

Extract from the draft minutes of the Policy and Public Initiatives Panel meeting of 19 June 2019

25. Responsible Dog Ownership

Councillor Scott-Boutell attended and, with the consent of the Chairman, addressed the Panel to give her views on responsible dog ownership. She praised the success of 'Bark in the Park' events for increasing engagement between residents and officers and raised the possibility of running similar events in the future, potentially in partnership with commercial organisations. Awareness of dog-related issues continues to be benefited by event participation of Council officers and Councillor Scott-Boutell thanked the involved officers for their efforts in providing free microchipping of dogs.

Councillor Scott-Boutell queried whether commercial dog carers and walkers were required to register with the Council. Some had been noted as not clearing up after the dogs in their care. A further query was made as to whether there was a maximum number of dogs one individual should walk at one time.

Councillor Scott-Boutell asked the Panel to consider whether enclosed areas could be installed in park areas (such as Stanway and Highwoods Country Parks), where dogs could be let off the lead. This would particularly benefit energetic breeds and could reduce the use of extendable leads which sometimes caused injuries of dog walkers, if used incorrectly. Agility training could take place in such areas, improving bonds between owners and their dogs. Online booking options could be offered to allow access to those who book time in the area, using specific entry codes that would be provided.

Councillor Scott-Boutell further requested an update on progress made to deal with 'back-yard' commercial breeding and asked for online signposting to be provided for residents who have concerns about this, and for the Panel to recommend that Cabinet take action in this area or form a task and finish group to examine the issue.

Belinda Silkstone, Environmental Protection Manager, and Brandon Kirk, Neighbourhood Manager, presented the report. The Environmental Protection Manager highlighted the statutory duties relating to dog ownership and welfare, split between owners, the Borough Council, the Police and the RSPCA. The Council's duties covered collection of strays, duty of care for dogs in kennels or daycare and licensing of operators providing these services, and duties regarding enforcement tackling dog fouling. Duties for the Council also covered microchipping, enforcement against nuisance caused by irresponsible dog ownership (such as accumulations of dog mess) and to investigate reported back-yard breeding concerns.

She also explained the production of the 2012-15 Responsible Dog Ownership Strategy and that data had shown that this had not been frequently accessed online.

Although the content was still relevant, the decision had been made not to update the document, due to the low numbers accessing it. Efforts had been channelled into raising awareness of responsible dog ownership guidance through participation of officers at community events, CBH 'Make a Difference' Days and Police-run events. The Dogs' Trust also provided advice at events and through visits to schools. Councillor Scott-Boutell requested clearer online signposting to explain where different statutory duties lay, and for more information to be provided via social media.

Regarding commercial dog-walking services, the Environmental Protection Manager informed the Panel that the best practice guidance was for a maximum of four dogs to be walked by an individual walker at any one time, and that it may be possible to introduce regulation of this in public areas and parks through amendment of an existing Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO). Community Protection Warnings could then be issued as the first level of enforcement.

The Neighbourhood Manager addressed the suggestion of enclosed spaces within which dogs could be let off leads. He highlighted the need to ensure that they were of a certain size to be feasible, and for public consultation to be carried out on each area proposed. Location and size would need to be discussed, and a Panel Member expressed concern that such areas would not benefit households without dogs.

The Panel discussed how new and replacement dog bins could be requested by councillors and raised concern that it took weeks for replacements to be installed. Panel members asked whether it was Council policy not to install new bins, even where significant numbers of residents requested them or where fouling was a significant issue. The Neighbourhood Manager informed the Panel that there was no Council policy barring the installation of new bins, but that resource was an issue, with the cost having to come from the budget for small-scale works. There was also a requirement to obtain permission from Essex County Council before new street furniture could be installed. It was highlighted that dog waste bags could be deposited in litter bins, if no dog bins were available.

Panel members discoursed on enforcement options to address fouling and dumping of bagged dog waste. The Neighbourhood Manager described current enforcement options, practices, and efforts made to provide education prior to enforcement, but informed the Panel that resources for enforcement were limited and that many problem areas were not located on Neighbourhood Team patrol routes. Wardens did respond to investigate problem areas upon receipt of reports from councillors and/or members of the public. Obtaining sufficient evidence as to perpetrators of dog fouling was a key element in successful enforcement.

The Chairman described the PSPO in force at the Colchester Rugby Football Club and the work between members of the public and Neighbourhood Team officers leading to enforcement actions, including the issuing of 14 Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) over the most recent year. It was stressed that the provision of as much information about individual breaches of the PSPO assisted Neighbourhood Wardens in targeted patrolling and successful enforcement, followed by publicity of the enforcement which acted as a deterrent to potential future offenders. Councillors

agreed that it was important for the Communities and Neighbourhood Teams to work together to address non-clearance problems.

The Panel were informed that the level of FPNs were fixed at £100 (rising over set timescales in the event of non-payment). It was noted that there was a current PSPO prohibiting dog fouling across the Borough. Panel members discussed whether the specific PSPO in force at Colchester Rugby Club could be emulated for play areas and sports pitches across the Borough, with similar enforcement and publicity applied. The Neighbourhood Manager agreed that options for enforcement and publicity on this issue could be examined, and that this would be best scheduled in three to six months, to allow the bedding-in of the new Neighbourhood Team structures.

RESOLVED that the information in the report regarding responsible dog ownership be noted.

RECOMMENDED to *CABINET* that:-

- (i) The Council website is updated to include a responsible dog ownership page to provide dog owners with information on responsible dog ownership and compliance with the law;
- (ii) The Animal Services Team continue to support the free CBC Neighbourhood Team events, CBH 'Make A Difference Days' and Police-led events;
- (iii) The Council continue to provide a free dog microchipping service;
- (iv) A publicity drive is carried out to increase public awareness of Council enforcement action regarding dog fouling;
- (v) The existing Public Spaces Protection Order (PSPO) covering the Colchester Rugby Club is expanded to cover all play areas and sports pitches in Colchester Borough and that this is publicised;
- (vi) The Council pursue a multi-agency approach to tackle fouling issues, where practical, and direct Neighbourhood Teams to temporarily increase their presence in areas where dog fouling is known to be common, followed by publicity of enforcement action taken.