COMHAIRLE CONTAE ÁTHA CLIATH THEAS  
SOUTH DUBLIN COUNTY COUNCIL



MEETING OF RATHFARNHAM/TEMPLEOGUE-TERENURE AREA COMMITTEE

Tuesday, April 12, 2016

MOTION NO. 10

Dogs and off leash walking in Cherryfield

There is currently no provision of an approved off-leash dog walking facility in the South Dublin County Council region which is at variance with emerging best practice in the developed world. An off-leash park will finally open parkland for taxpayers who were previously excluded from using parks with their dogs.

Parks are shared spaces, and it is recognised that the walking of dogs needs to be balanced with the needs of other park users, although it should equally be recognised that other park users are already extremely well accommodated in other parks and recreational areas within the ambit of South Dublin County Council. For several decades, off-leash dog walkers have been an established community along the Dodder linear park between the Spawell and Old Bawn section. The vibrant community of dog walkers in the vicinity is considerable. Dog owners are simply asking for an adequate shared or dedicated space in parks for off-leash exercise, namely the already established park area as mentioned above, and to be treated fairly, equitably and respected as users of parks.

Cherryfield Dog Walkers is a representative body of this community cohort. Membership consists of people from diverse areas of life. However, it should be noted that many of us are elderly and this is our main outlet for daily exercise and social interaction. In the event of a person becoming ill, others keep in contact and help as necessary. In recent years, we restored a park bench in honour of one of our deceased members. We advise each other of potential dangers in the area, for example if we see suspicious activity in the car park. Some members cut back overgrown pathways and collect litter. Responsible dog ownership is espoused by the group. Dog walkers, together with their dogs are present at all times of the day from early in the morning until after dark, and in all weather conditions. Facilities in the area are minimal and the group has asked for little other than the provision of bins. Dog owners recognise and respect the rights of all to enjoy nature and ambiance within the park. Several of the dogs in the area (and their owners) are active contributors to the community, where they work as therapy dogs, are guide dog puppies under training, working as police dogs, together with active and retired guide dogs (20). Their contribution to societal needs should be recognised in how we provide for them in relation to access to adequate exercise facilities.

It has recently come to our attention that there is a major initiative underway to develop the native parkland setting in this section of the Dodder linear park, with the provision of running tracks and a BMX facility together with a proposed significant cycle track thoroughfare through the park. In all these development plans there has been absolutely no consideration of the large cohort of citizens, particularly the elderly, who walk their dogs daily off-leash within this area. Provision of some of the proposed facilities – in particular a ‘high-speed’ cycle track - is not conducive to the safe walking, either on or off-leash, for dogs or humans. Wherever these shared-use (aka multi-use) paths exist, there are complaints due to the conflicts which occur. There already exists a recently constructed cycle lane along the Firhouse Road, with a minimal number of users throughout the majority of any day, which is at variance to the constant number of dog walkers within the park area. Most users of the cycle track are male, younger than our average dog walker, and already super fit. In contrast, family cyclists occasionally meander along the river in harmony with the environment and other users. It should be noted that a ‘high speed’ cycle track is completely at variance to the needs of the Cherryfield Dog Walkers who have a long history of daily walking in this area.

Current evidence of the importance of individual health in relation to not only personal benefits, but the impact on the wider economic and social aspects of society has justifiably led to increased emphasis on leading an active life (1-5). An active life varies for the individual depending on factors such as age demographics and general health (7-10). One aspect that is known to increase the participation of an individual in increased physical activity is dog ownership (1-5). Dog owners across the age range walk on a daily basis and generally they are associated with having better physical and psychological health compared to a similarly matched cohort in the population (1-5 & 7-10). Dog owners tend to be older than the demographic that are involved in what would be considered as ‘active sports’ such as cycling and thus dog ownership, with concomitant dog walking, can be considered as a valuable resource in getting the older citizen to participate in daily physical activity with the associated improved health (both physical and mental) and reduced expenditure in health provision (14 & 16) including proven health economics gain.

Within the Irish demographic there is a high number of pet owners, with nearly 40% of households in Ireland having a dog – and this number is growing (6), with a greater number of urban households owning dogs than in rural areas. Veterinary research indicates that the continually leashed dogs are less mentally healthy than those who have access to free runs (6). To encourage and facilitate physical activity the local environment should be friendly to pet owners, while being cognisant of other open space users (9-13, 17). It has been shown that provision of off-leash dog parks is a system that works well in several cities for both the dog and the owner (17). It is common in European cities such as Amsterdam, Rome, and Paris to see well behaved off-leash dogs even on crowded streets.  In Canada, USA and Australia off leash parks are common (see Table 1). Overall, in 2010 there were more than 1100 off-leash parks are present in the US & Canada with 600 of these being city park off-leash areas (19)

Table 1. OFF-LEASH DOG PARKS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS

**City No. of parks No. of parks/100 000 residents**

Portland 33 5.4

Norfolk 11 4.5

Madison 10 4.1

Henderson 11 4.1

Las Vegas 22 3.6

Arlington, Virginia 8 3 6

San Francisco 29 3.5

Tampa 10 2.8

St. Petersburg 6 2.4

Jersey City 6 2.3

(<https://www.tpl.org/sites/default/files/files_upload/2015-City-Park-Facts-Report.pdf>)

Ireland has been slow in providing any facilities for dog walkers compared with the vast expenditure on provision of, for example, cycle ways. Cycling is an important form of exercise – but for a variety of reasons cycling is not available to as wide a cross-section of society as dog walking. The latter is particularly the case for aging or health-compromised individuals. Provision of small enclosed fenced areas within parks is not conducive to dog walking and is more akin to dropping the dog to a crèche while the owner stands around not exercising (16, 18).

Dog ownership has responsibilities and the vast majority of pet owners uphold these responsibilities with considerable diligence. Irish legislation states that dogs must be kept under effectual control in public places, rather than that they be kept on a leash, the latter being regulated by council by-laws. Walking a dog off-leash is a healthier alternative for the animal and person (15). Responsible dog owners require what is best for both them and their pets (4,9). Cleaning up dog excrement is mandatory for any responsible dog owner.

Increased urbanization brings societal responsibilities, in this case on the part of the South Dublin County Council towards accommodating the needs of the considerable number of dogs within urban households, through the provision of adequate environmental accommodations including, but not limited to, the provision of extensive off-leash walking areas (15, 18).

In light of the long history of dog walking in this area, South Dublin County Council is requested to recognise and support off-leash dog walking in Cherryfield, in what would be a significant progressive development for so many living within this part of the South Dublin County Council’s remit. Such a pragmatic and modern approach would greatly enhance the strategic intent and international reputation of the Council.

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