

Animal control services in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

Animal control issues are the same in cities all over the world, with councils and their Animal Control Officers facing increasing pressure to give quality service delivery and provide resolutions to pressing problems. These problems are not new, but in New Zealand current trends are towards keeping more aggressive breeds of dog, as citizens become more concerned about their personal and property security. As the population of cities continues to increase and property sizes shrink, citizens disturbed by barking dogs reaches alarming proportions.

In response to calls for stricter dog control, but without adequate legislation to resolve the issues, councils continue to reward responsible ownership but lack the teeth to provide a real deterrent for those owners who choose not to control their dogs.

This paper gives a brief overview of some aspects of animal control in New Zealand from the author's perspective, outlining some of the current educational trends. The paper gives an insight into some of the options being explored by councils in this complex field.

TRENDS AND OPTIONS

Councils, animal control agencies, welfare organisations, Animal Control Officers and the public are increasingly concerned about the dog owners who do not voluntarily register their dogs, the increasing numbers of large aggressive dogs being kept and, of course, the increasing incidents of aggression towards humans that these dogs display.

Contact with animal control professionals in a number of countries and attendance at international conferences has confirmed that animal control issues/problems, particularly in the cities, are no different around the world. Whilst the numbers and percentages may vary in different countries, the issues remain the same.

Non-compliance with byelaws, including owners taking dogs into restricted areas, leash laws being ignored, owners not cleaning up after their dog has fouled in a public place and more dogs than allowed being kept, are common practise amongst a proportion of dog owners.

Barking dogs are a nightmare for neighbours who have sleep patterns disturbed. In New Zealand barking dogs are also a nightmare for animal control agencies which know what is needed to resolve the problem but are severely restricted in their ability to produce a practical answer to the problem because of inadequate laws.

In New Zealand we have seen a public outcry against aggressive dogs, fuelled by the media, supported by local government and some politicians, and strongly backed by animal control and welfare agencies, to introduce adequate laws to enable us to deal with them.

Because of this pressure the government ordered an enquiry into the existing legislation and a Select Committee was set up to investigate the laws governing dog control.

Submissions were called for and the Committee finally produced a report which contained a number of recommendations, which included increasing penalties for serious dog control offences through to allowing councils to define a dangerous dog and set higher registration fees for them, as well as increasing the powers of Dog Control Officers in the case of aggressive dogs and in the case of barking incidents.

The report, along with the recommendations to improve dog control, was published in July 1993, but since then there has been no further action at all. We still work with the Dog Control and Hydatids Act 1982.

Like many other activities carried out by councils in New Zealand, animal control work is frequently being put out to private contract or council is making the department a separate business unit, and some time after it has been established, that work is put out to tender and the business unit competes on the open market.

As more contracts have been introduced the contracts themselves have become more sophisticated and more demanding of contractors, just as in all other areas to which councils contract work. Contracts, or agreements, are commonly now as thick as a telephone book and include the tender document which serves as a reminder to the contractor of the commitment.

Along with the expected legal requirements are individual response times for each type of complaint and each aspect of the work, as well as comprehensive reporting procedures for each and every activity. Most authorities monitor the performance indicators that are included in the contract with a zeal unheard of before the work went out to contract.

Animal control work in most of the major cities in New Zealand is rapidly moving in to the modern business world, with a real focus on quality management systems and it is very customer service orientated.

Animal Control Services Limited is, along with other agencies, working towards I.S.O. 9000 certification in the near future. Personnel training is receiving a high priority in the drive towards professionalism.

However, in spite of the emphasis on professional quality service delivery the problems created by irresponsible owners seem to escalate.

In the greater Auckland area there are seven councils and five of those contract out their animal control work.

Animal Control Services Limited serves four of those councils, employing over 30 staff at two different office locations. We are responsible for approximately 50,000 dogs, and handle 17,000 complaints per year, impounding 5,000 dogs each year, and euthanasing 60 percent, or 3,000 of those dogs, and issuing nearly 4,000 offence notices. Two thirds of the offence notices result in legal proceedings being initiated.

In general terms 69 percent of impounded dogs are unregistered.

The complaints fall into the following categories, with some differences according to city.

Wandering in a public place	42 percent
Barking	22 percent
Biting and Challenging	18 percent
Citizens with dogs on their property	16 percent
Stock calls and miscellaneous complaints	2 percent

Field staff work rostered shifts covering from 6.00am to 10.00pm each day, and our Control Room is manned from 7.00am to 10.00pm daily so that trained staff deal with our customers other than emergencies outside these hours.

Animal Control Services supplies all the resources needed to undertake this work, including vehicles, staff and shelter facilities, and is responsible for all aspects of the work.

As the population of cities increase for a number of reasons, infill housing increases and the number of large aggressive dogs also increases. As our crime rate rises, and citizens become more concerned about personal and property security, they keep more dogs and they do not choose small breeds to deter burglary. Rottweilers, Pit Bull Terriers and Mastiff type breeds are now routinely encountered in townhouses with a backyard hardly big enough to house a Chihuahua.

Adding to this situation is the fact that we are increasingly living in a complaining society. Everyone knows their rights and wants to complain about their new neighbours' dog- on the day they move in.

Added to this some councils, in the name of customer service, send out written material inviting citizens to complain about any problem they have in their community, including dogs.

As well as this, animal control agencies feel the need to increase public awareness of the service they offer, engaging in advertising on radio and television, increasing their profile with educational campaigns, high profile vehicles and publishing all manner of hand-out material, including information on how to lay a complaint with the department.

All these factors must contribute in a significant way to increased numbers of complaints. In most cities in New Zealand complaints are increasing annually from anywhere between 6 percent to 20 percent.

With laws that lack teeth to resolve dog control complaints effectively, what are animal control agencies doing to stem the tide?

Great emphasis is being placed on education. I firmly believe in educating dog owners because once they are educated they can then be held responsible. All dog owners receive an educational visit annually at their home and, in New Zealand, this has traditionally been done because of the threat of hydatids. With that problem being greatly reduced, particularly in the urban areas, the visits are now called Hydatids Awareness visits and incorporate the field officer talking to the dog owner about all aspects of ownership and responsibility. This visit also provides an opportunity for the officer to check for current registration.

Animal Control Services runs a month long educational campaign annually in each area we service. Each campaign is entitled 'The Good Dog Owner Campaign' and has a different theme. Publicity is obtained via extensive radio advertising, a huge mobile bill board and displays at shopping malls. A competition is run for school children, incorporating the campaign theme, and posters and brochures are produced to promote the message. Educational videos are purchased or produced to further reinforce the message.

All schools are visited on a two or three year cycle, and again, school pupils, our future dog owners, are targeted with information on pet care and responsibility, according to their age group.

The 1994 campaign was probably the most effective campaign to date, with the theme entitled 'Bite Prevention- How To Stay Safe Around Dogs'. This theme was enthusiastically received by all sections of the community and requests for the brochures we produced came from all parts of the country. Press releases were made prior to the campaign and senior staff carried out radio talk-back sessions, advising callers how to avoid being bitten.

Previous campaigns have included themes such as desexing, leash laws and fouling.

Included in these campaigns has been a free community dog training course. The owners of dogs that have caused dog control problems are targeted to attend, but the course is open to everyone. These lessons have proved popular with up to 70 or 80 owners attending in one area. Lesson notes are handed out at the end of each session so that owners have some information to refer to as they carry out their training at home, between lessons. The free training has turned out to be a great public relations exercise for the animal control department with dog owners feeling they are getting something tangible for their registration fee.

Another worthwhile aspect of the training is that the owners targeted, because of previous dog control problems, frequently attend with an attitude problem on the first lesson. This changes dramatically as they realise that the Animal Control Officers really are experienced in training and are only there to help, not lecture.

There is such good feedback from the community about these free lessons that we were recently asked to conduct obedience training twice a year for one council that we service.

Dog Owner Licensing in one form or another, is being introduced slowly throughout the country. Animal Control Services Limited introduced the first scheme in New Zealand. Dog Owner Licensing is an incentive based voluntary scheme whereby dog owners willing to demonstrate their responsibility, by a once only attendance at a 1½ hour session, qualify for a reduced registration fee. During the session an educational lecture is given and relevant videos shown. The owners sit a ½ hour test based on a Dog Owner Licence Manual that they have acquired and studied before coming to the session.

At the end of each session test papers are marked and Animal Control Officers go over the paper with each individual owner, clarifying answers if needed. The whole session, including the test, is conducted with an educational attitude and whilst a 75 percent pass is required, the test is not designed to fail people.

The scheme has been quite successful with up to 25 percent of owners becoming licensed in areas where it has been introduced.

Criticism of this scheme has included comments that only responsible owners will apply to become licensed, and to some degree this is correct. The scheme was originally introduced with the hope that it could be made compulsory for all dog owners to be licensed, and in doing so become educated. It now seems likely that future changes to our Dog Control Act will include new legislation making it mandatory for local authorities to have a responsible dog owners training scheme for owners which allows them to qualify for reduced fees. This is the result of the educational merits of Dog Owner Licensing being recognised nationally.

I believe that any educational scheme that encourages owners to be responsible for their dog's actions has merit. Our experience shows that owners who allow their dogs to become a dog control problem frequently do not register their dog because of financial hardship, and we have been able to encourage them to become licensed, therefore educated, which has meant that registration has been more affordable for them.

The Dog Owner Licence Manual provides a guideline for all owners, whether licensed or not, and many councils supply them free to all owners.

Dog Owner Licensing is one of the many ways to educate owners and is an effective way of communicating their responsibilities to them.

Many authorities in New Zealand offer reduced registration fees for desexed dogs. The real problem is that the cost of desexing dogs or bitches is relatively expensive and the owners most in need of having their pet de sexed are least able to afford it.

A number of desexing clinics have appeared in the greater Auckland area, and though their desexing is reduced in cost compared to the average veterinary clinic it is still beyond the financial reach of those owners who would benefit most.

Every animal control professional knows that most dog control problems come from lower socio-economic groups who lack the finance to do more than exist, and feeding and clothing children has a higher priority than desexing the family dog. An owner's limited financial resources situation contributes significantly to dog control problems. Many dog owning families have only one income and that income is often received via a benefit or dole cheque.

Limited finance often means fences to contain dogs and/or kennels to house them are out of the question, and when desexing a bitch costs well over \$100 that is also out of the question.

Councils in the greater Auckland area met with veterinarians last year in an effort to establish a subsidised de sexing scheme. The end result of discussions was that agreement could not be reached and currently there is no reduced desexing scheme.

Dogs offered for adoption from our shelter are all desexed at a reduced fee before going to their new homes, so that these dogs do not add to our over-population problem. Prior to this procedure a voucher scheme was operated and everyone who adopted a dog had to purchase a desexing voucher. Although the charge for desexing was reduced we found that many new owners of adopted dogs did not present their dogs at the veterinary clinic, although they had prepaid for the dog to be desexed.

Other animal control agencies throughout the country run very good desexing schemes, via a sympathetic veterinarian, however, all schemes seem to depend on the co-operation of individual veterinarians. The pros and cons of desexing schemes have been widely discussed in many papers so I will not comment on them here.

New incentives in the field of animal control have been introduced, or are being considered, by some of the more innovative councils in New Zealand.

In some cases, an animal control department is being looked at from an entirely new perspective and is promoting itself as a one stop information shop where it is possible to get professional advice, or referrals to professionals in every conceivable area involving dogs.

An animal control department is a mine of information. Why not encourage citizens within your community to take advantage of this, and in doing that really lift the department's profile from one of, perhaps, only enforcement, to one of a professional department with a useful and respected role in the community .

You do not get anyone to see your point of view by waving a big stick, you get people on side by being professional, helpful, and by being the expert on your subject and prepared to take action when it is needed.

In our case, we have officers who have taught obedience professionally or instruct at a local obedience club, we give advice on obedience problems over the telephone, we send brochures on the subject to people enquiring, and we give callers the names of the nearest obedience clubs in their location. Dogs and owners that have attended obedience courses do not usually contribute to dog control problems.

If it is a medical problem we do not give advice, but again refer them to two or three veterinarians so that they make the choice.

We offer seminars, information and brochures on bite prevention to individuals and interested groups.

We encourage potential owners to telephone for advice on which breed will most suit their property and lifestyle, give advice on kennelling, fencing, byelaws, when vaccinations are due, raising a puppy etc.

We are the canine management experts. We should encourage dog owners to come to us for expert advice on how to manage their dog.

The real spin-off for a department offering professional advice is that in helping the community they are helping themselves. When officers go out of their way to help citizens with a problem, they really sow seeds for the future that materialise into increased respect for the department and an understanding by the community that the officers play a valuable role administering education and enforcement with compassion.

Citizens are encouraged to adopt a dog from the shelter when they next want to add a dog to their family.

Whilst impounded dogs have little history, prospective adoptee can be sure that the dogs have been temperament tested and evaluated. A medical check has been carried out by a veterinarian and vaccinations given, so the dog has a clean bill of health. No fees are charged for the dog, other than a greatly reduced registration fee and a reduced de-sexing fee.

Property inspections are carried out before each adoption is approved, to ensure that there are some facilities to contain the dog and adequate shelter is provided.

If the shelter is promoted correctly then those people who are approved to adopt a dog feel proud that they have qualified to accept responsibility for one of these special dogs.

Of course, in theory and in a perfect world, all or most of the unclaimed impounded dogs would be adopted, but this is not what happens. As any animal control professional knows, many of the dogs impounded are not suitable to be placed with unsuspecting first time dog owners.

It would, indeed, be unprofessional to place a good many of the guard dog breeds that have been conditioned by humans to over-react aggressively in routine situations with most pet owners. Adopted dogs must not add to dog control problems, nor present any threat to those that adopt them.

The shelter has a responsibility to euthanase these dogs for the public's protection, but it is the owners who have failed to socialise them, neglected them and failed to retrieve them from the shelter. It is the owners who are responsible for their death.

It is possible to give this information to the public in such a way that makes clear that the shelter has a real responsibility in making these decisions, and in making them with compassion the organisation will gain credibility with most responsible citizens.

EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE - FIRST OFFENDERS PROGRAM

One or two councils in New Zealand are likely to introduce, in the near future, a new educational initiative in an effort to reduce the numbers of dogs being impounded for a second or third time in the form of the PETS program.

Pet Education and Training Seminar (PETS) - is a first offenders program that has been introduced in a number of cities in America, and has been enthusiastically received by dog owners, city administrators, and even the anti-dog lobby.

The object of the campaign is to enlighten the public about the importance of responsible pet ownership, as well as target the owners of dogs that are impounded.

The program reminds people how owners, not dogs, are equipped to understand the consequences of the dangers of traffic, the spread of disease, bite situations, uncontrolled breeding etc., and that the responsibility lies with the dog owner .

Explanations are given of how all free roaming dogs, particularly entire dogs, fit in to the overall problems faced by an animal control department.

The program stresses the importance of controlling the over-population problem, byelaws regarding dogs, veterinary care, zoonotic diseases, Dog Owner Licensing, Hydatids regulations, and correct management of dogs, including proper exercise and feeding.

The program also touches on the topic of professional Animal Control Officers, explaining the duties of animal control personnel, their certification training and continuing education, as well as endeavouring to show that officers are responding to the problem the owner has allowed their dog to cause, rather than wanting to just impound their dog.

The program offers alternatives and solutions to animal escapees, excessive barking, obesity, parasite infection and explains how to avoid situations that lead to bite incidents and teaching children (the most frequent victims) how to avoid being bitten, and what to do if they are bitten.

The true intention of PETS is that, by having the owners of impounded dogs attend the seminar, the dog will not be impounded again. PETS puts the emphasis on educating offenders to alleviate the growth of dog control problems. It seems logical that a well informed, educated owner is less likely to allow their dog to continue to contribute to the dog control problem than an owner who is not in possession of all the facts.

The seminars are conducted in a serious but friendly manner. It is explained to owners how their pet fits in to the overall problem caused by roaming dogs in the community, and the cost and nuisance of that problem to their community. Also explained is the moral responsibility and legal obligation they have to resolve the problem.

Educating dog owners by charging them impounding fees and prosecuting them is treating the symptom without trying to cure the problem. Like other education programs this one is not a 'cure all', but it creates an opportunity to make an impact on the immediate future. Impounding fees certainly have a place in dog control and serve a purpose in acting as a deterrent, and PETS should work in conjunction with impounding fees.

The cost of running the seminars is negligible as qualified Animal Control Officers will conduct each seminar with voluntary input from professionals, such as a Veterinary Nurse, SPCA Inspector, etc.

The motivation for owners of impounded dogs to attend the educational seminar is the reduction or refund of their impounding fee. For a first time offender the entire impounding fee is paid at the time of the release of their dog. However, they are encouraged to sign up for attendance at PETS. After attending a seminar all or part of their impounding fee is refunded, for example, where the first impounding fee is \$50.00 a \$40.00 refund would be applicable. Obviously the higher the fee and the greater the refund, the more incentive there is to attend.

The seminars would be held fortnightly after work and, although a date would be set for them to attend at the time of the release of the dog, the owner would have 30 days to attend a session and qualify for the rebate. Each session would take two and a half hours.

A typical Pet Education and Training Seminar would have this program agenda:

Introduction of Seminar Instructor and Staff
Brief outline of program and the night's activities Record of attendance
Showing of videos : *Your Dog, Your Responsibility*
Kiss The Animals Goodbye

SHORT BREAK

1. Why Is There A Need For Animal Control?

- (a) Special Service Organisation
- (b) Public Safety
- (c) Byelaws and Law Enforcement
- (d) What happens at the shelter

2. What Is The Most Common Complaint?

Free roaming dogs?
Barking dogs?

3. What Is The Most Serious Problem?

Fouling?

Biting?

4. How Does The Standard Of Ownership Effect The Dogs Quality Of Life?

- (a) Injuries
- (b) Disease
- (c) Indiscriminate breeding
- (d) Fighting
- (e) Chased by irate people
- (f) Incorrect feeding
- (g) Incorrect care
- (h) Abandonment

5. Addressing Owner Responsibility

- (a) Food and shelter
- (b) Veterinary care
- (c) Grooming and exercise
- (d) T.L.C.
- (e) Prevent nuisance dogs
- (f) Confining a dog
- (g) Barking
- (h) Attacking people and other domestic pets
- (i) Acceptable ways of disposing of your dog

6. Cruelty To Dogs And Other Domestic Pets

- (a) Deliberate
- (b) Ignorance
- (c) Legal Aspects

7. Solutions For Dog Owners With Problems

- (a) Confinement Methods
- (b) Digging and Jumping
- (c) Fencing - Running wire etc
- (d) Housing

8. Legal and Moral Responsibilities of Dog Owners

- (a) Neighbours
- (b) People passing - property and public areas
- (c) Public areas
- (d) Other animals
- (e) Physical damage
- (f) Property damage

9. Animal Control Professionals

- (a) Certification Program
- (b) Extensive Knowledge
- (c) Continuing Education
- (d) Code of Ethics
- (e) Reason for doing the job
- (f) Community Awareness Programs

Question and Answer Session

Attend to Refunds and Issue Certificates

Other initiatives taken by councils include mail out customer service surveys, focus groups and employing additional staff, via a government subsidised scheme, to carry out door to door surveys checking for registration compliance or conducting surveys.

Mail out or door to door surveys, as well as focus groups, ask relevant questions about the public's perception of the current animal control service, how it could be improved, and seeks information on their experience in dealing with the department.

Mail out surveys and focus groups target customers that have experienced contact with Animal Control Officers and personnel during the previous two months. Focus groups are a real eye opener as councils and animal control personnel watch a group often to twelve customers unobserved through a one way window.

The customers are supplied with food and drink whilst being encouraged to express their opinion on whether they think the registration fee gives value for money or whether Animal Control Officers are professional and courteous when dealing with them.

There are some expected and unexpected responses when the group, which has been chosen at random, includes a customer whose dog has been impounded recently.

These methods all offer a way to measure the effectiveness of service delivery, advertising campaigns, desexing schemes and many other aspects of the work carried out by an animal control department. The collective opinion of these groups also supplies information on ways to improve the service and gives guidance to administrators to enable them to place greater emphasis on customer concerns in the future.

CONCLUSION

It is my opinion that the importance of educational programs for dog owners cannot be emphasised enough. New educational initiatives should be encouraged and implemented. However, in New Zealand at present, all the new initiatives are about rewarding responsible dog ownership and very little has been done to provide meaningful deterrents to those owners who choose not to control their dogs. Most councils provide reduced fees or incentives for desexed dogs, owners who register early and owners who qualify for a Dog Owner Licence or Selected Owner Policy. Apart from impounding fees, which often are not paid, or insignificant court fines, no real deterrents exist.

You can park your car safely but illegally and have it towed away and incur an instant fine.

Your dog can inflict injury on a person but it is illegal for an Animal Control Officer to remove it from its property to prevent further danger to the public. Any insignificant monetary fine comes after months of delay in getting the case to court.

You must have a licence to drive a car but you may walk your attack trained Pit Bull Terrier through a crowded shopping area without having to prove to anyone that you can control it.

Firearms owners must be licensed, but owners of aggressive dogs, which can be more dangerous than a firearm because the dog goes off without the owner pulling the trigger, remain unlicensed.

Many worthwhile initiatives have been introduced in New Zealand and emulated overseas in the field of animal control. Many animal control agencies and individual Animal Control Officers throughout the country are making an impact in their communities in spite of ineffective legislation.

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The author formed Animal Control Services, a private Company, in 1974 to provide a comprehensive professional service in urban animal management to councils. The company currently has contracts with four councils, two of which are North Shore City and Auckland City Council, the largest urban areas in the greater Auckland area, with responsibility for some 50,000 registered dogs. Animal Control Services leads the field in New Zealand with innovative educational programs, such as 'The Dog Owner Licence', and 'The Good Dog Owner Campaign' and has set standards within the industry for personnel training, professionalism and quality service delivery.

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