The agony and the ecstasy: Animals, amalgamations and alignments

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Abstract

On Friday 10th August 2007 the Queensland Parliament passed laws to allow the decrease in the number of regional councils from 156 to 72. In March 2008 the former Caboolture, Pine Rivers and Redcliffe local governments were amalgamated to form Moreton Bay Regional Council (MBRC). The new council area covers 2011 sq km, and has a population of 343,553. It is represented by a Mayor and 12 divisional Councillors. In terms of animal management issues, there arere are some 65,000 dogs registered in MBRC and the area is home to rural and semi-rural areas populated with livestock. Mandatory cat registration was added in July this year. Amalgamation has required the alignment of three sets of procedures, different systems and 97 local laws. This paper discusses some of the highs and lows of the ongoing alignment from an Animal Management perspective.

Background

Moreton Bay Regional Council was created in March 2008 when the local government areas of Caboolture, Pine Rivers and Redcliffe were forcibly amalgamated (Figure 1). Moreton Bay Regional Council shares a boundary to the south with Brisbane City Council and in bordered to the north and west by the Sunshine Coast and Somerset Regional Councils respectively (Figure 2). To the east, MBRC includes most of Bribie Island and the coastal centres of Redcliffe and Deception Bay.

The purpose of this paper is not to debate the good, the bad or the ugly of local government amalgamations but to describe the evolution of three distinctly different councils into a single, much larger entity. The focus will of necessity be restricted to the adjustment and alignment of processes, policies and attitudes within the area of animal management.

The new organisation of MBRC could accurately be described as a "super shire" as it is the third largest in Australia by population. The new council area covers 2011 sq km, and has a population of 343,553, represented by a Mayor and 12 divisional Councillors and employing 2,300 staff. The region's growth rate of 4% means it will be home to almost 490,000 people in 2026.

Animal Management at Moreton Bay Regional Council falls within the division of Environment and Local Laws and is the role of the Community Response unit which also performs local law enforcement and compliance issues (overgrown allotments, nuisance complaints, parking, signage, boat ramps and jetties etc). Officers within the Community Response Unit are multi-skilled and must divide their efforts between each of these issues.

In terms of animal management issues, there are some 65,000 dogs currently registered in MBRC. With the introduction of state government mandated cat registration from 1 July 2009, there were approximately 2,000 cats registered by 1 September 2009 with numbers continuing to grow. The western areas of MBRC are rural or semi-rural varying from residential estates and hobby farms to farming communities. These communities may create issues related to the keeping of animals include a range of livestock.

Figure 1. Three local government areas were amalgamated to form the "super shire" that is now Moreton Bay Regional Council.

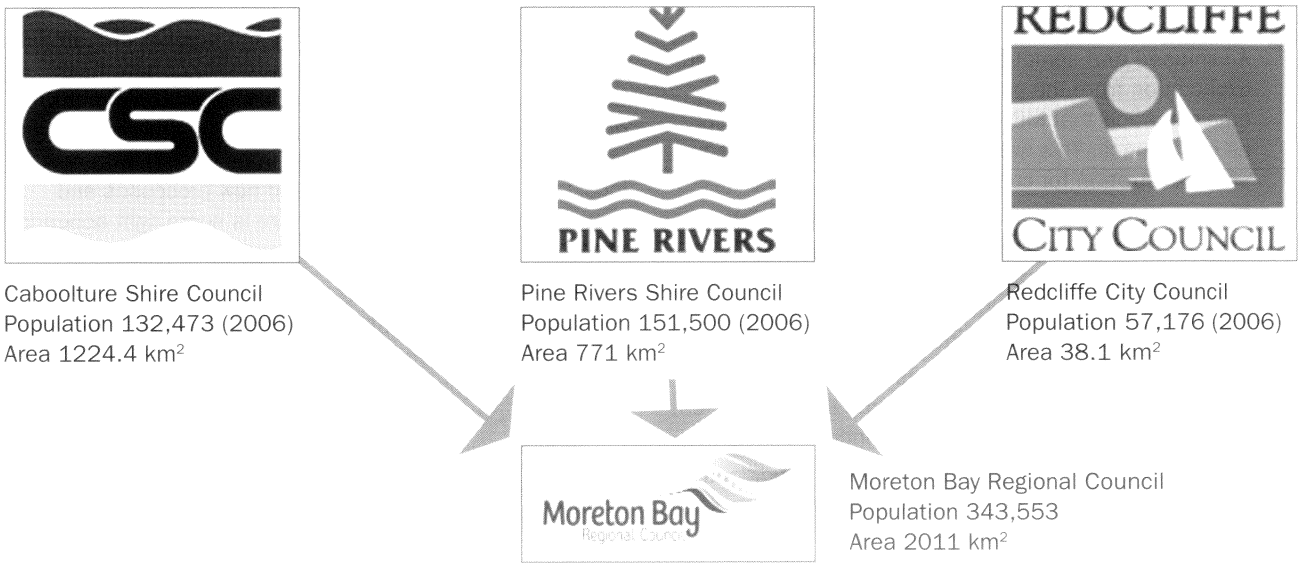
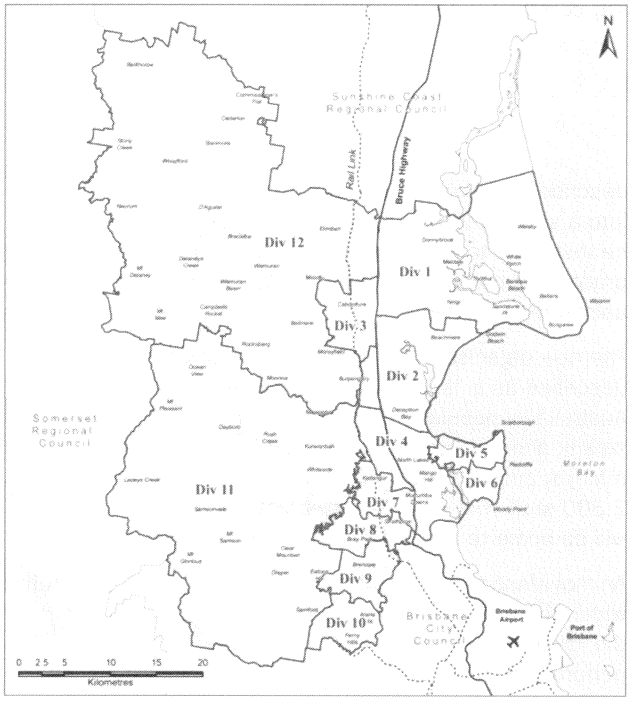


Figure 2. Moreton Bay Regional Council divisional map.



The agony

Changes that come with amalgamation can significantly disrupt work teams. Stress and even fear can become commonplace. Change of duties or workplace can be difficult enough, but if alignment is delayed by three different data management systems and three separated different customer service data systems a compliance and customer service team can quickly become frustrated, inefficient and confused. The following are just some of the hurdles that our teams have had to manage, while maintaining an efficient workplace and satisfying the expectations of the public and Councillors.

- Three "cultures" of staff, community and Councillors. People are comfortable with the familiar and any change to the status quo may be looked upon as being unfair or suspicious.
- A confused and sometime angry public – there was an expectation from the public that from the time of amalgamation that MBRC should be able to function as one council. This was not deliverable and caused some frustration for customers initially.
- Three sets of local laws exist relating to 3 districts. In some respects these are significantly different, particularly in terms of animal management. These differences include prohibitions and limitations on numbers and species of animals that can be kept.
- Three Town Plans with differences in definitions, regulations, conditions, limitations and responsibilities, particularly in terms of animal husbandry.
- Three sets of fees and charges, including conditions and rates for release of impounded animals, registrations and permits.
- Three different sets of procedures, protocols, policies and Key Performance Indicators.
- Different registration periods for dogs different for each district. Pine Rivers Shire Council had anniversary registrations with a lifetime tag, while both Caboolture and Redcliffe Councils had annual registrations with new tags issued.
- Three Electronic Data Management Systems (EDRMS). Caboolture Shire Council used "Trim" (Tower Records & Information Management), Redcliffe City Council used "Objective" (Objective Corporation) and Pine Rivers Shire Council used "Dataworks" (Avand/ TechnologyOne). Currently, staff from the three districts continue to use the original systems and must use Citrix (Citrix Systems) to log in and access data in other districts. Objective has been selected as the new EDRMS for Moreton Bay Regional Council with data to be moved across to that system by early 2010.
- Three separate Pathway (Infor) systems exist for the management of licences, registrations, permits and customer service requests. Although in each district Pathway is the common program, there are significant variations in questionnaires, conditions, request codes and versions. These systems are being aligned towards a single version of Pathway to be implemented by January 2009.
- Budget constraints have made it necessary to freeze vacant positions.

In addition, the new Animal Management (Cats and Dogs) Act 2008 came into force in July 2009, bringing with it further requirements and urgency for change and alignment.

The ecstasy

Amalgamation has required the alignment of three sets of procedures and different systems and the application of 97 local laws. While this has presented some significant challenges, it has given the unit an opportunity to reinvent itself by evaluating the operations of the three former animal management units, to discard those processes which are outdated or unsustainable while incorporating best practices into a new singular ideology and new procedures. For staff, the period since amalgamation has not been without its challenges. A number of staff have taken on new roles, new duties and/or have been transferred to new units and districts. Eighteen months down the road from amalgamation, the process of adjustment and alignment is still in its infancy, with new local laws yet to be developed and new processes and procedures evolving. However there is some light appearing at the end of the tunnel.

- The formation of MBRC has given the area a much greater sphere of influence than it may have had when previously represented by the three former, smaller councils. Moreton Bay Regional Council, as the third largest Council in Australia now has a significant voice in local government.
- Positions were clarified and the current structure released in September 2008.

- A new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement was finalised in March 2009, providing consistent conditions for MBRC staff.
- The department has supported a number team building and leadership workshops for all staff to address the anxieties that come with change.
- Moreton Bay regional Council representatives have been heavily involved in a number of stakeholder groups including the Queensland Companion Animal Management Group who devised the first code of practice for pet shops in Queensland, and were involved in the consultative phases of the new Animal Management Act. Members of the Community Response team have also been involved in Companion Animal Emergency Management and Animal Welfare focus groups.
- Moreton Bay Regional Council has begun a 2 year pilot program partially funded by the state government to investigate ways of reducing the numbers of unwanted cats and dogs in the community. A partnership with the Queensland RSPCA has enabled Council to offer heavily subsidised desexing of cats in targeted areas and to offer at cost microchipping to the community. From January 2009 to September 2009 this program has allowed MBRC to desex 400 cats and microchip over 2000 pets.
- The Community Response Unit has embraced the new Animal Management Act and developed new procedures accordingly.
- Cat registrations are being processed, with more than 2000 received to September 2009.
- Moreton Bay regional Council's 65,000 dog registration renewals have been aligned across all three districts to annual, with lifetime tags, a process that has not been without its challenges.
- Moreton Bay regional Council's Community Response Unit has worked with customer services units to ensure that services and responses to customers are as consistent as they can be.
- New staff rosters and training are being trialled to enhance the Caboolture Animal Management Facility – to boost its image and productivity from "pound" to a centre of excellence.
- A focus group has been formed to align the processes in each of the three district impounding facilities, two of which are managed in partnership with animal welfare agencies.
- A new "super pound" central to MBRC is proposed. The facility has the potential to become and Animal Management "hub" for the area, with the potential for a number of private public partnerships to operate from there.
- New local laws are being drafted, largely based on the model local laws for expediency, but with policies developed for best practice based on the previous experiences of the three districts.
- In 2010, new Pathway and EDRMS will be available and consistent across MBRC.
- An after-hours response system is running successfully, providing residents with a 24 hour emergency response via a contractor in the northern half of the district and roster Community Response Officers in the south.
- A Strategic Plan including a Business Plan has been drafted in consultation with staff.

Amalgamation has provided a number of challenges and opportunities. The greatest of the challenges lie in enforcement of any kind, particularly when dealing with significant differences that may exist along boundaries and between districts that are still operating under their own set of local laws and policies. Amalgamation has required staff to be resilient and flexible and to acquire a great deal of extra knowledge in a relatively short time frame. Community Response Officers that were once familiar with their local laws have had to expand their activities to those of two other districts. Managers have also had to be open, flexible and diligent to reduce the day to day confusion and anxiety that can come with great change. It is a credit to the staff of the Community Response Unit of Moreton Bay Regional Council that the unit has maintained high standards, embraced new local and state legislation and continued to provide quality customer service under what are sometimes trying circumstances. Not only has the unit maintained its place in the organisation, but during 2009 it has lead the way in implementing a number of innovative programs in Animal Management.