

# Application of the triangle

## Gill Little and Anna Hassett

Early steps in establishing the process of consultation, education and regulation as equal partners in an Urban Animal Management (UAM) strategy.

### BACKGROUND

I'd like to start by drawing you a mental picture of the town of Palmerston. Firstly the basics. Situated about 20 km south of Darwin with a population of 20,000 people, our 17% population growth rate is one of the highest in the country. We are bordered by the urban Darwin City and the rural Litchfield Shire Councils.

A fledgling community, Palmerston was designed as a satellite city of Darwin. Housing development commenced in the early 1980's and initially mostly consisted of government 'commission' housing. Land for new development was in short supply in Darwin so new home builders were forced to look to Palmerston initially. However it was at first tagged 'Palmerstum', with Darwinites having difficulty adjusting to this new place 'down the track'.

With the establishment of a new army camp and the relocation of several thousand soldiers to Robertson Barracks on the outskirts of Palmerston, a whole new boom in housing occurred and brought in a greater socio-economic mix. Developers such as Delfin stepped into the arena and smaller urban blocks were to become the norm, with many courtyard style developments.

A number of characteristics of Palmerston create particular challenges in animal management. Strict cyclone coding of developments means that housing and fencing is much more expensive in the north of the Territory limiting much of the fencing to chain mesh or pool style. The majority of the original developments have only block perimeter fencing although many of the newer subdivisions now have rear fences only. These styles of fencing presenting their own particular set of dog related behaviour problems.

The average population age is young at 26 years of age. Many of these are young couples acquiring their first dog, presenting another specific type of problem, that of lack of understanding of dog behaviour and the requirements and responsibilities of dog ownership.

There has been long been a Territory propensity to own dogs as indicated by our high registration rate of 1 in 5. Until recently the dogs of choice have mostly fitted into the macho stereotype, with mixes of fighting breeds (bred as pig hunters) and the 'Aussie' cattle dog being chosen as the family guardians for suburban yards.

Historically Palmerston had taken a firm line on dog control, the major focus and image of council being one of enforcement. Council had a particularly successful record in the courts and publicity had tended to concentrate on detail of fines and offender sentences with a view to discourage further problem behaviour. There were, however, some solid efforts at education; for example school visits handing out printed material and providing advice on request.

The kinds of problems outlined above, however, have contributed to council seeking new solutions beyond its strongly regulatory approach. Just over a year ago now, Palmerston town council developed a strategic plan for urban animal management. This involved a change in approach, endeavouring to give education equal status with enforcement and to base strategies on consultation with the community.

## THE EDUCATION STRATEGY

A three pronged education strategy has been developed focussing on children, adults and the wider community.

We are all aware that the majority of the behaviour problems we see in dogs in the community are a manifestation of the owners lack of knowledge of correct care and training. Obvious also is the fact that with most owners there is initially no intent on their part for their dog to cause or become a neighbourhood problem. Our education program is therefore targeted at changing this, by giving dog owners a better understanding of their pet, its care, needs and their obligations as responsible pet owners within the community. Taking into account the different ways in which people learn the educative approach is a multi-faceted one aimed at gaining the broadest possible coverage.

We have undertaken the following new initiatives in the past twelve months starting, in part in recognition of what a young town Palmerston is, with targeting young people. Children are also an important conduit of information (for example through schools) in a new community where information networks are not developed.

### Child and youth strategies

Strategies have included:

- **School visits** — aimed at giving children the knowledge to help them prevent being bitten, caring for their dogs and understanding council's role in regulating and encouraging responsible pet ownership;
- **Promotion of PetPep program within schools in the Palmerston Area** — actively encouraging the use of this excellent program to educate our next generation of dog owners, through supporting and now publicising a successful trial and offering support expertise and other resource;
- **Kids and K9's program** — offering hands on training and education for children and their dogs conducted during school holidays with subsequent regular newsletters to reinforce messages. These children are shown hands-on how to care for and train their pets. The approach is a fun one, using games and training of tricks combined with education and obedience. All feedback on this course has been wonderfully positive, with reports of parents being 'trained' by their children in dog care and training;
- **Colouring in sheets** — covering relevant topics such as preventing dog attacks and responsible ownership are distributed.

### Adult education and support

This approach has encompassed:

- **Home visits and phone consultations with owners discussing behaviour and pet management problems** — for example, upon lodgement of a complaint to council, the offender is invited to take advantage of the consultation process. This may be a phone call but preferably involves a home visit which is an opportunity to assess the conditions in which the pet is kept first hand and to offer suggestions to assist with their pet problems. This approach is obviously aimed at curing, reducing and/or avoiding problems with this or further pets, which is so often the case if the band-aid approach is used. We are given the opportunity to make the owners aware of their pets requirements and their obligations as pet owners and members of the community. This also involves liaison between myself, the dog owner and the complainant. I have found that this contact with the complainant has been very valuable in a number of ways. It informs the complainant that their complaint is being taken seriously and being acted upon and also allows me to gauge any improvement in the dog's behaviour. At this stage, with a relatively small population base, we are also able to open this service to all owners of registered dogs with specific behaviour problems or potential problems;
- **Group training sessions** — these have been aimed at specific problem behaviours such as dogs that chase vehicles or push bike;

- **Hire of citronella anti-barking collars (available only after consultation with the education officer)** — the public seemed to embrace this as a sign that council was actively trying to solve their problems. We had some very surprising outcomes, with people approaching us prior to complaints being laid about their dog's barking problems. Even those with unregistered dogs felt able to make contact to inquire about collars but also to ask general questions regarding registration and regulations. In many cases solutions other than the use of the collars were found;
- **Information and fact sheets** — offering solutions for common behaviour problems;
- **Media promotion** — through newspapers, TV and radio on newsworthy items such as availability of hire collars and treatment of thunderstorm phobias. These give regular broad exposure to the public;
- **Monthly newspaper articles** — these discuss relevant pet ownership issues and are for later compilation into a truly local pet owner booklet;
- **Shopping centre displays** — these cover such issues as registration, thunderstorm phobias and regulations;
- **Initiation of a walking group for people to exercise together with their dogs** — dog problems become somewhat circular when people are afraid to take their dogs out walking. These groups provide companionship, socialisation and the security of numbers for owners with similar benefits for the dogs.

### **Positive reinforcement and shifting community norms**

Early initiatives have been:

- **Rewarding responsible dog owners** — packs containing sample bags of dog foods have been handed out by Regulatory Officer's on their rounds;
- **Quarterly responsible owners awards** — with photos published in the monthly council newsletter, these foster a positive community profile for and of dog ownership;
- **Organisation of Pet Expo** — in conjunction with Darwin city council and pet owner groups. Darwin city council also runs a very strong education program;
- **Preparation of a cyclone procedures brochure in consultation with other councils, emergency services and the RSPCA** — with our region being prone to cyclones and with the lack of provision for pets after Cyclone Tracy devastated Darwin, there were many issues to be addressed. The brochure will be available to all pet owners. The preparation meant that this was a great opportunity for these groups to get together and plan procedures in the event of another major disaster;
- **Approachable and sympathetic image** — this allows residents to feel more comfortable in approaching council for both help and advice. This approach also means that dog owners are more amenable to working towards resolving the problem and not having to defend themselves and their pet's behaviour.

### **THE REGULATION STRATEGY**

Palmerston Town Council has of course also seen the need to keep working on the regulation front too. For example more recent strategies have included:

- **Good behaviour bonds** — for those offenders who are willing to be helped and where this can be established before a justice in a court of law (and to their satisfaction) a request is then made for a good behaviour bond to be given rather than a monetary penalty. There is education input and supervision of progress during the bond period;
- **Implementation of new leash laws** — introduction of new regulations give Regulatory Officer's stronger enforcement powers and on the spot fines.

## THE CONSULTATION STRATEGY

A survey was chosen as a first step in enhancing consultation with the community for a number of reasons. In particular, views on animal management are highly polarised and it was seen as useful to start with a broad community view rather than consult the limited number of vocal interest groups. In addition a survey was seen as a useful tool in bench marking and an effort was made to retain some questions in common with a Townsville city council questionnaire conducted at the same time.

The random survey covered 410 people, amounting to more than 2% of the population, and extended for 7 minutes. Surveying was undertaken over a week, at different times. It ensured that different members of the household were interviewed.

This was done by seeking participation by the person at home at the time who had most recently had a birthday, rather than by just using the person who picked up the phone.

The survey was seen as a tool for educating people about what council is endeavouring to do in the area of animal management. The opportunity was taken at survey's end to encourage people to contact council to further discuss any issues.

The results of the survey are currently under review.

<b>PALMERSTON TOWN COUNCIL ANIMAL MANAGEMENT SURVEY CONTENTS</b>
Number of dogs and cats at address.
Neighbourhood issues of concern.
How dog and cat issues compare with other neighbourhood issues.
Appropriateness of council involvement in various UAM areas.
Overall view of council's approach.
Assessment of strictness of council's approach in key areas.
Nature of complaints made to council.
Perceived response by council to complaints.
Overall rights to keep dogs and cats.
Preference re keeping dogs on leashes and associated sense of safety.
Use of parks and other public areas as on leash and off leash areas.
Current practice in terms of using public areas to exercise dogs.
Council contact in event further assistance can be provided.

However, early findings are:

- little use of parks for exercising dogs;
- some significant support for council's enforcement and education roles;
- strong support for limiting the number of dogs to a property to one or two;
- strong support for leashed areas to include bicycle paths, vicinity of children's play equipment and shopping areas;
- willingness to drive to an off-leash park to exercise dogs;
- perceptions of degree of enforcement are also divided equally between about right and not strict enough.

As an aside the survey reinforced for council that its registration rate is encouragingly high. Council has made a commitment to act on result of the survey. As part of this commitment a report will go into every household about the results of this survey. So too will a further report in six months, indicating how Council has acted or intends to follow up on survey results.

## COMMENTS

The above strategies on the part of Palmerston town council are not presented as any kind of model. They are early steps in the development of a more strongly integrated approach in a local government area which continues to be confronted by some significant UAM challenges. In taking these early steps, council has made a number of choices which could be debated. For example, in relation to consultation alone:

- council has only now commenced proper consultation efforts. In many ways consultation would have been best up front, to guide the changes over the past 12 months. On the other hand there was a sense that it would also be valuable to get some runs on the board. This is our gauge, our barometer of how we are going and where we should be heading;
- council is only now considering forming a key stakeholder group. Such a group might have constructively been involved in helping to frame questions and review results. Not forming such a group was partly a function of resourcing and partly a function of the limited number of stakeholders with truly local interests;
- the survey cost, in the vicinity of \$7000, was high and, clearly, related trade offs needed to be made in the section budget;
- to enable a stronger educational thrust to the survey there may have been some merit in having researchers with more direct knowledge of the issues and links to council. However this would also have involved more cost.

Overall, however, there is a sense of progress within the section in terms of all 'parts of the triangle'. Certainly the analysis of the survey results should help to test and clarify this impression. However a survey, performed only every 5 years or so, is only part of any assessment of effectiveness. A real key to the success of the strategy is going to be getting additional ways of evaluating our overall approach and the components of it. Clearly we see a benchmark partnership in which Palmerston town council is a player as an important way forward.

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