

Community partnership in animal management planning and practice - a success story

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Introduction

Legislative changes in Victoria in the mid 1990s precipitated major changes in animal control and management. The introduction of these changes at a local government level highlighted individual Council cultures. At this time pet owners were generally seen as consumers of regulations, rather than as active participants in the process of policy development and implementation. There was no recognised group to advocate for the legitimate interests of pet owners, and they were not acknowledged as stakeholders in the planning process.

This presentation provides a case study on the partnership that developed in Manningham between Council and pet owning residents as a mechanism to develop and introduce new Local Laws and Council Orders. At the time, making the interests and perceptions of pet owning clients a focus of animal management policy development was regarded as a risky business by some Council planners, and it was not without its challenges.

Animal owners saw participation as an equity issue, and were convinced that they could be a valuable resource for Council. Dog owners in particular were concerned about rights of access to public open space and opportunities for dog-related recreation.

At the same time Manningham City Council as a local government authority was responsible for the administration and enforcement of the Act, Regulations and its Local Laws in order to protect and support the interests of the Manningham Community as a whole.

This case study describes the process followed and the results achieved, and the outcomes in terms of perceived fairness and public acceptance and support. The effectiveness of the Local Law and Council Orders is measured by the compliance data.

Background

The City of Manningham is located about 12 kms east of central Melbourne and covers an area of 114 square kilometres. Manningham has one of the largest networks of open space in metropolitan Melbourne with more than 19 square kilometres of open space covering about 17% of the municipality. The open space network comprises over 300 parks including extensive parkland along the Yarra River, regional recreation parks, sporting reserves, community recreation reserves and neighbourhood parks.

The partnership approach to animal management planning and practice commenced in Manningham in 1996.

One of the factors that triggered this process was the introduction of the Domestic (Feral and Nuisance) Animals Act 1994. This legislation brought about major changes to the activities of dog owners with an increasing level of restriction under new leash laws and reduced access to public open space for off leash exercise. Other requirements of the new Act included cat registration and curfews. These restrictions, which were a necessary response to community concerns about real problems, were seen as an erosion of traditional rights and created much angst in the pet-owning community.

As a result of the introduction of the Act, municipalities had to draft new Local Laws and Council Orders for animal management and control. Dogs now had to be leashed in all areas of public open space apart from designated off leash areas, a reversal of the status quo. A core focus in developing the Manningham Dog Strategy was deciding which areas of public open space would become designated off-leash areas.

Coinciding with the introduction of the Act was a raft of changes in the Local Government sector by the Victorian Government. These changes included Compulsory Competitive Tendering of services and the Best Value legislation.

These changes were aimed at improving service quality and reducing the costs of service provision to the community. So in order to improve services and costs, Councils had to know who their customers were and their needs. This included the needs of dog and cat owners and the general community.

Council established a Steering Committee to provide a strategic approach to animal management in Manningham. The committee was comprised of dog and cat owners, members of the community and a Council representative, compliance officers, other stakeholders such as the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Department of Justice. Community representatives on the committee were involved as facilitators at community workshops so that people could candidly speak about what they thought of Council services and their needs.

I was fortunate to be invited to be part of the committee from the start. As a local resident and veterinarian in small animal practice here since 1975 (including providing services to Council) I am in a unique position to see both sides of the problem. In my work with the Local Laws department I am working with the AMOs trying to address the animal management and behaviour problems. My clients are the dog owners whose animals may litter our public open spaces or cause nuisance. As a dog owner myself, I have an intimate understanding of the realities of being a responsible owner, plastic bag in hand.

Errol Wilkins was the Manager of the Health and Local Laws Unit, so we worked together on a regular basis. Errol has always had a philosophy of listening to community members and working co-operatively with them, rather than simply enforcing an imposed solution. He brought this philosophy to the committee planning process.

Why Include Animal Owners

This approach recognised that animal management was multi-faceted, not only catering for dog and cat owners but also taking into account the various priorities of environment, community health and safety, and equitable access to public open space.

The style of animal management has changed radically over the past two decades, with much more emphasis on negotiation and education of pet owners. There are also changed concepts of how services should be delivered. Whilst there is still a requirement for enforcement, this is much more as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Input from and co-operation with residents is an important component of this type of process.

Residents are entitled to be part of the democratic process. Apart from reasons of equity, it is logical that all stakeholders should be involved in the process of developing regulations. Without input from all groups the content is rarely correct.

This approach also recognised that genuine participation by giving people an opportunity to have their views heard and having input into policy and legislative development meant that the community would have ownership of the process. This in turn meant better local laws and better outcomes in terms of community acceptance and compliance, improved public safety, reduced nuisance and improved standards of animal welfare.

The Manningham approach was in marked contrast to some neighbouring municipalities that had to revoke draconian imposed animal control laws because they were leading to mass civil disobedience. People who feel alienated, marginalized or disenfranchised are unlikely to comply or be co-operative with new Local Laws that reduce existing amenities.

The Process

The challenge was to develop a new Local Law and Council Order that would be accepted and observed by dog and cat owners, bearing in mind that these new requirements would impose further restrictions and take away some of the rights traditionally enjoyed by pet owners. Pet owners had to recognize that there were real problems such as dog aggression and public safety, environmental damage and pollution, and to accept restrictions.

There was also a need to get council planners to understand the pet owners' point of view. There needed to be more of an appreciation of how important having a pet is to animal owners, of the amount of time they spend in animal related recreation, and recognition of the proven health benefits they gain from pet ownership.

Animal owners can easily be marginalized in the animal control and management debate. Pet ownership has historically been so common in Australia that it has literally been taken for granted. There was no need for a group to advocate the rights of pets and their owners when these were not under threat. However, the reduction in the rights of pet owners has not been accompanied by any mechanism to safeguard the remaining rights and needs of animals and their owners. In many respects they have become the invisible stakeholders in public planning, budget allocation and decision making processes.

They demand recognition of animal ownership as a right and dog based activities as legitimate uses of public open space. They have the reasonable expectation that their municipalities might provide funding for the provision of facilities to enable them to enhance and enjoy their relationships with their pets through animal based recreation, exercise and education.

The process undertaken in Manningham required a shared commitment by Council and community members of the committee and was at times fractious and tenuous. The trade-off for increased restriction and new leash laws was a requirement that regulators provide sufficient off leash exercise areas. The major conflict during committee negotiations centered around the delineation of these off leash exercise areas. The end result is a very comprehensive, fair and equitable Domestic Animal Strategy, with Local Laws and a Council Order based on facts that are well accepted by the local community. There are approximately 100 off lead reserves ranging in size from pocket parks to reserves of several hectares.

There is recognition that most animal owners act responsibly and comply with the law, and a change in the way services are delivered with an emphasis on education and negotiation.

Readily available Annual Compliance Statistics

Compliance Data	Neighbouring Council A	Neighbouring Council B	Manningham
Non Serious Dog Attack	161	65	39
Serious Dog Attack	211	26	24
Number of Impounded Dogs	1061	363	438
Dog Euthanasia Rates	127	89	10
Number of Impounded Cats	440	826	82
Cat Euthanasia Rates	232	434	34

In addition to the above compliance data Manningham received the following number of complaints in 2012.

Complaint Type	Total
Barking Dogs	164
Dog Litter	14
Dogs Not Under Effective Control	8
Animal Welfare	7
Dog in Prohibited Area	1
Other	6
Dog/Cat Confinement	479

The new policy framework adopted for animal management included:

- communication and public information
- public education
- consultation with parties affected by legislation
- technical assistance and
- enforcement

One of the most significant and enduring aspects of the Manningham Strategy was the whole of municipality perspective in the allocation of an equitable amount of public open space for dog off leash exercise.

Friends of Manningham Dogs and Cats (FOMDAC)

At the end of this process the general committee was disbanded, but the dog and cat owners continued to meet as an organized group. This group of residents evolved into Friends of Manningham Dogs and Cats (FOMDAC) with the mission

To promote responsible pet ownership; to represent and advocate the legitimate needs of dog and cat owners; and to provide a resource for council and other representatives of the Manningham community on issues involving dog and cat ownership.

Given that the relationships were already established with Council officers and FOMDAC'S vision "to promote responsible pets ownership" is closely aligned with Council's legislative responsibility of promoting animal welfare and the responsible ownership of dogs and cats this mutual commitment provided for the continuation of the dialogue with dog and cat owners in Manningham.

Like any relationship it required work, being open and having respect for each other's view. This resulted in a more mature relationship with each other that has resulted in significant benefits to the community including:

- Providing a workable framework of off lead parks across the municipality. This has been an outstanding success with high compliance rates and self-policing by dog owners.

- The retention of Council's Pound and Shelter providing a convenient, effective service.
- Provision of dog litter bins – the majority of owners now clean up after their dog.
- Establishment of the Dog Activity Centre as described below.
- Development of the workable Local Laws including dog litter, nuisance barking, numbers of animals permissible per property etc.
- FOMDAC has assisted in the implementation of the Strategy with the formation of dog walker groups in the major reserves and participation in Community festivals to spread the responsible pet owner message.

Dog Activity Centre

One of the key actions under the Dog Strategy was the establishment of a Dog Activity Centre. This is a local park dedicated to dog related recreation. It took almost 15 years to finally achieve the vision, but has been a huge success.

The facility's secure fences provide a safe haven for friendly dogs and their owners to meet and socialise and train. There is a separate smaller fenced area for recall training, and there are dog agility facilities and clubrooms for meetings, lectures and other functions. Other organised activities include:

- Formal training to recall and walking on a loose lead.
- Introducing a new baby to the family pet.
- Strategies to support frail and elderly residents to continue to keep their pets at home.
- Social gatherings for elderly residents with volunteers exercising and grooming the dogs
- Targeting ethnic communities with the aim of reducing fearful attitudes to dogs, and about making better choices about the breeds of dogs to keep as pets and responsible animal management.

The mature partnership between pet owners and Council has also extended to industry groups such as:

- The local animal shelters in relation to re-housing abandoned animals that are of suitable temperament.
- Greyhound slipping track in conjunction with Greyhound Racing Victoria providing an off leash area for the exercise of greyhounds.
- Partnerships with local veterinarians providing discount microchipping of dogs and mutually respectful and trusting relationship between pet owners and senior Council staff has proven to be an invaluable bridge at times when there has been media frenzy and public outrage over dog attacks, or concern among pet owners about the potential

of planning proposals to limit their rights or access to public open space.

Managing Conflict

FOMDAC has a track record of being responsible and considered in its advocacy and Council's Local Laws staff have been open, compassionate and transparent in enforcing the law. This relationship has provided the opportunity for all stakeholders to sit down together in an atmosphere of trust and respect that has defused some emotional situations.

This relationship has provided the vehicle for Local Laws staff to explain the background to incidents and prosecutions, and to gauge the sentiment of dog owners. The FOMDAC network has been a valuable means of disseminating information from Council to pet owners. FOMDAC has been able to placate the more radical elements of the pet owning community over minor issues, while still being firm in advocating for the genuine needs of pet owners.

Pet owners have had an avenue to have their concerns heard in general, and to alert Council when precedent setting planning issues arose. For example, when a cat curfew/exclusion buffer zone was proposed around an environmentally sensitive area, FOMDAC was able to work with Council to initiate a research program which demonstrated that the problem was due to feral foxes, not wandering domestic cats. Another contentious issue was whether dogs could be allowed to continue to swim in the lake in the main park in the municipality. The end result of this and other similar interactions has been the achievement of equitable, evidence-based outcomes.

Conclusion

The Domestic Animals Act 1994 precipitated major changes in animal management, including in relation to the significant issue of individual Council cultures. The Manningham experience has been that the inclusion of pet owners in the policy development process has resulted in fair and reasonable Local Laws and Council Orders that address the issues and have public support.

Manningham now recognizes animal owners as a legitimate stakeholder group and FOMDAC is accepted as speaking on their behalf, not only on animal control and management, but also on a range of issues that affect animal owners such as public open space, health, and sport and recreation.

The Manningham story demonstrates that as well as representing and advocating the legitimate needs of dog and cat owners, animal owner groups can also be a valuable resource for councils in the implementation of local laws and the education of other pet owners in responsible pet ownership.

The partnership between Manningham Council and FOMDAC has stood the test of time. It is a mature

relationship based on mutual trust and respect that provides a quick and efficient vehicle for the transmission of information back and forth between animal owners and Council to address new issues as they arise.

I would like to compliment Manningham Council for their foresight in being prepared to genuinely include residents in addressing the real issues, and for their patience and understanding along the way. I want to particularly thank Errol Wilkins, Head of Health and Local Laws, for his professionalism, friendship and enlightened support of animal owners in Manningham. The animals and the residents of Manningham have been the ultimate beneficiaries in this story.

About the author

Dr Ted Donelan is a veterinarian based in Melbourne, where he has been running his own private practices for more than 30 years. He is a Fellow of the Australian Veterinary Association, a Senior Academic Associate of the University of Melbourne and Life Member of RSPCA Victoria. Ted has a long history of involvement in animal welfare and animal management policy planning and implementation at local, state and national levels. For almost 20 years he provided veterinary services to his local municipality. Amongst other community activities, Ted was a founding member of Friends of Manningham Dogs and Cats (FOMDAC) and is currently Vice President. Set up in the mid 1990s, this pet owners' advocacy group collaboratively with Manningham Council in the development of its Dog Strategy. Ted also has a longstanding interest in indigenous affairs. For the past ten years he has provided veterinary services to remote communities in Arnhem Land. Following these interests, it was a natural progression to involvement in the developing organisation that became Animal Management in Rural and Remote Indigenous Communities (AMRRIC), where Ted is currently President.

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