

Community solutions and cost benefits

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DOG CATCHERS – PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE

If you mention your occupation is that of a dog management officer, immediately you are the dog owner's number one enemy. You are assumed to take dogs from people's front yards, never to be returned, school children become hysterical when you impound a dog in the schoolyard because you are taking the dog away to be destroyed. This is the perception the majority of the public has had since the inception of the Dog Control Act 1979 and Councils employing 'dog catchers'.

I have been a dog management officer for 25 years and unfortunately the majority of the general public still think the only purpose in the life of a dog management officer is to catch and destroy dogs. It has a familiar ring to it, doesn't it, even after a quarter of a century.

I must admit that some dog management officers have the idea that the only way to deal with dog owners is to impound their dogs and hit them where it hurts most, in the pocket, as they have no idea of the impact their dog has on society. Some dog management officers and Councils still hold this attitude today - that there are no excuses accepted, expiate the blighters, it's the only way they will learn, that will teach them!

This is not the way to uphold the Dog and Cat Management Act.

EDUCATION

Instead of waiting for the owner's dog to do something wrong, then jumping on the owner and issuing a heap of fines, I believe that educating both the owner and dog gets the message through more effectively, although there are times when all the talking and education in the world is not going to change some people's attitude.

The City of Holdfast Bay takes a pro-active role in dog management and has given me the opportunity to place various ideas into practice.

When a City of Holdfast Bay dog management officer impounds a dog that has identification, the owner is contacted by telephone and if they are at home, the dog is returned to them instead of being taken to the RSPCA pound.

Council's dog management officers attend primary schools within our area and talk about responsible dog ownership to the students.

The Holdfast Bay Dog Owners' Association

The Holdfast Bay Dog Owners' Association is the first of its kind in South Australia with the Charles Sturt Dog Owners' Association hot on their heels. These associations are not affiliated with any canine association or dog obedience clubs.

When Council revised its by-laws the Holdfast Bay Dog Owners' Association campaigned for the dog owner's right to exercise their dogs on the foreshore throughout the year. The original by-law required dogs to be on leads at all times and during daylight saving, were not allowed on the foreshore between 10am and 8pm. After vigorous lobbying by the dog owners association and public consultation the by-law was amended and passed allowing dogs to be under effective control or on a lead no more than 2 metres in length on the foreshore, except during daylight saving times when they must be on a lead between 10am and 8pm. This has effectively created an off-leash dog beach 8.6 kilometres long for the majority of the year on South Australia's premier beaches.

I was asked by my manager to attend some of the Holdfast Bay Dog Owners' Association's dog training sessions as a public relations program. The people training their dogs were not just from Holdfast Bay Council area but also from various other adjoining council areas.

The Holdfast Bay Dog Owners Association conducted dog obedience training on one of Council's ovals. Unfortunately the oval had little or no amenities or shelter and they shared the oval with soccer, football and cricket clubs as well as the little athletics club. This meant the association could only use the oval on Tuesday nights and Wednesday mornings.

I am here to tell you it was very cold and wet in winter and hot in summer, although you could hide under a tree or a very small veranda on the toilet block, which was the only building on the site.

I arrived on time and introduced myself to the trainers and some of the association committee members. I had stocked up on pamphlets and laid them out in a nice display on the tailgate of my utility. I stood back and watched the training session and waited for the tidal wave of eager dog owners to rush over to the utility to ask questions after training.

WRONG!! It was a trickle, very disappointing.

I think they thought, 'Look out, it's the 'dog catcher', he might be here to check up on my dog registration!' On top of that it was a windy night and I was struggling to keep my pamphlets from blowing away.

I decided this was not going to deter me so I came back the next week with a better success rate, although some were still not sure. Again my pamphlets were blown all over the place.

Getting sick and tired of chasing pamphlets I came up with the idea of a sample bag. I used our dog poo bags (unused ones of course) and placed inside them, a fridge magnet, a puzzle book, and a colouring-in book, one of each of the pamphlets supplied by the Dog and Cat Management Board of South Australia.

I thought, "This is great." However, as I had the colouring-in books in the bag we should include some colour pencils as well. I contacted a promotions company who just happened to have what I was looking for. A packet of six half-sized pencils in a plastic container. Council purchased 500 packets and I placed a packet in each of the sample bags that I handed out.

In time the participants began approaching me and started asking questions relating to dog management. I started handing out the sample bags and was surprised when many of the participants were given the sample bag they would comment, "I wish our Council did something like this" or "Why doesn't our council do this?" These comments inspired me to attend each new training session.

I am pleased to say that I have made many friends and acquaintances at the association including local residents who have attended the dog training courses. With the help of friends from the Dog Owners' Association I have been able to develop the Holdfast Bay Puppy School to train 8 to 16 week old puppies. (The puppies must have at least their first vaccination before entering the puppy school). The Holdfast Bay Puppy School took twelve months of preparation before it was in a position to open for business and train puppies and their owners.

The Holdfast Bay Puppy School was a Council initiative, however, members of the association were volunteer trainers. The eight week curriculum of the puppy school was not just to socialise the puppies but also to train them in basic commands such as sit, stay, heel and come.

The school ran in conjunction with the Holdfast Bay Dog Owners' Association's dog training program. The money received from the puppy school was used to promote responsible dog ownership, ie, sample bags for the participants of the dog training and the children at the schools.

Due to other commitments I have now handed over the operation of the puppy school to the Holdfast Bay Dog Owners' Association. I can say with great pride that the puppy school is going ahead in leaps and bounds and always has full classes. I am also pleased to say that the vets and pet shops, within our council area, have referred their clients to the puppy school.

This partnership between the City of Holdfast Bay and the Holdfast Bay Dog Owners Association has been of great benefit to both parties.

Benefits to Council:

- Contact with owners of new puppies or dogs.
- Contact with future dog owners. (Children are allowed to attend the training sessions.)
- Better relationships with current dog owners.
- Less dog complaints on the foreshore.
- A decrease in dog attacks within our area.
- Better monitoring of dog owners on the foreshore.

(Association members fought hard to allow dogs to be exercised on the foreshore and do not want to lose that right. They therefore remind other dog owners of their responsibilities.)

The City of Holdfast Bay has experienced three major dog attacks in the past five and a half years. Two of the attacks occurred on private property. The first by a trespasser who scaled a fence to take photographs of a house and was attacked by two bull mastiffs who were guarding the property (warning signs were on the fence and gate).

The second, where a man was bitten by his Akita dogs whilst trying to separate two of his dogs fighting. He was not found until the next morning and by that time he had bled to death as one of the dogs had bitten through an artery.

The third was an attack by an Akita on a person who was returning the dog to its home. The dog attacked from behind when the person was leaving the property.

In the period 2000 / 2001 the City of Holdfast Bay Dog Management Officers investigated 17 dog attacks and 21 barking dog complaints. These attacks, I believe to be minor attacks resulted in a puncture wound, harassment, scratches or torn clothing.

In the period 2001 / 2002 there were 5 attacks and 10 barking dog complaints.

Council has a 78% return rate of impound dogs not including dogs returned to the owners.

Council has not had to resort to taking any matter to court in the last two years and all matters have been resolved between the concerned parties.

We still have a way to go but with the continued support of all Council's residents, Council will keep the number of dog incidents to a minimum.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Phillip Kirkpatrick is a General Inspector at the City of Holdfast Bay, South Australia. He is also a partner in TNPK Consulting, a local government training provider. He has been employed in South Australian local government for 27 years and has worked in both rural and metropolitan councils.

He has been employed with the City of Holdfast Bay for five years and in that time has reassessed his role as a dog management officer. With the support of Council and the Dog and Cat Management Board he has been able to cultivate a close relationship with the local Holdfast Bay Dog Owners Association and dog owners of the district. Some are very good friends. He established a puppy school in which puppies between 8 and 16 weeks are trained by volunteers from the Holdfast Bay Dog Owners' Association. The combined efforts of both parties have created excellent benefits for all concerned. The Holdfast Bay Dog Owners Association has been instrumental in Council initiating By-laws for dogs to be on the foreshore under effective control and a positive reward-training program for dogs.