

# Dogs on Beaches

## Discussion Paper

July 2009



### INTRODUCTION

In 2006 Wollongong City Council conducted the first city wide review of access for dogs in public places. The next complete review is intended for 2010-11.

The decision to issue this discussion paper has been triggered by ongoing community feedback and information Council has collected since 2006 regarding the dogs on beach component of our current off leash access policy.

This discussion paper is presented to allow possible opportunities to make changes to dogs on beach access prior to the next scheduled off leash area review in 2010-11.

### AIM

The aim of the dogs on beaches review is to:

- consider observations and data concerning dogs on beaches within the context of Council's current policy
- consider whether access for dogs on beaches is valued by the community;
- consider whether the current off-leash provision meets the community's needs;
- provide a revised option that meets the needs of both the dog owning and non dog owning community .
- determine which areas, if any, are regarded as priority new off-leash areas or if other off-leash areas should be withdrawn.

## **BACKGROUND AND CURRENT POLICY**

It is estimated that 37% of households in Wollongong own dogs. This equates to approximately 38,000 dogs.

In December 2002 Council approved the establishment of five off-leash areas for dogs in the Wollongong Local Government Area. On 6 November 2006, after a city wide review, Council adopted additional off-leash areas. The city now has twelve (12) off-leash areas, seven (7) of these on beaches.

These areas are valued - they provide locations where dogs can be exercised and socialised with other dogs which reduces problems such as barking and other nuisance behaviour.

### **Current policy**

Council's current dog access policy relating to beaches includes:

- a zero tolerance enforcement policy for all companion animal offences;
- ban for dogs accessing all beaches, with the exception of all approved off-leash areas;
- ban for dogs from all rock pools including Wombarra, Coledale, Austinmer, Bulli, Woonona, Bellambi, Towradgi, the old men's baths (rock pools north of the continental pool) and the nun's pools (northern headland of Wollongong City beach) rock pool areas;
- the following off-leash beaches:
  - Sharkey's Beach, Coledale(from the car-park, south toward the rock platform);
  - Little Austinmer Beach, Austinmer;
  - McCauley's beach Thirroul for a distance of 300metres south of Corbett Avenue
  - East Corrimal from Bellambi Point to include East Corrimal car-park;
  - Coniston Beach, Coniston;
  - MM Beach, Port Kembla;
  - Perkins Beach, Windang (extending from Shellharbour Rd/Wattle Street beach walkway north to easterly extension of unnamed access Rd).

### **Current concerns**

The most significant public concerns raised about the current policy include:

- the banning of dogs on beaches is considered harsh and unreasonable, especially given that where dogs are allowed on beaches on leash, "effective dog control" problems are largely eliminated.
- there is no dog off leash beach area in the Stanwell Park/ Coalcliff area.
- the need to introduce time sharing because of a perceived lack of off-leash areas.
- the need for Council to cater for the needs of the 37% of households that have at least one (1) dog
- issues of unwanted attention from dogs on beaches.
- dogs not under the control of their owners, resulting in nuisance behaviour.

## **PROPOSED CHANGES AND OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

### **1 Council is considering the introduction of a 'traffic light system' to manage dogs on beaches.**

The three (3) tiered approach (red, orange, green) makes it easier for the community to understand the rules about dogs on beaches. A map has been developed to show the community which beaches are proposed as;

**Green** - Dogs allowed on beach off leash.

**Orange** - Dogs allowed on the beach only when swimming flags are down, must be on leash. If the flags are up, no dogs are allowed on the beach.

**Red** - Dogs banned on the beach at all times.

Please find below the proposed three (3) tiered system for beaches.

#### **Proposed 'green' beaches (tier one) off leash areas**

- Perkins Beach, Windang (extending from Shellharbour Rd/Wattle Street beach walkway north to easterly extension of unnamed access Rd);
- MM Beach, Port Kembla;
- Coniston Beach, Coniston;
- Beach directly east of Puckeys Estate
- East Corrimal from Bellambi Point to include East Corrimal car-park;
- Bellambi between Bellambi ramp and ocean pool
- McCauley's beach Thirroul for a distance of 300metres south of Corbett Avenue
- Nth Thirroul beach from creek to Austinmer rock shelf pool area
- Little Austinmer Beach, Austinmer;
- Stanwell Park beach, north of northern lagoon

#### **Proposed 'orange' beaches (tier two) dogs on leash beaches**

This area is also known as flags up - no dogs/flags down dogs - on leash. Dogs on leashes are allowed on all beaches (except RED beaches). During summer, dogs would be allowed before 9am and after 6pm and in winter before 9am and after 4pm. (Summer is defined as being from September school holidays to ANZAC day).

#### **Proposed 'red' beaches (tier three) dogs not allowed on the beach**

- Austinmer beach,
- North Wollongong beach to Fairy Creek
- Wollongong beach to commencement of Coniston off-leash area
- Belmore basin
- Coledale beach

## **2 Continue with a zero tolerance policy for animal control offences**

In the 2006 survey 28.3% of the community wanted enforcement. Council's observations indicated that although improvements have been made due to the presence of Rangers there is still a need to continue with a zero tolerance policy.

## **3 Continue to ban dogs from rock pools**

There have been no complaints concerning this policy. Council continues to receive complaints concerning dogs in pools and for health reasons Council should continue with the policy of banning dogs in rock pools.

## **4 Remove the blanket ban on dogs on beaches and allow dogs on beaches on leash before 9am and after 6pm in summer and before 9am and after 4pm in winter.**

The banning of dogs completely from beaches has been seen by the community as a restrictive access policy. The Wollongong community generally do not mind dogs on beaches if the owner complies with leash laws and manages faeces properly. Allowing dogs on beaches will go some way in allowing people to access local beaches despite the dogs not being off-leash. It is felt that a time sharing approach will not create a significant conflict with users. This could be reassessed in the future should conflict occur.

## **5 Remove Sharkey's beach as an off-leash beach.**

Council has received numerous written complaints from the Coledale community requesting the removal of Sharkey's beach as an off-leash area due to the amount of people using the beach for picnics and other activities. Sharkey's was originally included as an off-leash beach to support Little Austinmer beach and to cater for the needs of the Stanwell Park and Coalcliff community. The proposal to make Stanwell Park Beach an off leash area means we can consider making Sharkey's a time shared beach only.

## **6 Increase McCauley's beach off-leash area to include the southern half of the beach**

Currently the off-leash beach extends 300m south of Corbett Avenue. It was previously intended to have the whole beach as an off-leash area, however this was not possible as Stockland owned the southern end of the beach. Council is currently purchasing this land from Stockland and to avoid community confusion, Council proposes to make the whole beach an off-leash beach.

## **7 Increase the Bellambi Point off-leash area between Bellambi Ramp and the ocean pool**

The area on this side of the ramp is unofficially used as an off leash area with no impact. No complaints have been received concerning any conflict in this area.

**8 Increase Perkins Beach, Windang (extending from Shellharbour Rd/Wattle Street beach walkway north to southern Port Kembla beach carpark)**

Currently this off-leash area extends from Shellharbour Road/Wattle Street to the unnamed road. The length of beach to the southern most carpark of Port Kembla Beach is generally very lightly populated and is considered to be an appropriate off-leash area. This beach is isolated and allowing dogs on the beach will increase usage and security for the public.

**9 Beach east of Puckeys Estate**

This area has been regularly commented upon by the community as an ideal area for an off-leash beach. Possible environmental impact to the estate has been considered however it is believed the impact will be minimal and able to be managed with suitable directions and signage.

**10 North Thirroul Beach from creek to Austinmer rock shelf pool area as an off leash area**

This area is regularly used as an off-leash area. There appears to be no conflict in this area. Thirroul residents have highlighted this area as a possible location for an off-leash area.

**11 Include Stanwell Park beach north of northern lagoon as an off-leash area**

Although this area is relatively small the northern carpark (opposite Cnr The Drive and Maxwell Crescent), Council proposes to make this an off-leash beach to cater for the Stanwell Park, Coalcliff and Helensburgh community.

## **HOW TO HAVE YOUR SAY**

Council officers will attend a number of community activities during the exhibition period. Come along to discuss the changes proposed in this discussion paper. Please check Council's website for details or contact the Engagement Team on 4227 7096.

Feedback forms are available at all Council libraries, at engagement activities during the exhibition period or on Council's website [www.wollongong.nsw.gov.au](http://www.wollongong.nsw.gov.au)

Submissions can be made in writing and sent to Council by mail or email to [consultation@wollongong.nsw.gov.au](mailto:consultation@wollongong.nsw.gov.au) All submissions must be received by 6 August 2009.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Principles of access by dogs to public space**

Access for dogs must be considered in a strategic manner, consistent with “Public Open Space and Dogs - A design and management guide for open space professionals and Local Government” by Harlock Jackson Pty Ltd, August 1995. The Department of Local Government accepts this document as the guide for local government in planning for dogs in public open space.

Jackson (1995) indicates that there are four (4) principles that need to be established and considered when Council is considering access by dogs to public places and provide a sound basis for assessing the options for dogs' access to public open space, as follows:

- 1 provide formal recognition of the legitimacy of dog owners as being a deserving significant group of customers.
- 2 understand more clearly the needs of both dogs and their owners.
- 3 aim for integration of dogs with other public space users while recognising that separation is warranted in some instances.
- 4 Councils should apply a strategic approach that considers access on a comprehensive Council wide basis rather than on a piecemeal park by park basis.

The main access options are:

- on-leash areas;
- off-leash areas;
- banning;
- different zones in one park/beach;
- time share arrangements. Seasonal variations have also been used although mainly on beaches for example: dogs banned from November to April.

### **Selection of off-leash areas**

What to look for in selection of off leash areas:

- beaches that can withstand free-running by dogs;
- beaches that have natural boundaries;
- beaches that meet the needs of dogs and their owners;
- beaches that are not associated with established recreation interests;
- unique local conditions or opportunities.

The areas to avoid in selecting off-leash areas are:

- areas in the immediate vicinity of children's playgrounds - because of the relative unpredictability of children in unfamiliar situations;
- areas that attract high concentrations of people, e.g. popular beaches;
- picnic areas - the presence of food may provoke annoying behaviour;
- Botanic gardens or Environmental protection areas;

### **Needs of dogs and owners**

The most fundamental need for dogs is that they be taken out with their owner as much as possible. This enables them to experience the full range of benefits - exercise, training, socialisation, relief of pent-up energy as well as time and fun with their owner and other dogs. They don't need to run freely off the leash as much as they need interaction with their owner and diversity of experience (sights, sounds, smells, textures, other dogs and humans).

Taking a dog out has been found to stimulate social interaction with other humans. Studies suggest that friendships developed with others using the same route and that on average, the conversations with this group lasted for longer than those with people without dogs. For some, particularly the elderly who live alone, taking a dog to the park may stimulate the only human contact that person has for an entire day.

Urban consolidation, with more high and medium density housing developments occurring, will place greater demands on public open space both for human needs and as an outlet for dogs.

### **Fitness, health and mental health**

Harlock Jackson (1995) states that the health benefits of pet ownership are increasingly being recognised. Studies have revealed a beneficial effect of pet ownership on several of the classical factors for coronary heart disease and reported better physical and mental health than of non dog-owners.

Owning a dog encourages people to exercise and provide social opportunities particularly for the elderly and parents isolated at home during the day with small children. In an era when people feel increasingly threatened in public areas, being accompanied by a dog can also improve actual and perceived safety.

Pets can act as emotional substitutes for spouses, romantic partners and children. The studies have found that widows, single people and empty nesters are more likely to emphasise the companionship qualities of pets. Pets are often also obtained to help children learn responsibility and how to share. They show that if affection is given it will be returned.

### **Conflict**

The problems generally attributed to dogs and their owners whilst in public places include defecation, aggression to humans and other animals, non-compliance with leash laws and other nuisance behaviour.

Conflict is a matter of degree with its impacts ranging from threats to safety, to detracting from the quality of the recreation experience, to more simple annoyance. Even annoyance is a matter of degree - what is intolerable to one person may only annoy another and may not even be noticed by another.

The most common complaint about unremoved faecal deposits is the effect on aesthetics and the unpleasant experience of dodging droppings on footpaths and in parks.

Dog attacks are the most serious potential problem and there is always a great deal of interest in the issue. Attacks can occur against humans, other dogs and other animals. Most dogs don't bite people or other dogs. Those that do are either frightened, dominant, protective or possessive.

Another argument for restricting dogs' access to public open space is that their presence (behaviour and smell) frightens away native wildlife.

The problems described above are either eliminated or reduced if dogs are confined to a leash. However leash laws of themselves raise another area of potential conflict - that of non-compliance. People don't comply for many reasons whether through protest, lack of awareness, laziness or because they think they can escape prosecution.