



FINAL REPORT: WALKERS WITH DOGS AROUND WINCHESTER



31 March 2008

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***The authors would like to thank the following
people for their support and cooperation during this project:***

The project's steering group: David Ball, Michael Burge, Cllr Frank Pearson, Maggie Snow

The dog walkers of Winchester for surveying and workshop participation

The landowners around Winchester who agreed to be interviewed

Jo Hale and Cath Hart: Hampshire County Council

Zoë Martin and Bill Williamson: Winchester City Council

The 6 veterinary practices in and around Winchester

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research into the experiences and perceptions of both walkers with dogs and land managers in and around Winchester has found that:

- Dog owners are a major user of sites and access networks around Winchester. 4,000-7,000 dogs live within this area, and are each exercised for between one and two hours daily by their owners. This equates to 5-10% of the local population meeting government targets for exercise through dog walking alone.
- This regularity of use means dog owners are a loyal “consumer” of public access, whose desire to exercise their dogs off-lead, close to home, away from traffic in attractive areas needs to be accommodated somewhere. 56% of dog owners reported that less access is available to them locally than 10 years ago; this trend, if it continues, will produce increased pressure on the sites that remain available.
- Whilst in legal and practical terms a dog may be seen as just the “accompaniment” of a walker, it is actually a major influence on where owners go, what they do and how often. Access management policy and practice needs to recognise that their needs are significantly different to walkers without dogs.
- Many, but not all, land managers report problems from certain types of behaviour of some walkers with dogs. These are understandably very real to the land managers concerned, although the impacts are rarely, if ever, quantified.
- For some land managers, there are no or few issues; for others the problems are acute and need addressing. There is no evidence to suggest dog walking as a whole presents a generalised, significant problem. Any alleged or actual impacts depend on the unique circumstances and setting of a particular landholding.
- Landowners, as well as dog owners, also recognise the benefits dog walking can bring for individual sites (such as reporting crime and problems with livestock), as well as promoting regular, year-round daily exercise.
- To ensure the most effective management of access and use of resources, dog walking needs to be seen in a balanced way. It is in everyone’s interests to ensure any management interventions/restrictions are developed to address the specific undesired behaviours involved, rather than impose ineffective generalised bans.
- Locally-relevant information, support and advice to help land managers and dog owners avoid conflict, enjoy their rights and meet their responsibilities, is often lacking, fragmented and not readily accessible, which can lead to needless conflict and lack of understanding.
- There are untapped opportunities to reduce conflict by taking a more strategic view of access provision for dog owners, and by: brokering access to new, less sensitive sites; improving communication between different interests; giving consistent advice about rights, responsibilities and restrictions for all parties.

continued...

Hampshire Countryside Access Forum (HCAF) is in a good, statutorily-supported position to help improve matters; it is recommended that HCAF should consider:

1 - Acting as a catalyst to ensure the best expertise, support and access provision is available to all with an interest in access to the countryside by walkers with dogs, irrespective of which part of local government or other body they approach first.

2 - Making a statutory request to all section 94(4) bodies that it is consulted in good time on any proposed Dog Control Orders within its area, and those in areas that abut its boundary. It can also usefully promote the value of its advice on any other restrictions proposed under different legislation.

3 – Promoting the production of engaging material, in the most relevant format (eg leaflet, website etc) to more effectively and sensitively engage with dog owners, minimise any negative impacts and promote wider related benefits.

Practical examples of how the above can be done appear later in this report.

2 RESEARCH REPORT

2.1 Aim

This research, commissioned by Hampshire County Council (HCC) on behalf of the Hampshire Countryside Access Forum (HCAF) aimed to:

- a. To identify the extent and nature of local access available to Winchester residents with dogs.
- b. To understand how this access is currently used by walkers with dogs and others for recreational activities.
- c. To gain an understanding of the needs of local dog walkers.
- d. To determine current management practices and identify pressures and conflicts.
- e. To produce a plan of action for HCAF which proposes improvements for dog walkers and which reduces the potential for conflict with land managers and their own needs.

2.2 Research approach and constraints

Within the resources available for the project, it was not possible, nor intended to, independently investigate all access used in and around Winchester by people walking dogs, nor to identify all the consequential benefits and problems for site managers or other site users.

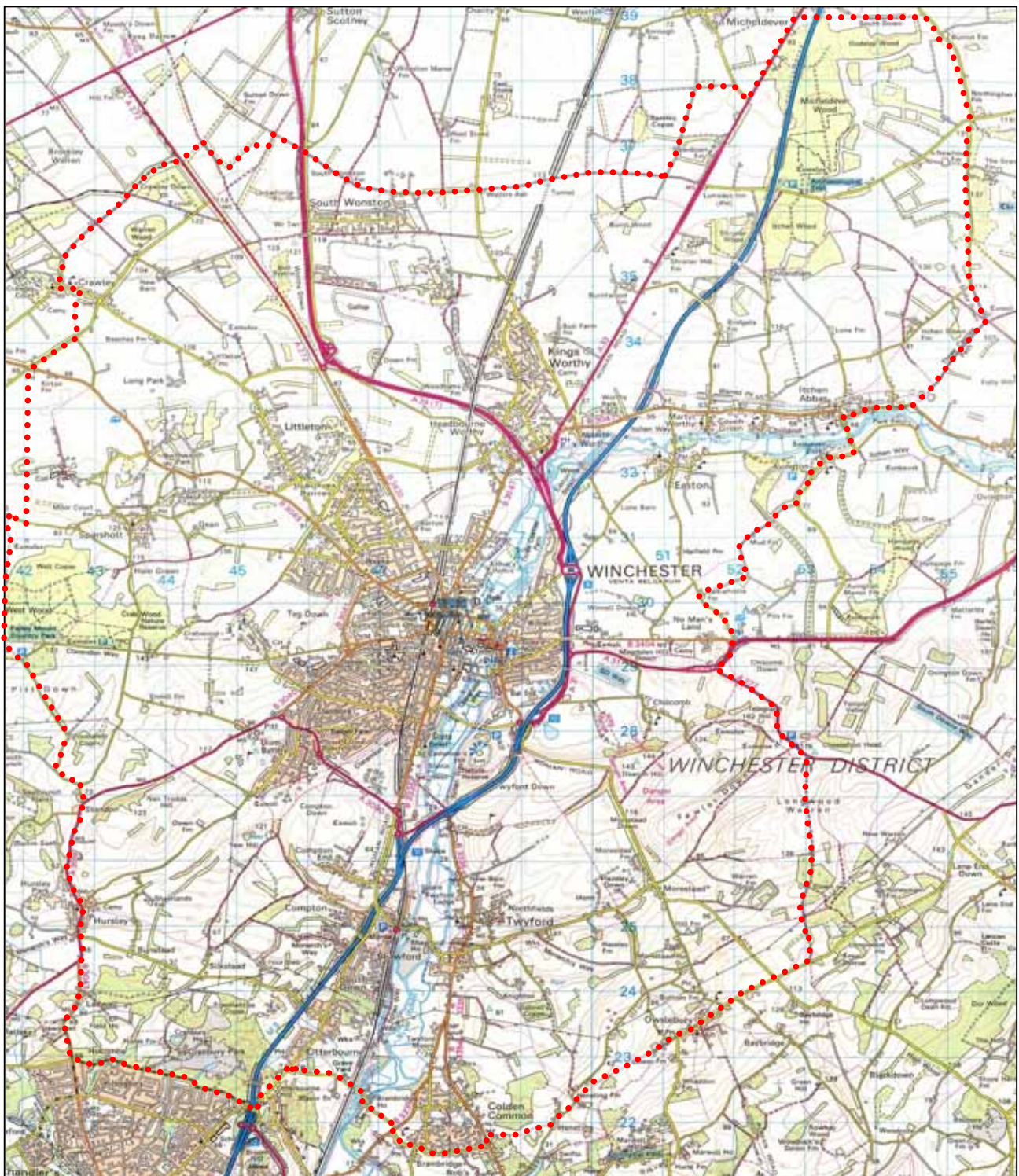
Instead, the project made use of volunteers from the local dog walking community, and a sample of local land managers, to give a flavour of the current situation. Apart from being a pragmatic approach, this also inherently developed a direct rapport with site managers and dog owners, which can itself be potentially useful when developing and delivering any subsequent changes.

The study area examined an area of approximately 5 miles / 8km radius from the centre of Winchester, as shown on the following plan.

The data gathered is largely comprised of the subjective, personal perspectives of dog owners and site/land managers. When seen in context, this need not be viewed as a drawback, as it is such personal perspectives that underlie an individual's reaction and behaviour in a given situation.

The research comprised three distinct areas work (dog owner workshops, interviews with landowners, site surveys) which are summarised below, and reported in more detail in separate complementary reports supplied to HCC.

2.2.1 Plan of study area



Winchester dog study area shown thus:

↑ North

Based on 1:50,000 Landranger base plan – not to scale

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2.3 Dog owner workshops

Two structured, informal workshops, two and a quarter hours long, were held on 15 November 2007 at Badger Farm (afternoon) and Harestock (evening). The aim of these events was to engage with regular walkers of dogs in and around Winchester in a positive way, and to support and inform site survey and landowner research.

In total 23 local dog walkers attended, recruited through fliers positioned on popular dog walking routes/sites, and in local vets. They came across as committed dog owners who were keen to improve their access resource, whilst equally recognising the need for restrictions at sensitive times and places.

A combination of talks and activities brought those present up to date with this project and allowed them to share their views and experiences.

A map-based activity was used to help participants identify the areas where they walked their dogs. Overall 54 regularly-used sites were identified, nearly all of which were close to owners' homes and within the study area. Dog owners used these sites because of their accessibility and perceived suitability for exercising their dogs (more information about site preferences is given in section 2.5 – site surveys) At 16 of these sites, issues were identified that meant owners now visited this place less often or not at all. These visit-reducing issues included land management changes, increased restrictions/on-lead requirements, and the behaviour of other site users with or without dogs.

When undertaking these workshop activities, it was noticeable that participants were very interested in finding out about new places to go from other dog owners; many asked if a list of the sites could be published or shared in some way.

In terms of improvements that would help walkers with dogs, the most common responses were for more dog bins and more information (leaflet/website) about safe dog walking areas, presence of livestock and path condition.

Other less frequent improvements suggested were: more opportunity to comment, protection of informal access and more off-lead areas.

Regarding the extent of access available to them, around half (56%) felt that there were slighter fewer places to go than 10 years ago; 33% felt there were slightly more places to go, and 11% felt there were many more places to go.

Most of those attending (78%) felt that having somewhere they could exercise their dogs off lead each day was the most important thing to them in this context.

70% of those attending offered to help with the site survey described below.

In summary, those attending felt:

- Positive about being a dog owner in the area
- It was worthwhile attending the event
- They could freely express their views.

2.4 Land manager interviews

Between 12 and 14 December 2007, the managers of 14 different sites/areas were interviewed face to face, using a structured questionnaire. All the interviews were carried out by the same person, who was not involved with the dog walkers survey, to help ensure independence and objectivity.

The land managers interviewed were selected to illustrate the situation at a variety of site/land use types: 4 farms; 3 nature reserves; 3 areas of land managed by local government organisations; 2 managed by corporate bodies and 2 managed by a national government agency.

Without exception, the land managers were welcoming and keen to take part, volunteering information and opinions with little prompting. There was a general recognition of the importance of the main issues, and several went out of their way to say how they wanted to see areas of concern resolved for everyone's benefit.

The findings of the interviews can be summarised as:

- Landowners already provide a variety of public access for walkers with dogs, both statutory and permissive, with some actively seeking to improve and enhance access.
- Landowners have strong views about how walkers with dogs should behave on their land, but are less sure about their own responsibilities, with none of this recorded in any formal policy or written undertaking.
- Some efforts have been made by landowners to help walkers with dogs understand their responsibilities, but most interventions appear reactive and proscriptive.
- Landowners are aware of the effect that changes in land management practices are likely to have for walkers with dogs, both positive and negative.
- There are genuine problem behaviours surrounding walkers with dogs for some landowners, but a lack of detailed records makes quantifying the scale or impact of such issues difficult.
- Problem behaviours are apportioned to a variety of factors, although the overall impact on each landowner varies considerably and much depends on the nature and type of landholding.
- Landowners have contrasting views on the negative/positive role played by walkers with dogs, with some suggesting that the problems are exaggerated and appearing open to the idea of providing more public access.
- Over half of the land managers felt dog walking also brought benefits to their site, such as early reporting of problems like injured livestock and deterring criminal activity.
- Landowners suggested better all-round education of dog owners is required, plus other targeted measures.
- On many publicly-managed sites, there is an existing and increasing priority to manage for nature conservation, which can readily prompt conflict with dog owners, who see such areas as having a wider public amenity role, especially when longstanding access traditions are challenged under new regimes.

2.5 Site/access surveys

Between 15 January and 3 March 2008, 12 volunteers from the local dog walking community surveyed 34 different sites/areas using a structured, self-administered survey form. Surveyors were selected to survey sites they were already familiar with, as the study was seeking the perceptions of regular local dog walkers, rather than tourists or occasional visitors.

Training sessions were held to ensure surveyors understood the purpose of the survey, how to complete the forms and to help ensure overall consistency. It was made clear that the survey was examining their personal perspectives as dog walkers, as this is what will influence what people do and where they go with their dogs.

The findings can be summarised as follows:

- Dog owners get to their dog walks by walking from home (41%, mostly for up to 10 minutes) or by car (52%, mostly by driving for between 5 and 20 minutes).
- The most attractive sites/access for dog owners were those close to home and away from traffic, with attractive scenery where dogs could be off-lead – the latter being the single most important factor.
- Surveyors had mostly always known about the sites they visited; whilst some had found the site from maps (18%) or other dog owners (13%); promotional materials, signs and leaflets were rarely influential.
- An average dog walk was for around 1 hour.
- Surveyors felt dog owners in general kept to the access rights they perceived existed, for example sticking to paths for linear access, and wandering more widely where there was open access.
- Most surveyors (86%) felt the site they surveyed was good for dog walking, and that there were suitable alternatives. However, 12% of people felt they had no alternative site if the access was curtailed. Such alternative sites in 54% of cases would mean a longer walk or drive (on average 12 minutes longer).
- Having to keep their dog on a lead all year round at a site, or from March to July, would make 85% of dog owners visit a particular site less frequently, or stop coming at all.
- Dog owners were less likely to be put off sites due to the introduction of grazing cattle (it would make no difference for 35% of people), compared to introducing sheep, which would reduce visits to some degree for three-quarters of dog owners.
- Charging for car parking would reduce visits for three-quarters of people, whereas having to park further away had a much smaller influence.
- Fining people for not picking up dog poo was reported to only put 7% of people off visiting a site to any degree.
- On-site information was mostly about what to do with dog poo (32%), around farm animals (21%), places to avoid (16%) or where dogs must be on a lead (16%). Only 9 signs (14%) were about wildlife or other site users.

- Around half such information had a convincing explanation for the request, although in less than half the cases (44%) was the request clear about where the restriction applied at all or finished. Around two thirds of surveyors (62%) said they were very likely to comply with the requests they saw.
- 88% of surveyors felt there were benefits to the sites from dog owners, such as reporting injuries to livestock and damage to property (20%), keeping access open and available (20%) and deterring criminal activity (10%).
- 57% of surveyors felt some people not picking up poo had a negative effect on the site; 14% perceived disturbance to wildlife occurred.
- To correct negative impacts, apart from suggesting more poo bins, surveyors suggested better information and communication would help, as would better mutual respect between all parties, and provision of alternative sites.

2.6 Landowner attitudes toward access use by dog owners

The following table compares the attitudes towards walkers with dogs from the dog-owning site surveyors' perspectives, alongside those reported by interviewed landowners. The third column compares these with similar questions asked of the National Farmers' Union and Country Land and Business Association members about public access in general (not just with dogs), in a HCC survey in 2006.

Landowner attitude towards access	Dog owner perception of land manager attitudes toward dog walkers	Attitude of interviewed landowners towards access for dog owners	NFU/CLA member attitude to all types of access
Don't mind access as long as users don't cause any damage and act responsibly.	56%	21%	25%
Accept people have access rights, but do not agree with allowing any extra access.	13%	21.5%	50%
Would prefer to have no dog / public access to their land.	13%	7%	17%
Welcome access as they think providing for such public recreation is worthwhile.	16%	50%	2%

The comparison shows that only a minority of landowners seek to prevent public access completely. The landowner interviews show that over half welcomed public access; this may reflect the fact that a significant number of public sector land managers were interviewed, compared to the CLA/NFU survey.

Whilst this data cannot be scrutinised in great detail due to the sample sizes, it does show that most landowners and dog walkers alike do not have an "anti" or negative view towards each other in general.

2.7 Implications for access management

2.7.1 Demand for dog walking routes and sites

Whilst knowing the number of dog owners in the study area helps to reflect the relative importance of these issues, it is very difficult to get an accurate figure. Nonetheless, even the lowest estimates below reinforce the importance of considering dog owners in access management policy and practice.

Based on national statistics, there is approximately one dog for every 10 people; in this study's area there are 70,000 people, equating to 7,000 dogs.

Six veterinary practices in the study area were approached to try and obtain more accurate figures. All were cooperative, but their data is limited by, for instance, not knowing when dogs on their books have died, and the number of dogs not going to the vet annually. Based on the best estimates the vets provided, a figure of 4,000-9,000 dogs emerges. The district council estimates 1,000 dogs in the town of Winchester itself, and 8,000-10,000 dogs in the whole district.

Based on all these measures, we can estimate that there are between 4,000 and 7,000 dogs in the study area.

Research commissioned from Sheffield Hallam University in 2007 by HCC shows that a third of dog owners walk their dogs twice or more per day, and 40% between once and twice a day. The findings of this Winchester study accord with this, showing that an average dog walk is around 1 hour in duration.

2.7.2 Consequential access management issues

Given the foregoing, in the Winchester area each day, and using the lower estimates above, we have around 4,000 people/hours of dog walking every day. This lower estimate equates to 6% of the local human population meeting government targets for exercise through dog walking alone.

Based on even these rough estimates, walkers of dogs are clearly a major user of public access around Winchester, and their specific, year-round needs must be managed and accommodated to minimise conflict.

This high frequency of dog walking, considered alongside all three strands of the research, leads us to the following practical conclusions:

- Dog owners are very regular users of sites and access networks. Whilst in legal and practical terms a dog may be seen as just the "accompaniment" of a walker, it is actually a major influence on where owners go, what they do and how often.
- Given the large number of dogs and time spent exercising them, irresponsible behaviour by only a small percentage of owners can understandably still present a problem to the land manager concerned. Equally, given several thousand dog walks per day, it is suggested that dog walking cannot be legitimately seen as a generalised "problem" activity in itself, particularly given a distinct lack of data about impacts to help put this into perspective.
- Landowners, as well as dog owners, also recognise the benefits dog walking can bring for individual sites, as well as promoting regular, year-round daily exercise.

- However, conflict does occur in specific circumstances on particular sites. This can be significant and acutely impact on what a land manager is able to do on a particular area of land. This seems especially likely when changes take place that require dog owners to change long-standing behaviour.
- Specific figures on the frequency of incidents or their impacts is largely absent, to any degree of accuracy. Nonetheless, these incidents are clearly very real for the people involved and need to be accepted and addressed.
- Responses to such conflicts, or attempts by land managers to promote desired behaviour by dog owners, are often reactive, uncoordinated and lacking in the clarity or explanation that is essential to optimise compliance. Misapprehensions and uncertainty by land managers about their rights and responsibilities further exacerbate the potential for conflict.
- Action to change the behaviour and perceptions of any party involved, be they dog owner or land manager, needs to use excellent communication skills plus sensitive engagement with the intended audience. Simply putting up a sign stating the law is not sufficient – as we see every day in other areas of life, such as compliance with speed limits and parking.
- Dog owners are loyal to the range of sites they have traditionally used and usually have alternative sites to go to, although this can often increase car usage.
- Due to dog owners' strong desire for off-lead access, away from traffic and close to home, suitable access for them is much less than that theoretically provided by the rights of way network, open access and permitted paths.
- Whilst dog owners generally feel they have other sites where they can exercise their dogs, when access ceases or management changes are imposed (eg requiring dogs on leads) long established traditions of access may well be difficult to change in the short term. It cannot be assumed that the existence of an alternative site means dog owners will always use this.
- The longevity and attachment of owners to their dogs means that site-based restrictions on access are unlikely to reduce their daily need for access. There will thus always be a high demand for places where dogs can be exercised off-lead, close to home and away from traffic.
- This loyalty could be utilised to secure practical and political support for well-funded management and provision of public access.
- When conflict does occur on a site, dog owners can be very protective about their use of such areas and, irrespective of the rights and wrongs on either side, if not addressed proactively at an early stage, poor communication, lack of engagement and misunderstanding between parties can lead to acute, ingrained conflict that is hard to reconcile, especially in the short term.
- In short, the relevant solutions are to be found in excellent communication and access management skills; this is a people management issue.
- Whilst a land manager will have a view on the behaviour of dog owners, it does not necessarily make them good communicators or influencers. Equally, we cannot expect dog owners to be skilled in understanding their impacts on nature conservation or agriculture. The expertise of HCC and other public bodies can help address these deficiencies.

2.7.3 The need for action

The above conclusions show that dog owners do need special consideration, if we are to reduce conflict for all who manage or enjoy the countryside and green spaces around towns.

The trends perceived by dog owners of having fewer places to go, combined with increasing building development that can both increase the number of dog owners and reduce the greenspace available, suggests the potential for conflict will increase unless action is taken.

The land dog owners go to is primarily managed for one of three purposes:

1. Agricultural production
2. Nature conservation
3. Public amenity and recreation

Despite a lack of supporting evidence, Government commitments to increasing biodiversity are noticeably being interpreted by some organisations as requiring greater restrictions on dogs, by either restricting access to new sites, or reducing long-established access traditions. Changes in agricultural production and subsidy also can have an impact, as can differing views on the legitimate use and value of public amenity land.

For whatever reason a restriction on existing access comes about, in reality dog owners can have one of four responses:

1. Keep visiting the site if their needs are still met with the restriction in place.
2. Go somewhere else that seems to better accommodate their needs.
3. Practically and/or politically challenge the restriction.
4. Ignore the restriction given a low likelihood of being caught/fined.

Options 1 and 2 have most potential to best meet the interests of all parties with the minimum of conflict. However, they need land managers to proactively and sensitively implement changes, face up to the strategic issue of where else dog owners could go, and consider what impact the changes may have on such other sites. Currently, this study found that in practice, a more reactive, site based “not in my back yard” approach prevails, which is more likely to prompt responses 3 and 4, and/or simply displace issues and conflict to other sites.

As the demand for access by dog owners is not going to go away in a current climate of fewer places to go, there is a clear need for strategic access planning and management, backed up by sound practical advice, if conflict is to be minimised in the future

2.8 Opportunities for HCAF action to improve management

Hampshire County Council is already making great strides in improving how it influences and engages with dog owners, to both reduce negative impacts and optimise the benefits of dog ownership.

However, HCAF is in a privileged and special situation that can help complement this work and improve matters for all who manage or enjoy the countryside and open spaces around towns.

A key message coming through this research is that conflict can be reduced by: maintaining a sufficient network of suitable sites/access; improving communication between parties; giving consistent advice to all about rights and responsibilities; better explanation and clarity about where any restrictions start and finish.

There will always be a minority of people in any community, be it dog owners or land managers, where a tough enforcement line is the only option. From this and other work, there is clearly also a substantial number of people who are willing to do the right thing if we set them up to succeed by giving them sufficient access provision and timely advice.

The following three points suggest how HCAF can make a positive difference in this respect:

2.8.1 Ensuring a consistent, integrated approach

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 requires many public bodies to have due regard to HCAF advice; this includes county, district and parish councils and national government bodies/agencies like the Forestry Commission and Highways Agency. HCAF can also give guidance to any other bodies, organisations and individuals regarding public access to land in the area for “any lawful purpose”. (Revised Defra Guidance for Local Access Forums, 2007).

From this study, when both landowners and dog owners were seeking advice, accessible, timely and consistent information was not available, even though it exists. This appears not to be intentional; it is just a symptom of the difficulties the public face when dealing with the different layers of local government.

This problem can be particularly acute when people seek advice about dogs, given that several district councils cover the Hampshire County Council area, as well as numerous parish councils.

The expertise and statutory interest of HCC and HCAF can be initially overlooked, and only then brought in once issues have become needlessly inflamed. The study also shows that dog owners' needs and their use of public access is different to other users; they cannot be considered in the same way as walkers without dogs.

Moreover, issues like keeping dogs on leads at certain times and in specific places are major issues for dog owners, even though other interests may see this as being far less of an imposition. There is a great need for sensitive planning and engagement on such issues, and individual land managers are not always well-equipped to deal with this by themselves.

Some solutions will rest with better management at a site level. Other solutions will be found in initiatives targeted at dog owners across a wider area. In most cases, the best solutions will be found in a combination of both approaches.

Better liaison could also help address displacement issues if restrictions are imposed on a particular area/site and identify where, for example, payments to landowners through agri-environment schemes could usefully provide an area for dog walkers, relieving pressure on more sensitive sites.

Practical measures that HCAF could helpfully encourage in this respect include:

1. Publication of good practice guidance for land managers with HCC, in partnership with the district councils.
2. Developing an agreed policy across HCC and district councils to ensure clear, consistent advice to dog owners, land managers and other access users.
3. Ensuring the needs of dog owners are recognised and accommodated in policies and plans such as, greenspace strategies and major building developments.
4. Brokering the provision of alternative, accessible sites for exercising dogs that are currently unavailable or under-utilised, to take the pressure off more sensitive areas.
5. Making recommendations about the distribution of grants to landowners (eg through the Higher Level Stewardship scheme and Lottery funding) to ensure any public funding at least does not increase conflict, and preferably reduces it.

Recommendation: HCAF should consider acting as a catalyst to ensure the best expertise, management and support is shared between relevant bodies and available to all with an interest in access to the countryside by walkers with dogs, irrespective of the sector of local government or other organisations they first approach.

2.8.2 Scrutinising Dog Control Orders and other restrictions

Under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005, parish, district and county councils can make potentially extensive Dog Control Orders (DCOs) to, for instance, ban dogs from some areas, insist they be on leads at certain times/places and require poo to be picked up, with powers to impose fines for lack of compliance.

The Defra guidance on DCOs emphasises that such orders need to be a “necessary and proportionate response to problems” that “balance the interests of those in charge of dogs against the interests of those affected by the activities of dogs”.

Unlike rights of way orders, DCOs do not need to be advertised on site when proposed. Given the many bodies that can make DCOs, there is the potential that an integrated approach will not be taken, leading to confusion and conflict for people walking in different areas of Hampshire, and which can also result in problems being displaced to other areas.

It is suggested that the strategic view and balanced composition of HCAF means it is in an ideal position to give statutory advice on proposed DCOs, to ensure they are implemented in the most effective and balanced way. Currently, LAFs only need to be consulted on DCOs affecting CROW access land, and not those affecting rights of way, permitted access or other greenspace.

Restrictions under other legislation, or on permitted access, are also likely to come forward at times and HCAF is well-placed to make a useful contribution to these.

The HCAF secretariat could have a role in screening proposed restrictions, to ensure only the most appropriate ones come before HCAF or a related working group.

Recommendation: HCAF should consider making a statutory request to all section 94(4) bodies that it is consulted in good time on any proposed DCOs within its area, and in those areas that abut its immediate boundary. It should equally promote the benefits of being consulted about any other proposed restrictions so that private or public land managers can benefit from its advice.

2.8.3 Encouraging the delivery of better, integrated information

Apart from fostering a more integrated approach between organisations, there appears to be an untapped opportunity to give better, localised information to dog owners in Winchester and/or Hampshire in general. During the research for this project, vets, pet shops and information centres were visited and staff asked (in the guise of a “mystery shopper”) for information on responsible dog walking or where to go. There was very little information on access targeted at this significant user group.

Localised publications and websites such as “Holidays with your best friend” by Pembrokeshire County Council, have been very successful in influencing dog owners, supporting related local businesses and services, and directing dog owners to less sensitive sites. Sponsorship and advertising is also much easier to come by for such proactive and positive materials.

Publication of such information could also be an excellent catalyst for getting the different organisations involved to work together and develop consistent, engaging advice for dog owners, that would then indirectly also benefit non-dog owners and land managers alike.

Practical measures that HCAF could helpfully encourage in this respect include:

1. Publication of a persuasive and positive local leaflet to help dog owners be more aware of their responsibilities and rights, and make an informed choice about when to go, and what to do, at the range of access and sites available to them.
2. Provision of improved wording/templates for more effective signage, for use by land managers.

Recommendation: HCAF should consider taking an active role alongside HCC to produce useful and widely-available material, in the most relevant format (eg leaflet, website etc) to better engage with dog owners, minimise any negative impacts and promote related benefits.