

Planning for dogs in open space with a focus on integrated planning and dog parks

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This paper focuses on how effective planning, policy and operational protocols can help us address animal management issues. It will outline the benefits of service planning and how this specifically applies to the development of a dog park i.e. a fully enclosed area dedicated to dogs and their handlers.

By providing a dedicated environment, dog parks enable owners to spend quality time with their dogs and enhance the bonds between them. Spending all day in the home and backyard surrounded by a privacy fence, does not provide a dog with the socialisation and stimulation required to be a well-rounded, happy pet. Visiting a dog park can help satisfy a dog's need for canine companionship and exercise. With dual income families having less leisure time, providing adequate exercise for the family dog has become increasingly problematic with long walks unrealistic.

Walking a dog on lead does provide some exercise, but it is primarily linear in nature (McGreevy, P 2008; Personal Communication) and limited in the speed at which it occurs. By contrast, dog play with other dogs is three dimensional involving much twisting and turning of the body, changes of pace, jumping and prancing. This exercises many muscle groups, enhancing the benefit gained from a relatively limited amount of exercise. Dog parks facilitate this type of interaction by allowing it to occur off leash in a contained area.

For dog owners with limited mobility, such as older adults or people with disabilities, a safe, accessible place where they can meet with other like-minded people and exercise their dogs is beneficial and helps combat social isolation. For some dog owners, a dog park may provide the only opportunity they have to socialise their dogs with other dogs. The community need for dog parks has been increasingly recognised in the USA with the number of dog parks doubling in the five years from 1999-2004 (www.bestfriends.org/archives/forums/090604dogparks.html)

Anecdotal commentary from dog park websites in the USA indicates the benefits of dog parks include the following:

- They provide for dog activities in confined open space areas that have to cater for a number of uses
- They provide meeting place or activity hub for communities
- They encourage people to exercise more vigorously with their dogs
- They provide elderly and disabled owners with an accessible place to exercise their companions
- They help apartment dwellers or people living on small allotments to continue dog ownership
- They provide a venue that encourages dog to dog socialisation
- They can provide an environment where advice is exchanged on dog management and where less responsible dog owners are encouraged into responsible practices
- They provide a focal point for community initiatives relating to dogs.

However, creating a successful dog park does not just happen. It is the product of an effective planning process which ensures we optimise outcomes in relation to:

- Pet ownership
- Safe and harmonious environments and
- Partnerships.

In general, the benefits that come from effective service planning and policy apply to all situations where new services are developed, including the development of a domestic animal management plan or planning for dogs in open space. These benefits are outlined below.

Benefit 1 – Effective planning will establish service principles

Service principles underpin the values, goals, objectives and strategies on which a service is based, and ensure that council staff and departments operate from the same understanding of the service. They also communicate a council's position on companion animals to the wider community. The following table provides an example of service principles and the issues they relate to in animal management.

Example of guiding principles

Council must comply with all relevant codes of practice and legislation in providing animal management services

Pet ownership will be *supported* (and encouraged) in *recognition* of the important role that pets play in terms of *community health and wellbeing*

Council will remain *responsive* to the needs of *pet owners* and the *broader community* as they may change over time.

Strategies that optimise *the safety and security* of pets, people, and the environment will be a priority

Information and knowledge will improve *understanding* of issues and opportunities relating to pets.

Council will encourage *partnerships* that *enhance opportunities and outcomes* around pets in the community.

Examples of issues and discussions relevant to the principle

Council responsibilities under relevant legislation; the adopting of local laws

Notifications (offences); Provision for healthy lifestyle activities that are enhanced by dog ownership e.g. dog play areas; Support programs for older people; the role of educative vs. punitive measures

Town planning and provision for pets / dogs e.g. public / private open space provision; Confinement strategies and options; Community meeting places; cafes and streetscape environments; Travellers and their pets; The non-dog owner / sharing of public spaces

Dealing with dangerous breeds; Registration; Identification; Protection of flora / fauna; Designation of dog off-leash / on-leash / 'no go' areas / shared spaces; Domestic violence support or referral programs; Animal / welfare; Dog etiquette / behaviour.

Education initiatives and priorities (schools, media, community events); Responsible pet ownership information

Recognising public and private stakeholders and their role in supporting initiatives or as a source of advice and information; Identifies who is 'out there' and how you can work with them e.g. animal businesses, welfare organisations

Relevance to the Dog Park

The dog park should be considered in conjunction with other provision opportunities for the dog in the local community. For example, it may be determined that dog parks will only be provided in areas where there is a lack of parkland to provide for off-leash opportunities. Alternatively, it may be a council objective to provide a dog park in each district to enable all residents to have similar access to a dog park.

Clearly establishing the rationale for providing dog parks in given locations ensures that such provision is based on sound principles and not in response to specific interest groups.

Benefit 2 – Effective planning will engage key staff and departments

A recent Parks and Leisure Association workshop on the issue of dogs in open space identified that a number of local laws departments had not engaged with their council's recreation and open space staff when preparing their animal management plans.

Working effectively with other departments within your organisation has three key benefits. Firstly you are informing them about the scope of your service and the type of issues you are dealing with. Secondly you are actively engaging with departments that can add value to your own operations. Thirdly you gain an understanding as to how your planning and operational decisions may impact on them.

Think about the implications if the town planning department assumes that people who live on small allotments or apartments will not own dogs. How will that affect you as animal management service planners? What are the implications if the leisure services department declares all sports ovals off limits for dogs? Conversely, animal management should also understand the implications of decisions you make for other departments - such as fencing a piece of open space area for a dog run, when that area is used as an overflow space for junior soccer training or car parking.

Additionally, utilising internal Council networks may help you identify a more comprehensive array of stakeholders and you may be able to benefit from the strategic planning experience in departments such as the recreation, open space, aged services, children's services, youth services departments.

Relevance to the Dog Park

Many recreation managers express frustration when their local laws counterparts create / designate a dog off leash area or fence of an area of open space for use as a dog run area without discussion. Conversely Animal Management Officers may be frustrated with their recreation colleagues, who want to restrict dog access to sporting ovals in an area that has limited open space. Each has a legitimate point of view but may lack an understanding of the issues the other party has to deal with. In establishing the dog park it is critical to ensure all internal stakeholders are engaged particularly if they will have responsibility for aspects of managing or monitoring the dog park at a later time.

Benefit 3 – Effective planning will engage the community

Effective consultation with a representative sample of the community, using techniques such as focus groups, surveys, interviews or submissions, will ensure you have a sound grasp of the needs of various community groups. Lack of engagement with relevant community stakeholders in the planning process has the potential to create gaps in information, isolate important groups and result in a project that is not embraced by the community. Many projects fail because of an oversight in consultation with a small, but vocal element in the community.

Relevance to planning for a Dog Park

Council A chose a site for a dog park without community consultation. When planners were invited to design the park, it was found the area did not meet open space planning criteria due to its proximity to residential properties and the isolated nature of the site. The outcome – council spent money on a design but no dog park eventuated because the site was not supported by the community.

Consulting with the community early in the process may have identified opportunities to address community concerns. This was the case with Council B who successfully developed a dog park equally as close to residential properties. In this case there was extensive community engagement, a history of informal use by dogs and their owners and an acceptance of the site as a dog off-leash area. As a result the dog park has now been successfully established.

Effective consultation will also identify opportunities to develop partnerships with dog associations, trainers, veterinarians and dog related businesses. This may be valuable when planning community education initiatives.

Benefit 4 – Effective planning encompasses innovative thinking

At the outset project planners should throw the net wide to ensure that all relevant issues are identified. Maintaining an open mind can enable you to develop novel approaches or solutions that may be missed if you are wedded to a certain outcome or direction.

Relevance to the Dog Park

The dog park that is planned with involvement from the following service areas – aged, disability, recreation services, open space, local laws, children's and risk management will optimise outcomes for a diverse number of groups in the community.

Benefit 5 – Effective planning incorporates data capture

It is important to identify what data you require so as to better understand your community and their behaviours, needs and aspirations. Collecting data about usage patterns, beliefs and trends enables you to monitor outcomes over time. The Victorian Department of Primary Industries document "How to Prepare a Domestic Animal Management Plan" identifies a number of key statistical reporting criteria relating to core service operations. Having a grasp of the social trends relating to the ageing community, shifts in population or exercise patterns enable you can be responsive to the changing needs of the community.

Inter-departmental cooperation can have benefits when collecting data. It can be relatively easy to add a question or two to a survey being run by another department. Perhaps a survey conducted as part of the recreation strategy could include questions around the frequency of walking with the dog. The healthy ageing strategy might ask questions relating to older people and the need for support services to help them keep their pets in their lives. It may be that you need to capture information relating to dog ownership in apartments or areas where subdivisions are occurring. These data will enable you to identify the best open space provision for dogs in these areas.

Relevance to the Dog Park

Understanding the level and type of dog ownership in an area and the demographic groups that are more likely to own dogs than others, will facilitate better planning for dogs. For example, an increasing number of people, notably grey nomads, are now travelling with their pets. What are the implications for small townships to attract these individuals with pet friendly accommodation options and wayside stops that cater for pet dog? With the relevant data available, discussion on whether the space is better considered as an on-leash, off-leash, dog park or 'no-dog' area can be best informed.

In summary then by the time you construct your dog park you will have:

- Ensured the dog park is located where people will want to go
- Considered the inclusion of a number of different activity spaces
- Considered opportunities to minimise maintenance requirements, particularly those relating to ground surfacing
- Included basic amenities such as shade, water and seating
- Addressed accessibility requirements relating to entries, proximity of car parking, footpath surfacing.

Dog parks should be considered as an addition to your existing complement of opportunities for dogs. They have some unique benefits if well designed and managed but as Allen, L (2007) writes "generally dog park design to date has not adequately addressed the social and behavioural patterns of dogs, health issues and environment and amenity considerations". Some of the design considerations that help prevent undesirable canine behaviour include:

- Providing multiple entries that are double gated
- Including fences that will minimise escape from the park and that have rounded corners
- Limiting the number of dogs allowed in the park at any one time
- Limiting the number of dogs that can accompany one person at a time
- Not encouraging young children in the dog park
- Locating dog parks away from playgrounds
- Locating amenities such as seating away from entries where they may cause congestion
- Including features that provide visual barriers which add interest and can help reduce arousal levels in dogs
- Not encouraging food or toys in the dog park to prevent protective aggression occurring
- Including a number of activity spaces and areas for small and large dogs or 'time out' areas
- Locating rules and regulations and council contact information in a prominent place
- Providing waste bins and considering the provision of plastic bags, however this may depend on council policy

Many issues can be minimised by carefully designing the facility and providing informative signage and guidelines for the use of the park. However, there are a number of concerns which are commonly raised when the establishment of off-leash areas ((OLA) or dog parks are considered

OLA or Dog parks can be hazardous for people

Dog bites are the most serious potential problem and there is always a great deal of interest in this issue. However, dog bites are more likely to occur on a dog's territory, either in the owner's home or its immediate vicinity, than they are in public open space (Podberscek & Blackshaw, 1990). Often the triggers for these territorial or protective behaviours are not present when in the neutral territory of a public park.

OLA or Dog parks can be hazardous for dogs

A study was conducted a study by Shyan, Fortune and King (2003) looking at dog-to-dog aggression in a 'bark park' indicates that inter-dog aggression is extremely rare, suggesting that such concerns are often exaggerated. Attention to risk management will optimise physical safety for dogs. The same risk minimisation considerations should apply to dog parks as it does to other open space areas.

Dedicating of public open space for a specific (and restricted) use

Open space planners try to avoid restricting the use of open space by fencing it or dedicating it to a specific use. However, the advantage of the dog park is that it can optimise the use of public open space by balancing access for different interest groups and facilitating the safe co-location of a number of activities in a limited environment. Dog parks also service the large percentage of the community that owns dogs.

Dogs can be a threat to park wildlife

The enclosing of an OLA to create a dog park minimises the potential for any adverse impact on wildlife and allows the dog park to be located closer to sensitive environments than open off-leash areas.

Dogs off-leash dogs can impact on other park users

Again, the dog park which is fully enclosed allows for a closer co-location of the dog park with other recreation activities and minimises potential conflict.

Dog faeces are unsightly and a health hazard

This is a fact. However, it must be recognised that dogs defecate whether or not they are on a leash or in a dog park. Rather, we need to change the attitude of those who allow their dogs to defecate on public property without picking-up afterward.

Councils may be concerned about possible public liability issues

A concern often voiced is that legalising the use of public property for off-leash recreation creates a public liability risk. This does not appear to be the experience of municipalities in the United States of America as indicated by the increasing numbers of dog parks from 253 in 1999 to 623 dog parks in 2004 (www.bestfriends.org/archives/forums/090604dogparks.html).

In summary then, effective service planning optimises service outcomes by building partnerships with relevant organisational and community stakeholders, fosters innovation and promotes the understanding of trends and changing community needs. In relation to the dog park, effective planning ensures that we address broader organisational issues, understand the needs of both the dog owning and non-dog owning members of the community, optimise the design outcomes for both human and canine users, and understand the role of the dog park in providing for dogs in open space areas.

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About the author

Lesley has a background in recreation, open space and health and wellbeing planning and policy and is currently working as a consultant to the local government sector. Lesley previously managed the Leisure and Parks portfolio for the Yarra Ranges Shire Council in Victoria. Lesley has prepared numerous recreation and open space strategies that have had to address issues and community needs relating to dogs in public open space. Lesley also worked with the City of Melbourne to produce the city's Animal Management Plan. Lesley is also a trustee with Animal Aid providing local government, business and policy advice and support to the organisation.

