

# "Bow wow leash me now!" dog owner behaviour change campaign

## COUNCIL NAME

Byron Shire Council

## WEB ADDRESS

[byron.nsw.gov.au](http://byron.nsw.gov.au)

## SIZE

556 square kilometres

## POPULATION

34,500

## Overview

Leash-Up is an innovative community engagement project aimed at increasing dog-leashing compliance in public spaces to reduce the risk of dog-koala attacks. Koalas are vulnerable in NSW and, in Byron Shire, increasing dog ownership in rural and peri-urban environments is increasing the likelihood of dogs-koala interactions. The project adopted a social marketing approach, guided by the theory of behaviour change, to engage with dog owners. By understanding attitudes and norms of dog owners, a targeted, engaging and effective campaign was developed. By using social media and a dedicated website, Byron Shire Council was able to measure the reach and influence of the campaign. Post-campaign surveys at the pilot study site indicated an 11.4% increase in dog leashing, with the greatest increase (26%) in large dogs. There was a 20% increase in dog owners leashing their dogs in streets and parks.

## Background

Domestic dog attack is the third largest human-induced threat to koalas after habitat loss and vehicle strike. In the last decade, 230 koalas were rescued from dog attack in the Northern Rivers. Estimates suggest 50% of Byron Shire's 15,646 households own a dog, and recorded dog attacks in Byron Shire have tripled in three years to 59 in 2020, with 70% of attacks involving other animals. Dogs are naturally curious and koalas will respond aggressively if they feel threatened, which poses a high risk to both dogs and koalas. Koala skin punctures easily, and dogs carry bacteria in their mouths that can cause severe infections in koalas, eventually leading to slow, painful death.

Keeping a dog restrained in places where it may encounter a koala is one way to reduce the risk of dog-koala interactions. Greater dog control in open spaces also reduces risks to other native animals including threatened shorebirds. However, dog control is a sensitive issue and changing human behaviour is difficult. Literature indicates the despite decades of effort, dog owner education to change leashing behaviour has been largely ineffective.

The objectives of the Bow wow! Leash me now! community engagement campaign were to:

- Raise awareness of dog leashing as an issue requiring action;
- Support dog owners to increase their leashing behaviour, resulting in an increase above the 31% on-leash levels in West Byron Koala Management Precinct;
- Increase dog owner understanding of Byron's biodiverse environment and specifically the threat posed by dogs to koalas and other wildlife;
- Communicate in an engaging and warm manner that builds good will and connects with the target audience in a memorable way.

## Implementation

The Leash-Up project ran from June 2020 – June 2021. It was funded by a \$84,890 grant under the NSW Koala Strategy's 'Conservation through Community Action' pillar.

Byron Shire took a novel approach with the Leash-Up project. It researched attitudes and social norms of the target dog-owner community, and developed and pre-tested a communications strategy incorporating social behaviour change theory. A summary of the approach and timeframes is outlined below.

**June 2020:** Pilot study site selected in a subdivision bordered by koala habitat, with koala sightings within 100 metres of houses, high dog ownership, and proximity (1 km) to a designated off-leash area.



**July 2020:** Field surveys at pilot study site to gauge pre-campaign off-leashing rate.

**Aug-Sep 2020:** On-line dog-owner survey, with prize incentives, to identify dog owner behaviour, attitudes and social norms.

**Oct 2020-Jan 2021:** Communications Strategy developed, based on survey results and guided by theory of planned behaviour, development of campaign messages and creative concepts.

**Feb 2021:** Testing draft creative concepts with dog owner target audience via online survey, with prize incentives, to identify value propositions most likely to motivate owners to leash their dogs.

**March 2021:** Finalisation of campaign based on concept testing and Council stakeholder input

**Apr-Jun 2021:** Deployment of Bow Wow! Leash-me now! media campaign for eight weeks, including

- Installation of on-ground signs in pilot study area, displaying 8 different messages aimed at reaching pedestrians
- 6-week television campaign: 'if koalas could talk', across 3 commercial networks in Northern NSW
- Facebook boosted post 'if dogs could talk' video
- Website landing page including TV and Facebook videos, plus video with Friends of Koala veterinarian
- Digital display ads; ten different ads with messages based on target group interests identified via surveys. Deployed via Google ads and targeted at dog owners in the project area
- All digital elements were set up to drive traffic to Council's webpage.



**June 2021:** Follow up field surveys at pilot study site to gauge post-campaign off-leashing rate and 5-minute, online post-campaign survey to benchmark campaign awareness and changes in attitudes compared to prior measures.

## Outcomes

Pre-campaign surveys at the pilot study site indicated a 69% dog off-leash rate in natural public spaces where dogs should be leashed. 401 people (5.1% of dog owning households) completed the preliminary dog-owner survey, with 154 of these registering interest in participating in future research. The survey found that dog owners highly value off-leash walking (91%), with many perceiving this behaviour as harmless and discretionary (33%) and necessary for dogs to exercise. The survey found a strong social norm not to leash dogs in on-leash public spaces, and the limited size and number of dog off-leash public spaces made them inconvenient to use.

Concept testing indicated that the propositions most likely to encourage leashing among non-leashing dog owners are: reduced stress for other dogs and people; preventing a fine; preventing unwanted interactions, aggression and bites; and helping to protect the shire's biodiversity. Engagement concepts were developed to communicate the most highly ranked persuasions to leash.

Results from the digital campaign:

- Digital display ads resulted in over 500,000 viewable impressions, with 925 click throughs to Council's dog-leashing web page, making this page the 4th most visited page on Council's website over the campaign period (3,400 page views).
- The television advertisement – 'if koalas could talk' reached 53% TV viewing households 3+ times and 41% TV viewing households 7+ times across the Northern Rivers.

- Facebook video – “if dogs could talk” – 13,000 views, 190+ likes, 60+ shares and 80+ comments, creating a community conversation reflecting the varying opinions identified in the community surveys.

Post-campaign surveys at the pilot study site indicated an 11.4% increase in dog leashing, with the greatest increase (26%) in large dogs. There was a 20% increase in dog owners leashing their dogs in streets and parks. This indicates a positive result from the campaign communications. 62 respondents completed the post-campaign benchmarking survey, which indicated:

- 29% awareness of ‘If koalas could talk’ TV ad
- 17% awareness of ‘If dogs could talk’ video
- 13% awareness of digital ads

The survey suggested that participants felt more positive about dog leashing after the campaign.

## Key Learnings

- Byron Shire has a large, active dog-owner community that wants to be part of the conversation about koala safety.
- Wildlife conservation is not the most appealing motivator to change dog leashing behaviour but gives a ‘feel good’ to those leashing; stronger drivers include risk of fines and concern for dog safety and wellbeing.
- Reaching dog owners in high numbers, and generating message recall, requires multi-pronged media and high repetition.
- Short boosted videos increase audience engagement and the sharing of important information.
- Social media is effective in directing website traffic and allows simple monitoring of the level of interest in the issue.
- Human behaviour is very hard to change so aim for small increments of change. Shifting social norms takes longer than two months and requires consistent, ongoing effort.
- To ensure project benefits are ongoing, the engagement tools developed (artwork, videos) are available for future use.
- As off-leash dog walking is highly valued, more off-leash areas with fencing, seats and shade are also needed.

## Contact

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This project was the 2021 winner of the Communication, Education and Empowerment Award at the LGNSW Excellence in the Environment Awards