

# Dog Off-Leash Strategic Guideline

## 1. Purpose

The purpose of the Dog Off-Leash Strategic Guideline is to provide the City of Port Phillip with clear principles that guide how Council will make provision for dogs to be off-leash in our public open spaces, ensuring everyone is mindful of their use of dog off-leash areas, is respectful of dogs and feels welcome in these spaces, no matter their age, gender, ability or background.

The Dog Off-Leash Strategic Guideline outlines Council's position on the provision, distribution, design and management of dog facilities in public open spaces. It will be used to guide our decisions on the planning for all our dog off-leash areas and parks.

## 2. Background

Our public open spaces are designed with all people, pets and their needs in mind. Our spaces host a variety of uses including active, informal and passive recreation for everyone to enjoy. Dogs are an important part of the City of Port Phillip community.

There are over 8,000 registered dogs living in the City of Port Phillip and our dog population is increasing. A recent study by the University of Melbourne found that the City of Port Phillip has the highest density of dogs out of all greater Melbourne local government areas, with 410 dogs per square kilometre<sup>1</sup>.

Many of our public spaces and beaches provide space for dogs to be off-leash to exercise and socialise with other dogs. These spaces also attract a large number of visitor dogs from outside of the municipality.

With limited opportunities to provide new public space and increasing demand for usage, Council needs to ensure that our public spaces are designed and managed to be shared for multiple uses and user groups, including dogs. There are significant social and health benefits associated with owning dogs, with dog owners meeting more people and having increased exercise because of their dog.

In 2023, the Victorian Pet Census<sup>2</sup> showed that the top three reasons for getting a dog were for companionship, habitual (had always had them) and to benefit the owner's, or their family's mental health.

In Council's *Places for People: Public Space Strategy 2022 – 2032*, Council has committed to providing public spaces that are designed with all people and their needs in mind to ensure that everyone, no matter their age, gender, ability or background, feels welcome in our public spaces. To deliver on this commitment, Council provides a mix of spaces for dogs across the municipality, including on-leash areas, off-leash areas and some areas where dogs are not permitted at all.

To do this in an equitable way, we need clear guidelines to plan the best way for our community members and their dogs to safely spend time in our public open spaces and beaches to exercise and socialise with other dogs and their owners.

---

<sup>1</sup> [We checked if Melbourne really is a dog-friendly city | Pursuit by the University of Melbourne \(unimelb.edu.au\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Victorian-Pet-Census\\_Report.pdf \(agriculture.vic.gov.au\)](#)

### 3. Scope

This guideline provides strategic planning guidance on the future of DOLAs in the City of Port Phillip, including the:

- Planning, design and management of dog off-leash areas including unfenced, partially fenced and fully fenced DOLAs
- Areas from which dogs may be excluded, including daytime or seasonal restrictions
- Type and level of provision that Council will consider at off-leash areas
- Process to assess the suitability of existing and planned future DOLAs within the municipality.

### 4. Context of the guideline

The guideline sits under Council's *Places for People: Public Space Strategy 2022 – 2032* which sets the overarching vision and blueprint for our public space network.

The guideline works with Council's *Domestic Animal Management Plan 2022 – 25* to provide Council with a strategic, balanced approach towards promotion of responsible pet ownership, in the community.

### 5. Function

There are three key functions of this guideline:

- Provision – where dog off-leash areas are located
- Design – how we design public open spaces to include dogs
- Management – how dog off-leash areas are physically maintained and how we work with dog owners to create great public spaces.

The functions can work separately (e.g. education program) or together (identifying and designing a new park).

Each function includes a principle (what we are trying to achieve for our network of dog off-leash areas in the municipality), supported by outcomes (how the principles will look in practice).

#### Provision

In assessing a new idea, potential project or request, the following steps are followed:

##### Stage 1: Demand analysis

The first stage is to determine what the existing and future demand is for a dog off-leash area in the neighbourhood.

Principle: Diverse - A range of experiences will be provided for our dog community through our network of diverse public spaces.

##### Outcomes

- A variety of off-leash environments across the City will offer different experiences for dogs, including areas for dog owners with restricted or limited mobility.

- Council will plan for equitable provision of dog off-leash areas across all neighbourhoods in the municipality.

Principle: Impact and suitability – (NEW) Dog off-leash areas should be at sites which are suitable for expected use and should consider dog needs, potential benefits and potential impacts to the site, other users and surrounds.

#### *Outcomes*

- Daily and/or seasonal restrictions will apply to some off-leash areas to balance the needs of different users of open space (this will particularly apply to foreshore areas and sports grounds)
- Prioritise equitable provision in dog off-leash areas across our neighbourhoods, where possible, by taking a network approach to planning for dog off-leash areas
- Residents will be able to access a dog off-leash area within a safe walking distance from their homes
- Recognise that some open spaces, such as sports grounds and playgrounds, have other primary uses which may not always be compatible with dogs off-leash and use of these areas will be in line with the Local Law
- Use of open space for dogs to be off-leash will be considered in line with hierarchy and classification of open spaces in Council's *Places for People: Public Space Strategy 2022 – 2032*.

#### **Assessment:**

The neighbourhood assessment looks at the:

- availability of public open space in the neighbourhood
- availability of existing DOLAs in the neighbourhood (open spaces and beaches)
- current and forecast resident and dog population growth and neighbourhood density
- planned development in the neighbourhood
- potential impacts of a DOLA
- potential benefits of a DOLA.

The site-specific assessment looks at the:

- existing use of the site
- accessibility, including if there are any potential barriers to access
- infrastructure requirements
- size and shape of the area proposed
- distance from residential properties.

#### **Stage 2: Site Analysis**

The second stage is to look at the nominated site to assess whether it is appropriate to be a DOLA based on potential impacts and potential benefits.

Principle: Safe - The safety of people and dogs will be prioritised when planning and designing dog off-leash areas.

### *Outcomes*

- Council has a responsibility to balance the needs all users of public open space
- All people and pets have a right to be, and feel safe, in our public open spaces
- Council will consider criteria relating to the safety of dogs and people when reviewing the suitability of sites as DOLAs

### **Assessment:**

The site analysis looks at whether the space has, or has the potential to have:

- easy access with good connections to existing pedestrian paths
- good visibility from surrounding public areas
- vegetation and trees to provide sufficient shade
- room for dogs to run and/or areas of interest for dog activity, ensuring the safety of dogs
- buffers from residential properties, exclusion zones or high-risk areas
- the ability to share infrastructure such as drinking fountains, seating, lighting and public toilets.

### **Stage 3: Criteria**

The third step of the process is to evaluate how the nominated site aligns to a number of DOLA specific criteria.

Principle: Environment and heritage - Dog off-leash areas should not impact on areas of historical value and environmental significance.

### *Outcomes*

- Some environments have a primary role to protect and enhance flora, fauna habitat and/or heritage values which means access may need to be restricted for dogs, consistent with the Local Law

### **Assessment**

The DOLA specific criteria includes:

- buffers from biodiversity corridors, fauna habitats, areas with endangered species, significant wetlands and high value habitat areas
- located outside an area with an environmental overlay
- located outside an area with a heritage overlay.

If the nominated site is located within an environmental or heritage overlay, further assessment will be required.

### **5.1. Design**

This section is used to inform the design of dog off-leash areas. The aim is to provide a variety of experiences across our network of dog off-leash areas that are designed and developed to consider whole-of-life costs and environmental impacts. The quality of the dog off-leash areas will depend on the size, diversity of use and facilities in the space.

## **Context**

Principle: Quality - Dog off-leash areas will consider all users of the space, providing spaces for dogs which are well designed and fit for purpose and ensuring grounds with other primary uses are not impacted by dog usage.

### *Outcomes*

- Good dog parks should be good parks for all dogs and their owners
- Design of DOLAs will look to better utilise and engage with spaces currently in use
- Design of DOLAs will consider a variety of experiences such as different sensory environments, trees, shrubs, grass, water for swimming and shade
- Design of DOLAs will consider the safety of users and dogs, including lighting, fencing, shade, access to drinking water and clear signage.

## **Design Guidelines**

The following design elements will be considered when developing, upgrading or maintaining DOLAs:

### **Surface treatments**

Consideration given to type of surface most suitable to each site, associated maintenance requirements and layout.

### **Shape / layout**

Consideration to size, safety, location of equipment/vegetation and fencing types.

### **Entry/exit points**

Consideration to ease of access, conflicting uses, safety, connections to pathways and 'airlocks' (for fenced parks)

### **Lighting**

Consideration on current lighting, safety and use of sports ground lighting.

### **Infrastructure**

Consider the types and placement of infrastructure (seating, dog bowls, bins) and greening.

## **5.2. Management**

Management includes maintenance, enforcement, responsible dog ownership and education (for dog and non-dog owners).

### **Dog management**

#### **Context**

Principle: Shared responsibility - Education communication programs and enforcement will be used to promote accountability and respect between all users of dog off-leash areas.

### *Outcomes*

- To ensure that dog owners in the City of Port Phillip understand and comply with dog control regulations relating to:
  - Leashing of dogs

- Preventing dogs making unwanted approaches to other dogs and people
  - 'Effective control' of dogs in line with State Government and Council dog control legislation
  - Collection of dog litter.
- Education programs will be provided to:
  - Members of the community who do not usually interact with dogs to improve their understanding and safety
  - Dog owners about the importance of registering their dogs
  - Dog owners to assist with dog training and educating other community members about the positive benefits of responsible dog ownership.
- Improved available information on restrictions, requirements, registration, education programs and other dog related topics
- Enhanced and clearly visible signage and wayfinding in open spaces
- Council will undertake research into strategies that are recognised to be effective in achieving compliance with dog control regulations, and respect between all users of public open space
- All users of our dog off-leash areas will be responsible and mindful of the variety of uses in these areas
- Enforcement will be part of Council's approach to non-compliance with dog regulations
- Owners are responsible for the physical wellbeing of their dog and for ensuring their dog remains under 'effective control' and is following all regulations.

## **Site management**

### **Context**

Principle: Well Managed - (NEW) Dog off-leash areas will be well managed and will enhance usage.

### *Outcomes*

- DOLAs are well maintained and fit for purpose
- Public space signage relating to dogs will clearly outline all restrictions that apply to an open space
- Areas impacted by dog use may closed for periods of time for maintenance and/or to reestablish surface conditions
- Council will continue to monitor the status of dog off-leash areas to ensure that there are no significant ongoing impacts, damage or conflict.

## **6. Supporting documents**

These principles and outcomes are supported by the following documents:

Dog Off-Leash action plan

Dog Off-Leash Local Law help sheet