



A Sustainable Approach to Animal Welfare

Louth County Council



Title of the case

A sustainable approach to animal welfare.

General description of the organisation and / or project

County Louth is situated on the North-East coast of Ireland. One of 29 elected county councils in the State, Louth County Council is a local authority charged with the provision of local services to its population of over 100,000 people.

This objective of this project was to transform the approach to stray animal care and re-homing (mainly dogs) in County Louth local authority area by developing, through internal collaboration, better enforcement and innovative design, an environmentally sustainable modern facility.

The main content of the case

In September 2005, Louth County Council opened the doors of the new Animal Compound, which was the fruition of the 3-year project, to improve the facilities offered by the county to the animals housed at the pound, the staff and the visiting public.

This new premises represents the best of its type in the country and will serve the county well for many years to come. The specification includes:

- 16 individual kennels, with under-floor heating, each unit sealed for disease control;
- 4 large stables;
- Large modern reception foyer with separate wardens' office, kitchen, food store and disabled bathroom;
- Vet's office, treatment room and potential operating theatre for neutering dogs;
- Walk-in chill room for hygienic storage ;
- Enclosed yard with vehicle wash area and secure storage of vehicles, horsebox and trailer;
- Landscaped grounds with high security fencing and CCTV (closed-circuit television);
- Enclosed, pea-gravel horse exercise area;
- Public picnic area, complete with recycled plastic picnic table.

The reasons behind the case

The Need for the Project

In 2002, Louth County Council's 75 year old warden decided to retire. This precipitated a full review of the service. The pound facilities up to 2002 were very inadequate, with only very basic kennels and no stables. The re-homing rates for impounded dogs were negligible. Likewise enforcement on the ground was minimal with only four fines issued in that year and the annual dog licence numbers were 1,800. The service to the public was weak, with areas in the county being served only on certain days of the week. The review led to a full strategy being developed to create a service that would better serve the community and the animals.

Legal Reasons

Louth County Council has duties under various pieces of legislation which dictates the operations carried out by the service. The obligations and requirements of the legislation can be summarised as follows:

Control of Dogs Act 1986-92

This legislation obliges the council to provide at least one dog warden for the county. The dog legislation is the most specific, requiring all dogs to be licensed and to be kept under control at all times whilst in public places. The act allows for fixed penalties to be issued and for offending dogs to be impounded.

Control of Horses Act 1996

This piece of legislation allows for stray horses to be impounded and also fixed penalties to be issued. It also allows local authorities to introduce byelaws to control horses locally. With byelaws any area within the county can be declared a control zone where horses needed to be licensed and micro-chipped by the local authority. It also allows exclusion zones to be declared, where horses are not allowed under any circumstances.

Animals Act 1985

This allows the local authority to impound any animal found wandering in a public place.

Pounds Act 1935 & 1985

This details the requirements for a local authority to provide a pound facility and also specifies the daily fees to be charged in respect of the different species of animals impounded.

The above requirements create a natural demarcation between the roles of the local authority veterinary service and the Department of Agriculture and Food veterinary service. All animals in public places generally fall under the control of the local authority whilst large animals on private land are the concern of the Department of Agriculture.

The actors behind the case

The pound was fully designed 'in house' with close co-operation between the architect and engineer from the Housing Section, the county veterinary officer and the senior executive officer from the Environment Section of Louth County Council. Visits were organized to various pounds around the country, including the recently built, €4 million headquarters for the ISPCA in Longford. The final design was sent to a quantity surveyor for costing, but proved too expensive at €1.5 million. By adopting a *Kingspan* framework and other minor modifications, the overall facilities were preserved whilst reducing the cost to €1.25 million. The tender phase was also successful, with the winning tender coming from a local builder, and at **€1,067,000**, reduced the cost even more. This builder had already successfully tendered for 3 local authority housing schemes within the last few years and so had a good history with Louth County Council

The process leading to success

The plan was to replace the retired warden with two new wardens. These wardens would be fully resourced and would be active in the areas of enforcement. It was crucial that the majority of the dogs in the county would come into the dog licence net, as this would create the necessary revenue stream to further improve the service and fund the construction of the new pound. It would also increase the levels of dog control in the county, by reducing the stray dog population and imposing the requirements of the legislation on all the dog owners. Also the existing pound would be discontinued and a new interim pound would be sourced until the new pound was completed. The interim pound would have stabling facilities this time, to allow horses to be impounded. This would enable the horse control legislation to be fully applied, by enacting byelaws under the Control of Horses Act.

The new pound would have excellent facilities and be a beacon for sustainable, quality animal control. It would also improve customer service immeasurably through better location and better facilities for the visiting public. The opening hours would be extended from an hour a day to all day. The site would be very accessible, with good off road parking and fully enclosed landscaped grounds, allowing time and space for families to interact with the animals. This will be especially useful when people need to spend time to decide on the re-homing of an animal.

The project would also focus on I.T., utilising this new medium of communication to push the boundaries of customer service, by putting the pound fully online. This will allow the public to see in real time, from the comfort of their homes or office, exactly what dogs are in the pound. Also, it will facilitate owners of lost dogs to check if their dog is at the pound.

Results indicating the success

Interim pound

In mid-2002, we sourced an interim pound in the shape of an abandoned farmyard, which was leased by Louth County Council until the new pound was ready in 2005. It consisted of 4 stables, one of which was converted into an office for the wardens, and a barn that was converted into 5 large kennels with outdoor runs. The pound did not have the means to individually kennel dogs and, coupled with the poor surfaces, it made disease control very difficult.

The basic facilities did not do much for staff morale either. The pound was quite isolated and unattractive to the public, especially in the dark wet days of the winter. This had the knock-on effect on the dog re-homing rates, and, whilst the statistics were running at a credible 26%, which was among the best in the country, it was obvious that the more centrally-located pound with good facilities would attract more visitors and thus improve the chances of the dogs finding a new home.

New Site

A new site was identified in 2002, being a tract of land beside the M1 motorway that was formerly used by the construction crews whilst the motorway was being built.

It was centrally located within the county and, being sandwiched between the M1 and the Dublin-Belfast railway line, it was not going to cause any undue disturbance.

Funding

The funding issue was critical to the overall success of the operation and was dealt with on three fronts.

1) The Control of Horses Act 1996 was administered by the Department of Agriculture but enforced by the local authority. The act contained provisions that all reasonable expenses could be recouped by the local authority and so verification was sought that the new pound would be eligible. In total the Department of Agriculture agreed to fund 40% of the cost, especially as we had been quite active enforcing the Act through Byelaws.

2) The two major town councils, Dundalk Town Council & Drogheda Borough Council, both agreed to contribute €100,000 each, as the dog warden service covers the county as a whole.

3) The balance needed was €140,000, which would need to come from the dog licence income. In 2002 we had 1,800 dog licenses but following active campaigns by newly recruited dog wardens this figure rose to 5,000 in 2003 and is now running at an average of 8,000 a year. Coupled with a revision of charges at the pound (re-homing fees, surrender charges, re-claim charges) the pound generates an income of €128,000 per year, more than sufficient to service a loan for the balance.

Environmental Aspects

As the Veterinary Office operates under the wing of the Environment Section in Louth County Council, it was decided to incorporate some appropriate features during construction, the most significant being the following;

The site is quite exposed and so we investigated the idea of installing a wind turbine. The 2.5KW unit was selected, which supplies approximately 40% of the electricity of the building. Also, being close to the M1 and a flyover with tall lights, the turbine is not in any way obtrusive.

A state of the art animal waste disposal system was installed to handle all animal waste effectively.

Picnic tables located in the grounds are made completely from recycled plastic.

The design of the building ensures minimal noise disturbance. A central wall running the length of the pound blocks line of sight and so helps dogs settle quickly.

Efficiency

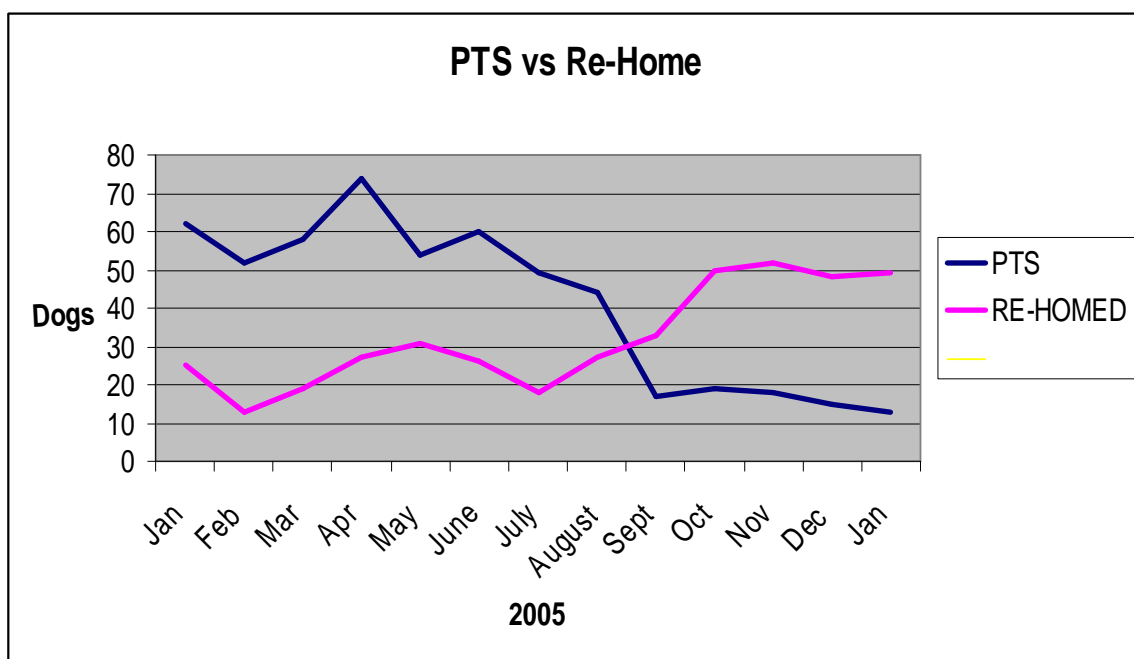
The pound has become one of the sites for **wireless broadband**, with the erection of a satellite dish on the roof of the pound, bouncing off Mt. Oriel, thereby networking the Animal Compound to County Hall. The system went 'live' in December 2005. The advantages of this are:

- IT access speeds at the pound, similar to all offices in County Hall.

- Being able to discontinue the ISDN line connection, saving on both line rental and call charges for e-mail, internet and database connections.
- Using voice over internet protocol (VoIP) thus routing all telephone traffic between the pound and County Hall over the wireless broadband, creating 'free calls'.
- Being able to route all the CCTV cameras over the wireless broadband link allowing authorised personnel in County Hall to have a cost-free live link to the pound.

The Results

Public visits to the new pound have rocketed, and the rates of re-homing have more than doubled. The figures for the first month of operation show a 66% re-homing rate, compared to the average of 26% in the old pound. The picture before the new pound opened in September 2005, the graph has completely flipped, and the trend now is that the majority of dogs are now re-homed.



Also, the size and design of the building, with secure enclosed grounds, lends itself to accommodating visitors such as school tours. We are currently drawing up a programme, involving consultation with the local national schools and our own environmental awareness office, to run school tours of the facility, to include many environmental issues.

Staff morale is excellent with the improved facilities and the animals housed are much happier, with no disease incidents to date.

The main obstacles of the case

The main obstacle was the need to convince senior management that the service needed not just an immediate short-term fix but also a substantial long-term fix. As this would involve significant capital expenditure and also an increase in staff numbers, it was necessary to find avenues of funding that would justify the case.

Another obstacle was to source a suitable site for the new pound, as it needed to be both accessible and visible to encourage greater use by the public, but also suitably remote so as not to be a source of nuisance to any neighbours.

Main sources of inspiration behind the case

The inspiration came from two recent appointments to the section. A senior administrator had previous experience in enforcement activities, having recently pioneered a council run, pay-parking scheme for a major town in the county. A new veterinary officer had come from the private sector, and had much experience running veterinary hospitals. Collectively they supplied the knowledge to fund and to construct the project.

The inspiration was further fine-tuned by visiting various pounds around the country; drawing on all the best aspects and learning from any mistakes.

The most important lesson learned

Our take-home lesson is that any project, no matter how urgent it may be, needs to show reasonable sources of financing before it will be considered. It is often a case that the necessary financing needs to be cobbled together through various means such as grants, service charges and fees. Positively exploring any increases in duties or obligations can often create opportunities for new sources of funding.

Expenses can also be reduced by having a hands-on approach to a project rather than outsourcing to consultants. There is often a vast array of expertise within the organization that can be tapped at minimal expense.

This project caters for all classes of people, both the dog lover and the non-dog lover. Our services are used by a wide variety of people that do not actually own a dog but rely on the service. These include the postman and health visitors who need to be able to visit houses and estates without fear of attack by savage dogs. They include farmers that need to protect their sheep, cyclists and motorists who use the public highways and responsible dog owners who take their dogs out on a lead.

Finally, we are always mindful of our position in the Environment Section of Louth County Council. We often preach about the need for sustainability so we felt it was vital to actually practice what we preach and include some elements of sustainability in the project. We always feel that it is important that we lead by example.