

Next steps - Resolving dog barking complaints

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Introduction

This paper explores the development of further tools to assist those people charged with the investigation of dog barking complaints. At the City of Onkaparinga we have been actively working for several years to assist in the development of these tools with the hope of providing some clear and objective methods to establish the presence of and/or measure extent of barking nuisance.

To date most of the investigation techniques have been objective, unless you completely trust the person complainant, or you have the resources to sit someone outside of the subject premises night and day to monitor the complaint.

In the absence of hard data we are dealing with opinion. How often has the AMO heard "but my dog doesn't bark" or "those whingers next door would complain about anything". Clearly these are personal opinions and typical of the common responses received when approaching an uncooperative dog owner to discuss a dog barking complaint.

We all know that a simple complaint about a barking dog can escalate into a time consuming pain in the arse for all concerned. It is time that we had systems in place to quickly determine whether a barking problem exists and then take the appropriate action to close the complaint based upon that determination.

There are two areas where significant development is occurring that will better equip AMOs to deal with barking issues:

1. Development of technology to accurately measure the frequency of barking
2. Development of scientific standards to determine whether such barking constitutes nuisance

Technology

The most significant technological breakthrough in the investigation of Dog Barking Complaints has been the development of the Bark Counting Collar. This is a collaborative project between Animal Behaviour Systems and Multi Vet. Distribution of the product in Australia will be by Animal Behaviour Systems (Melbourne). Anthony Beard of ABS has been the driver of the development of this product.

We have been involved in the testing of the proto-types of this device and our tests have shown that these collars are invaluable in determining whether a barking problem exists and if so the extent of that problem. They have been particularly useful in resolving some long standing problems, which have involved neighbour disputes.

Using the collar we have been able to clearly demonstrate to dog owners and complainants the extent of the problem (if any). It is interesting to note that in many of these long running disputes we have found that the barking was not excessive.

As we carried out the testing a number of other Councils in South Australia have also borrowed the collar and have had similar successful results.

I understand that the final model of the barking collar will be available in the latter half of 2007 and I believe it will prove to be an invaluable tool to AMOs dealing with dog barking complaints.

Barking Standard

Last year at the Hobart Urban Animal Management Conference I presented the Draft City of Onkaparinga Dog Barking Standard.

So to briefly revisit the Draft Standard:

- In 2006 we had an acoustic engineer measure the elements of dog barking noise and develop a scientifically based measure of how much barking would constitute nuisance to persons being exposed to dog barking noise.
- It was found that there were three main factors that influenced the extent of the nuisance being:
 - o time of day,
 - o distance from the dog, and
 - o solid sound barriers i.e. fences and walls
- The acoustic engineer presented a number of scenarios including all of the above factors and from this data we drafted our Dog Barking Standard
- We apply this standard for suburban areas (dog 10 to 20 metres away behind a solid fence):
 - o 240 barks per day between 7.00am and 9.00pm and
 - o 35 barks per night between 9.00pm and 7.00am.
- This standard also applies to rural living allotments (up to 60 metres away – no fence)
- MOs uses this standard as a guide and where the factors vary or there are other mitigating or exacerbating circumstances they seek advice from their supervisor on how to proceed.

At the Hobart conference I left with two main matters to progress to finalise the standard

1. Confirmation of our interpretation by the acoustic engineer and
2. Development of a procedure to enable our AMOs to apply the standard.

In February 2007 we received the confirmation from the acoustic engineer that our interpretation of his findings was accurate and that our standard was an appropriate manner in which to assess barking nuisance..

Following that advice we have developed a set of Interim Dog Barking Guidelines I have appended this guideline to this paper. It can be seen that it is a simple document that provides our officers with a simple tool to assess barking nuisance in accordance with our standard. It can be seen from that document that not only barking nuisance is addressed but also excessive barking. For the purposes of the guideline we define excessive barking to have occurred where the nuisance standard is breached only once or the level of barking is approaching the nuisance level.

We have now applied the standard in a number of cases and we are yet to be challenged. That is not entirely good news as such a challenge in the courts would provide us with a solid opportunity to confirm what we have developed is a fair assessment of dog barking nuisance.

In addition there are two universities who doing further research into our standard, they investigating it from a psychological or social point of view.

Again the findings in these cases will allow us to further develop or confirm our standard.

Summary

As long as there are dogs in the urban environment Councils will receive dog barking complaints. The development of the Bark Counting Collar and standards may not significantly reduce the number of barking complaints received but their use will significantly reduce the amount of time spent on investigating those complaints that cannot be resolved between the parties.

As with most customer service interactions timely and responsive action is the key to satisfactorily resolving customer complaints. In the majority of cases such action will resolve the dog barking complaint without reference to initiatives discussed in this paper. However these tools will substantially increase the ability of the AMO to conclude those complaints that cannot be resolved using good customer service techniques.

About the Author

Chris has a background and qualifications in Human Resource Management. He has worked in Local Government for the past 13 years. With eight years experience managing Animal Managements Officers, Chris is currently employed as Manager Public Health and Safety at the City of Onkaparinga. This position entails the management of the General Inspectorate, Environmental Health, and Emergency Management functions of the largest Council in South Australia.

In addition to the operational aspects of this position, Chris is currently focusing on performance measurement and the utilisation of technology by within the regulatory environment.

City of Onkaparinga Interim Dog Barking Guidelines

Barking Nuisance

Exists where, on more than one occasion in the survey period, dog barking exceeds 240 barks per day between the hours of 7.00am and 9.00pm or 35 barks per night between 9.00pm and 7.00am.

Excessive Barking

Exists where on one occasion during the survey period, barking exceeds 240 barks per day between the hours of 7.00am and 9.00pm or 35 barks per night between 9.00pm and 7.00am or regularly exceeds 30 barks per hour during the day or 4 barks per hour during the night.

Actions

Where barking nuisance occurs enforcement action (expiation, prosecution, orders) should be considered in addition to advice of remedial actions.

Where excessive barking occurs dog owners should be

- advised of remedial actions that could assist to resolve any future problems
- advised that barking nuisance is imminent and that any instances of barking nuisance can lead to enforcement action.

Remember

That the above guidelines are for our "typical" suburban or semi rural scenarios, 10-20 metres away behind a solid fence or 60 metres + with no fence. If the situation varies from the above advice should be sought form the Team Leader or Manager.

The only dog barking data that can be assessed using these guidelines are

- o Resident diaries that have been verified by other resident diaries,
- o Resident diaries that have been verified by observations of an AMO,
- o Data from a bark counting collar.

This guideline should only be required in the minority of cases – early intervention and good communication will resolve over 90% of all dog barking complaints received.