

Safer Southwark Partnership: Dog Action Group

The Dog Action Strategy

Introduction

Dogs have been considered man's best friend for thousands of years. The vast majority are sociable, playful, and convey tremendous pleasure to the owner and household. Walking a dog has obvious health benefits, and often facilitates social interaction with the community, whilst recent research has confirmed that owners have lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and fewer medical problems. For some people, particularly those who are older and alone "the social support offered by an animal is greater than the support another human could offer."¹

Unfortunately there is another side to the equation, and recent years have witnessed an alarming rise in dog related problems and community concerns. The blame for this does not rest with dogs per se, but with the careless, anti-social, and sometime even dangerous people who keep them.

But whatever the cause, the problems are serious and growing.

In the last five years London hospitals have seen admissions for dog bites increase by 79%, and some attacks have led to fatalities, often of children². Between 2004-2008 dog fights have increased twelve fold³. This activity, dangerous and distressing in itself, also marks our communities through the damage to trees, swings and park benches caused by violent owners coercively training their dogs to savage and fight. The authorities have responded - Met Police seizures of dangerous dogs have witnessed a 24 fold increase in six years, from 43 in 2003 to over 1000 in 2009 - but it has been at a cost. In 2010 the Met Police have allocated £10.5 million for kenneling fees alone.⁴

At the lower end of the scale, but none the less concerning for local communities, is the amount of dog fouling that blights our estates and public areas; the noise nuisance from dogs who have been neglected; or the increasing number of strays allowed to wander the streets because of careless or uncaring owners.

This strategy defines what these problems are for Southwark, and puts in place the partnership action required to resolve them. Our objective is to make dog ownership a positive experience for both owner and the community alike. To that end the strategy is pro-dog, within the confines of the law, and against the anti-social behaviour of the small minority who use dogs in such an irresponsible or dangerous way.

¹ BBC website article "Dog Owners Live Healthier Lives" quoting from academic research

² Source GLA, 31 March 2010

³ RSPCA figures

⁴ Figure quoted by Lord Toby Harris, Hansard, 21 June 2010

Partnership Action

In April 2010 the Safer Southwark Partnership established a Dog Action Group to progress action in a co-ordinated way. This group consists of (from the Local Authority) Community Safety, Housing, Parks, Waste Management, and Communications. It also includes the Met Police, RSPCA, and Battersea DCH. A full list of current members and contact details can be located at Annex A.

However, our most important partnerships are with the communities of Southwark and other stakeholders who work with dogs or tackle some of the problems that are being caused. A key feature of the strategy is to provide education and support, as well listening to concerns and responding with robust action when it is appropriate to do so.

Key Principals

- A pro-dog strategy which promotes the value of dogs and encourages responsible ownership
- A strategy which targets action on irresponsible owners, rather than dogs per se.
- In terms of dangerous dogs our main concern is tackling or preventing dangerous deeds, but we will also actively administer the law in relation to banned breeds.
- The Strategy also aspires to the highest standards of best practice, as nationally recognised by the RSPCA

Key Objectives

Promoting responsible ownership

1. To promote responsible ownership through compulsory micro-chipping and to explore a dog registration scheme on Southwark housing estates and RSL properties.
2. To take forward a regular programme of education, chipping and neutering in order to promote responsible ownership and to reduce the problems of strays, dog fouling, and noise. This includes behavioural training for the dogs of accidental owners or those who require additional support.
3. To promote responsible ownership and provide reassurance through a series of media campaigns and action updates

Tacking Irresponsible Owners

4. To put in place new powers to tackle irresponsible owners through the roll out of a Borough wide Dog Control Order
5. To reduce number of dog fouling clean ups or noise call outs through robust enforcement against owners or keepers.
6. To use tenancy enforcement or anti-social behavior legislation against persistently irresponsible owners

Tackling Dangerous Deeds and Banned Breeds

7. To develop Southwark BARK, including comprehensive intelligence gathering, to deter and disrupt dangerous behaviour and to seize dangerous or banned breeds.
8. To take robust action against owners of status or fighting dogs, and all that this involves, through criminal prosecutions, anti-social behaviour legislation or tenancy enforcement, with the aim of banning or preventing them from owning dogs in the future
9. To reduce the supply of dangerous dogs through BARK, neutering programmes, and enforcement against illegal breeding or sales

Meeting National Best Practice

10. To meet the RSPCA gold footprint standard for tackling stray dogs by September 2011 and to meet at least bronze standard for housing, contingency planning and animal welfare by September 2011. This includes training for staff, written protocols, effective partnerships, and clear communication of our policies and services to the public.