

Responsible Dog Ownership Strategy

This strategy sets out what the Council will do to encourage and promote responsible dog ownership, and the Council's commitment to tackling the antisocial behaviour of irresponsible dog owners.



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Introduction

No one can deny the pleasure that owning a dog can bring and the many ways in which pet ownership enriches our lives. Indeed, it has long been recognised that the companionship, comfort and sense of wellbeing provided by a pet can decrease loneliness, isolation and depression whilst engendering a sense of security and the desire to nurture among both adults and children alike. Often, pet ownership also necessitates lifestyle changes that promote physical activity and therefore it is hardly surprising that it is widely believed that pets are good for us!

This strategy supports this belief and recognises that the majority of dog owners do behave responsibly by both caring for pets and fulfilling both their legal and moral obligations. However, the same cannot be said of a small minority of owners whose behaviour, and consequently the manner in which they allow their dogs to behave, is at best irresponsible and at worst, antisocial and in some instances, criminal.

It is with this very much at heart and the desire to improve our streets and local environment that Colchester Borough Council seeks to promote and encourage positive dog ownership, whilst also tackling those antisocial behaviours that all too often give our much loved pets a bad name.

The Council's Strategic Plan

In October 2011, Colchester Borough Council undertook a consultation exercise to establish which aspects of life matter most to local people. The results of the consultation, together with the findings of other research work carried out in the borough have been used to ensure the priorities identified by local people are reflected in the Council's Strategic Plan and that resources are allocated to those areas with the potential to make most difference to the local quality of life.

Colchester Borough Council's Strategic Plan 2012 - 2015 sets out the overarching vision for the Borough and the Council for the next three years and this vision is for Colchester to be 'the place to live, learn, work and visit'. The Plan also identifies a number of broad aims and a set of priorities that support two distinct areas where the Council has a role to play namely, 'Leading our communities' and 'Delivering high quality, accessible services'.



The 'Leading our communities' theme is about influencing others in a range of functions where the Council does not have direct responsibility for delivery but knows these things are vital to the future of the Borough and its residents. The Responsible Dog Ownership Strategy supports a number of the priorities identified under this theme including:

- **Working in partnerships to help tackle health and crime issues, and**
- **Showing tolerance and changing behaviours to create better local communities**

The 'Delivering high quality, accessible services' theme concerns the Council's actual delivery of direct services either through our own resources or using others to provide services. The Responsible Dog Ownership Strategy supports a number of the priorities identified under this theme including:

- **Improving our streets and local environment.**
- **Tackling antisocial behaviour and using enforcement to support priorities, and**
- **Enabling local communities to help themselves**

The Council has listened to the views expressed by local people about local issues and the impact these issues have on quality of life. Antisocial behaviour and crime, in its broadest sense, was considered to be the most important area the Council can influence. This strategy acknowledges these views and therefore provides a response that:

- **focuses on behavioural change, prevention and tackling the underlying causes of dog fouling, straying and the antisocial behaviour of irresponsible dog owners, and**
- **Strengthens the Council's approach to enforcement of the law as and where this is necessary**



Strategic Aims and Objectives

This strategy aims to protect public health by reducing dog fouling, noise nuisance caused by barking dogs, road accidents attributable to stray dogs, and injury caused by dog attacks. It also aims to promote the welfare of dogs.

The overarching objective of the Responsible Dog Ownership Strategy is the promotion and encouragement of responsible dog ownership and the specific objectives of this strategy can be summarised as follows:

- 1. To educate dog owners in the principles of sustainable and responsible dog ownership**
- 2. To raise awareness of the legal responsibilities associated with dog ownership and breeding**
- 3. To provide information and advice to dog owners to enable and support compliance with the law**
- 4. To reduce the social and environmental impact of stray and abandoned dogs on our communities**
- 5. To work with partners and communities to ensure that stray dogs are reunited with their owners or re-homed as swiftly as possible**
- 6. To reduce the incidence of dog fouling by working with partners using education and enforcement**
- 7. To ensure that areas affected by fouling are cleansed as soon as possible**
- 8. To work with partners to reduce the incidence of dog attacks in the Borough**
- 9. To work with Colchester Borough Homes to increase compliance with Conditions of Tenancy as they relate to dogs**
- 10. To clarify and raise awareness of Colchester Borough Council's role and responsibilities with regards to dogs, and those of our key partners including Essex Police and the RSPCA**
- 11. To share intelligence with key partners and wherever possible, work in partnership, pooling resources to promote responsible dog ownership and secure compliance with the law**
- 12. To ensure that robust enforcement action is taken where appropriate**



Strategic Context

Responsibility for a dog's actions ultimately rests with the owner or where the owner is absent, the person in control of the dog. However, Colchester Borough Council and its partners, including Essex Police, the RSPCA and other Essex Local Authorities (Councils) share a number of responsibilities, including law enforcement responsibilities, in relation to the control of dogs and dog welfare.

A Memorandum of Understanding exists between the partners, which seeks to clarify these responsibilities in terms of the statutory duties held and the services provided. These responsibilities are summarised below:

The Council

- **Collection of stray dogs**
- **A 'duty of care' to the animals in its care i.e. collected stray dogs**
- **A duty to enforce the requirements for dogs to wear a collar and tag when in a public place**
- **Primary responsibility for the enforcement of dog fouling legislation**

In addition to the above, the Council is also responsible for:

- **The investigation and enforcement of statutory nuisances including noise from barking dogs, nuisance attributable to the manner in which animals are kept and accumulations of dogs mess on private land, and**
- **The licensing of animal boarding establishments, pet shops and dog breeders**

The Police

- **Primary responsibility for dangerous dogs including those breeds that are prohibited by the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and any dog deemed to be out of control in a public place**
- **Primary responsibility under the Guard Dogs Act 1975**
- **Responsibility for dogs worrying livestock**

The RSPCA

- **The promotion of kindness to dogs and the alleviation of suffering**
- **Dogs abandoned on private property**
- **Dogs in distress**





This Strategy recognises the need for effective partnership working with these and other agencies and also with communities and voluntary organisations such as dog rescue groups, as it is through these partnerships that long term behavioural changes can be achieved and sustained.

The existing legislation around the control of dogs has developed piecemeal over a period spanning more than some 140 years. At the time of writing, two Private Members' Bills concerning the control of dogs remain before Parliament. One of these Bills (The Dog Control and Welfare Bill 2010-11) proposes the repeal of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, the compulsory micro-chipping of dogs and makes provision for the welfare of dogs and public safety around dogs. Neither Bill appears to be making significant progress but it is anticipated that the development of effective partnerships at a local, regional and national level, will be instrumental in shaping future Government policy and legislation that is relevant to the challenges we face today, and those we will face for years to come.

Delivery

An Action Plan, setting out how the Council intends to achieve its objectives, sits alongside this strategy. This plan draws upon the various resources available to the Council as a whole, and those of its partners, including voluntary organisations and other interested groups and individuals.

Broadly speaking, the Council aims to achieve its objectives by way of the following:

Education and Awareness

Raising awareness of the principles of responsible dog ownership and the impact of irresponsible dog ownership and associated antisocial behaviour is absolutely fundamental to the delivery of our objectives. The potential mechanisms for achieving this and for ensuring that these messages reach the right people will therefore require thorough exploration.

The Council will seek to ensure that information and advice is made available to both dog owners, and to persons who may be experiencing antisocial behaviour caused by irresponsible dog owners thereby improving access to the right services and organisations. The information and advice provided will address how to care for your dog and how this can be done in such a way that recognises the financial difficulties that so many of our residents are now experiencing.

Special emphasis will be placed on ensuring that young persons have access to advice and information and are educated in the ways of responsible dog ownership as they will not only be the dog owners of tomorrow, but also have the opportunity now to influence the behaviour of parents and other adults and young persons around them. We will therefore investigate the most appropriate and effective ways of engaging younger people and bringing these messages to them.

The Council will also seek to educate dog owners in the benefits of spaying and neutering their dogs and will investigate ways in which the Council can support owners in accessing affordable veterinary services for this purpose. Equally, the Council will raise awareness of the legislation relating to the breeding and sale of dogs and related licensing requirements.



To underpin the above and the Council's broader activities around the promotion of responsible dog ownership, we will formulate a Communications Strategy to ensure that key messages are communicated using a variety of media (including the appropriate use of signage) and that the profile, once raised, is maintained.

Enforcement

Unfortunately, not all dog owners will respond positively to the responsible dog ownership messages we will communicate. Enforcement therefore has a key role to play in terms of achieving our strategic objectives and is there to support and complement the other themes such as education and awareness and promotional activities and events.

The Council will closely examine all legal duties, powers and provisions i.e. the enforcement tools at its disposal, and will determine not only the appropriateness of each tool, but also the most efficient and effective way of use including, for example the range of officers from within the Council and other individuals outside the Council, who may be authorised to take actions such as the issue of fixed penalty notices for dog fouling.

In order to tackle the underlying causes of the increasing number of stray and abandoned dogs, we will be proactive in our approach to the licensing of breeding establishments and enforcement in respect of non-compliance with the law.

We will work to ensure that all enforcement is well targeted, effective and fair and will be tough on those who commit serious breaches of the law.

Sharing Information and Intelligence

We will work closely with partner agencies to develop and agree protocols for sharing intelligence and other information. This will enable us to make the most effective use of resources, targeting our patrols to known 'hot spots' and tackling the highest priorities.

We will investigate the use of a multi-agency intelligence database and the opportunities this may provide for the detection of crime and potential intervention.



Partnerships

As previously stated, effective partnerships have a pivotal role to play in delivering our strategic objectives. Will we seek to strengthen existing partnerships with the Police, RSPCA and other Essex Local Authorities, but will also look to establish new and effective partnerships with voluntary groups, communities and individuals.

We recognise that a great deal of knowledge, skills and passion exists among responsible dog owners and we will seek to harness this energy, making effective use of this previously untapped resource by bringing together communities of interest with a common desire to effect the necessary changes in behaviour and attitudes, making irresponsible dog ownership socially unacceptable.

Furthermore, the Council will encourage effective co-operation between various agencies involved in the reunification and re-homing of stray and abandoned dogs.

Promotional Activities and Events

The Council will seek to enable, facilitate and deliver a range of promotional activities and events working in partnership with other agencies, businesses, and voluntary and community groups.

These activities and events may involve Council Officers, charities and interest groups, national organisations and suppliers of services and products, and may be targeted towards specific groups, for example young persons or known offenders (along similar lines to that of the National Driver Offender Retraining Scheme), or more generic in their appeal.

Events and other activities will have clear, measurable objectives and will be planned and managed to ensure they are inclusive, accessible and achieve their aims. This approach will also ensure we make best use of partners' collective resources and post-event evaluation will be undertaken, the findings of which will serve to inform future events and allocation of resources.



Community Empowerment

Our communities and individuals within these communities have an important role to play in influencing behaviour and the provision of support, advice and assistance to other dog owners, and potentially to those affected by the actions of irresponsible dog owners.

Communities also have a role to play in terms of influencing decisions that will affect them at a local level whether these are decisions taken by the Council, the Parish or Town Councils or even the Government.

The Council is keen to explore how it can support people and businesses in coming together to do things for themselves that will have a positive impact on their communities, environment and quality of life. Examples of this might include:

- **encouraging vigilance and empowering people to approach others who do not clean up after their dogs in a non-threatening way,**
- **educating and promoting responsible dog ownership in schools or through faith and other activity groups for young people e.g. Cubs and Brownies**
- **identifying businesses and individuals within the community who can either provide, or assist others in accessing affordable products and services that support the Council's wider strategic objectives e.g. low cost dog waste bags, collars and tags, veterinary care, pet insurance, or even know of someone looking to adopt a dog**

Clearly the opportunities are there and Colchester Borough Council is committed to supporting communities in achieving their full potential and developing communities to be proud of.

Resources

Officers from across Colchester Borough Council have a role to play in delivering the objectives of this strategy, including:

- **Animal Control – responsible for the collection of stray dogs, enforcement of stray dog and dog fouling provisions and promotional activities**
- **Environmental Protection – responsible for the investigation of statutory nuisance complaints**
- **Zone Wardens – responsible for community engagement and providing assistance to dog owners and the enforcement of dog fouling legislation**
- **Environmental Health & Licensing Officers – responsible for the licensing of Animal Boarding Establishments and Pet Shops**
- **Parks and Recreation – responsible for the provision and management of the Council's parks and open spaces**

Wherever possible, officers are trained and developed to enable them to respond to a wider range of environmental issues in order to maximise Council resources. Resources are also shifted to enable a targeted, intelligence-led approach to enforcement.

However, as previously stated, the development and maintenance of successful partnerships is also fundamental to the achievement of our objectives and Colchester Borough Council is fully committed to fostering such partnerships.





Consultation

Members of the public and key partners, including Essex Police and the RSPCA, have been consulted and this process confirmed overall support for the strategy and its objectives and in particular, strong agreement with the following strategic objectives:

- **Educate dog owners in the principles of sustainable and responsible dog ownership**
- **Raise awareness of the legal responsibilities associated with dog ownership and breeding**
- **Work with partners to reduce the incidence of dog attacks within the Borough and**
- **Ensure robust enforcement action is taken where appropriate**

Linked to the above, a number of comments, other ideas and suggestions were received and these have been considered and where appropriate, fed into the Action Plan accompanying this Strategy.

Performance Monitoring and Review

The Action Plan accompanying this Strategy sets out specific and measurable targets for the achievement of the objectives and the team responsible for delivery.

The effectiveness of this strategy and the Council's performance against the associated Action Plan and Key Success Indicators will be routinely monitored and reported via the Council's website (www.colchester.gov.uk)

This process of evaluation will ensure full accountability, the highlighting of successes and will also provide the opportunity for the early identification and intervention in respect of any areas of concern.

