

7. PAYMENT OPTIONS FOR DOG REGISTRATION FEES

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The purpose of this report is to outline possible payment options for dog registration fees, as requested by the Committee at its Annual Plan meeting.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 1993 the Animal Control Team recognised that some dog owners struggle to meet their financial and therefore legal obligation to register their dogs for the up coming registration period. A number of options were discussed, with the "time payment" scheme being the most preferred option. This option would enable dog owners to "pay off" their dog registration fees over an agreed period of time.

At the outset it was envisaged that only those dog owners who really struggled to pay this annual fee would actually be given the opportunity to take advantage of the scheme, but by the end of the 1994/95 financial year this scheme had blown way out of control and the handful of dog owners turned out to be hundreds. By 1995/96 the scheme had become an administrative nightmare and required approximately 1.5 FTEs to manage and monitor the process.

This scheme required initial set up work for the Council, the purchase of additional stationery for contract documents, the training of cashiers on receipting functions, modifying software and setting up of back room financial services staff.

THE PROCESS

- Council staff carried out the initial time payment negotiation, agreement and signing of the "time payment contracts" with each dog owner.
- Dog registration staff filed and stored contract documents.
- Cashiers processed the receipting of the transaction – each transaction incurred a \$1.00 cost, which was charged to the dog registration account regardless of the amount of the transaction.
- Each transaction had to be cross-referenced to ensure the amount was credited to the correct dog owner against each dog.
- Dog registration staff had to monitor the payments to ensure each dog owner met the agreed contract conditions.
- Where conditions were not met officers were sent to visit the dog owner and remind them of their contractual arrangement or issue legal documents to register the dog.
- Non-payment meant debt collection agencies were involved to recover the debt; payment of these agencies increased the cost of running the time payment scheme.
- Many dog owners failed to complete the payments in full.

This scheme was abandoned at the commencement of the 1997/98 dog registration period. It began in recognition of the day to day financial difficulties some dog owners experience, but ended in administrative chaos and the feeling amongst staff that such schemes ought to be avoided in the future. Rather than try to manage dog owners' finances for them, it was considered more appropriate to offer financial reward through Responsible Dog Owner status. A further reason for abandoning the scheme was the introduction of the Dog Control Act in 1996, which enabled officers to issue \$200 infringement fines for non-payment of registration fees.

OPTIONS

Voucher System

A possibility is a "voucher type" system (similar to CD or petrol vouchers), which would enable dog owners to purchase different denominations of voucher (\$5, \$10 or \$20) that could only be redeemable for the payment of dog registration fees. Investigation of this idea has indicated, however, that set up costs, printing and security of vouchers is likely to be prohibitive.

Time Payment Scheme

Recent discussions with Financial Services indicate that a "time payment" scheme could be considered within the existing GEMS database for cash receipting. This system effectively attaches all receipts directly to the dog, and would require less work than the scheme operated previously. However, it will still involve additional staff time over and above the normal registration process.

Many businesses charge a fee to cover the administrative costs associated with time payment. The Courts, for example, charge an administration fee of \$35 for each infringement. In the case of dog registration fees, however, our solicitor has advised that we cannot lawfully charge any more than the set fees recently adopted by the Council.

Recommendation: That the information be received.

Recommendation from the Chair: That the Legal Services Unit explore an appropriate mechanism under the Dog Control Act 1996 for the possible introduction of a time payment system for dog registration fees.