

The purpose of the survey

The Founders created Bearsted Woodland Trust to provide a green space for everyone to enjoy. As a result of a growing number of complaints that the Trust is not providing adequately for members who wish to walk undisturbed by dogs, the Management Committee decided to conduct the survey to assess the size of the problem and explore possible solutions.

Response to the survey

There were c350 responses...a very large number. 40% of respondents were dog walkers, 60% were not. Most people welcomed the decision to conduct the survey: *'We commend the Trust for your attempts to find a solution. We are dog lovers but feel for non dog owners who want to use this beautiful space too' 'There is obviously a problem for some people. Well done to your committee for taking their concerns seriously'.*

Scale of the problem

Some replies doubted the existence of a problem: *'I have never seen a dog behaving badly...it must be a campaign by one or two anti- dog people'.* However, in fact 50% of respondents reported a negative experience of one sort or another. This is clearly a very big problem and your Committee is a little embarrassed that it has parked the issue as 'too difficult' for so long.

Not a dog walker v non dog walker issue

We were surprised to discover that 32% of dog walkers reported negative experiences with other dogs, and were in favour of the Trust taking some action to help them.

Bad experiences at BWT

Below are a number of comments received concerning bad experiences:

'Although we support the Trust, my wife and I have not felt able to visit for a number of years because of concerns about badly behaved dogs'

'We rarely visit because BWT has evolved into a dog pooing site...an inappropriate place to take our grandchildren'

'Even though I have a tree dedicated to my mum, I feel too frightened to visit it with my dog because of dog owners who let their dogs do as they like, even when I ask them to keep them away from me'

'As a dog runs towards you or jumps up, the owner often says "he's alright...he won't hurt anyone". They need to understand that some people are scared of dogs...and that to a small child even a medium sized dog can be very frightening'

'We really like BWT but have stopped using it because of dogs scaring our children. If there was a separate zone for dogs, we would go back to visiting regularly'

'I have on many occasions seen dogs running free who then foul and their owners do not witness it, so it is not cleared up'

'I would love to walk my dog more often on Trust land but am unable to because she is pestered by other dogs off their leads, even if I tell the owners not to let their dogs approach'

'When walking my dog, I see groups talking for ages not taking any notice of whether their dogs are running up to people or making a mess'

'I do not want to have to dress in old clothes to walk BWT for fear of wet noses and dirty paws'

'My suede jacket was ruined by a dog jumping up'
'I have a tree on the Trust, but can't go over there because of problems with other dogs'
'Have not been back since my wheelchair got covered in dog mess which took all day to clean off'
'Two large dogs knocked my grandchildren over – we don't go anymore'
'Sadly many dog owners do not understand that some of us do not like dogs'
'I am aged and do not like being accosted by loose dogs'
'For us BWT is a no go area because of dogs on the loose'

Level of support for a 'dogs on leads' area

60% of all respondents, including 32% of dog walkers favour the introduction of a 'dogs on leads' area somewhere on the Trust. 23% are opposed to the idea and the remainder unsure. This means that three times more people want this policy than object to it.

Reasons why a 'dogs on leads' area is not a good idea

Some of the 23% opposed to a 'dogs on leads' area felt very strongly. Some were even offended that the survey had taken place. Reasons for opposition include:

Too difficult to enforce

Boundary management would be difficult

Possible confrontations with non dog walkers if dogs stray into the on leads zone

Inconsiderate people will disregard rules

Nobody likes too many rules

All BWT land should be available to everyone

Everyone has a right to walk freely, as long as they behave responsibly

Restrictive to dog owners – interferes with their enjoyment

It should be left to owners to put problem dogs on leads

BWT is very successful...why change?

Penalises owners of well behaved dogs

Most dog owners are responsible - Identify the problem dog owners and punish them

Letting your dog off the lead is the point of being there

People need a place to let dogs run free – there are not many places one can do this safely

There would be too many dogs off leads in the permitted area

The less able need to allow dogs off leads early

BWT would lose my annual membership donation

People need to learn how to cope with dogs...even silly ones

It's not dogs that are a problem - child walkers should control children on bikes

Only a completely irresponsible person would let a vicious dog off its lead

Makes dog walkers feel unwelcome

Not necessary – rarely see anyone without a dog

Dogs like exploring all areas

I have never seen a dog behaving badly

I like the freedom

Only one in a thousand object

If dogs on leads, children on leads too

Cyclists are the problem, not dogs

Non dog walkers should be more tolerant

People who don't like dogs should go elsewhere

Those who don't want dogs should go to a park, not a woodland

Dogs should always be on leads

Committee/authors comment on these reasons

There are clear practical difficulties regarding boundaries and enforcement. Many of the other reasons given appear to be related to the freedom of dog walkers to allow dogs to run free. It is not clear from these responses why the whole of BWT needs to have dogs running free to meet this requirement for freedom. These objections would appear to be met by the retention of a large area in which dogs can run free.

In which areas should 'dogs on leads' apply?

There was a very high level of support for 'dogs on leads' in the areas nearest to Church Landway and for dogs to run free on Moore Meadow. A natural and manageable boundary point (which would allow a circular walk for all users) would be the Lilk bridge.

Other ideas relating to dogs

Dog training classes

Dog waste bag dispensers

More dog waste bins

More signs to request responsible behaviour

Cameras to catch irresponsible behaviour

Prosecutions or fines for dog fouling or intimidation

Wardens patrolling

PCSO involvement

Dogs on leads at certain times of day

Dogs on lead at certain times of year

A dog tag scheme with tags withdrawn from negligent owners

Spray un-cleared dog waste with bright colour as at Vinters

Responsible dog owners to be pro-active in persuading all dog walkers to be control their dogs

An area which is completely dog free

A limit of two dogs per person

The rule to be 'if you can't completely control your dog, keep it on a lead'

Big dogs on leads, bad dogs on leads, well behaved dogs OK

Responsible dog owners to form a group to come up with a solution to suit everyone

Conclusions

There is such a large majority in favour of taking action that the debate must move on from whether to do something to the practicalities and the detail of what to do. It does appear that if dogs were permitted to run free on half of the Trust land and were on leads in the other half, the needs of all users would be met. However, such a policy would require the support of responsible dog owners to be successful.

Appeal to the 23%

At one extreme of the argument are people who want BWT to be completely dog free. At the other are people who want dogs to be allowed to do as they wish anywhere. We are trying to find the middle ground. We very much hope that responsible dog owners will accept that the survey has revealed that there is a big problem and a strong mandate for a solution. It will not be possible to introduce a successful policy unless responsible dog owners support it, albeit reluctantly. We appeal to dog owners to help us to formulate a workable policy, and to encourage all dog walkers to adhere to it.

Other suggestions

Clear path from Ashford Rd by lake

Reduce height of some benches

Improve path surfaces

Put up signs re taking rubbish home

Cull rabbits

Car park at east end

Rain shelters

Picnic tables

Tea room

Toll ride

Toilets

Footnote

As one respondent noted: *'dog owners may not like the idea of a policy, but unless it is invoked there is no way of ensuring that a) they do not foul the land, and b) they do not intimidate other walkers'*.