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## Living well together: Animal management as the key to people living with pets in the future

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Australia has one of the highest rates of pet ownership in the world - approximately every second household in our national community has at least one dog or one cat. Studies find that 91% of pet owners report feeling 'very close' to their pets, and decades of scientific research has found a range of health and social benefits that comes from pet ownership. However, when you have this many people and this many pets together in the same one community environment, you know that some social difficulties are going to arise – and they do. To think differently would be unrealistic.

Decades of experience, data, research and learning help us, however, to reliably anticipate what these negative issues are going to be. By endeavouring to address these issues more proactively and less reactively through skilful management by Animal Management Service, Local Government can expect to better meet its obligations to the Australian community.

This paper will draw from a recent, extensive research project called "Living Well Together" which addressed the subject of Australian companion animal ownership under the following headings: "Building Community", "Healthy Communities", "A Place For All", "Doing The Right Thing", "Making The Most of What You've Got" and "Catering For All". This paper presents several real life examples of where outside-the-box thinking, including progressive and proactive measures, can assist in promoting socially responsible pet ownership practices and a sense of community wellbeing.

*"Social capital is the social glue, the weft and warp of the social fabric which comprises a myriad of interactions that make up our public and private lives."*  
(Eva Cox, Boyer lecture, 1995)

### **Building community**

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<sup>1</sup>.

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.

In a recent Australian study, pet owners scored more highly on the social capital scale than those that did not. Furthermore, the research went on to show that pet ownership was positively associated with social interactions, favour exchanges, community involvement and increased feelings of neighbourhood friendliness and sense of community;<sup>2</sup> attributes not to be sneezed at.

With around 63% of Australians owning a pet, these benefits, when aggregated across the whole community, are of significant interest to local Councils and others concerned with building healthier, happier neighbourhoods. In addition, these benefits create a ripple effect that extends beyond pet owners into the broader community, with pets helping to smooth the way for social interaction and general 'out and about-ness'.

Both anecdote and research suggests that pets are well recognised ice-breakers. Dogs, for example, can stimulate conversation and contact between strangers<sup>3 4 5</sup> and trigger positive social interaction<sup>6</sup>. Dog walkers are also more likely to experience social contact and conversation than those that walk alone<sup>3</sup>. Similar findings have been demonstrated in an Australian study where half of all dog owners indicated that they had come to know locals in their suburb as a result of their dog<sup>2</sup>.

Even non pet owners recognise the value of pets as social ice-breakers, be it in their experience of speaking to dog walkers passing by their home, with neighbours who own a pet, or with dog owners at the local park<sup>7</sup>.

Residents or neighbours chatting to each other as a result of a pet is not just a social nicety. Such community-based interactions between people have the very real potential to break down the barriers

and stereotypes that separate us from 'others' while playing an important role in building trust and a deep sense of community at the neighbourhood level.

## **Healthy communities**

*"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." - World Health Organisation*

Obesity, poor nutrition and sedentary lifestyles have been described as a 21st century plague in developed countries. In addition, depression and anxiety are estimated to effect one in four people during their lifetime<sup>8</sup> and it is predicted that these will be a leading cause of disability around the globe by 2020<sup>9</sup>.

While not negating the role of individual choices, the environments in which we live and work play a critical role in shaping our health opportunities and behaviour. Mounting attention has therefore recently turned to the role that the built environment and local community can play in determining our health.

Physical activity for example, can be influenced by the availability and quality of local parks, shops and other walkable destinations, road networks, footpaths, traffic and road safety, street lighting, and the presence of nature<sup>10</sup>. Many of these elements also impact on mental health, for example the social connections that are generated through the use of parks, open space and public places.

Communities and councils around Australia are recognising the impact that they can have in fostering active living, strong social connections and sound quality of life for all residents.

## **DOG WALKING AND PHYSICAL HEALTH**

Walking and physical activity is strongly linked to improved general health and lower risks of obesity, heart disease and blood pressure problems.

Many studies now associate pets, and particularly dogs with increased levels of physical activity. Australian research indicates that not only do dogs motivate their owners to walk more often and meet recommended levels of physical activity<sup>11</sup>; but also that children who own dogs are less likely to become overweight or obese<sup>12</sup>. With obesity also a growing problem among the pet population<sup>13</sup> dogs themselves stand to benefit.

## **MENTAL AND SOCIAL HEALTH**

There is increasing evidence of the benefits that physical activity has on mental health and wellbeing<sup>14</sup>. Walking for example, can provide contact with nature which can be restorative, provide stress relief and be beneficial to mental health<sup>15</sup>. Similarly, it also provides opportunities for informal contact with others.

More people and dogs out walking, combined with an increase in regular walks, can further a sense of safety in the community<sup>16</sup> while well exercised dogs are less likely to behave anti-socially<sup>17</sup>. All of which is critical in building and maintaining community cohesion, pride, and social capital. This in turn has been linked to better general health<sup>18</sup>, lower mortality rates<sup>19</sup>, positive child development<sup>20</sup> and less violent crime<sup>21</sup>.

## **A place for all**

The extent to which communities include pets and their owners is an issue that affects a substantial slice of the population. In Australia, pubs, cafes and apartments are still viewed as primarily 'people only' zones, yet Europe and the US provide countless examples where pets are welcomed in such venues. However the scattered examples that do occur within Australia suggest that the benefits of embracing pets within the community far outweigh the surrounding tensions and concerns.

## **A PLACE FOR PETS IN HOUSING**

Traditional patterns of Australian housing are changing. The single house on a quarter acre block is not only less common, but less sustainable. Renting is increasingly becoming the only affordable option for many, while longer life expectancy and declining fertility rates have led to more people living alone and more childless couples<sup>22</sup>.

This social phenomenon is producing an increased community desire for residential options that allow for companion animals. To date, public housing acts, body corporate documents and tenancy agreements have often defaulted to a blanket "no pet" rule, usually determined well before full consideration is given to the options and opportunities of pet friendly housing.

## **A PLACE FOR PETS IN OUR SOCIALISING**

Places where people can meet informally to chat and socialise contribute greatly to community vitality and sense of community. Without such places, the urban area fails to nourish the kinds of relationships and the diversity of human contact that are the essence of the city<sup>23</sup>. Deprived of these settings, people remain lonely within their crowds. While a number of pet-friendly places where people can eat and drink are beginning to emerge in Australia, they are few and far between, a somewhat ironic factor given our alfresco, pet-friendly climate. Pets can add to the social ambience and conviviality of cafes and pubs and be good for business in the process. Neither do they have to take an 'all or nothing' approach. The allocation of outdoor areas or the addition of 'pet friendly' nights can help to address the needs of various patrons.

## A PLACE FOR PETS AT WORK

In Australia the dog on the back of the tradesman's ute is the most iconic form of pets in the workplace, but other less visible examples include the nursing home with its visiting cat, the hairdressing salon with the sleeping dog in the corner, and the garden nursery with its wandering parrot. While not always possible or practical, with a bit of lateral thinking, it can be both feasible and positive to include pets in the workplace.

### ***Doing the right thing***

Shared use of public space and the needs of different user groups is a common issue that arises in communities and falls within the remit of local councils. When rules about who can use what areas and when are simply imposed from 'top-down', there is a risk of some community resistance and loss of goodwill.

More 'bottom up' alternatives focus instead on engaging with the community, whether this be through a formal consultation, a needs assessment process or plain old fashioned talking to those people impacted.

Fundamentally most people want to 'do the right thing' by others and their community, but sometimes may not be aware of the issues or the consequences of their current actions, or feel that their voice can be heard.

The role of social norms in facilitating cooperation and mutual benefit for community members is one of the platforms of social capital<sup>24</sup>. This can apply to a range of community issues, from the way in which we respond to climate change, resolve disputes with neighbours, care for those who are disadvantaged, and cooperate when shared use of space or amenities is required.

It has been said that 'the good community' is not created through singular reliance on formal controls, but rather it achieves social order through mutual engagement and negotiation among residents, mediating institutions, and agencies of law enforcement<sup>25</sup>.

### ***Making the most of what you've got***

*"Every community has more potential resources than any one person knows."*<sup>26</sup>

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).

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.

## VOLUNTEERING

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

However, the desire to help others in the community is the most frequently cited motivation for volunteering in Australia<sup>27</sup>. As well as the obvious benefits that volunteer services provide to recipients, the very act of volunteering itself can fulfill an individual's need to belong, feel valued and find meaning in life<sup>28</sup>. Indirectly, the individual benefits of volunteering then go on to flow into greater levels of community trust and civic engagement<sup>29</sup> and help to build community goodwill and community mindedness.

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND PLACE

Enhancing 'the fit' between existing resources and community needs can often be both more effective and less expensive 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<sup>30</sup>.

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***

*"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<sup>31</sup>.

### SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

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.

Pets can sometimes play an important role in assisting independent living and mobility.

### DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS

Pets are a great leveller, transcending racial, cultural, 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 an animal being the catalyst for communication between timid patients and health professionals.

### SOCIETAL FRINGE

Pets have also 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. The same applies to 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<sup>32</sup>.

### SUPPORTING OUR COMMUNITIES

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 to buffering the impact of grief, traumatic events and loneliness<sup>7</sup>.

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.

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.

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