DOGS IN OPEN SPACE PLAN

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

An overview of research to inform
Hume's Dogs in Open Space Draft Plan

paws4play
planning for people and dogs

HUME CITY COUNCIL



Yulendj ngurrak Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Recognition

Hume City Council recognises the rich Aboriginal heritage within the municipality and acknowledges the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung as the Traditional Custodians of this land. Council embraces Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander living cultures as a vital part of Australia's identity and recognises, celebrates and pays respect to the existing family members of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and to Elders past and present.

Purpose

Hume Council engaged specialists in dog management Paw4Play/LMH Consultants to provide expert advice and guidance to the development of the Dogs in Open Space Plan.

This report provides an overview of findings from research and studies relevant to the Dogs in Open Space Plan, highlighting social and behavioural considerations for planning for dogs in open space.

The research is drawn from a large range of sources including Local Government Areas (LGAs) across Australia and beyond.

About Paws4Play and LMH Consultants

Lesley Humphreys has been a recreation, open space and community planner and policy writer for over 25 years, increasingly specialising in animal management service planning and design of off-leash environments/dog parks.

She has worked with metropolitan, rural and regional LGAs across Australia to:

- prepare Domestic Animal Management Plans
- prepare dog off-leash provision policy and rationale; and review existing policies
- review the suitability of existing fenced off-leash/exercise areas/dog parks
- assess the suitability of sites (Site Assessments) for consideration as fenced or partially fenced dog off-leash areas
- prepare concept and detailed designs for fenced off-leash areas
- prepare Management Plans for fenced off-leash areas

Lesley has presented at state, national and international conferences on the topic of Dog Off-Leash and Dog Park Planning, Management and Design. She was also commissioned by the Victorian Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) to write the technical guidance notes for the department's funding program.

In her role as a trustee with Animal Aid, Lesley was fortunate to have the opportunity to collaborate with leading Australian animal behaviorists. This enabled Lesley to better understand:

- dog behaviour
- the triggers that can cause unsociable or aggressive behaviour in dogs
- the role of landscape design in managing dog behaviour
- the correlation between dog owner attitude, beliefs and relationship with their dog, and dog behaviour and control

Lesley's 20 years of work, research and learning in relation to dog management, together with her open space and recreation planning background means she has a unique understanding of the opportunities and challenges that need to be addressed when planning off-leash areas.

Research Limitations

A Note About Telephone/Targeted and Random Surveys

The type of survey methodology employed will generally influence the degree of response to issues examined/tested. This is because telephone surveys canvass respondents that represent a cross section of society and random surveys will generally attract respondents with a strong opinion on an issue either way.

As a result telephone surveys generally result in less extreme variation in responses than do online surveys. The results from random surveys generally correlate with the complaints/customer service requests most commonly received by LGAs. However, there are some exceptions to this.

Considerations in the Provision of Dog Controls in Public Open Space

1. Dog Litter

Dog litter is generally cited in surveys, by dog owners and non-dog owners alike, as the most common grievance associated with dogs. However, many councils do not receive the number of complaints about dog litter in line with the level of grievance expressed via community surveys.

Anecdotal feedback indicates a prevailing sentiment that nothing can or will be done in relation to the matter, and perceptions of dog owner indifference to the issue and sense of entitlement.

A 2025 LGA survey[1] from WA again reinforced dog litter as the most common grievance by 70% of online respondents and nearly 28% of telephone respondents. However, in both samples non-dog owners rated the issue as more significant than dog owners with 5 percentage points difference between non-dog and dog owner telephone respondents, and more than 20 percentage points difference between comparative online respondents.

The WA study found that while most survey respondents claim to always collect their dog litter, most also identified this as their greatest grievance of other dog owners. This suggests a significant disparity between actual compliance with littering regulations and self-reported compliance.

These findings are consistent with a UK study[2], a Milbemax[3] survey and a Victorian LGA[4] study that found 50%, 44% and 40% of respondents respectively did not always pick up their dog litter.

Twenty-one percent of dog owner respondents in the LGA survey stated that having to carry used litter bags was a disincentive to picking up litter.

Many LGAs increase the number of litter bag dispensers and bins in response to requests from dog owners and because of a perception that these strategies will result in greater compliance with litter regulations. However, a site survey of littering behaviour in a park[5] reinforced anecdotal industry feedback that this does not result in greater compliance. Instead it has resulted in increasing

[1] City of Karratha Dog Exercise Area Review
[2] Environmental and Social Impacts of Domestic Dog Waste in the UK: Investigating Barriers to Behavioral Change in Dog Walkers; C. Lowe et al; 2014, University of Central Lancashire
[3] Milbemax Dirty Dog Study, 2013
[4] City of Melton Dogs in Public Places Plan
[5] Whitehorse City Council, 2015

costs, complaints (when bags run out) and environmental impacts associated with dumped litter bags.

To address issues associated with littering, the greatest impact will come from community-based engagement and initiatives with supportive and compliant dog owners, strengthening of local pride in place, a balanced application of penalty, warning and educational strategies.

2. Dogs barking excessively at home

Dogs barking at home will not generally be perceived as being an issue for the public domain, though barking noise from public areas is related.

Dogs generally bark at home because of the lack of a stimulating environment/boredom, and/or because of restlessness, and/or because separation issues have not been addressed. Excessive barking is particularly problematic for neighbours.

However, the behaviour of these dogs if let off the leash in a public environment can be problematic for other people and dogs because of their likely boisterousness, over-excitement and potential intimidation of other dogs and people.

Two recent surveys[6] indicate that dogs barking excessively at home was the second most significant issue for online and telephone survey respondents (38% and 52% of respondents). Anecdotal feedback from industry local laws staff indicates this has become an even more significant issue post COVID because of dogs suffering from separation anxiety and no compensatory enrichment of domestic environments.

[6] Joondalup (WA) Dog Management Strategy; Yarra Ranges Domestic Animal Management Plan (Vic)

In both surveys non-dog owners reported a significantly higher incidence of barking than dog owners with an approximate 30 percentage point difference.

This issue has become particularly heightened post COVID when new cat and dog owners (primarily dog owners) represented over 47% of purchases/adoptions, many of whom were not equipped with the requisite knowledge of cat/dog wellbeing needs, strategies to address behavioural issues and did not have support networks/programs to address issues through.

3. Dog Management

Issues relating to the management of dogs are the most noted concerns about dogs in public places following dog litter. However, they are likely to be rated as the most pressing matters LGAs to address and relate to:

- aggressive dog behaviour
- poor dog control including dogs being allowed to annoy other dogs or people
- dogs being off-lead in on-lead areas

A number of factors will influence the number and severity or perceived severity of incidents related to these matters, including socio-demographic factors, the extent of access to off-leash areas, and the associated level of compliance with leashing regulations.

Research demonstrates that LGAs with significant pockets of social and economic disadvantage are significantly more likely to experience issues associated with a lack of resources to invest in the training/education of the family dog; households in distress; households that do not have requisite knowledge/information relating to dog behaviour, strategies to address inappropriate behaviour and to understand the implications of excessive/punitive behaviour correction methods.

This is highlighted by the difference in online survey results between an eastern Melbourne metropolitan fringe LGA[7] compared to a western suburban fringe LGA[8] where:

- 38% vs 75% citied dogs annoying other people or dogs as an issue
- 18% vs 72% cited experience with rude or aggressive dog owners
- 30% vs 87% cited concerns about or witnessed aggressive dogs

A comparison between an LGA with a primarily off-leash policy compared to LGAs with a primarily on-leash policy[9] suggests that the former has implications in terms of the likely incidence of:

- dogs attacking another dog (5% vs 29%)
- dogs attacking/biting a person (2% vs 14%)
- dog litter not being picked up (62% vs 70%).

Of note is that a similar percentage of respondents in both LGAs reported having experienced:

- another form of aggressive behaviour such as growling or lunging (33% vs 34%)
- dogs roaming (18% vs 19%).

A recent LGA[10] study supports previous research findings that non-dog owners are generally likely to report a higher incidence of poor dog and/or owner behaviour than do dog owners as in reports of:

- dogs annoying other people or dogs/poor dog control (47% vs 35%)
- other aggressive behaviour by dogs e.g. growling, lunging/ jumping
- dogs roaming/not contained (39% vs 14%)
- rude or aggressive dog owners (27% vs 16%).

[7] Shire of Yarra Ranges
[8] Melton City Council
[9] City of Joondalup (WA) and Shire of Yarra Ranges (Vic)
[10] Yarra Ranges Domestic Animal Management Plan survey

4. Investment in Dog Training/ Education

The number of dog owners who have attended dog education/obedience classes is likely to be very small with 80% of owners likely to have only attended introductory puppy classes[11]. Similarly, research conducted by Animal Medicines Australia[12] indicates only a small number of dog owners in Australia invest in any significant training of their dog with $117 being the average yearly spend training.

A survey of 18 dog trainers/educators[13] identifies that dog owners:

- do not understand and/or invest the time required to train their dogs to achieve effective recall
- are inconsistent in attending training classes and/or reinforcing training at home and with other members of the family
- become easily disillusioned when they do not achieve outcomes in line with their expectations
- won't take on the advice/change what they have been doing but expect change
- are making inappropriate choices about the breed of dog they adopt.

Most dogs who have been 'trained' are likely to have been 'owner trained' only and with reference primarily to online instructional sources.

Similarly, in Australia the dog training industry is unregulated such that there are no stipulated training and/or experience requirements relating to the industry and the type of methods and/or equipment that can/can't be used to train a dog.

As a result, those owners who are seeking help for problematic dog behaviour are often relying on often contradictory and poorly informed advice from a number of sources which are generally not based on applied behavioral science.

Studies[14] indicate that up to 40% of dog owners cite behavioral concerns such as hyperactivity, aggression, or destructiveness as the reasons for surrendering their dog. The lack of training and associated control over dogs has negative welfare implications for dogs and impacts on other people and dogs in public spaces.

[11] ARG Director and Founder, Department of Psychology, Counselling and Therapy La Trobe University, Australia as referenced in https://furgetmenot.com.au/should-you-do-more-than-puppy-school-with-your-dog/
[12] Animal Medicines Australia, Pets in Australia: A national survey of pets and people
[13] LMH/P4P surveys of 18 Victorian dog obedience clubs/trainers 2024-26
[14] Mental Health Disease or Preventable Problem? Australian Dog Trainers' Opinions about Canine Separation Anxiety Differ with Training Style; T. Hunter et al; 2020 PubMedCentral

5. Priorities for LGAs

Two recent studies[15] and indicate that survey respondents do not necessarily rate the issues they have witnessed most or are most aggrieved by, as council priorities.

Table 1 – Comparison of frequency of witnessing of events vs Council priority for addressing

% of respondents witnessing event daily, weekly or monthly in the last 2 years	**Priorities for Council (% of respondents selecting as a priority)**
Dog litter being left (62%)	Dog litter being left (47%)
Dogs excessively barking when at home (52%)	Dogs excessively barking when at home (44%)
Dogs annoying other people or dogs/poor dog control (38%)	Dogs being off-lead in on-lead areas (35%)
Dogs off-lead in on-lead areas (37%)	Dogs attacking/biting another dog or animal (31%)
Other aggressive behaviour by dogs e.g. growling, lunging/ jumping (23%)	Dogs attacking/biting a person (30%)
Dogs roaming/ not contained (19%)	Dogs roaming/not contained (27%)
Rude or aggressive dog owners (18%)	Dogs annoying other people or dogs/poor dog control (23%)

This possibly indicates:

- community sensitivity and awareness of the potential for serious injury to occur as a result of these behaviours
- a heightened awareness of dog attacks more generally because of media reporting and the potential extreme injury that can occur
- a more frequent sighting of aggressive behaviours than in the past.

[15] City of Joondalup (WA) and Shire of Yarra Ranges (Vic)

6. The Perceived Benefits and Challenges of off-leash areas

Research[16] identifies that owners commonly identify the presence of fencing as the primary benefit of off-leash areas, particularly because it reduces concerns about dogs running away or failing to respond to recall commands.

Additional benefits cited include being able to relax, devote less attention to supervising their dog and more time to socialise with other dog owners.

These findings suggest that some users value fenced off-leash areas because they provide a greater sense of security and reduce the need for constant compliance with dog control requirements. There is a common misconception among many dog owners that they do not have to comply with dog control regulations when in a Fenced Off-leash Area (FOLA).

These perceived benefits present management challenges for LGAs because there is likely to be a higher proportion of dogs in FOLAs that are poorly trained, not actively supervised and are less likely to be removed if poor behaviour persists.

More than 80% of respondents in these surveys cited the following as their primary grievances in relation to FOLAs:

- owners failing to actively supervise their dogs
- dogs being allowed to harass or annoy other dogs and people
- poorly behaved dogs
- aggressive dogs

Seventy-three percent of dog owners gave these same reasons for ceasing or reducing their use of FOLAs.

A Western Australia survey[17] found that between 59% and 72% of survey respondents stated they rarely/never use the 6 off-leash area in the city, or used them infrequently.

Anecdotal feedback further indicates that many owners use fenced off-leash areas selectively. Attendance decisions are often influenced by the number of dogs present, the presence of specific dogs or owners, and, in some cases, the presence of any other dogs at all.

The majority of dog owners interviewed[18] walking their dog along the Emu Bottom trail said they avoid FOLAs or rarely use them because of poor dog behaviour and control and/or owner attitude.

[16] Melton Dogs in Public Places Plan; Melton DAMP
[17] City of Karratha Dog Exercise Area Review
[18] Hume Review of FOLAs