

Risk management in an animal management environment

Steve Morison, City of Whitehorse

1. Risk, what risk?

It's an interesting question. Of course we face risks in the delivery of our services every day. They are unavoidable. These risks can include dog bites, back strains, assaults and a myriad of other physical risks. Unfortunately it's a part of being an animal control officer.

Risk can arise from a variety of sources including internal and external exposures and have the potential to lead to litigation, injury, lack of community trust and failing to meet statutory obligations.

The operational risks are ones we generally manage every day through training, establishing policies and procedures and monitoring.

But we do face other risks that are not so obvious. These are generally centred on the legislation we administer, corporate responsibilities, OHS issues and matters considered subsidiary such as fire prevention, school crossing supervision and others.

These risks often fall under the responsibility of management but can have an effect on field staff.

To illustrate this, we are called to investigate a dog attack where a cat has sustained minor injuries requiring veterinary attention. It is clear an offence has occurred with the dog's owner acknowledging the incident. However a decision is made to issue a warning as it was considered a minor incident and the owner was repentant. No further action was taken. The legislation is clear that there are a number of enforcement options available but they are not taken up. Two days later the same dog savages a person causing extensive injury. In this scenario, the Council has a potential risk exposure as it was aware of the dog's propensity to attack, however it did not utilise the legislative powers at its disposal to prevent a similar incident occurring.

How do we prevent this type of situation occurring? How do we ensure that all staff deliver the same level of service? The introduction of approved policies and procedures is an effective tool in this type of situation. The documents provide an organisational perspective to service delivery, and from an officer's perspective, delivers a guideline on the application of daily activities.

The City of Whitehorse recently prepared a draft Community Local Law that was made available for public comment. Nothing unusual. However, what we did here was, at the same time as presenting the draft Local Law for comment, we also prepared a draft policy document that was also in the public domain. The policy documented how the City intended to interpret the Local Law and factors that would be considered. The policy provided a clear platform for the community to be fully aware of how the Local Law is to be managed. It also provides clear direction for officers implementing the new provisions.

Following on from this, if there are no policies or procedures in place, can we be confident that we are consistent in our service delivery and are aware of what is required? A scenario - a microchipped animal is impounded and after the statutory period, is euthanised. However, no attempt was made to contact the animal's owner. Is the Council responsible? Is it the officer who is at risk or the pound staff?

Without a documented procedural document that staff are committed to, an unnecessary risk exposure develops as there were no documented guidelines in place.

2. How does it affect me?

There is no such thing as a risk free environment. However, good governance can manage those risks and minimise any exposures that may occur.

In consideration of this, animal management officers and managers should:

- Apply risk management principles in their work plans;
- Incorporate evaluation methods to help manage risk;
- Communicate effectively both up and down on issues effecting risk; and
- Document risk strategies in procedural documentation.

The impact on delivering on these actions will result in:

- Improved awareness of the issues surrounding risk management that will lead to improved performances in this area;
- Improved training regimes;
- Application of documentation that identifies responsibilities, duties and expected outcomes;
- A potential reduction in claims associated with risk management;
- Improved safety of staff; and
- Reduced corporate exposures.

How can we become involved? AS/NZS 4360:2004 – Risk Management has developed a risk management process that is inclusive of all effected parties.

The main elements of the process are:

- **Communicate and consult**
Communicate and consult with internal and external stakeholders at each stage of the process.
- **Establish the context**
Establish the internal, external and risk management context in which the rest of the process will take place in addition to the criteria that risk will be evaluated.
- **Identify risk**
Identify how, when, why and how.
- **Analyse risk**
Identify and evaluate existing controls. Determine likelihood and consequences and hence the level of risk.
- **Evaluate the risk**
Compare the estimated level of risk against your criteria. This then determines the treatments and priorities.
- **Treat risks**
Develop and implement strategies and plans to address the risk.
- **Monitor and review**
Monitor the effectiveness of the treatments and evaluate changing circumstances that may impact priorities.

The table below provides a snapshot of the process.

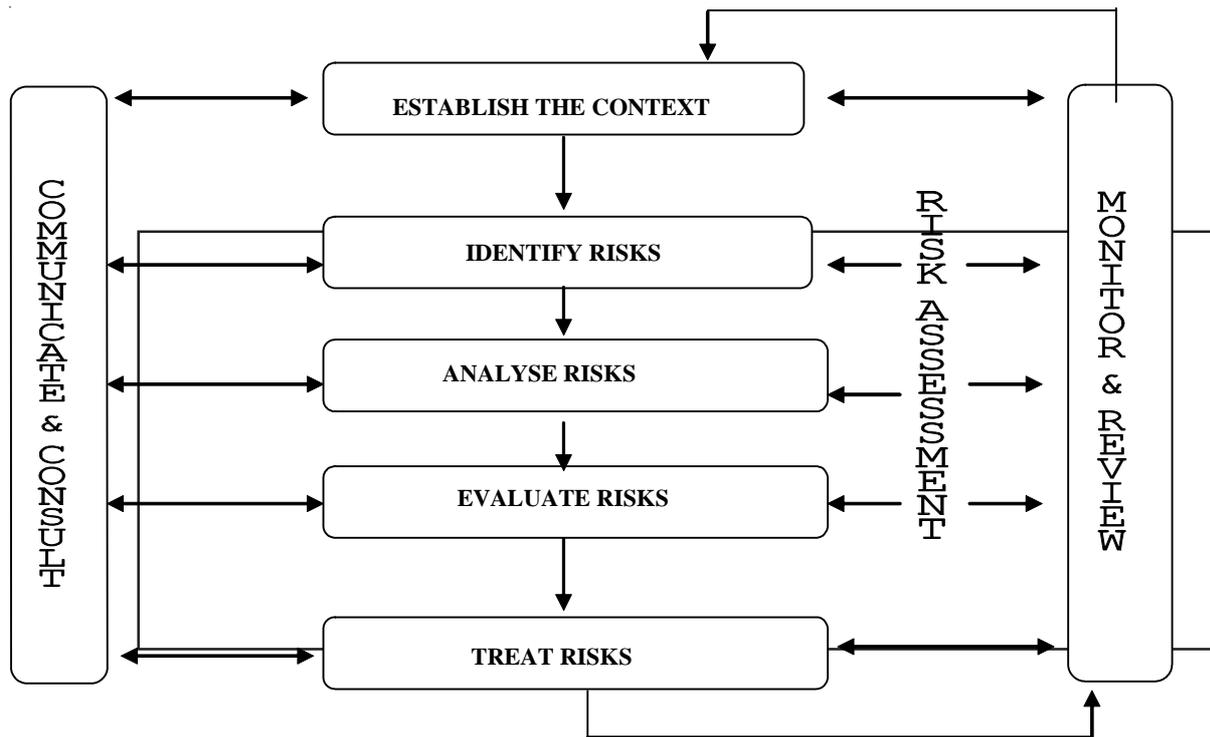


Figure 1: Risk Management Process – Overview (Source ANZS 4360:2004)

By introducing a process such as this, the organisation, staff and other affected parties are aware of the risks, are successfully treating those risks, informing those that need to be informed, and planning for the future.

3. What has been done to date?

From my perspective, the City of Whitehorse has adopted “KnowRisk” software – a management tool to manage its risk exposures. Each work group has profiled their risks, rated them, developed control treatments, identified the people responsible and established review dates.

Further, the Risk Management reports have been adopted by executive management with a commitment to manage the risk and implement and importantly, fund the strategies identified.

From an Animal Management perspective, we have developed extensive procedure and policy documents that provide staff with guidelines on how to manage our business, incorporated risk in our induction training and provide cyclic training in areas where staff are potentially at risk.

From a sector perspective, LGPro’s Statutory Services Interest Group has obtained funding to develop an extensive guideline for Local Governments to use in the management of the Domestic (Nuisance & Feral) Animals Act 1994.

The aim of the document is to establish an industry framework for Local Governments that allows for consistent and appropriate implementation of legislative requirements and best practice within this field. The framework will lead to improved quality standards for Councils in the analysis of risk exposures and the allocation of resources. The framework will improve awareness of service levels, statutory requirements and standards for the management and control of animals; including the development of checklists and documentation for quality control and regulation and the management of complaints. Ultimately, the framework will improve the quality and consistency of service delivery across urban, interface and rural municipalities.

The project has been initiated in response to the acknowledged inconsistency to service delivery experienced across local governments in animal management. This inconsistency is resulting in risk exposure for Councils when legislative requirements are not addressed adequately and for staff who maybe ill equipped to undertake their duties. Further, the perception of risk is not necessarily understood by some segments of the sector.

It is anticipated the project will lead to increased consistency in service delivery; the provision of a risk management model and the establishment of guidelines that may protect Councils from litigation and aid in delivering high quality services and management of legislative requirements. The guide details the obligations and actions required of Local Governments in Victoria to satisfy the requirements of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act, its Regulations and associated legislation.

It is anticipated that the document will address two main facets: Risk Management and the establishment of a Procedural Manual.

The Risk Management Model would:

- o Look at existing standards
- o Identify specific parts of legislation requiring risk analysis
- o Report on control measures to be implemented
- o Identify process required to be undertaken
- o Recommend an optimal process for the dissemination of the guidelines

The Procedure Manual would:

- o Establish a suite of guidelines to assist in managing the provisions of Domestic Animal Legislation
- o Cover all facets of the Domestic (Feral & Nuisance) Animals Act including Domestic Animal Businesses
- o Be flexible to allow local needs and procedures to be incorporated
- o Be a living document that would be updated on a needs basis.

The document will also have best practice models and minimum standards in recognition of the diversity of Local Governments. It will be centrally stored so as to ensure that information is accurate and up to date and is the subject of extensive sector involvement.

It is anticipated the guideline will be available in the next few months.

4. Who does it protect?

By implementing an effective risk management plan, all facets of the business have a degree of protection. Officers in the field are properly equipped, trained and resourced to meet their obligations; management have in place clear strategies that define the business and plans in place to manage risk; the organisation are meeting their statutory requirements in the areas effecting risk management; and finally, our insurers are satisfied due process is in place.

In essence, the incorporation of an effect risk management model protects us all. It potentially provides:

- A safer environment for staff;
- Consistency in service delivery;
- Improved customer satisfaction;
- Reduced exposures to corporate risk;
- Improved awareness and commitment; and
- Improved lines of communication.

5. Where to from here?

Risk management is a tool to identify, evaluate and manage risk. It is also an opportunity to develop quality systems that are inclusive of the whole operational structure of your team, division and Council. It's an effective means to an end and should be incorporated into our everyday work.

Risk management principles are also a tool to plan for the future to improve our business. It is not just a methodology about minimising loss or avoidance, but a proactive program that can recognise opportunities and when used effectively, is a powerful tool.

All segments of the sector have a key role in identifying risk and then managing it effectively

Steve Morison

Steven Morison
 Manager, Traffic and Local Laws
 City of Whitehorse
 03 9262 6333
 steven.morison@whitehorse.vic.gov.au

Steven Morison is currently the Manager of Traffic and Local Laws with the City of Whitehorse in Victoria. Steve has worked in Local Government for over 15 years and has managed a number of areas including Environmental Health, Emergency Management, Community Safety and Road Safety.

Steve is also the convenor of LGPro's Statutory Services Special Interest Group and a member of DAMIC, a ministerially appointed committee examining legislative impacts on domestic animal management.