data that up to half the urban population has a fear of being attacked by a dog and that it could therefore be expected that control measures would receive strong support. Harlock Jackson and Bradshaw and the UAM Advisory Group Conference Papers were consistent in presenting the strength of animal ownership in Australia, the importance of socialisation and exercise in obtaining desirable behaviours in dogs and the pleasure owners derived from running and playing with their dogs. The arguments were in favour of the provision of safe areas for unleashed exercise activity.

Community studies and consultations

The main findings of the research and reviews were found to be:

- The preponderance of views and findings supported leashing of dogs as the method of control considered most likely to reduce the incidence of dog attack in public places.
- These controls should be matched by the provision of opportunities and resources for safe unleashed activity.
- It could be expected that the measures would be strongly supported.

These propositions were then taken to those industry professionals operating in the Salisbury area and also to the community at large in consultation exercises in April and May 1999. The professional consultation consisted of presentation of these findings to local industry professionals and the seeking of responses from them.

Veterinary surgeries and animal behaviourists were targeted. Responses were received from only two parties, both supportive and emphasising the need to provide resources for unleashed exercise opportunities.

For the community consultation, the methodology used was:

- extensive advertising in the local newspaper of a broad invitation to residents to respond with views on 4 options. These ranged from doing nothing to tight leashing control with no resources for dog owners,
- random questionnaire on preferences in controls and resources for dog exercise, aimed at 400 households divided proportionately between dog owning and non-owning households.

The two methods were selected because they provided an opportunity to canvass a range of responses and through the random questionnaire to provide statistical validity to findings. The results were unequivocal:

- Over 90% of all households were not satisfied with existing controls.
- Approximately 80% of households were favourably disposed towards a leashing By Law requiring that all dogs be leashed in public places generally.
- Protection of children's areas was supported at the 90% or higher level.
- There was support for the provision of parks and open spaces at carefully considered times for unleashed exercise – in fact, the success of any control measure would very likely be judged on how appropriately this issue was dealt with.

In June 2000, the annual Salisbury Residents Survey was conducted by McGregor Tan Research, independent research consultants. The figure of 80% of residents in agreement with a control requiring dogs to be leashed in public places was again confirmed.

FINDINGS AND COUNCIL ACTIONS

The research and consultation findings were given consideration by Council on the following bases:

- Council desired to reduce the incidence of dog attack by as much as 50% and more if possible.
- Public support needed to be maintained and improved.
- Both these goals would require strong levels of compliance with whatever measures or controls were introduced.

In the research and consultations, the leashing of dogs in public places emerged as the simplest and most feasible control to reduce the incidence of dog attack in public places. There appeared to be no hindrance in terms of deleterious effects upon the animals and the control should not reduce the benefits of socialisation and exercise on the dogs. The community attitude could be predicted to be predominantly supportive and indeed was found to be 80% or better particularly where Council committed to provide access to open space for safe unleashed exercise.

The very public process of consideration of a control to reduce attack had also raised backlash and resistance from some dog owners and supporters. While very vocal and visible, the group was found to consist of no more than 15% of the population and possibly as little as 10 - 11%.

Accordingly, Council then went through the process of 1) establishing a control, 2) providing for unleashed exercise opportunities and 3) resourcing the enforcement of the controls and the dog friendly safe unleashed exercise areas, as follows:

- In September 2000, Council adopted a By Law requiring that all dogs be leashed in all public places in the City of Salisbury, except in those areas designated by Council.
- In 2001, after extensive consultation, Council resolved that all public parks would be available between 6.30 pm and 8 am for unleashed exercise. In 2001, Council also resolved that there would be 4 dog friendly parks constructed after consultation on their locations.
- In August 2001, Council employed 2 Compliance Rangers to inform people in parks and open spaces of their obligations under the By Law and to enforce it as necessary – these Rangers were highly mobile, in vehicles, on pushbikes and on foot and were first engaged in mounting ‘Blue Dog’ information signs in all parks in the City.
- In early 2002, 3 dog friendly parks were completed and opened and after additional consultation a further 2 parks were committed to by Council.

Council had a control, resources and the capacity to enforce. It also had set down a review procedure to assess the success of its measures to reduce dog attack in public places.

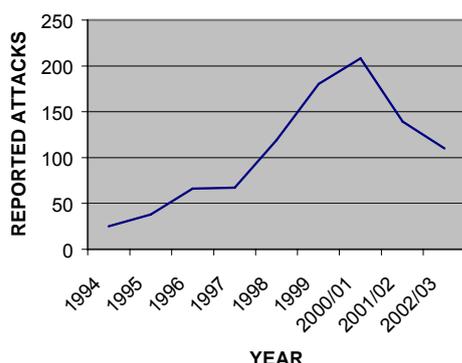
EVALUATION OF THE EFFECT OF LEASHING BY LAW - PROOF OF SAFETY BENEFIT AND COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS

The effect of the leashing By Law has been considered in 3 ways:

- reduction in dog attack,
- public acceptance of controls and resources,
- compliance with leashing control.

The method used to evaluate the reduction in the incidence of reported dog attack was examination and enumeration of the records of complaints and Council responses and the results can be observed in Chart 2.

REPORTED DOG ATTACKS BY YEAR

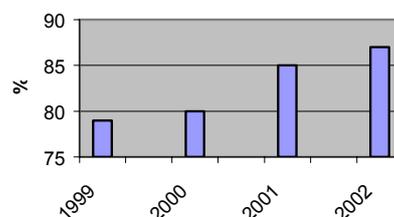


The primary observable trend was the overall reduction in the incidence of dog attack:

- in 2000/01 reported attacks diminished by over 30% from 208 attacks in the previous period to 139 attacks. This reduction occurred against a backdrop of heightened community awareness of the relationship between dog attack and Council’s investigating and enforcement role, an awareness encouraged by extensive media coverage over the previous two years,
- in the first half of the year 2002/03, only 55 attacks were reported, on track towards a 50% reduction in reported attack since 2000/01,
- additionally, the majority of dog owners indicated support for the control – only 9% actually continued to oppose the measure.

Public support for the leashing control actually further increased after its implementation – to 85% overall. The overall trend in public support across the life of the program can be viewed in Chart 3.

Chart 3. Proportion of Households Supporting Leashing Control



Retired persons predictably also showed 93% support and only 9% of dog owners remained opposed to the leashing By Law. This was of particular interest as by this time, a lobby group had been formed arguing that Council’s hours of control (6.30pm to 8am) were discriminatory to older residents who “tended to rise late and often could not be expected to hold a leashed dog” – excerpt from letter from the group. This finding supported Council’s contention that most older residents preferred the control and times because it gave them greater protection from loose or loosely controlled dogs.

Compliance with the leashing law was estimated at over 95% by the rangers from their observations in the field compared with the 70% estimated from the consultations and questionnaires conducted between 1998 and 1999.

