

ACCESS & COUNTRYSIDE MANAGEMENT
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# DOGS AND ACCESS: GUIDANCE FOR ACCESS & SITE MANAGERS

There are around 6 million dogs in the United Kingdom; around a third of all people out for a walk have a dog with them. With such a high number of dogs being walked, their owners are a major year-round visitor to the countryside and urban greenspace.

With good management and access provision, dog walkers can be very supportive, responsible visitors, with a keen long-term interest in conserving the areas they value. Conversely, low levels of access provision and predominantly negative, restrictive management, can lead to conflict and alienation of this visitor group.

This sheet aims to give you some initial pointers to optimise the benefits of dog walking and minimise any negative effects that can occur.

## *Why people walk dogs*

Because dog walking is such a traditional and widespread activity, the benefits to society can often be overlooked. Engaging with both the positive *and* negative aspects of dog walking is the key to successful access management.

Walking a dog helps people:

- Have healthier lifestyles and reduce stress through taking regular walks, even on the dullest of days.
- Feel more confident when out for a walk, or feel less conspicuous when out alone.
- Prevent social isolation by acting as an icebreaker for contact with others.
- Overcome disabilities through the 5,000 assistance dogs that help with visual impairments, deafness, epilepsy and diabetes. Many of these people will not have a mobility impairment, and so need to be considered in all landscapes, through the adoption of a 'least restrictive approach' to management and infrastructure.

People have dogs for many reasons. For example, dogs can be the traditional, faithful friend, allow participation in activities like shooting or canine sports, or – especially for older people – they can be the living reminder of a deceased partner.

*Caring for a dog may be the only reason a person takes any exercise or leaves their home on a daily basis.*

Whatever the relationship, there is often a very close bond between owners and their dogs which - if handled sensitively - can be a very powerful way to influence behaviour. Conversely, giving out predominantly negative messages or comments can lead to very emotive and unhelpful conflict.

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## *Benefits from engaging with dog owners:*

- Dog owners can be regular, supportive visitors with a keen interest in conserving areas they care about.
- As regular visitors, dog walkers can provide informal surveillance and let you know of unlawful, unusual or suspicious activities.
- Compliance with any restrictions or requests is much easier with a community that feels welcome, valued and thus develops internal influence through peer pressure.
- Income can be raised from associated facilities, events and services.

## *Ways to engage with dog owners:*

- Speak to them face to face and find out their issues; approaching them with your own friendly dog – or some dog biscuits - can help break down initial barriers.
- Recognise that dog walkers also want a relaxing time without conflict.
- Accept that many dog owners will want somewhere their dog can be safely off the lead; consider management that lets this happen away from sensitive areas.
- If conflict does occur, ask people what is happening and why. Look for positive solutions that make all interests feel welcome and accommodated somewhere.
- The principles and case studies in the Forestry Commission / Kennel Club *Managing Dogs in the Woods* guidance, illustrate opportunities to develop more effective and mutually-beneficial management approaches in any environment, not just woodland: www.forestry.gov.uk/england-dogs
- Hampshire County Council's website also hosts helpful background research and advice for land and access managers: www.hants.gov.uk/dogs

## *Signs and other management will be most effective when they:*

- Make dog owners feel like welcome visitors who are being asked to be responsible.
- Explain the reasons for any restrictions, and where their extent and duration are proportionate to the issue being addressed. Ensure seasonal or temporary signs (eg for nesting birds/livestock) are removed promptly when not applicable.
- Offer alternatives to any restrictions, such as "dog friendly" routes away from sensitive areas. These also help others avoid areas where dogs go, if they so wish.
- Clearly indicate where restrictions start *and* finish.
- Connect with dog owners' values. For example, requests to not let dogs chase wildlife because the dog may get lost or injured, will be more effective than just talking about nature conservation.
- Have a contact name and telephone number for any queries.
- Are initially tested on the target audience to check understanding and reaction.
- Have been designed and located to reflect local circumstances; generic signs may be convenient but often have limited effectiveness.

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