

## **A place for pets: How pets can strengthen community social fabric – ‘The Living Well Together Handbook’**

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Australian local government is becoming increasingly aware that creating healthy, happy communities is a smart investment in the country's future. The term that is commonly used to measure the wealth of such variables is "social capital" and it describes the everyday interactions and activities that knit society together.

Communities with strong social capital have been proven to have reduced crime rates, positive child development and good community governance. They are also associated with better general health and decreased mental illness rates.

### ***Why we created the ‘Living Well Together Handbook’***

Progressive councils seek to increase the wealth of their social capital by using resources that are readily accessible, cost effective and are already being actively taken up in the community.

The Petcare Information Advisory Service (PIAS) teamed with University of Western Australia researcher Dr Lisa Wood to create a handbook that would help organisations and councils utilise and harness such resources in the form of pets, especially dogs and cats.

While pets in the community can cause a degree of nuisance, studies demonstrate that the closer the bond between animal and owner, the more responsible the owner is likely to be with pet nuisances less likely to arise.

The Handbook cites examples across every state in Australia where positive pet ownership and pet related activities are helping to create healthy neighbourhoods and strengthen communities across a diverse range of settings and issues. There are further case studies demonstrating that even when pet related problems arise, social capital can 'kick in' to help identify mutual ground and build community-based solutions.

Importantly, most of the initiatives described in these case studies have evolved at a grassroots or local government level with the ideas capable of being adapted to any number of circumstances or environments.

The Living Well Together Handbook draws upon Dr Wood's research and pulls together a range of examples and case studies from the 'real world' on the way in which pets are contributing positively to the social fabric of communities, ranging from community building to utilising volunteers.

### ***The research***

In most Australian neighbourhoods and towns, around two thirds of the population will own a pet or companion animal. People walking, chatting, exercising and experiencing nature are common sights in parks, with the ambling dog often a part of this picture. Intuitively, most people are aware of the way in which pets

draw people together and because of this growing interest in social capital, research evidence is now being gathered to study the phenomenon.

While others have studied the individual 'one to one' benefits of companion animals, Dr Wood has been the first to investigate the link between pet ownership and its effect on the social capital of community.

Her study, "The Pet Connection: Pets as a Conduit for Social Capital" was first published in 2005 in the Journal for Social Science and Medicine which was then followed by "More than a Furry Companion: the Ripple Effect of Companion Animals on Neighbourhood Interactions and Sense of Community Society and Animals" in 2007.

Her groundbreaking results concluded that the domain of a pets influence extends well beyond their immediate owners to create positive effects across the broader community.

Using Wood's research as a foundation, PIAS created the handbook, delivering it in six chapters for organisations to source programs that will suit their particular community requirements. The chapters include "Building Community", "Healthy Communities", "A Place for All", "Doing the Right Thing", "Making the Most What You've Got" and "Catering to All".

Each of these chapters provide case studies from both councils and not for profit organisations demonstrating ways in which pets can strengthen the fabric of community through activities and community building programs.

The following chapter descriptions illustrate the role that pets play in strengthening the varied threads that make social capital function within communities.

### **Building Community**

***Building Community provides case studies on how pets can promote positive community relations through informal and formal groups.***

A good sense of community is an aspiration most people have for their neighbourhoods and is not just something associated with a "warm fuzzy feeling". Instead, sense of community has been shown to influence perceptions of community safety, neighbourhood attachment, community involvement, and improved community problem coping skills (McMillan and Chavis 1986).

Until recently, the role of pets in building a sense of community has gone relatively unnoticed in the scientific literature, although it is often recognised anecdotally. Recent research however, demonstrates the role that pets can play in building a strong sense of community and developing active social capital; two cornerstones vital to any vibrant, healthy community.

## Making the most of what you've got

*Making the Most of what you've Got provides examples of ways that councils can harness existing community assets such as pets, people, and infrastructure to create community.*

'Every community has more potential resources than any one person knows'. (Green, Moore et al. 2006)

While needs assessment and problem identification have often been the cornerstone of community planning, this can have a 'deficit' focus. There is however a growing trend towards more 'asset' based methods' (i.e. what strengths do we have, how can we support what is already working). With some lateral thinking, making the most of what a community already has can provide low cost solutions to its needs.

Councils can play a lead role in harnessing existing community assets such as people, infrastructure and resources, while simultaneously encouraging and affirming those that do it of their own accord (i.e. the many individuals and groups involved in volunteering).

More simply, it is a glass half full way of viewing community, versus a glass half empty (Green, Moore et al. 2006).

### Volunteering

The Australian tradition of 'mateship' and helping others is a sometimes overlooked or taken for granted community asset.

In fact, the desire to help others in the community is the most frequently cited motivation for volunteering in Australia (ABS, 2006). As well as the obvious benefits that volunteer services provide to recipients, the very act of volunteering itself can fulfil an individual's need to belong, feel valued and find meaning in life (Wesley Mission). Indirectly, the individual benefits of volunteering then go on to flow into greater levels of community trust and civic engagement (Putnam 1993) and help to build community goodwill and community mindedness.

Economically speaking, there is also growing recognition that official national accounting figures such as Gross National Product (GNP) seriously underestimate the economic value that many important activities such as unpaid labour and volunteering give to the community (Meyer 2003) .

### Infrastructure and place

Enhancing 'the fit' between existing resources and community needs can often be both more effective and cheaper as community improvement options than solutions that rest on a 'more is better' premise. In a recent community consultation relating to parks for example, residents didn't actually want 'more' but wanted the local parks to feel safe, to be well maintained and to cater for children of all ages.

Programs or promotional strategies that draw people to visit a community facility or park are also cost effective methods to make the most of what already exists and tap into people's desire for a strong sense of community.

## Catering to all

*Catering to All demonstrates through various case studies, how pets can play a part in our expressions of humanity and care for others.*

*If civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships - the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together, in the same world at peace.*

*Franklin D. Roosevelt*

Australia often prides itself on providing a 'fair go' for everyone. The litmus test of an inclusive society however is how well it includes and meets the needs of different population groups, including Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and those who are disadvantaged by social or economic circumstances. With Australia's aging population, older people are also a significant and growing part of local communities, which is said to present both challenges and opportunities for local government [ALGA, 2004 #2400].

### The elderly

For older people, as well as people with illness and disabilities, there is increasing emphasis on enabling people to live in the community or at home for longer. This has implications for the way in which housing and neighbourhoods are designed, the accessibility of community facilities, as well as for the availability and delivery of various government, non-government or voluntary support services.

### Diverse backgrounds

Pets are a great leveller, transcending racial, cultural and geographic, age and socio-economic boundaries in terms of their ownership and impact. This is evident in the exchanges between dog owners of diverse backgrounds at a local park or the catalyst of communication between timid patients and health professionals.

### Societal fringe

In addition, pets have been shown to bring therapeutic benefits and pleasure to many people who are not in a position to own or fully care for one on their own as well as population groups who are sometimes on the societal fringe, including those in prison, in healthcare facilities or nursing homes, or living in more impoverished circumstances (Fine, 2000).

The benefits of pets for priority population groups is not just about a superficial 'feel good' effect; rather research has linked contact with pets to the prevention or reduced incidence of depression and stress and buffering the impact of grief, traumatic events and loneliness [Wood, 2007 #1753]. In a society struggling with issues of loneliness, isolation and depression, and an increasing proportion of people living alone or in fractured family situations, supporting initiatives that provide contact with pets can be seen as a real investment into the community.

As articulated by Eva Cox in her seminal Boyer lecture series on social capital, "societies rich in social capital recognise our common humanity, accept diversity and reject gross inequalities" [Cox, 1995 #83]. In their own

small way, pets can in fact play a part in our expressions of humanity and care for others; and in the way in which we cater for diversity and strive for greater equality within Australian communities.

## Summary

Dr Lisa Wood and PIAS have created a publication that demonstrates the various pet related programs and activities being undertaken around Australia to enhance social capital. Some of the programs are simple and require little organisation or funding while others are more complex. The ideas in these case studies can be readily adapted to suit different communities and circumstances and various environmental, budgetary and social requirements.

Further, we designed it so that the benefits of each example are clearly outlined. Tips are provided to demonstrate how such concepts might be replicated. Web links and an appendix are included to make further investigation easy.

There are a multitude of subjects that can contribute positively to social capital – involvement with sports and schools are common examples but not everyone plays sport and not everyone has children. Yet two thirds of households own pets with more than half of all households owning a dog and or cat. It's true that pets can be a nuisance to the community, but it's also true that communities that promote and support positive pet ownership in the community tend to achieve better animal management outcomes.

While not everyone has the desire or capacity to have a pet of their own, communities that embrace pets for their positive and tangible contribution to human health and well being have much to gain. Pets don't just make people who own them feel good, they can create a positive ripple effect that extends into the broader community.

For a free download of the Living Well Together Handbook visit [www.livingwelltogether.com.au](http://www.livingwelltogether.com.au).

*The Petcare Information Advisory Service acknowledges the significant contribution that Dr Lisa Wood has made to the writing of this paper.*

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## About the author

Tamara Shardlow grew up in semi-rural NSW with her best friend Beau the Blue Cattle Dog. After finishing her Communications Degree, Tamara travelled around Australia living and working on farms and wildlife sanctuaries and studying horticulture. Having an innate interest in people and their links to community she has worked as a project manager for an art based community organisation in Adelaide, and in community engagement and communications officer positions for both corporate and community organisations in Melbourne. Since 2007, Tamara has married her interest in both pets and people by working as a consultant for the Petcare Information Advisory Service. She has spent the last 6 months project managing the research translation document Living Well Together with Dr Lisa Wood. Over two years, Tamara has worked closely with experts in the field of animal research, acted as secretary for the AVACCAC and co-authored submissions for government animal legislation. She is now planning the next phase of Living Well Together which will target community at its grass roots. In her spare time Tamara illustrates and writes children's books about dogs and cats that save the world.