

You may have been aware of a consultation from Darlington Borough Council (DBC) regarding the sweeping changes to the laws surrounding the control of dogs in Darlington with their proposed Public Order Protection Orders (PSPO).

## **Overview**

PSPO's are a criminal offence and it is a crime to breach one. We believe criminalising an individual who walks their dog(s) is a step too far.

Dogs have been man's best friend for centuries; the latest figures suggest that there are approximately 9 million pet dogs in the UK with between 1 in 3 and 1 in 4 households having a pet dog. The north east is the UK's largest dog owning region with many households having more than 1 dog.

One of the most important and enjoyable elements for most dog owners is getting out in the fresh air to take their dogs on a walk. We are lucky to have such a wide and varied choice of locations to walk our dogs. Dogs form an important bond with man and this bond is immeasurable when it comes to how dogs provide mental health support.

As far back as 1783, Darlington has been dog friendly and the dog community has provided a valuable boost to our economy through the annual Darlington Dog Show, visiting sports and welfare dog groups participating in our area.

Unfortunately, Darlington Borough Council have decided to put all of this at risk.

Not only may we lose these valuable attractions for our town, (recent dog shows have exhibited more than 10 000 dog entries), the loss of this economy will be sorely felt by local businesses as dog competitors avoid areas where these new laws are introduced, dog owners themselves will be subject of sweeping changes and restrictions on where and how they exercise their much loved pet.

It certainly has created a furore of opinion both in Darlington itself and the wider media reporting through the press, radio and on television.

## **Lack of evidence**

Central to the report before DBC cabinet and in subsequent press, radio and television interviews by DBC representatives is the public statement that there have been numerous complaints of packs of dogs causing distress to residents of our town and the dog walking community.

Dog related businesses were outraged by these statements knowing that although there are issues with responsible dog ownership in Darlington there are not packs of dogs running amok. Following Freedom of Information (FOI) requests it has now been established that there have been **no** reported incidents of packs of dogs causing anti-social behaviour in Darlington in the last 3 years.

In fact, DBC have only had 6 incidents reported to them in that period 5 relating to a single dog and 1 involving two dogs. The only other reports concern dog fouling and even then the numbers are small and action from DBC smaller still.

Why then would DBC make public statements saying this is a problem that they have to respond to if there is no evidence of any problem.

### **Poor proposals**

DBC have a duty to consult prior to the proposal being brought forward and to complete an Equalities Act impact assessment, there is no evidence this has been done.

There are unanswered questions from the impact assessment produced for cabinet on discrimination, displacement, expenditure and equality.

The consultation produced by DBC does not involve all sections of the public, from both the dog owning and non-dog owning residents, it has to date not involved national bodies such as The Kennel Club or The Dogs Trust. It does little to address education or equality or assistance requirements.

It does nothing to address cause and effect, how to deal with offenders and dismisses alternative enforcement solutions. Business expertise and experience are being ignored and recommendations from national bodies unconsidered.

In short DBC are attempting to rush through a tick in the box exercise (copied from another local authority) that will achieve very little.

Is this what we must accept from our council or have we the right to expect more?

DBC promote themselves as innovative and different – so why copy and paste from other local authorities when there is clear evidence that their proposed approach to PSPO's doesn't work – hardly innovative and certainly not different. Why are they resistant to the wider dog owning public, business and national welfare and authorities coming together to provide support for our town.

It was irresponsible statements from DBC that led to responsible dog owners and non-dog owners, business owners and organisations who visit Darlington to come together with support and advice from The Kennel Club and Dogs Trust to form Darlington Responsible Dog Owners Action Group.

Our group has now had a succession of meetings with senior leaders of DBC and their representatives and despite being assured of feedback – there has been no response.

Our group have challenged our council to do something unique for the benefit of all residents, businesses and visitors to our town. By working together we will provide resources and expertise to work with the Council to introduce a responsible dog charter that will bring about real change and clean up our streets and open spaces, introduce dog education and responsible ownership programmes, introduce alternative legislation that means that persistent offenders are targeted and promote our town as a beacon for the UK in how to deal effectively with dog ownership for the benefit of all residents.

Unfortunately, our Council leaders do not want to engage with our group and have no plan other than to change the law and all the expertise, resources and energy we have gathered will be lost and nothing will change. Dog fouling will still be a huge problem, poor behaviour or out of control dogs will not be addressed, dog welfare will become negatively affected as more and more public spaces become banned, and dog owners will become resentful.

A substantial number of local councillors support our group and can't understand why the Council leadership are so resistant to this collaborative approach.

Your support will help bring about change to Darlington and create an inclusive dog charter that both dog owners and non-dog owners will support together with local businesses.

This charter initiative, supported by The Kennel Club, creates the opportunity for Darlington to stand out as a model for clean, friendly dog walking.

We have produced an online petition which we are urging you to support

Please join our Facebook page

### **Darlington Responsible Dog Owners Action Group**

Or visit our website

<https://darlingtondogs.org>

and follow the links to sign the petition to urge DBC to engage with our group supported by The Kennel Club for the benefit of all residents, businesses and visitors to our town.

In the event DBC fail to respond the PSPO's will be brought in and we are confident that nothing will change other than the dog owning public will have to live with the fear of gaining a criminal record for exercising their dog.

We have organised a group walk to present the Council with the petition on Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> February 2020 meeting at Stanhope Park, Stanhope Road, Darlington at 4pm. We would love you to join us on this walk to highlight to the council that Darlington dog owners are responsible.

Thank you