

# **New Direction in Municipal Dog Control**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The justification for and scope of a current research project involving new municipal dog control measures in Townsville and Brisbane are outlined. Five main research objectives are identified. Preliminary results of Townsville based work on one of these objectives involving public education about responsible dog ownership are presented and discussed. A practical public education measure described in this paper showed consistently positive results in assisting Council animal control officers to reduce community tension caused by nuisance dogs.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Considerable effort has been invested over recent decades in the study of personal benefits associated with the keeping of dogs as family pets. Equal attention has been given to the community disadvantages that dog ownership can entail. The advantages and the disadvantages are now well understood. The sum effect of these advantages and disadvantages has been referred to as a "calamitous pet paradox" (Allen and Westbrook 1979).

Considering the amount of work done in these two areas, it is remarkable how little research has been done to evolve and promote the kind of urban animal management methods necessary to resolve this paradox. It seems clear that the reactive measures and ad hoc dog control initiatives of the past have been none too successful. But, generally speaking, they haven't as yet been replaced by anything much better.

If the keeping of dogs as family pets in future is to be more socially comfortable, a general improvement in urban animal management methods appears necessary.

## **Townsville research**

The first logical step on the way to better dog control is to analyse the mechanics and effectiveness of current management methods. The second step is to then develop new procedures specifically designed to remedy the management faults thus identified.

In Townsville City, such an analysis of the mechanics and effectiveness of current dog population management methods was carried out in 1986 (Murray 1991). The results of that Townsville study are summarised as follows:

- There was a major dog problem in the City. Most residents (76% of respondents) considered dogs to be a neighbourhood nuisance. Most complaints (85%) to the Health Department of the Council were about dog problems.
- Socially intrusive kinds of dog behaviour, including roaming, fouling, aggression and excessive barking, were the most serious dog problems identified by survey respondents.
- Few respondents in the survey who had been annoyed by nuisance dogs had actually registered complaints with the Council.
- The Council aldermen did not have a good understanding of the dog population/nuisance/control subject.
- Dog control by-law compliance was poor. Approximately one in seven dogs owned by survey respondents were not currently registered. Approximately one in three of dog owning respondents did not comply with the Council's dog restraint ordinances.
- Many respondents who owned roaming dogs did not seem to appreciate that their own dog's intrusive behaviour might be a nuisance to their neighbours.

It should be pointed out that these findings were not considered uncomplimentary to the Council aldermen or to the Council officers involved with dog control in Townsville at that time. On the contrary, the fact that this research project was undertaken in the first place was recognised as being indicative of a standard of municipal management that was both progressive and responsible. The dog control situation at that time was probably better than in any comparable city.

A review of the dog problems in Townsville at that time, however, indicated that most of the City's dog problems could be overcome if all dog owners could be encouraged to comply with existing Council dog registration, dog noise suppression and dog restraint by-laws. It was clear that a lack of community feedback to City Hall (Figure 1) about dog problems was compromising Council awareness of and sensitivity to these problems. Without better consensus (Figure 2) at the top echelon of city administration, municipal dog control could be expected to continue to be relatively lacking in purpose and direction.

It was concluded by the Townsville City Council that a subsequent research project should be undertaken. This research was to investigate remedial approaches to the identified problems and to concentrate on the following human management (rather than dog management) factors:

- improving community feedback to the Council aldermen and officers about community dog problems
- securing a positive change of public attitude towards compliance with dog management by-laws.

From the outset it was understood that new dog control methods investigated by this research project should be strictly practical. Ideally, the implementation of these methods (if proven effective) should be possible within the framework (personnel and fiscal) of the existing Council dog control structure.

With this people management focus and with these constraints relating to practicality in mind, a research project was undertaken in 1992 in Townsville with the following objectives:

- *Dogscan*: Develop a technique for objectively and reliably assessing the severity of dog problems in selected localities.
- *Softsell*: Evaluate the effectiveness of a new public education approach to the promotion of responsible dog ownership.
- *Feedback*: Evaluate a method of actively soliciting public feedback to City Hall from selected localities areas about neighbourhood dog problems and neighbourhood problem dogs.
- *Hotspot*: Record the effectiveness of a direct, proactive response in particular problem areas to data generated by the method above (Feedback), involving owner counselling and by-law enforcement by animal control officers (ACOs).
- *ACO test*: Investigate a method of recording ACO opinion and experience of animal control measures used by the Council.

The essential thrust of this research project was to investigate new methods of dog control which emphasised a positive rather than negative role for animal control personnel.

- Figure 1. The number of specific dog nuisance incidents noted by survey respondents in Townsville over the preceding 12-month period compared with the number reported to the Council by them in that same time (Murray 1991)
- Figure 2. An example of how the opinion of individual aldermen varied on a basic animal control issue: Estimates made by seven aldermen of the proportion of Townsville residents experiencing dog nuisance problems in the last 12-month period are shown with reference to the statistic derived from the data gathered by a concurrent household survey (Murray 1991)

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Survey areas**

Three suburban areas in Townsville (approximately 500 residences each) were chosen for study. Two of these areas were used as test (intervention) areas while a third was used as control. The suburban areas chosen all had the following characteristics:

- high dog density per household
- average complaint rate to City Council
- similar socioeconomic profile.

Dog density was determined from dog registration data held by Townsville City Council. Dog problems were evaluated from complaint records and by consultation with dog wardens. The socioeconomic profiles of the areas involved were determined from the City Council's Social Atlas of Townsville.

### **Research intervention**

In each of the three study areas, a background of normal Council activity for dog control applied ie Council ACOs responded to routine complaints in the usual manner. In each area, observation of dog behaviour was carried out as follows:

Dog behaviour was assessed by street survey. An observer, riding a push bike, moved along the streets in each survey area at a speed of approximately 15 km per hour. While riding, comments of the observer were recorded on a voice activated pocket tape recorder using a lapel microphone. All dogs seen were noted. Data was recorded for each, including colour, breed, sex, age, address, whether at large, activity, response to the presence of the observer (shows interest, aggressive, barks, approaches on road, attacks).

These street surveys were carried out three times a day (6-9am, 1-3pm and 3- 6pm) on 5 days each week for 3 weeks both at the beginning and at the end of the project (separation interval of 7 weeks).

Other research intervention was as follows:

In Test Area 1 (approximately 500 residences), ACOs introduced themselves to available householders and left public education brochures at every residence whether the residence had dogs or not. These brochures (Appendix 1) presented credible and simple messages in an attractive format. They were designed to indicate to dog owners:

- that it is a dog owner's duty to be responsible and considerate of their neighbours;
- that the Council's ACOs were there to assist in resolving dog problems;
- that the Council's by-laws were in place specifically to prevent community dog nuisance;
- that, if the owners did not comply with the by-laws, the Council ACOs would issue infringement notices to errant owners and impound dogs at large.

In Test Area 2 (approximately 500 residences), ACOs introduced themselves to available householders and left every residence with the new brochure as in Test Area 1. ACOs also contacted the owners of each dog identified by somebody as being a nuisance in questionnaire 2. The problems caused by each nuisance dog thus identified were explained to the owners of the nuisance dogs by the ACOs, possible solutions were recommended, by-laws explained and enforcement measures used where necessary to ensure by-law compliance.

## Questionnaires

Questionnaires were used to determine the opinion of householders about dogs, the problems caused by dogs and Council dog control methods. Four questionnaires were used. The questionnaires were delivered to each residence and persons over 18 years were asked to complete and return the questionnaire direct to the surveyor or to the Anton Breinl Centre by post free mail. If nobody was home at the time of canvassing, two questionnaires were left (with a covering letter of explanation) in the letter box with the same instructions for return.

Questionnaire 1 (Q1) was used in Test Area 1 after the first street dog survey had been completed, but before any ACO intervention (Softsell) had been undertaken. This questionnaire was structured to evaluate general public attitude to dogs, dog problems and Council dog control methods.

Questionnaire 2 (Q2) was used in Test Area 2, similarly to Q1. This questionnaire differed from Q1, however, in that it included an added section in which respondents were asked to identify specific problem dogs so that pro-active (Hotspot) remedial action could be taken by Council ACOs.

Questionnaire 3 was distributed at the end of the 7-8 week intervention period in Test Area 1 to assess any changes registered by respondents as a result of the Softsell intervention. This questionnaire was also used at the end of the intervention period in the control area.

Questionnaire 4 (Q4) was used in Test Area 2, similarly to Q3. This questionnaire differed from Q3, however, in that it sought to also find out if the nuisance caused by specific dogs (identified in Q2) had abated.

## RESULTS

For the purposes of a preview of this current research undertaking, it is only possible to present a limited package of results. However, preliminary results of the Softsell component of the research in Townsville are detailed and discussed below to demonstrate the productivity of the work thus far.

### Softsell

In the Softsell test area, as explained above, the only action taken by the ACOs was meeting householders and giving them the brochure promoting responsible dog ownership. Questionnaires were used to gather primary and comparative data.

Comparative data was obtained by asking survey respondents a number of questions that were the same in the pre-treatment and the post-treatment questionnaires. Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6 show positive shifts in respondent perception of different aspects relating to dog control in their locality. Figure 7 shows a favourable shift in owner attitude about dog restraint, while Figures 8 and 9 show another favourable shift in respondent opinion about dog control in the Softsell treatment area.

- Figure 3. A comparison of respondent perception of neighbourhood dog nuisance before and after Softsell (Are dogs a neighbourhood nuisance?)
- Figure 4. A comparison of respondent perception of the level of Council concern about dog control matters in their locality before and after Softsell
- Figure 5. A comparison of respondent perception of the competence of Council ACOs before and after Softsell (\* Response category "undecided" not shown)
- Figure 6. A comparison of respondent perception before and after Softsell of whether or not local dog owners take Council dog control by-laws seriously
- Figure 7. A comparison of owner attitude to allowing their dogs to roam before and after Softsell (Does your dog roam?)
- Figure 8. Respondent opinion about the effectiveness of Council animal control methods after Softsell (\*Response category "no change" not shown.)

- Figure 9. Respondent opinion about the level of neighbourhood dog nuisance after Softsell . (\*Response category "no change' not shown)

## DISCUSSION

Dogs are popular pet animals. Because of this, improved public access to dog ownership is a worthy goal. In the long run this can only be achieved in an ambience of better community tolerance of pet dogs. It is only through better methods of urban animal management that this can be achieved.

There is nothing new about municipal dog problems. The specific problems caused by nuisance dogs in urban environments have been well understood for 30 years or more. It is no secret that the primary cause of these problems is the actively or passively irresponsible dog owners who fail to effectively prevent their pets from being a public nuisance.

Many authors, from as far back as 1959 (Parrish et al 1959), have suggested that these problems can be abated by the introduction and enforcement of specific problem-preventing municipal by-laws.

Dog control by-laws have evolved as a sort of code of responsible dog custodianship over past decades in much the same form wherever people keep dogs in towns and cities. Dog control by-laws set reasonable standards of pet owner responsibility. They are designed to protect both animal and human welfare without unduly compromising public access to the benefits and privilege of dog ownership. While such by-laws make good sense and are relatively easy to frame, they are much less easy to enforce effectively.

The enforcement of dog control by-laws, is a task well noted in local government for its divisive, stressful, intractable and generally unrewarding characteristics. Long and often bitter experience has universally found dog control to be a headache for local government. There is a considerable difference between how easy it is to say what should be done and how easy it is to actually do it. As Carding pointed out more than 20 years ago (Carding 1969), the success of animal control programs depends on public cooperation. This is a truism.

Traditional dog control methods have focused on dogs rather than people. If it was only a matter of handling the dogs, animal control by-law enforcement probably wouldn't be so difficult. The fact is that municipal dog control relates more to managing people than it does to managing dogs. Softsell, as explained above, is a public education device. It is a remedial animal control measure which concentrates on people management.

Softsell was designed to contact all households in a given locality regardless of whether they own a dog or not. It explained to people in a friendly way what the community at large, as represented by the Council, expects of responsible dog owners. It provided a basis for neighbourhood self regulation and allowed ACOs the luxury of working for part of their time as counsellors rather than regulators.

Softsell was, in this research project, tested as means of reducing community tension caused by nuisance dogs. While accepting that two swallows don't make a summer, the results were consistently positive. These results indicate that further work along these lines is justified.

Provided ACOs are capable, presentable and genuinely interested in their work (as were the Townsville City Council personnel involved in this project), the Softsell concept appears to offer local government good animal control gain for very little pain.

Softsell depends on conscientious door to door canvassing of households by competent ACOs. It involves ACOs talking to people, showing interest and being constructive and positive about pet ownership.

It has the flexibility of being used in all or part of any town or city environment. It provides a method of taking ACOs away from their traditional, reactive and none too pleasant dog and people crisis management role.

No two cities are ever going to present the exact same animal control environment. For example, Townsville City Council prides itself on having better than average standards of animal control and this might have had some bearing on the results obtained here.

While similar research needs to be done in other cities to further substantiate the findings presented here, Softsell at this stage appears to offer an effective and inexpensive animal control measure which is well received by the public, is easy on councils and is easy on council ACOs.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The author wishes to draw attention to the financial support and encouragement given this project by the Townsville City Council, The Anton Breinl Centre of James Cook University and The Petcare Information and Advisory Service. Other projects will hopefully be undertaken in other municipalities to support and extend this stream of research.

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Even 15 years ago when I was practising as a veterinarian in the field of companion animal medicine and surgery, it seemed clear that suboptimal urban animal management was bad for people and bad for pets. While council problems associated with pet animals seemed to be almost universal both in Australia and overseas, there also seemed to be a depressing sort of learned helplessness about how to remedy these problems. Lots of people could point out what was going wrong. But nobody seemed to know what to do about it. At the time my interest was initially sparked in this subject, Townsville City Council had a supportive Chief Health Surveyor (P. Foxwell). The Council also had an active and progressive city council led initially and subsequently by mayors M. Reynolds and T. Mooney respectively. Working on the subject of dog control in Townsville, I completed an MSc degree by thesis in 1991 at James Cook University with the financial support of Townsville City Council. The paper presented here is about work that followed from my original research. I am delighted to say that other institutions, notably the Brisbane City Council and the Petcare Information and Advisory Service are now involved with this study and are supporting the Townsville initiative. The learned helplessness I referred to above is gradually being replaced by a general enthusiasm about finding better ways to integrate pets in society.

