

4. DOG TRAINING COURSES

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The purpose of this report is to provide information on the value of the various dog training courses held throughout the city as a possible method to encourage responsible dog owners and reduce the time taken for them to achieve the Council's Responsible Dog Owner status.

This information was requested by the Committee at its March 2003 meeting after hearing from Mr Chris Steel (Straven Road Veterinary Clinic) and Mr Les Bruce (former Police dog handler) on the dog training programme they offer, which includes Council requirements of dog owners. Mr Steel sought Council's endorsement of this training programme.

Whilst on the face of it Mr Steel's request seems perfectly reasonable, Council endorsement of this particular training programme would probably lead to similar requests from other training providers. Animal Control staff would have to try and assess the merits of each training programme because there is no national standard that can be applied. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority does provide an Animal Training Certificate which covers a number of industry related standards, but it does not include dog legislation or Council requirements.

There are only five dog training providers listed in the yellow pages, so assessment by our officers if Council endorsement was sought by some or all of those providers should be possible. However, the Director of Legal and Secretariat Services does not believe the Council should become involved in endorsing the products of operators (see comments below).

The other question the Committee has asked is whether or not there is merit in reducing the time required to achieve Responsible Dog Owner (RDO) status if an owner has attended an approved dog training course. Currently RDO status is not awarded until the dog's second year of registration, although in most cases the owner pays only a portion of the first year's fee depending upon when they acquired and registered their dog. For example, if a person first registered their dog in January, they would pay \$40 (\$35 if it was neutered or spayed) as only half of the registration year is left. In June they would pay \$47 for the following year if their application for RDO status was successful. The financial incentive for an earlier granting of RDO status is \$33 or less. When this is balanced against the cost of a training course (around \$80), the financial incentive can at best be described as minimal.

Two further factors weigh against this proposal. Firstly, if RDO status is granted after the owner provides evidence of having completed a training programme, the Council would then have to organise a refund. This is a time consuming and costly process in itself. Secondly, the Animal Control Team Leader (Mark Vincent) is of the view that the sort of people who take their dogs to training courses will be responsible dog owners in any case. He does not believe the "problem" group of owners would attend training sessions even if they were free. On balance, this proposal does not appear to be worth pursuing.

The Director of Legal and Secretariat Service comments:

"In my view the Council should not become involved in endorsing particular operators in this type of situation. The Council is the administrator of the Dog Control Act 1996 and as such sets policy under that Act and also enforces its provisions. In the future the Council is potentially in a situation where it may have to enforce provisions of the Act in respect of persons who have attended a course that the Council has endorsed. This also has the potential for the Council to become involved in a civil issue between the dog trainer and the dog owner as to the value of the particular course in question, particularly if the enforcement undertaken by the Council is in relation to an offence involving dog biting.

In my view the Council should not be in a situation of having to enforce dog biting laws and having the dog owner raise as a defence before the District Court the fact that the Council itself was involved in the training of the dog and such training must have been insufficient otherwise the person would not have been brought before the Court. It adds a difficulty to the enforcement role for the Council which is unnecessary.

Further there is the potential that with the Council's endorsement, complaints regarding the course itself may well come back to the Council with an expectation that somehow the Council is responsible for the content of the course or any other factors when the Council has no direct involvement at all.

There would also be a precedent effect such that if there is to be endorsement in this area, then other persons engaged in the dog area, such as the supplier of dog food or other dog products, could fairly ask why the Council was not prepared to endorse their particular products.

In conclusion, in my view the Council should not become involved in endorsing the product of a particular operator as proposed."

Staff

Recommendation: That further consideration be given to this issue by the Animal Control Team, noting that further matters may arise as a result of the review of the Dog control Act 1996.

Chairman's

Recommendation: That the above recommendation be adopted and that Mr Steel be thanked for his presentation to the Committee and his continuing good work in animal welfare.