

Stirling City Council - an integrated system

Chris Liversage

BACKGROUND

The City of Stirling is an urban council in the metropolitan area of Perth, Western Australia. The City has a population of approximately 186,000 residents, contains some 6,000 businesses and 76,000 households. The district is primarily made up of single residential developments, with industrial areas and some unit infill occurring in higher value pockets closer to the Perth central business district. The City is well serviced by parks and reserves (730ha) and is 109.4km² in area. The City employs some 744 full time staff, including 14 in its Ranger Services Section which has responsibility for local authority animal management in the district.

The WA Dog Act 1976 is state legislation which prescribes controls over dogs. Owners are required to register their dogs, prevent them wandering at large, and control barking of the dogs. Local councils have responsibility for administration of the Act, and are able to make bye-laws under it in matters like prescribing areas where dogs may be exercised off leash.

Registration fees and fines payable are not under the City's control and are set by the state government through the Dog Act and the Dog Act Regulations. Fees range from \$5.00 for a sterilised animal for 1 year's registration to \$50.00 for an unsterilised dog for 3 years. Pensioners receive a 50% discount. The dog owners are given a numbered, coloured plastic tag to attach to the dog's collar to identify it as registered. On the spot fines of \$40.00 are payable for offences such as keeping an unregistered dog, letting a dog wander at large, or failing to pick up dog faeces. Other penalties of up to \$2,000 can be imposed if offending dog owners are taken to court for more serious offences such as an attack by the dog on a person.

In 1987, Stirling made all public parks dog exercise areas, and set aside three beach areas as well. Complaints about dog faeces in public areas and footpaths are frequent.

Stirling operates its own pound and has a policy of selling dogs from the pound. The typical cost of acquisition is about \$100, which includes registration, inoculations and payment for the sterilisation operation. By asking owners to pay for the dog and its sterilisation, the City can be quite confident that they will take good care of it. The City has computerised its dog registration system, although handling of complaints and recording details of impounded dogs is done manually. The City is home to some 22,000 dogs and an estimated 32,000 cats. There are no regulations in place at present with respect to cat ownership, although the state government is presently considering companion animal legislation. Animal ill-treatment and welfare issues are dealt with by the WA branch of the RSPCA.

PREVIOUS URBAN ANIMAL MANAGEMENT INITIATIVES

In February 1992, the City conducted an internal review of its Ranger Services Section, and found that its 4 Animal Control Officers were experiencing difficulty in coping with the scale of the task in hand. The Section was re-structured to train staff in all aspects of municipal law enforcement, training was upgraded, and equipment was provided improved. All 11 field staff in the section were then able to deal with almost any situation which they may experience.

The City was also divided into 4 operational areas with two staff assigned to each, with the balance assigned to leave relief and special projects. The operational areas gave an opportunity for Rangers to develop a local 'feel' for the area, and staff were rotated on a periodic basis. This structure allowed greater flexibility in terms of resource allocation and also allowed for rapid responses if necessary. The City also cut its response time to 'routine' calls from 24 hours to an average of 1½ hours.

With new resources available, the City concentrated on ensuring that fines and penalties were applied in as many cases as possible, and that prosecutions were undertaken of serious offenders.

This approach did not work particularly well. Complaints received actually increased and clerical staff became inundated with letters and calls from dog owners claiming unreasonable treatment. This was compounded by the Section having a (then) policy of requiring appeals and queries to be in writing. The City tried initiatives such as 'dog of the week'. This program entailed placing an article and picture in the local community newspaper featuring a dog in the City Pound. This program had little effect on the overall problem and no effect on pound statistics. It was resource hungry in terms of the time required and was discontinued.

During this period, the City was also lobbied by proponents of subsidised sterilisation schemes. These schemes were examined as part of the strategy formulation. Apart from the large doses of public funding required, the schemes actually made matters worse for local councils, as they reduced the level of the owner's responsibility for their pet. Whilst sterilisation of dogs does play a part in the overall approach adopted by the City, wholesale subsidisation of animal sterilisation does not.

THE LONG TERM APPROACH

In February 1993, Council reviewed the situation and resolved to adopt a long term dog control and management strategy.

This arose out of a further review of the 'enforcement' approach. The review found that:

- expenditure in the area was approximately \$345,000 per annum, with income of approximately \$180,000. This loss was cause for concern as dog control in WA is supposed to be self funded;
- only about 30% of dogs kept in the district were currently registered with the City;
- an overall lack of direction in the area made the City administration vulnerable to attack when unexpected or unusual situations arose;
- the issue was not really associated with dog behaviour. A dog will generally do whatever it is allowed to do by its owners. The central matter related more to altering the attitudes and behaviour of dog owners. Years of ingrained habits and attitudes needed to be changed to make dog control more self-regulating; and
- there was a need for research to be done into where the community felt the City needed to direct its resources for local authorities.

It was felt that it was imperative that the problem be dealt with as efficiently as possible in the long term, both in terms of costs imposed on the community via council rates, and the cost imposed on dog owners. It was felt that solutions applied should be to treat the cause of problems, rather than simply the symptoms. For this reason, the City examined and discounted sterilisation schemes and registration schemes as the primary focus for its strategy.

The current approach dealt with the *symptoms* of inadequate owner control over dogs. Essentially the initiative currently rested with dog owners to 'do the right thing'. By the time the City was brought in on the scene, there was already a problem - the dog had already attacked, wandered, fouled someone's lawn, or was constantly barking.

The City needed a plan to solve problems before they happened - not after. The strategy adopted drew on the conclusions the council reached itself, as well as ideas and knowledge gained from other sources like other councils, UAM Conference proceedings and consultation with staff.

The Strategy had two broad phases to be implemented over a 5 year period. Phase 1 aimed for maximum 'market' penetration. Its primary focus was on raising registration levels, as well as laying the foundation for an effective effort in owner education. As part of Phase 1, a survey to obtain current community attitudes to dog control was also undertaken.

Phase 2 of the strategy used the expertise, knowledge and financial base gained to positively influence dog owners, and educate them about the problems that their action (or inaction) caused to the community. It was anticipated that Phase 1 would result in a 100% increase in revenue, making the service break even. At the same time, it would also strive to educate the public and dog owners about the responsibility of dog ownership. Phase 2 would be more difficult to implement, and care needed to be exercised to ensure that the strategy remained flexible enough to deal with any issues that arise.

The plan was to be regularly reviewed, and its effectiveness thoroughly assessed in 1998. It was hoped that this strategy of educating owners would see a significant reduction in the number of problems that dogs caused to the community.

PHASE 1 - THE RESULTS

Phase 1 of the City's Dog Control and Management Strategy involved primarily increasing 'market share' by raising the number of registered dogs, via a door to door check of each residential property. Prior to implementation of the doorknock campaign, the City conducted a survey of residents to find where they felt resources should be directed.

This survey formed the basis of measurement of the success of the strategy - if residents perceptions or statistics kept do not change, then other initiatives will have to be considered.

The objectives of the survey were to determine:

- tolerance of dog behaviour such as wandering, fouling, barking and attacking;
- level of satisfaction with the City's Ranger Service;
- awareness of dog registration laws;
- dog ownership levels;
- dog registration levels;
- dog sterilisation levels;
- reasons why people obtained dogs, and major sources of them; and
- whether or not people would use dog faeces bins if provided.

Differences in attitudes to the above were also analysed according to suburb, income, sex, age, language and whether or not respondents owned or rented the property they were staying in. Data were collected by a questionnaire containing 25 categories in an easy to complete form. Some 3,500 households were selected at random from the City's properties database. From these, about 1,600 responses were received. Statistical analysis of responses was undertaken by a consultant, with results and conclusions made by City staff. These results were the subject of a detailed report presented to Council in November 1993.

Among the results was an indication of a major problem with dogs in the City suburbs of Balga and Mirrabooka. Dog ownership levels were high, and registration low in this area. Non dog owners also reported the highest levels of annoyance with the adverse impact of dog activities such as barking, wandering and fouling. As a result, more resources would have to be directed to this area.

There was also a great deal of community concern about dog faeces in public places, with 58% of all residents annoyed 'very much' by the presence of doggy doo. Dog owners (not surprisingly) showed a greater tolerance for adverse dog activities, and with 27.1% of dwellings within the City of Stirling having at least one dog, it shows how important it is that the rights and responsibilities of both dog and non dog owners be balanced so that both groups can enjoy community facilities without having a negative impact on each other.

Responses to each area of the survey were kept on a suburb by suburb basis, as well as on an operational area basis so as to make comparisons in years to come more meaningful.

In order to increase dog registration levels, four people were employed to check every residential property in the City for unregistered dogs. They were given print outs, on a suburb by suburb basis, of all properties where dogs that were registered. People who had unregistered dogs were given:

- a Caution Notice and 7 days to register the dog;
- a registration form and pre-addressed, pre-paid envelope to return it and their registration fee; and
- a note explaining why registration was necessary.

Where there was no one home, and an unregistered dog was on the premises, a card was left explaining the situation and asking the dog owner to register their pet. A part time clerical officer was also employed to issue infringements when dogs had not been registered and to deal with enquiries generated.

The door knock campaign resulted in current registrations being increased from 11,349 to 17,190. Income from registrations increased from \$95,273 in 1992/93 to \$171,861 in 1993/94 (up by 80.4%), and \$152,771 in 1994/95. The City had to issue approximately 600 \$40 fines to those who did not register their dog after having received a caution, that is, about 10% of new registrations.

The flow on effect of being able to return impounded dogs to their owners could also be seen. In 1991/92, the City impounded some 1,529 dogs, of which 65% were destroyed as their owners were not found. In 1994/95, 1,553 dogs were impounded, of which 42% had to be destroyed. Whilst this was still too high, it represented good news to the 300 or so pets and families who were reunited. For the first time in Stirling, more dogs were reclaimed than destroyed.

From a purely financial point of view, pound operations were also made more efficient. Veterinary costs were reduced and pound income rose by 24% over one financial year, as the City was also able to recover impounding and sustenance charges from those dog owners whose pets had wandered from their care.

The registration drive had a very positive impact on the City's long term strategy from all points:

- it improved income and efficiency;
- the number of dogs unnecessarily euthanased was reduced by almost a quarter in its first year alone; and
- it reinforced the overall aim of the strategy, which was to make owners responsible for their pets behaviour.

PHASE 2 - EDUCATION AND LEGISLATION

Following completion of Phase 1 of its strategy, the City was searching for a suitable vehicle through which to 'push' its message, but was not particularly keen to do so on its own. Expensive advertising programs, or diversion of staff resources into extensive educational campaigns over ongoing periods were unattractive options due to the cost, uncertainty of results, and scarcity of resources.

Involvement of more groups and organisations in the dog control and management field was seen as being beneficial, however these groups tended to have widely diverging aims, some of which were in conflict or contradicted one another. Agreement on a common theme was seen to be difficult to reach, given the commitment of these groups to their various aims. Some promoted compulsory sterilisation of dogs as the solution, others thought restrictions on breeders would work, some pushed training as the answer.

During this period, the City was approached by Garth Jennens, who had conducted research into dog attacks on livestock in the fringe of metropolitan Perth. Garth suggested that the City of Stirling become involved in the 'AMREX' (Animal Management Resource Extension) program, as a means of furthering the objectives of its Dog Control and Management Strategy.

With respect to the various groups involved, it seemed that whilst everybody was trying to do the right thing with respect to responsible dog management, there was no co-ordination or system of co-operation between the various groups. The AMREX program facilitates exactly that and also supports the City's long term strategy of combining education of dog owners with enforcement of legislation.

The aims of AMREX are simple:

- to establish a state 'approved' animal management program that is controlled and administered by organisations such as the Australian Veterinary Association, the RSPCA, and local councils, using only qualified and experienced advisers;
- to co-ordinate and persuade all animal interest groups to work towards a common objective; and
- to clearly define who in the community needs to be educated or re-educated, and provide them with comprehensive animal management programmes that are not primarily government or levy funded.

AMREX operates on referrals from local councils and veterinarians, from owners whose pets have problems or from those who simply want to be able to better control their animals.

Support given by the WA Branch of the Australian Veterinary Association has been critical to the program's success, and this organisation really deserves a special mention for their responsible and exemplary approach. People who want to learn how to properly control their dogs are often referred to the program by veterinarians. This ensures that dog owners are given some meaningful instruction at the point when they are most enthusiastic about their pet - when they first get it and take it for vaccinations and so on.

Funding for the program is provided by the running of training classes on local reserves. Most councils have a passive (unreticulated) park or piece of land that is underutilised, and this was the case in Stirling. In one instance, a school oval was used where a lack of suitable sites existed.

Trainers are employed by AMREX, which also provides its own insurance liability cover. Trainers must possess a Certificate in Urban Animal Management, and are paid for their efforts. This removes the need to employ volunteers (who are often difficult to control, as many have their own ideas of a good management program) and ensures a high quality, consistent and professional approach.

AMREX also serves as a referral point for persons whose pets have behavioural problems. This gives local councils a positive weapon to use instead of an adversarial, legalistic approach.

For example, persons with a dog whose persistent barking is causing a problem in the neighbourhood were previously served with a notice requiring abatement within 14 days. No advice was given by the City as to the nature of the problem, let alone how to resolve it. The City is now able to suggest to the dog owner that a visit to AMREX or their local vet may help.

In addition, the City reviewed its dog noise nuisance abatement procedures to obtain more meaningful information from complainants about the duration, time of barking and possible causes.

This information is relayed to the dog owner (with the complainant's details withheld), and is particularly useful in:

- reducing vexatious complaints;
- convincing the dog owner that a problem does, in fact, exist;
- coming up with strategies to modify the dog's behaviour; and
- possible referral to AMREX with a proper 'case' history.

Failing all else, it is also handy information to have in the event that prosecution is necessary.

The procedural modifications were made in consultation with AMREX and have been reasonably successful to date. In particular, behavioural modification where a dog barks persistently during the absence of its owner is a handy option to have, especially when the only other course of action entails prosecution of the owner - which may not stop the barking, even if a conviction results.

Use of veterinarians and trained professionals provides a suitable alternative to problem solving where dog owners are co-operative. Resorting to more severe means is necessary where co-operation is not forthcoming. Hence the need for the other part of the strategy - legislation.

Local authorities do have a duty of care to ensure that the general community is not adversely affected by the action (or inaction) of an irresponsible few, and in many circumstances punitive action is a legitimate and appropriate course of action to take.

With respect to dog attacks, the City has developed guidelines to assist staff in determining the appropriate action to take depending upon a variety of criteria, including the severity of the attack, steps taken by the owner to adequately confine the dog, previous complaints and so on. Outcomes also range from court action and seizure and destruction of the dog to issuing of cautions. Referral to the AMREX program for behavioural correction is also an option for consideration, particularly where the attack is not severe and the dog is a 'first offender'.

Use of the guidelines and referrals to the AMREX program can take some of the emotion out of what can sometimes be a difficult problem.

Following a recent and fatal attack on an elderly woman in an adjoining council area, allegedly by a group of 3 dogs on a semi rural property, the state government is in the process of reviewing the Western Australian Dog Act with a view to introducing controls on 'dangerous and aggressive dogs'.

The outcomes of this review are not yet known, but ideas such as AMREX to try to resolve problems before they occur through education and training, combined with the backup of legislation for enforcement should be considered. Whilst it may not eliminate this type of thing, it should be of great benefit in preventing attacks, and in reducing overall dog related problems in the community.

Finally the City also upgraded its record keeping system to provide a better 'intelligence' system for staff. All information received - letters, records of site visits, internal memos, and so on are filed under the property address using an assessment number drawn from the City's Property Rating System. This might seem like an obvious and straight forward thing to do, but some thought was needed to make sure that a system that worked as efficiently as possible was put in place so as not to create more work for office staff, and to ensure that field staff spent as much time as possible out of the office rather than dealing with paperwork.

This system provides a valuable source of intelligence to allow the City to better carry out its obligations. It means that different staff attending the same property over periods of time can deal with a problem with full knowledge of a dog owners 'priors'.

CONCLUSIONS

There are some conclusions that can be drawn from Stirling's experience in this area.

An assessment of the environment in which you are operating is useful to begin with, to establish what directions or strategies are appropriate. Whilst each area tends to have its own peculiarities, which to some extent determine what steps would be most effective, there are some common elements. In Stirling's case, a determination was made that the strategy should be as cost effective as possible, given that the community was already paying considerable sums towards dog control in the area. Responsible management dictates that programs and policies should be as efficient as possible, and as such self funding initiatives such as AMREX should be explored.

Ask yourself some questions:

1. What is our objective(s) with respect to dog control? Do we have any at all?
2. Are they appropriate?
3. Do our policies and practices work for or against these objectives?
4. Are our staff resources adequate?
5. Can we make any resource changes without costing any money?
6. Are our staff properly trained and do they understand their role?
7. Do our practices/policies need amending? Make sure that they actually support your overall goals and direction.
8. Is there any opportunity to better co-ordinate our efforts with others?
9. Do our office systems work? Do they provide meaningful and useful information to field staff? Ask them!
10. Are there any unexplored funding sources that we have not tapped into? Can we reduce costs without affecting the quality of our service?
11. Will our staff benefit from involvement in a review of these processes? (I am yet to come across a person who hasn't).
12. Are the statistics we collect meaningful and what do they actually measure?

There are no quick and easy solutions to the ongoing problems faced by local authorities with respect to dog control in urban areas. What is needed is commitment to actually do something, and the willingness to involve people from both inside and outside the organisation in agreeing to, and implementing a strategy. Those who are actually going to have to carry out the tasks will benefit most from being involved in the strategy formulation. Whilst not everyone is going to think the same way, it is important to identify critical players. At the City of Stirling, these have been:

- staff employed by the City;
- those involved in the AMREX program; and
- veterinarians.

A 'total' view is necessary of the entire system in order to devise initiatives that will work in the long term. Will the strategy work for the City of Stirling? Only time will tell, but the early indications are encouraging. A full evaluation of the Strategy will be conducted in 1998 - stay tuned.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mr C R Liversage

Manager Administrative Services

City of Stirling

Civic Place

STIRLING WA 6021

Telephone (09) 345 8555 Fax (09) 345 3073

Chris Liversage is a professional local government administrator and has worked for 3 councils in Western Australia over the past 12 years. He has a background in several areas of local council operations, and his qualifications include a Bachelor of Business (Management) and a Diploma in Local Government (Clerk). His role with respect to dog control and management at the City of Stirling is to provide as effectively and efficiently as possible an overall long term direction for the area.

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