

## Interface with other stakeholders

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### Abstract

This presentation will discuss the mutual benefits that can be experienced in a Local Government context through the successful interfacing with stakeholders. These benefits are not only to the groups involved and the Council but most importantly to the communities we represent.

### Introduction

Some of the associations of the Gold Coast City Council highlighted in this paper have existed for over forty years and some are newly formed. It is intended to show that strong associations as well as newly formed coalitions can equally be beneficial. The groups specifically mentioned are:

- SEQROC – South East Queensland Region of Councils
- AWL – Animal Welfare League of Queensland
- NRCAWG – Northern Rivers Companion Animal Working Group
- UAM RG – Urban Animal Management Reference Group

Local Government has, over recent years, been more actively engaged in extensive community consultation processes. This consultation can involve a range of issues from legislative changes to policy and even from time to time operational programs. With more open and accountable government comes a need to ensure community expectations are considered. Obviously it would be more prudent to consider this before embarking on processes that may well cost more to change at a later stage.

In the political sphere a number of officers at all levels of government will be asked to provide advice to elected representatives and with that comes a responsibility to ensure that not only is the advice sound but is a true representation of community needs.

“ I believe the community service obligation of the public service is to continually test how the development and implementation of government policy will actually improve the lives of people.”(Dr. Kemp 1997)

It is widely recognised that the way Local Governments deal with domestic animals can attribute greatly to the benefit of the community. This has been a fundamental concept for the development of effective urban animal management throughout Australia. In fact national conferences such as the UAM Canberra conference have been developed to progress these initiatives to enable more sound decision making processes and effective public administration. The result being benefits to pet owners, non pet owners and to pets themselves.

What are these benefits? well lets look at each association and the merits of the involvement between the two organisations.

### SEQROC – South East Qld Region of Councils:

It is important to note at this point that Qld has over 100 Local Authorities and each has the capacity to create and implement local laws that in some instances are unique to the particular Council region. With this has come some disparity and SEQROC was formed to ensure a modicum of commonality exists regarding fundamental policies within the region.

SEQROC was (at the time of writing this paper) primarily a Mayoral forum that had under its umbrella a number of working groups. SEQROC was formed 1991 to assist local government in South East Queensland to respond to the issues associated with the necessary increases in infrastructure, people and their pets.

The objectives were:

- To support and advance the interests of its 18 member Councils and their constituencies.
- To formulate policies and strategies from which all member councils may act collaboratively in determining complementary plans for the coordination of regional growth and management of change.
- To foster co-operation amongst members on issues of mutual concern or to further joint interests.
- To act as an advocate to State and Commonwealth Governments or public bodies on issues of concern to members.

Following the raising of some specific animal related issues that required clarification and advice the Animal Management Sub working group was aligned with SEQROC approx five years ago. The group had previously met informally for over ten years.

The group quickly established itself as an important reference group in relation to many issues eg. Microchipping, cat registration, restricted and prohibited breed legislation and various other operational problems. The ability for this group to discuss such issues in an open and honest forum has been largely recognised and the benefits to each of the Councils involved has been acknowledged many times.

Not all the benefits have been political or policy issues and I would like to elaborate on some of the operational initiatives the group have been progressing:

#### **Dog attack database:**

This required a collaborative approach to gathering dog attack information and storing the data in a central repository for comparison. Such was the influence of the group that LGAQ (Local Government Association of Qld) has agreed to store this data that will allow access by all Councils throughout Qld. The development costs were underwritten by SEQROC from funds contributed by regional Councils on per capita basis. The required templates were developed by the working group and will enable information to be compared relating to breed, relationship of the dog to victim, time of attack, injury etc. It is anticipated this data will assist in future policy decisions that may reduce dog attack incidences and be an enormous benefit to the community for ensuring continued public safety.

One of the more positive advantages that has developed from this project is the ability for smaller Councils throughout Qld to access the site and use it as a database for all complaints. Some regional Councils have not seen the necessity to develop systems to capture animal complaint data due to the small number of issues. This system can now be used for such purposes at a fraction of the cost to develop a system in house. Special recognition to the Brisbane City Council work on this project should be made.

#### **MOU for impounded animals:**

The group has recognised the need for a ‘memorandum of understanding’ to allow animals to be taken to pounds in neighbouring authorities for a range of reasons eg. better security if animals are held for court cases, overcrowding or in times of natural disaster.

#### **Breed identification on restricted breeds:**

Following the introduction of state legislation regarding restricted breeds the group developed a breed template to assist authorised officers in determining these breeds. The template has recently been recognised through the courts as definitive in identifying pit bull terriers when used in conjunction with training being provided by Brisbane City Council.

This is possibly the most contentious issue facing Councils in the region, who actively enforce this legalisation, in recent times.

**Clarification of 'cross border' authorisations:**

This is an issue that occurs with neighbouring Councils and went largely undetected by authorities over the years. The group has now recognised the need to have a formal agreement for officers to take action when required within the neighbouring Councils area. The Qld Local Government Act provides that Council may authorise officers to take specific action in other areas.

As mentioned earlier this forum is about to change and it is envisaged that the animal management working group will possibly report to the newly formed regional CEO Collaboration Steering Committee.

**AWL – Animal Welfare League of QLD:**

The GCCC and AWL have had a formal relationship since the inception of the league 48 years ago. The league has provided a service within the City for the holding, release and rehoming of around 9,500 animals each year. These animals are handled through the refuge either due to impounding, surrender and rescue. The contract has been mutually beneficial to Council and the League during this extensive period and as a result a number of joint initiatives have developed and a few are mentioned here.

**Cheaper desexing:**

The league offers free desexing to all impounded animals upon release. The establishment of a veterinary clinic on the facility has also allowed cheaper desexing for the financially handicapped including pensioners.

**Rehoming animals:**

All impounded animals are passed to the league after they have spent their statutory impounding period with Council. The league in turn find homes for many of these animals once they are temperament tested, health checked and been suitably adopted. Over the last four years the AWL have increased rehoming rates by 140% for cats and 56% for dogs. This has led to one of the best rehoming percentages around the country. Something we are both very proud of.

**Education and awareness for secondary schools:**

The league has recently developed a curriculum for secondary school students who visit the pound and refuge to better understand the importance of responsible pet ownership. The program is very comprehensive and well received. We believe this will reinforce the present primary school program by targeting the age group who will soon be the responsible pet owners of the community.

**Stakeholder Coalition:**

Council has partnered the league with a number of stakeholder representatives in a coalition to discuss and progress a range of issues for the region. The following representatives also attend the bi monthly meetings:

- Pet shop industry
- Canine control council
- Feline association
- Wildcare
- Wildlife preservation society
- Qld National Parks and Wildlife
- RSPCA Qld
- AVA

The group recently developed a DVD and accompanying brochure for new puppy and kitten owners designed to improve knowledge about new pets.

The DVD will hopefully reduce nuisances and ensure better welfare for the newly adopted pets. GCCC and the AWL have funded the initial production expenses and the generic design has allowed interest from other regional Councils. The voice over and the brochure can be easily modified to include the particular authorities local laws and specific requirements.

The DVD will officially be launched at the City Pet Expo in September this year.

**NRCAWG – Northern Rivers Companion Animal Working Group**

This is a group of six Councils representing the northern region of New South Wales. They include the shires of Tweed Heads, Lismore, Kyogle, Byron Bay, Ballina and Richmond Valley. The group meet every 8-10 weeks to discuss mutual issues and initiatives. The Gold Coast City Council has been invited in recent years because many people live close to and may cross the State border regularly. Animal related transgressions may therefore occur in a different jurisdiction to that where the animal is registered or resides.

They have recently renamed the group to the R.C.A.C.G. Regional Companion Animal Compliance Group. This is to emphasise the need for improved compliance at a regional level where unlike Qld the legislation in NSW is developed by state government. With each of the legislative systems come a range of benefits and difficulties for both states.

This NSW system allows consistency across the state regarding legislation however does not compensate for the ability of each individual council to deliver the necessary program. Funding has been a major issue for small councils and the regional approach by Northern Rivers Councils has alleviated some of this. In the couple of years I have been involved with this group they have commenced a number of initiatives of which a couple are elaborated upon here:

**Regional microchipping:**

The group hold an annual microchipping day that is coordinated across the region allowing residents to meet the requirements of the state legislation regarding microchipping. This has been well supported and a popular and fun day for pet owners animal management officers and local veterinarians.

**Education and awareness:**

The group has asked for a contribution of \$1,000 from each member Council to enable a regional campaign regarding pet owner education and awareness. They intend to develop regional pamphlets and media advertising that will raise awareness and hopefully compliance. The previously mentioned DVD may form part of this campaign. This a unique example of the cross pollination of ideas from other regional associations.

**Urban Animal Management Reference Group**

This group of course has been at the forefront of urban animal awareness since its inception in 1992. It has provided an annual forum for animal management and industry representatives to progress ideas relating to this fascinating and compelling area of community interest. This has been a highly organised and professional body with which it has been a privilege to be involved.

The UAM RG has two clear objectives:

1. The minimisation of public pet nuisance and
2. The maximisation of community benefit.

The group has continued to provide information to a wide range of beneficiaries aligned to the pet industry. From the individual pet owner to the policy and legislative developers there has not been an area associated with pets that have not been impacted upon by this group.

