

Best practice in Municipal Pet Management - information access is the key to competitive efficiency in both governance and service delivery

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ABSTRACT

There is a hierarchy of tasks in Municipal Pet Management (MPM) which includes general complaint handling, dog at large patrols, pound operation, pet registration surveys, serious complaint investigation, public relations/education, staff administration and policy formulation. It stands to reason that, if the job is to be done competently, the people involved *at all levels* in every council should have the right competencies, the right skills, the right resources and, most importantly, the right information. In practice this seldom occurs and therein lies a major problem for good governance and efficient delivery in this important aspect of local government administration. While competencies can be selected for, skills can be taught and resources can be provided, in the absence of good and up to date information the critical decisions will never be as good as they should be. Information access is the key to best practice in MPM.

INTRODUCTION

The results you get in MPM depend on the capability and integrity of a whole horizontally and vertically integrated system of social, animal and corporate management. People have to be managed, their pets have to be managed and the pet management system itself has to be managed. The days of thinking that pet management even vaguely resembles what used to be called 'dog catching' have been, for a long time now, relegated to the history books.

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The world of policy and practice in community management by local authorities throughout Australia is currently dominated by the imperatives of compulsory competitive tendering and the National Competition Policy. Seeking best practice in both governance and delivery is at the heart of these initiatives. It applies to the processes of MPM just as much as it does to every other kind of community service local government delivers.

Regardless of what national and state directives such as these may dictate, seeking best practice in any aspect of community management is an undertaking which has fundamental merit in its own right. But what exactly is 'best practice'?

- What do you need to know in order to tell if you have it or not?
- What do you need to know if you haven't, but would like to?

There are 4 things:

- The need to *know* what it is really all about - **the job**
- The need to *understand* what the community wants - **governance**
- The need to *measure* what is being achieved - **the delivery performance**
- The need to *compare* performance with 'the rest' - **benchmarking**

Without this information, performance and contestability of performance is all conjecture. Councils claiming best practice standards may in fact have anything but best practice standards. In the meantime other councils which feel a little bit out of the big league may actually be performing quite well - possibly even better. At present no one can tell. However change in MPM is happening in this area and things are progressing apace. The nature of these changes is in many ways fundamental and better information access is the key to it all.

INFORMATION 1: THE JOB

MPM personnel in local government may be involved in any or all of the following roles:

1. Complaint handling - taking the calls and recording the details.
2. 'Dog at large' patrols - locating, identifying, impounding or issuing infringement notices to errant owners.
3. Pound operation - maintenance and management.
4. Pet registration surveys - canvassing to check registration compliance.
5. Complaint investigation - confirming details of complaints and when possible initiating remedial action.
6. Public relations/Public education - press management, school visits, dog obedience training, pet club activities, park maintenance and recreational programs.
7. Pet management administration - handling cash, keeping data bases up to date, keeping track of staff and staff performance.
8. Pet management policy - council committee representation, community consultation process, executive process.

The hierarchy of task description here is laid out to lead through from pet management 'beginner' status (1), in a step by step fashion, to a person having all of the 'job skills' necessary to be a pet management supervisor (7). For someone to reach stage 7 they would have to have been proficient in *all* the functions (1-6) *and also* have shown aptitude in people management.

To be placed at stage 8 (council policy level) it would be helpful to know all about *all of it!*

Team effort at city hall is essential and, for this reason, vertical integration is important, horizontal integration is important and multi-skilling is important. Whatever their status, if they are working for the council and they are involved in the processes of pet management, then they are pet management personnel. Whatever their status these people have to be, and have to feel like they are, on the same team. The magic term is 'shared direction'. It is too hard out there in this job for any council to be careless of the need for their MPM team to have shared direction. Without shared direction the team simply can't go forward - and there are more people on the team than might be realised.

As an example: If the cashier at the council tells everyone who grizzles about paying their dog registration fees that it is a rip off and they don't agree with it either, then the system that should be pulling together, is in fact very efficiently shooting itself in the foot every day. If council cashiers are interacting with the public at dog registration time, they are part of the team. The others are depending on them. They have to be included in the 'shared direction'.

It is strange that many councils still don't rate Pet Management as a significant kind of municipal service

While municipal services like traffic management, garbage disposal, park maintenance, public libraries and cultural/recreational facilities routinely involve all manner of staff (including professionals, office staff, consultants, specialist, contractors) and big budgets - all pulling together - pet management unfortunately often seems to be the 'odd man out'. Pet management for some strange reason always seems to have to struggle along with people at all levels of administration, including policy makers right at the top of the system who:

- have been recruited without any reference to their personal capabilities, qualification or experience;
- have to 'learn as they go along';
- get virtually no recognition, resources, appreciation or support from anybody.

People in pet management have to be very good at what they do if they are to have any chance of doing it well. They have to be informed and they have to be trained. *They can't be either without having access to the right information.*

Until relatively recently, reference texts dedicated specifically to the role of local government in MPM in Australia were virtually non-existent. The information councils needed was very hard to find. While texts from North America such as 'New perspectives of our lives with companion animals'¹ and 'The handbook of animal welfare, biomedical, psychological and ecological aspects of pet problems and control'² were quality texts in their time, they didn't offer a lot for local government in Oz.

Things started to change in Australia in 1983, with the first official Pet Management conference being held in Brisbane on a theme that was then called 'Urban Animal Integration'³. Almost 10 years were to pass before MPM momentum was re-established in 1992 with the release of the author's previous book 'Dogs in the Urban Environment - A Handbook of Municipal Management'⁴. In the same year, 1992, steps were taken to ensure this momentum was continued with the commencement of the current on-going series of annual National Urban Animal Management conferences convened under the auspices of the Australian Veterinary Association⁵.

The 5 most recent National Urban Animal Management conferences (1992-1996) have seen a total of 86 different papers presented on a whole range of MPM issues. The text of these papers (currently available from the AVA) have been supported by some 1500 cited references and represent a tremendously valuable information resource.

The most recent comprehensive text on this subject, 'Dogs and Cats in the Urban Environment - a handbook of Municipal Pet Management'⁶ was researched and written to be an 'all in one' reference work. This reference work is also recommended to councils as a text for orientation in MPM.

INFORMATION 2: GOVERNANCE

Governance is the essential role of democratically elected bodies. In essence it is the obligation they have to provide the kinds of services their electorate wants - at a price the electorate is able/prepared to pay. Good governance is all about doing the right things at the right time and in the right way for the people who gave the mandate. Of course it is impossible for councils to deliver good governance without first being attuned to community expectations. This is because any idea of striving for best practice (in any kind of service delivery) is nonsense if you don't know what the customer wants in the first place.

Elections are one way to gauge public needs and wants, but it is a risky way for elected councillors to test the water. It is far safer and also more efficient to regularly seek community feedback on sensitive issues - and there is no doubt that pet management qualifies as one of these.

While councils don't have to ask all the questions of all the people all the time to keep their finger on the pulse, a reasonably complete overview of the appropriateness of MPM activity does still need to be maintained. Such an overview can progressively be built up and then maintained by following an organised program of asking residential owner/occupiers some of the main questions from time to time. For example:

- Do you support the following pet management laws: leash laws, fence laws, registration laws?
- Do you believe these laws are being adequately enforced in your neighbourhood?
- Do you have neighbourhood problems caused by nuisance pet animals?
- Do you support the idea of 'user pays' pet management?
- Do you agree that fines for by-law breaches should be high enough to cover the cost of enforcement activity?

It would not be difficult to arrange a standard set of 10 detailed questions that could be used in conjunction with routine council community surveys to generate vital information on public perceptions about council MPM policy and practice. It wouldn't be difficult to arrange for this feedback to reflect both overall and sectional community opinions.

INFORMATION 3: DELIVERY PERFORMANCE

Let us never ignore the information that is available to all local authorities right in their own 'back yard'. This is all the data, stats and trends that each council's own MPM database can provide - if their database management system is capable.

Performance indicators are an 'internal' management tool. They can be arranged to show anything councils needs to know about how their MPM system are performing. All competent businesses use them these days.

Key performance indicators are a short list (possibly 10-15) of 'main' performance indicators that can be taken from a more general and larger list. Key indicators are a 'see at a glance', 'how you are going', kind of thing.

The following are examples of pet management performance indicators:

- Hierachy (based on frequency) of different kinds of complaints received - which problems are proving most persistent?
- Distribution (district by district) of complaints and types of complaints received - which areas need the most attention?
- Problem resolution rates - how effectively are complaints/problems being solved?
- Mean complaint response/resolution intervals - how efficiently are complaints/problems being solved?
- Degree of full registration - what proportion of the whole dog population is actually registered?
- Population dynamics - frequencies of breed/types registered, male vs female, desexed vs entire, average age etc.
- Euthanasia rates - proportion of the population being discarded and put down.
- Breed incidence and degree of breed over-representation in dog attacks, barking complaints or unwanted pet discards (unclaimed pound dogs) and general complaints.
- Activity/performance comparisons between different PMOs - how many complaints handled, how many infringement notices issued, what proportion of complaints resolved and settled?

Performance indicators allow managers to do a whole range of essential system tasks more efficiently. These might include:

- prioritising resource allocation - directing effort focus;
- watching budget projections - component income and expenditures;
- comparing current with previous performance - doing better;
- supporting staff - advancing better performers; and
- moving with change - being flexible and keeping ahead with change.

But everyone in *this* swamp is 100% up to their arse in alligators 100% of the time *already*. We don't have time for any of this performance indicator stuff.

With a decent computer setup (probably standing alone but linked for key demographics to the council's main computer) all this is possible without having anybody specifically tasked to generate the indicators.

No longer should any body have to slog away with pencil, paper and calculator to work out what's happening out there. The machines can do it - and do it better.

By making the transition from 'hard copy' recording systems to computerisation all 'day to day' activities can be logged via keyboard instead of by 'pen and note pad'. All those activities, by this method, are 'in the system' - they are all flagged and tagged - they are all just ready and waiting to be processed and reported on. They have become the database.

By using dedicated pet management software, it will be easily possible to perform all sorts of important management functions:

- stats can be automatically generated from a standard database report menu;
- performance indicators can be plotted in the form of pie or bar or line charts for ease of interpretation;
- data trends can be presented similarly in spreadsheet format with projections into the future;
- reports can be generated right off a terminal keyboard - right there in the office - anytime; and
- Key Performance Indicators can be automatically posted via e-mail or via the internet to 'benchmarking partners' in other local authorities.

Such software does not currently exist in general use. But the computing processes necessary for the tasks are unremarkable by today's standards. There is nothing standing in the way of dedicated MPM software development right now, especially if local authorities pull together to ensure they get what they want.

There is an opportunity here for a body like the LGAQ (or better still, the ALGA) to rise about the nonsense of politics and commercial competition to coordinate the cooperative effort.

It would be *completely foolish*, with all the potential that lies herein, to get into another tangle with this technology in the same manner as happened with microchips. What's needed here is more cooperation and less competition. What is needed is a mindset that is more global than parochial.

Following this theme, it would make a lot of sense for a standard (nationally coordinated) package of performance indicators similar to those listed above, to be developed in a national benchmarking framework so councils all over Australia could measure performance by comparing the same indicators.

This technology, which offers so much, will be no help at all if different councils end up benchmarking different things.

INFORMATION 4: BENCHMARKING

Benchmarking is a process of establishing points of reference. That's all there is to it. The use of benchmarks was originally (and still is) a technique used in surveying. The idea being that once a start point has been marked and tagged all other points can then be measured and located relative to it. The main point is that anybody can come along at any subsequent time and use the same reference. They can say: right here, now, at this point, I am 'x' metres above, 'y' metres away from and due East of benchmark 'A'. Surveyors have probably used benchmarks since the time of ancient Egypt and before. They are a wonderful concept - simple and essential. But there's a catch - benchmarks only work if the people using them are measuring the same things in the same way.

In MPM, if a number of councils were to pool their Key Performance Indicators, provided they were all using the same ones that have been derived in the same way, the mean result for each of these components could then become MPM Benchmarks. As benchmarks they would then become the reference points for all the contributors. MPM benchmarks can provide a means (the only objective means) for inter-council performance comparison. They allow managers interested in best practice to assess the contestability of their own performance within their global environment.

It will be a very great pity if different councils all over the country start running off in different directions with different MPM software and different benchmarking frameworks for pet management. The MPM benchmarking concept outlined here, which offers so much, will be no help at all - to anybody - if different councils run different systems and benchmark different things.

Benchmarks are the signposts pointing the way to best practice in MPM
but ...

1. you can't have MPM benchmarks without first having MPM performance indicators, and
2. for MPM performance indicators to be of any value in MPM benchmarking they have to be measuring the same things and they have to be derived (generated) in the same way.

In the not too distant future sharing 'best practice' benchmarks between local authority partners (probably via local government authority networks) may well be standard practice. It is quite possible that this capability will shortly become so routine as to be positively 'hum drum'. With standard computer capability there is more than a fair chance that whole processes of data handling like this will be done by a single mouse click.

For many people, me included, the Internet is still a source of wonder. It is an amazing medium for the access of information about any and everything. It seems probable that, with time, Web Sites dedicated to MPM issues (eg list below) will evolve and that these sites will provide pathways to improving practices in MPM.

OTHER MPM INFORMATION OFF THE NET

Remember, there are no external information quality controls on the Internet. Anyone can put anything on the 'Net' and, while it might be the good oil, it might also be complete twaddle - unreliable, misleading and dangerous. Who the author is, what their real qualifications are, how factual their information is, whether or not they or their product is endorsed by anybody of any consequence, is all a matter of conjecture. If you know and respect the integrity of the source, OK. If not, it is best to be sceptical.

Some internet addresses

Australian Local Government - <http://www.nla.gov.au/oz/gov/local.html>

Petcare Information and Advisory Service - <http://www.petnet.com.au>

Australian Veterinary Association - <http://www.ava.com.au>

SA Dog and Cat Management Board - <http://www.lga.sa.gov.au>

KEEPING THE WHEEL MOVING FORWARD

The aim is to ensure that the wheel continues to turn on a journey towards the best possible environment of MPM service:

1. The first step in creating this environment is the development of a shared direction by each council's MPM team. The foundation of shared direction is defined by knowing the subject and also knowing what services the customer wants. Clear strategic direction (vision, mission, customer focus etc) is a foundation of organisational effectiveness in this as in any business.
2. The second step is the development of leadership with integration in MPM. It may sound complicated but it is not at all. Provided there is good leadership, where communication is free flowing (both top down and bottom up), things in MPM start really 'fizzing' along. It is the same in any business.
3. Once a shared direction has been documented and agreed to by all parties and good leadership has been established, MPM still needs to commence the process of progressive change towards best practice. The third step therefore, is to begin the fundamentally important task of performance indicating and benchmarking.
4. The final step is to strive for continuous improvement. This is the culture that needs to be nurtured to ensure progressive improvement in the way in which councils go about things in MPM. Nobody can afford to stand by and believe that their current MPM practices/processes are the best they can manage.

Progress towards best practice might be related to superior methods of recruitment, traineeship, resourcing, governance, service delivery, system processes, vertical integration, horizontal integration, system leadership, information access or some particular combination of these.

If key indicators are used to generate benchmarks, and if these benchmarks are shared by cooperating partners (all other interested local authorities), better performance will automatically be flagged. Whenever a council produces consistently better performance indicators than their partners interest will automatically focus. While the reason for the better performance may not be immediately obvious, the fact that something good is happening at that place will be. Once it has been determined what the recipe for the improvements is, it can then be shared.

The aim is to progressively try to eliminate the negatives and at the same time accentuate the positives in MPM. This will ensure that the wheel of progress moves steadily forwards. Some of the steps forward may be small. Whatever the process, if it takes us forwards it needs to be indicated and flagged. It needs to be mapped and recorded. It needs to be used like a driver to roll the wheel forward and at the same time like a chock in behind the wheel to stop it rolling back.

Information access is the key to it all.

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Footnotes

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- ⁴ Dogs in the Urban Environment - A Handbook of Municipal Management ISBN 0 646 071572 (1992), written by Murray and Penridge published by Chiron Media at URL <http://www.peg.apc.org/~chiron>, Email chiron@acslink.net.au and PO Box 6069, Mooloolah Q4553
- ⁵ The Australian Veterinary Association Ltd, PO Box 371, Artarmon NSW 2064
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Management, councils can offer their ratepayers (customers/clients):

- Greater community amenity - better public safety, improved public health and cleaner public environs.
- Enhanced community harmony - less community stress and people getting on with each other better.
- Better animal welfare - healthier, happier and better cared for companion animals.
- Improved pet access - more people benefiting from keeping and enjoying companionship of pet animals.

He has worked ever since to assist wherever possible in the improvement in both the policy and the practice of Municipal Pet Management at all levels of government. To this end, with the assistance of co-author Helen Penridge, he has recently published the most complete text currently available on this subject, 'Dogs and Cats in the Urban Environment - a handbook of municipal pet management' which has been referred to in this paper.

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