

Extract from Minutes of:-

HYBRID MEETING OF THE CITY  
PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 8th August, 2023

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**Responsible Dog Ownership**

The Committee considered the following report:

**“1.0 Purpose of Report or Summary of main Issues**

**1.1 To provide members of the People and Communities Committee with an update on addressing better responsible dog ownership, in particular:**

- The Committee noted the previous update at the meeting on 7 March 2023 and requested a Members’ Workshop to discuss the issues and potential solutions to dog fouling in the city in more detail.
- Actions taken following the Members’ Workshop on 25 April 2023 on Tackling Dog Fouling in the City; and
- The deferred decision regarding proposed changes to Fixed Penalty Fines for dog fouling offences and littering offences.

**2.0 Recommendation**

**2.1 The Committee is asked to:**

- Note the actions and outcomes following the Members’ Workshop on 25 April 2023.
- Reconsider Options 1 – 3 in relation to the new fixed penalty limits for dog fouling and agree a preferred option.
- Consider Option 4 - applying any changes made to the fixed penalty limits for dog fouling offences to littering offences.

**3.0 Main Report**

**3.1 PART 1 – Members’ Workshop**

**3.2 A Members’ Workshop on responsible dog ownership and the tackling of dog fouling in the city took place on 25 April 2023. An overview of the Dog Warden Service was followed with fouling statistics and trends; the challenges when tackling dog fouling**

and updates from the various teams in the Council with responsibility for tackling dog fouling.

- 3.3 Sixteen actions have been grouped under eight headings and since the workshop, officers in the Dog Warden Service, Environmental Education and Outreach Team, Corporate Marketing and Communications, Open Spaces and Streetscene and the Performance and Improvement Unit have held further workshops and been working through these actions.

#### DATA

- 3.4 **ACTION 1 – Consider how best to use data from street inspections / street index data or other data sources to identify hot spots and look at impact. Consider how best to provide data to Members.**

- 3.5 **A full analysis of the available data was carried out and the key findings were:**

- **Customer complaints in relation to dog fouling increased by 14% from 21/22 (889) to 22/23 (1013).**
- **The data from the Council's Quality Monitoring Survey evidences a seasonal trend to dog fouling, where there is increased dog fouling in the winter months (December – February) compared with the summer months (June – August). This same seasonal trend has been identified in customer complaints recorded by the Customer Hub. It shows from about November to March in both 2021/22 and 2022/23 there was a sharp rise in complaints.**
- **The number of fixed penalties and revenue from the fines are currently low. Fouling detection patrols are resource intensive and are carried out in pairs. We are continuing to review the opportunity for fouling detection patrols against the other demands on the Dog Wardens time.**
- **There was a greater number of people with dog licences pre-pandemic than post pandemic.**

- 3.6 **Outcome 1 - We will continue to use the data from complaints (via public and Members) and the Quality Monitoring Surveys to target hot spot areas and direct resources. Resources permitting, additional fouling patrols will operate between December and February. We are continuing to work towards pre-pandemic levels of enforcement activity. A licensing intervention has been introduced with an additional resource secured to tackle the backlog. Open Spaces and Streetscene will review the available data and determine how best to circulate future performance information.**

- 3.7 **ACTION 2 – Benchmark other locations with good practice.**

We restricted our benchmarking to Northern Ireland as we felt that other NI authorities would provide information that was most relevant to Belfast in managing these issues. 8 of the 10 councils responded. We asked a series of questions about fouling patrols; dog enclosures; dog control orders; signage; stencilling; provision of free poo bags and use of dispensers. We also reviewed the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) Briefing 2019 which collated a list of good ideas from local authorities across the UK:

- The Green Dog Walkers Scheme
- Rewards for residents reporting fouling
- Chalk stencils with messages being painted onto pavements
- Highlighting fouling with bright coloured sprays
- Glow-in-the-dark posters to target night-time fouling
- Dog Watch Schemes – inspired by Neighbourhood Watch Schemes
- A Council reporting app that allows individuals to identify the location of fouling

3.8 Outcome 2 – Where appropriate the benchmarking findings have been included in the relevant actions below.

3.9 **ACTION 3 – Survey / updated research**

We reviewed available research including that commissioned by BCC and carried out by QUB (Canine Behaviour Centre, School of Psychology) in 2004 and 2009. We have re-engaged with QUB and are hoping to work with the university in the coming academic year to draw up a strategy for new research that will be tailored to our needs. However, the university has stressed that resources are limited and any research will need to be conducted within very tight parameters.

3.10 We also reviewed the most recent research from the Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) Briefing 2019 which included findings from local authorities across the UK. It notes dog fouling is one of the most prevalent issues for local authority environmental services. It is particularly difficult to tackle for a number of reasons:

- People are aware they could be fined, but many do not think they will ever be caught;
- Fouling can happen at any time of day or night, so patrolling often will not catch the offenders;
- Residents are (rightfully) hesitant to confront residents who persistently allow their dog to foul;
- Prosecution requires good evidence;
- Attempts to introduce new dog controls to combat dog fouling can lead to a public
- backlash;

- The public is still largely unaware that (in many areas) they can dispose of dog waste in any available local authority litter bin;
- Many people do not consider leaving dog waste bags on the ground fouling.

3.11 Outcome 3 – We will continue to engage with QUB regarding opportunities for bespoke research. We will seek to increase awareness of successful prosecutions and will work to address the difficulties listed above through our education programme.

**MESSAGING - EDUCATIONAL MESSAGING VIA LEAFLET DOOR DROPS**

3.12 **ACTION 4 – Build on current leaflet drops with public awareness messaging in identified hot spot areas.**

This is a cost effective and visible action. However, it does have limitations. If we leaflet a street with significant dog fouling, it is not necessarily the residents of that street that are allowing dogs to foul in their own street. In an attempt to mitigate for this we will normally leaflet several surrounding streets. Fouling in gated alley ways can be attributed to specific houses with access to the alley way and only those houses would be targeted through leafleting.

Outcome 4 – Dog Wardens will continue to leaflet houses in hot spot areas. Colleagues in our Enforcement Team, who tackle littering, will continue to assist with leaflet drops.

3.13 **ACTION 5 – Humanise the message, make messaging local. Harder hitting – health impacts / implications, especially to children.**

3.14 The ‘think again’ dog fouling campaign was launched during October/November 2022, with a second burst of activity in February 2023 and it has recently been shortlisted for a CIPR (Chartered Institute of Public Relations) Pride Award for best Integrated Campaign. Our objective was to create a campaign using real insights and research to help influence behaviour change by encouraging dog owners to pick up after their dog, take responsibility and Think Again! The campaign used integrated communications consisting of heavyweight advertising, social media and innovative PR.

3.15 Independent research was commissioned to evaluate the paid for advertising element of the campaign and it found that 93% recalled the message; 80% said the artwork was understandable and 72% said its greatest benefit was encouraging dog owners to take responsibility. As the ‘think again’ campaign is so new Marketing and Corporate Communications have recommended that we do not invest in a new campaign creative until 2025/26 in order to let the ‘Think Again’ campaign embed and percolate. The current campaign shows the consequences of not cleaning up after your dog. Future campaigns could focus on the perpetrator (hopefully the QUB research will help us identify main perpetrators) and

creative approach would also be reviewed at this time to incorporate feedback from the workshop such as the possibility of having Belfast identifiable images within advertising assets.

3.16 Outcome 5 – We plan to develop a new campaign creative in 2024/25 (for use in 2025/26) and will use up to date research to identify who to target and how best to deliver the message.

3.17 **ACTION 6 – Use of social media in future campaigns, particular focus on targeting hot spots, males under 30 etc. and the evaluation of impacts.**

Our integrated marketing campaigns already use a wide range of media formats (including social media) to target people during all aspects of their life, when at home before they walk their dog, when they are out walking their dog, when they are online and travelling to and from work. Hotspot areas are currently targeted within current dog fouling campaigns for example during the ‘think again’ campaign Adshel posters were located at hot spot areas.

3.18 Outcome 6 – Marketing and Corporate Communications team will select the most appropriate media channels in future campaigns to target hot spot areas based on findings/feedback and select the most effective ways of reaching perpetrators based on any new research findings.

3.19 **ACTION 7 – Further promotion of the Green Dog Walker scheme to reward positive behaviour.**

Our Environmental Education and Outreach Team promote this scheme in our parks during summer fun days with Scoop Dog and also support this scheme with social media activity. (See Appendix 1 & 2) Anyone signing up to the scheme must have a licence for their dog so the scheme is raising awareness of the licensing requirements too. By taking the Green Dog Walkers' pledge and using a Green Dog Walker's lead, owners commit to:

- always clean up after their dog;
- carry extra dog waste bags;
- give free dog waste bags to other dog walkers.

3.20 Outcome 7 – We will continue to promote our successful Green Dog Walker scheme.

3.2.1 **MARKETING – SIGNAGE**

**ACTION 8 – Signage in parks / on street, consider positioning / visibility and work with communities on location.**

Our Open Spaces and Streetscene colleagues in parks will continue to use signage at appropriate locations throughout our parks. Whilst we appreciate the role of signage and agree with Members that location is important, we are reluctant to encourage excessive signage. We believe the current level of street signage

throughout the city is sufficient. We will however still consider requests for additional signage but need to be cognisant of the requirement for permission from the Department for Infrastructure should we want to erect signage on its property. As an alternative to street signage we have designed a poster (see Appendix 2) which we can be distributed to local communities in hot spot areas for indoor use.

3.22 Outcome 8 – Open Spaces and Streetscene will continue to use signage in our parks. The Dog Warden Service and our Environmental Education and Outreach Team will continue to engage with communities and raise awareness of the new poster.

3.23 **ACTION 9 – Signage: Consider materials, design bespoke signs for specific areas. Consider CCTV message as a deterrent, wardens patrolling this area etc.**

Through our benchmarking we have determined that all councils in NI use signs with a variety of construction materials including metal, Perspex, cortex and banners. There was a difference of opinion as to whether graphic signage or cute dogs were the best way to engage with dog owners. Some include the level of the fines on signage and others do not. Given the limitation to use DfI property for additional signage we have instead continued to develop our banners (See Appendix 4) that can be used on park and school railings. We will take account of all of the benchmarking information when developing our next campaign during 2024/25.

Members had suggested CCTV signage (similar to PSNI speed camera signage) to be used as a deterrent. We have taken advice and use of such signage, when we have no CCTV would mean we would intentionally be misleading the public and it would put us at odds with our own Code of Conduct. We already use social media as a deterrent by advising of current and future dog fouling patrols.

3.25 Outcome 9 – We will consider the benchmarking findings on signage when developing our next campaign. We will continue to use social media about dog fouling patrols as a deterrent.

3.26 **ACTION 10 – Chase DfI for permission to stencil. Review stencilling and its impact on changing behaviour.**

Through our benchmarking we have determined that 7 of the 8 councils that responded use or have used stencilling. Anecdotally, it is considered to be better at raising awareness in the summertime. We have now received confirmation from DfI that it does not object in principle to stencilling. However, we are required to contact the appropriate area manager for each location, to obtain permission, in advance of any stencilling. This is because stencilling can cause damage to certain pavement surfaces. We have already carried out a small pilot of stencilling at schools in East Belfast and are now waiting on permission from DfI for hot spot schools in North, South and West Belfast. A Quality

Monitoring Survey will be carried out before and after in N, S and W and we will then evaluate the effectiveness of stencilling.

3.27 Outcome 10 – Provided we obtain permission from DfI we will undertake a small pilot of stencilling when the new school term starts and evaluate its effectiveness.

3.28 **MARKETING – COMMUNITY**

**ACTION 11 – Actively encourage reporting, make reporting process for residents straightforward. Consider pros and cons of providing bag dispensers in certain locations for emergency use.**

3.29 In the last year we have amended our online dog fouling reporting form. It has been broken down into several questions which prompt more detailed information and we have found the information provided is more useful for targeting hot spots / individuals. The ‘think again’ campaign also encouraged reporting and our colleagues who manage the social media channels always make a response when fouling is reported.

3.30 We recently ran a Billboard Challenge focused on dog fouling in Spring/ Summer School Term and had an excellent response with 19 schools participating. The Key Stage 2 pupils received an interactive, curriculum-based talk around dog fouling and the issues surrounding it. The pupils then designed their own billboards, and we had 4 winners (N/S/E/W) who had their artwork displayed on a local billboard. (See Appendix 5 & 6). The entries were such high quality we added 4 runners-up, who will receive their entries as a banner for their school. We received positive media coverage of this project.

3.31 From our bench marking all the responding councils provide free poo bags in variety of ways e.g. at pop up events, when on fouling patrols, via Green Dog Walker Scheme, in community centres and when sending out licence renewal letters. There were reports of complaints when supplies at council buildings ran out as dog owners mistakenly thought it was the council’s role to provide bags. In Belfast we will continue to supply all community centres with free dog bags and a poster encouraging centre users to pick up free bags there.

3.32 Based on the costings for the dispensers that were installed in Belfast during the COVID pandemic we estimate each dispenser would cost in the region of £800 - £1000 to purchase and install. There would then be on-going refilling and maintenance costs. We have over 50 parks and open spaces and most have multiple entrances. The bench marking findings demonstrated some difficulties where poo bag dispensers were located outside – in one trial in 4 parks all the dispensers were either destroyed or stolen, another reported that dispensers were ‘robbed’ almost as soon as they were filled and vandalised dispensers are no longer being replaced. There is the potential when free poo bags are provided in parks for those observed committing an offence to use the lack of poo bags in the park dispenser as a defence. We firmly

believe that purchasing poo bags is the responsibility of all dog owners and whilst provision of them at events or during fouling patrols is beneficial, the cost to provide them via dispensers is prohibitive and contradicts the message of responsible dog ownership.

3.33 Our Dog Wardens will continue to engage with the public to encourage reporting of dog fouling and to provide free poo bags where appropriate. Our Park Wardens will do the same within our parks.

3.34 Outcome 11 – We will continue to encourage reporting and to provide free dog poo bags at events, at community centres, during fouling patrols and in our engagement with visitors to our parks.

3.35 **SERVICE DELIVERY**

**ACTION 12 – Continue to deliver a visible response to reports of fouling.**

3.36 Through our benchmarking we determined that none of the 8 responding councils patrol 7 days a week as is the case in Belfast. All councils had some scope for variations in the timings of patrols to take account of problem areas, time of year etc. Two of the responding councils have used WISE Enforcement (an external, self-funding company) to enhance / support their Dog Warden fouling patrols. There was no agreement about the best time of day to detect fouling and it was considered to be extremely difficult to detect and more opportunistic in witnessing rather than at planned locations and times. There was a mix of high viz and low viz patrols across the 8 councils with 3 using a blend of both.

3.37 Outcome 12 – We will continue to deliver a visible response to reports of fouling with the use of social media to highlight our activities.

3.38 **ACTION 13 – Consider dog enclosures in parks; more bins; more resources to deal with dog fouling; and more FIDO machines.**

3.39 Bench marking revealed that 5 of the 8 responding councils have separate dog enclosures in their parks. Within Belfast there are 2 dog enclosures – one at the Grove and one at Stormont. Previous Committee approval was granted in August 2018 with regards to pilot dog enclosures in the West, South & East, however, due to financial pressures, resourcing and Covid this was not progressed. The financial and resourcing pressures still exist, however, this will be refreshed and updated and taken back through the Area Working Groups and then to Committee for approval.

3.40 Outcome 13 – Officers to revisit and refresh the 2018 report and to include graffiti and other pressures such as Anti-Social Behaviour.

3.41 **ENFORCEMENT**



**Action 14 – Bring back report to Committee on increasing dog fouling fine to maximum of £200.**

3.42 Outcome 14 – See Part 2 of this Committee Report.

3.43 **LEGISLATION**

Action 15 – Consider if new legislation is needed.

3.44 There is provision within the existing legislation for Councils to decide to introduce Control Orders for specific scenarios and in Belfast we have one for dog fouling and one for the maximum number of dogs that can be walked by one person. A legal process which involves public consultation must take place before a council makes a dog control order. Back in 2012/23 the Council did consider Dog Control Orders for dogs on leads and exclusion zones but ultimately decided that more information / consultation was needed prior to introducing additional Dog Control Orders.

3.45 All but one of the responding councils have dog control orders including dog exclusion zones and dogs on leads. They apply at various locations e.g. in parks, cemeteries and other specified land owned by the Council and if appropriate at various times. They are restricted to Council owned land because the legislation states: *'No offence is committed where the person has a reasonable excuse for failing to keep the dog on a lead, or the owner, occupier or other person or authority having control of the land has consented (generally or specifically) to the person failing to do so.'*

3.46 The primary consideration is to balance the interests of those in charge of dogs against the interests of those affected by the activities of dogs, bearing in mind the need for people, in particular children, to have access to dog-free areas and areas where dogs are kept under strict control, and the need for those in charge of dogs to have access to areas where they can exercise their dogs without undue restriction. Those who responded provided anecdotal evidence that fouling is less likely to happen when a dog is on a lead and our own Dog Wardens agree.

3.47 Outcome 15 – We already have Byelaws that require dogs to be kept on leads on certain council owned land but there are difficulties with enforcement (including lack of a fixed penalty) however a feasibility study could be carried out regarding the introduction of a Control Order for Dogs on Leads in our parks, cemeteries etc.

This is to be considered as part of the update report in Action 13.

3.48 **FINANCE**

Action 16 – Report back to Committee in August with costings of options where appropriate.

- 3.49 Where appropriate, estimated costings have been included under the relevant actions throughout the report. In addition a separate Committee Report, including costings for Action 13 will be submitted at a later date.

## **PART 2 - PROPOSED CHANGES TO FIXED PENALTY FINES FOR DOG CONTROL OFFENCES**

- 3.50 In our report for Committee on 7 March 2023 we provided details of The Environmental Offences (Fixed Penalties) (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022 which came into force on 30 December 2022 and amend the previous 2012 Regulations. The effect is to alter the amount of a fixed penalty capable of being specified by the Council for certain fixed penalties. We detailed 4 options for the Committee to review and after some discussion it was agreed to defer until a future meeting. 4 councils in NI have already increased their fines and we would ask that the options below are considering again.

### **3.51 OPTIONS**

- Option 1 – no change
- Option 2 – increase to maximum of £200 with reduction if paid within 10 days. Suggested reduction to £100 as an incentive to pay the fixed penalty promptly and avoid court action.
- Option 3 – increase but not to maximum with reduction if paid within 10 days. Could be anything from £90 - £190, with any level of reduction.
- Option 4 – Consider applying any changes made to the fixed penalty limits for dog fouling offences to littering offences. The Council previously agreed to set the level of fixed penalty fine for littering at £80, reduced to £60 if paid within 10 days. There would be no additional signage costs as most signs include information about dog fouling and littering.

### **3.52 Finance and Resource Implications**

#### **Part 1**

There is currently no additional budget available to implement any of newly the suggested outcomes in this report.

#### **Part 2**

There are cost implications if changes are required to signage. We do already have a budget for signage and cost varies depending on the size of the sign and the method of mounting but is in the region of £20 - £25 plus VAT each. The livery on some council vehicles would also need to be removed or updated.

### **3.53 Asset and Other Implications**

**None**

### **3.53 Equality or Good Relations Implications/ Rural Needs Assessment**

**None.”**

The Committee thanked the Director of City Services for the update report and detailed discussion ensued regarding the ongoing issues that had been highlighted at the workshop.

During discussion the following issues were, once again, discussed/highlighted:

- The lack of dog off lead facilities in parks and open spaces
- Undertaking a feasibility study for dog off lead facilities, citing Wallace Park in Lisburn as a good example;
- Noted the introduction of a new streamlined digital process and the rates charges for concessionary fees for dog licencing;
- Enhancing and localising the dog foul media campaign and also promoting and publicising the need for dog licences;
- Welcomed the stencilling campaign in east Belfast and sought to extend it to the south, north and west of the city (to include liaison with DfI in this regard);
- Discussion regarding the provision of free dog foul bags in problem areas within park locations and not just via community centres and publicising that they were available;
- Ensuring adequate bins for disposal were available for the disposal of dog waste and noted the importance of the location of these bins;
- The use of Fido machines and need to benchmark with other Councils;
- Ensuring adequate staff resources, with costings sought for what would be deemed to be necessary to improve the service;
- A suggestion that officers promote and give out advice regarding the Dogs Trust neutering scheme, which was available at a cost of £50 for dogs belonging to owners on means-tested benefits (for a restricted number of breeds);
- Sought the location and details of how many people had signed up to participate in the Green Walkers Scheme; and
- The development of responsible dog ownership campaigns in the Council's parks and playing field locations.

The Director highlighted to the Committee that it had previously decided not to increase the fixed penalty limits for dog and litter offences and asked the Members whether they wished revisit this again in light of discussions.

A number of Members stated that they would be opposed to increasing the fees at this stage and would be keen to see some of the other initiatives implemented prior to this measure being further considered.

Following discussion, it was

Moved by Councillor Flynn,  
Seconded by Councillor de Faoite,

That the Committee agrees to introduce option 2 and option 4, as detailed in the report.

On a vote, 6 Members voted for the proposal and 13 against and it was declared lost.

### **Further Proposal**

Moved by Councillor de Faoite,  
Seconded by Councillor Flynn,

That the Committee agrees to introduce option 2.

On a vote, 11 Members voted for the proposal and 8 against and it was declared carried.

The Committee therefore:

- agreed to adopt Option 2 in respect of fixed penalty limits for dog fouling and dog fouling offences - to increase the fine to a maximum of £200, with a reduction of £100 if paid within 10 days as an incentive to pay the fixed penalty promptly;
- agreed not to apply any changes to littering offences at this time and noted that an update report would be submitted to committee in due course.