

NFNPA 569/19

NEW FOREST NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

AUTHORITY MEETING – 28 MARCH 2019

NEW FOREST PROFESSIONAL DOG WALKERS' CHARTER

Report by: Nigel Matthews, Head of Recreation Management and Learning

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The New Forest Dog Walking Code encourages all dog walkers to abide by standards that respect other people, other dogs, wildlife and the environment. It was developed by the New Forest Dogs Forum and has helped clarify what is expected of people walking dogs in the Forest.
- 1.2 In recent months, the Dogs Forum has discussed the need for an equivalent document for people who provide a dog walking service as a business. This has now been developed: as a charter, in the same way that the Cycle Event Organisers' Charter (for businesses) was developed alongside the New Forest Cycling Code (for individuals).
- 1.3 Commercial dog walking is currently regulated only:
 - in respect of businesses that walk dogs as part of a day care or home boarding service; or
 - by landowners that license commercial dog walking on their land.
- 1.4 Compliance with the proposed Professional Dog Walkers' Charter would be voluntary; it would not impose any legal restrictions above those that already exist for any dog walker (e.g. in respect of dangerous dogs, trespass etc.).

2 Consultation

- 2.1 A wide range of organisations has helped develop the overall concept and finer details of the Charter, through their representatives on the Dogs Forum.
- 2.2 Responses to the recreation management consultations, both in 2017 and 2018, included references to commercial dog walkers, e.g. asserting that they should be regulated on Crown land.
- 2.2 Two workshops have been held with dog walking businesses. The concept of a charter was introduced (and welcomed) at the first of these, in March 2017. A draft of the Charter was discussed (and broadly welcomed) at the second, in December 2018. A further draft was subsequently shared with dog walking

businesses by email, prompting several responses which have informed the final draft which is attached as **Annex 1**.

- 2.2 The proposed text has the support of the Kennel Club and Stephen Jenkinson who has advised many organisations across the UK on dog-related access and countryside management topics including here in the New Forest and on the Solent coast through Bird Aware Solent.

3 Charter content

- 3.1 The proposed Charter used the Dog Walking Code as a starting point, and the Code has been amended and updated through the same process (**Annex 2**). Both share two identical headings; the Charter has an additional heading: 'Operate the business in a professional manner'.
- 3.2 To keep it concise and avoid unnecessary duplication, the Charter includes links to additional information and relevant legislation.
- 3.3 The biggest topic of debate has been whether or not to include a limit to the number of dogs that should be walked as once – and if so, what number this should be. The stated number of six is in line with Defra's [Animal Welfare \(Licensing of Activities Involving Animals\) \(England\) Regulations 2018](#) under section 13 of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. These regulations apply to businesses that offer dog day care or boarding services; they stipulate that a maximum of six dogs may be cared for at once and that these may be walked together as part of that service.
- 3.4 The RSPCA guidelines, published in December 2017 (linked in the Charter), recommend 'that no more than four dogs are walked at any one time'. However, no particular justification is given for this lower number and the Kennel Club has written to say that they are not aware of any robust evidence that it is not possible to walk six dogs in a manner that maintains the interests of both the dogs being walked and other site users. They also point out that insurance companies widely insure commercial dog walkers to walk six dogs, for modest annual premiums (under £100 pa) and that the current Defra and Welsh Government practitioner's manual for local authorities and the police in England and Wales in dealing with dog-related incidents "Dealing with irresponsible dog ownership" refers to a maximum limit of six dogs per person as a guiding principle.
- 3.5 A lower limit on the number of dogs a commercial dog walker can walk would reduce the income generated per walk. This in turn could result in higher charges, dogs being walked less frequently or for shorter distances, or dogs left in vehicles while others are being walked.
- 3.6 Several dog walking businesses have expressed a clear preference that the Charter is aligned with the Defra regulations; a small minority would like to be able to walk more than six dogs at once; others are content to walk only up to four at once.

- 3.7 Importantly, the Charter makes it clear that however many dogs are walked, they should be under effective control, if necessary by putting them on leads.
- 3.8 Furthermore the Charter is designed to apply across the whole of the National Park, not just the Crown lands or other potentially sensitive areas. The Forestry Commission currently has no plans to introduce a licensing (and charging) system to control dog walking businesses. Instead, its current policy is to rely on voluntary compliance – it is fully supportive of the Charter as currently proposed.
- 3.9 The fact that there are restrictions on other landholdings (e.g. on Wildlife Trust nature reserves) is allowed for within the Charter, by specifying: ‘Ask the landowner whether you need permission to operate a commercial business on their site and if any charges or additional regulations apply’.

4 Support from other organisations

- 4.1 At the time of writing, the Charter as currently drafted is supported by the organisations listed in bold in the Charter’s introduction. We are awaiting confirmation from the other organisations.
- 4.2 There is currently no association or other recognised ‘voice’ for dog walking businesses operating in the New Forest. However, the two workshops and subsequent email correspondence lead us to believe that the majority of businesses with whom we have had contact would support the proposed text. The businesses are probably representative of those that are most keen to establish and demonstrate high levels of care and responsibility.
- 4.3 The New Forest Dog Owners Group (NFDOG) has been involved throughout the process through the Dogs Forum. At a recent NFDOG meeting, committee members confirmed that they are very happy to endorse the Charter, citing that irresponsible behaviour is often shown by some of those walking dogs commercially and that the Charter seeks to redress the problem.

5 Promotion and monitoring of the Charter

- 5.1 The Charter will sit on the NPA’s website so that other organisations can link to it, especially those listed as being supportive.
- 5.2 We will promote it widely through a news release, social media, printed materials and face to face discussion. This will include encouraging people who are looking for someone to walk their dog to ask whether prospective businesses comply with the Charter. NFDOG has agreed to promote the Charter to its members in this way.
- 5.3 We anticipate that businesses that do comply with the Charter will commit to doing so publicly on their websites and other communications. We will also offer vinyl stickers for their vehicles. For this, we plan to follow on from the current dog walking window stickers (which say: ‘I walk my dog responsibly’) –

with stickers that say: 'I walk *your* dog responsibly, by following the Professional Dog Walkers' Charter'.

- 5.4 We monitor the response to the Charter: which of the 80+ New Forest businesses that we are aware of 'sign up', any feedback from their customers and reports of the degree to which businesses comply with the Charter's standards.
- 5.5 As part of our ongoing work to encourage responsible dog walking, we will offer training to dog walking businesses. This will also help us maintain effective communication with them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Members confirm that the NPA should be listed as being supportive of the Professional Dog Walkers' Charter.
2. Officers report back on responses to the introduction and roll-out of the Charter through the quarterly Work Programme reports to Resources, Audit and Performance Committee.

Equality Impact Assessment:

There are no equality or diversity implications arising directly from this report.

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