

Dog Off-Leash Area (DOLA)



Why This Activity Matters

Dog off-leash areas (DOLA) are an important component of everyday recreation and social infrastructure. They provide opportunities for dogs to exercise and socialise and for owners and carers to be active, meet other people and build informal neighbourhood connections. Their importance increases in higher-density areas where residents have limited or no access to private yards.

Dog off-leash provision must also protect the safety, comfort and amenity of other park users. Poorly located, undersized or overused facilities can create conflict with play, picnicking, organised sport, walking and cycling; generate noise or residential amenity impacts; damage turf and drainage; and place pressure on sensitive vegetation, waterways and wildlife. Provision therefore requires an evidence-based and risk-informed approach that balances demand, accessibility, site suitability, user conflict, environmental considerations and long-term management requirements.

Whilst sports fields are not designated off-leash areas, dogs on leads may be permitted outside training and competition times where Council requirements and signage allow.

Role and Types of Provision

Dog exercise opportunities form a hierarchy rather than a single facility type:

DEDICATED FENCED FACILITIES may be appropriate at selected higher-order parks where demand, site size, surveillance and separation from incompatible uses can be achieved.

DESIGNATED UNFENCED AREAS can provide flexible off-leash exercise where boundaries are legible, risks are manageable and effective control can be maintained.

ON-LEAD WALKING ROUTES through the broader path and open space network remain an important part of everyday dog exercise.

TIMED OR SHARED-USE AREAS may supplement provision in constrained locations where operating arrangements can protect other park functions.

Dog owners remain responsible for complying with the Companion Animals Act 1998, maintaining effective control, registering their dogs, removing waste and ensuring their dogs do not disturb other park users. Fencing is not a substitute for effective control or responsible ownership.

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Key Needs, Gaps and Pressure

The network has been assessed using a broad **2 km strategic catchment** and a **1 km catchment in high-density areas**, reflecting stronger reliance on public open space. Whilst these catchments indicate broad spatial coverage only, they do not confirm that access is walkable, or that it has adequate size, condition, capacity, shade, drainage, accessibility or management performance.

Assessment of the network identifies a number of indicative provision gaps and locations requiring further investigation to determine the most appropriate form of future provision. Other mapped edge and interface gaps require cross-boundary, land ownership, walkability and management review before capital investment.

Future investigation and investment should be prioritised where several factors align:

- high dog ownership or demonstrated informal use;
- high-density housing and limited private open space;
- a confirmed gap in practical access;
- suitable Council-controlled land;
- sufficient usable area and capacity;
- low environmental or cultural constraint;
- separation from incompatible activities and sensitive adjoining uses;
- evidence from observations, complaints, community engagement or operational records.
- conservation, cultural continuity and low-impact access;
- micro spaces supplement, but do not replace, functional parks.

The principal gap is therefore the uneven availability of safe, accessible, appropriately scaled and manageable dog exercise opportunities and not simply a shortage of fenced facilities across the network.

Council's Strategic Position

Council will plan dog off-leash provision as an integrated network of fenced, unfenced, timed and shared-use opportunities. New provision and upgrades will be based on demonstrated demand, practical access, site suitability, capacity, compatibility, environmental constraints and whole-of-life management requirements.

Council will:

- consider fencing only where there is a clear site-based risk, compatibility, accessibility or management rationale;
- prioritise unfenced and shared-use provision where this provides safe activity dispersal, equitable access and efficient use of limited open space;
- assess high-density and growth areas for capacity and performance even where they fall within a nominal 1 km catchment;
- consider edge gaps as matters for cross-boundary access and management investigation before identifying new capital works;
- integrate dog off-leash planning with walking access, shade, seating, drainage, waste, compliance and community education; and
- protect play spaces, picnic and food areas, organised sport, sensitive environments, cultural landscapes and adjoining residential amenity.

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Objectives

Objective	Strategic Intent
Plan for future need	Align provision with growth, housing density, dog ownership and reliance on public open space.
Improve equitable access	Address genuine geographic gaps while recognising that not every park is suitable for off-leash use.
Balance competing needs	Protect the safety, comfort and inclusion of dog owners, with people who may be uncomfortable around dogs, children, cyclists, walkers and other park users.
Improve facility performance	Review of capacity, surface condition, drainage, shade, seating, accessibility, amenity and user experience.
Use fencing selectively	Use fencing only where supported by risk, compatibility, accessibility or management evidence.
Strengthen responsible use	Combine clear design, signage, education, owner responsibility and proportionate compliance.

Technical and Desired Standards of Service Baseline

- Provide a hierarchy of DOLAs aligned with park typology and network role.
- Indicative size: Signature Park generally greater than 0.5 ha; District Park generally at least 0.3 ha where feasible; Local and shared-use areas subject to site constraints.
- Locate facilities away from play spaces, food-preparation and picnic areas, sports fields during use, sensitive environmental areas and other incompatible activities, with appropriate separation or buffers.
- Use visually permeable fencing with self-closing and double-gated entries where a fenced facility is justified.
- Do not require fencing at Local or shared-use facilities unless needed to address a significant hazard or protect an environmentally sensitive area.
- Provide DDA-compliant access and gates, clear sightlines, passive surveillance and seating that supports owner supervision.
- Use durable, non-slip and well-drained surfaces that reduce mud, odour and excessive wear.
- Provide waste bins at fenced facilities and key access points to shared areas, scaled to use and operational capacity.
- Provide drinking facilities at Signature and District sites; Local and shared facilities may rely on nearby water where available.
- Incorporate shade through tree canopy where possible, supplemented by built shade at higher-order facilities where required.
- Use clear signage showing boundaries, conditions, hours (where relevant), owner responsibilities and effective-control requirements.
- Provide lighting only at higher-order locations where evening use is intended and impacts on neighbours and wildlife can be acceptably managed.

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Strategic Priorities

Planning Priorities

Investigate priority gaps identified across the dog off-leash network, to determine the most appropriate provision model, including fenced, unfenced, timed-use or shared-use arrangements or other management responses.

Undertake detailed site-suitability assessment of identified potential dog off-leash opportunities to determine the most appropriate response, considering access, demand, capacity, compatibility with surrounding uses and ongoing management requirements.

Review the performance of existing facilities and identify priority improvements relating to accessibility, drainage, shade, water, seating, bins, signage, surface condition, conflict and lifecycle performance.

Apply a documented site-selection and fencing decision process to all new and upgraded facilities.

Determine the appropriate response for each off-leash location, including fenced or unfenced provision, timed or shared use, access improvements, shared-use opportunities, demand redistribution or no additional provision where impacts cannot be managed.

Use education, signage and compliance programs to reinforce effective control, owner responsibility and respectful shared use

Monitor facility performance, user experience, and environmental impacts to inform future planning, investment and management responses.

Measures of Success

- ✓ Improved proportion of residents within the adopted strategic catchment of a suitable off-leash opportunity.
- ✓ Additional facilities within confirmed provision gap are subject to documented site-suitability assessment rather than automatic fencing.
- ✓ Increased proportion of facilities meeting accessibility, shade, drainage, waste and signage requirements.
- ✓ Reduction in recurring conflict, uncontrolled-dogs, waste, noise and surface-condition issues.
- ✓ Post-implementation monitoring demonstrates that new or augmented facilities remain safe, manageable and fit for purpose.