

Information to Dog Owners

Before any action is taken, the Shire requires a reasonable level of proof that a dog is creating a nuisance by barking. The dog owner may not believe their dog is barking excessively and may be affronted at the thought a neighbour has complained to the Shire. However, what the dog owner should understand is that someone has felt sufficiently annoyed to lodge a complaint and that the Shire has an obligation to investigate it.

The decision to infringe, prosecute or take no action lies with the Shire and will be made following a thorough investigative process. It is imperative that the dog owner cooperates and focuses their attention on taking proactive and constructive action to resolve the nuisance (if proven) rather than focusing on who made the complaint.

The Shire will not provide details of complainants, only the specific allegations. However, should the matter proceed to Court complainants will be required to give evidence in support of prosecution arising from their complaint.

A dog owner may be able to verify or refute a complaint by:

1. Checking with nearby neighbours to establish when and how often the barking may occur and whether it is a nuisance to other neighbours. If you have a personal relationship with one or more of your neighbours, it may be they have not mentioned anything in the past for fear of upsetting you or spoiling the relationship.
2. Leaving home and returning, without the dog noticing, at the times the nuisance barking is alleged to be occurring. It is recommended this practice be repeated a number of times to either confirm or refute the claim, or to establish a pattern to the barking.
3. Having an independent neighbour or neighbours keep a diary of your dog's barking, asking them to observe and report if there is a trigger to the barking. These observations and recordings may:
 - a. establish the duration, time and nature of the barking;
 - b. confirm there is indeed a problem that needs to be addressed;
 - c. match the barking to a regularly occurring event in the neighbourhood; and
 - d. determine whether the actions of a third party (neighbours, children, local youth) are causing the barking to occur (photographic or video evidence, or a willingness to provide a witness statement would assist).
4. Discretely boarding the dog at another location for a few days. During this time you may request the Shire to make enquiries with the complainants to determine if they heard the dog during the time the dog was absent. A signed receipt from a boarding kennel or statutory declaration from the person boarding the dog should be obtained and provided to the Shire as evidence.

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One or more factors may contribute to nuisance barking. These include:

1. **Inappropriate confinement** – prolonged, sudden or inappropriate restraint (tethering or confinement) without exercise or attention.
2. **Fence line distractions** – a dog kept behind a barrier such as a front or back fence may bark at visual or auditory stimuli such as passers-by, other animals or family members it cannot reach.
3. **Attention seeking** – dogs may seek attention by whining, barking, pawing or pushing against their owners. Usually they have learnt that in the past these behaviours gain attention.
4. **Separation anxiety** – many dogs are anxious when separated from their owner or another dog, and may bark to cope with the stress of separation. Such barking often occurs just after the owner has left home, continues for extended periods and/or may be accompanied by whining or howling. Separation anxiety is found frequently in nervous or timid dogs but also in dogs that are demanding of their owner's attention when home.

Dogs need to be corrected for inappropriate barking and distractions when their owners are home. An effective verbal correction helps to break the habit and teaches the dog that the correct behaviour is not to bark, or to bark for a short time and stop. Exercise and play in isolation will not stop a dog from barking but may provide an active release for the dog's energy.

When Rangers carry out their initial public relations visit to the dog owner to discuss a barking dog complaint, they will briefly discuss some options for managing the nuisance. It should be understood however, that although the Shire's Rangers do deal with dogs on a daily basis they are not experts in dog behaviour.

The Shire highly recommends that dog owners seek the professional advice of their local vet, a dog behaviourists or the RSPCA to discuss how they can best manage their dog's nuisance barking.