

Let's go walkies!

Getting dog owners
(and their dogs) more
active in woodlands



Forestry Commission Scotland
Coimisean na Coilltearachd Alba



THE KENNEL CLUB
Making a difference for dogs

paths
for all

FOR A HAPPIER,
HEALTHIER SCOTLAND



We love our dogs

Our relationship with our four-legged friend is special. Most dog owners care a great deal for their dogs. Happy dog, happy owner? Healthy dog, healthy owner? Can we use our urban woodlands to promote outdoor activity and physical fitness for the dog and their owner, therefore increasing wellbeing for both?

In 2016 Forestry Commission Scotland, The Kennel Club and Paths for All commissioned some research in communities near urban woodlands in Glasgow. The work focused on providing low cost, sustainable and accessible health benefits for both people and dogs. The findings will be of interest to policy makers and service providers in public health, local authorities, land managers and vets.

The research consisted of:

- a survey of 300 people who owned a dog but were less active than government recommended guidelines;
- six focus groups with dog owners who had a mix of activity levels;
- in-depth interviews with vets.



Opportunities to get active

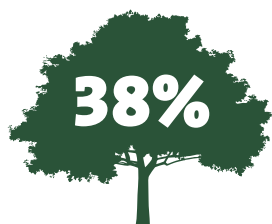
Less than half of the people in the survey were aware of their local urban woodland and still fewer had visited it. This was despite most in the survey strongly believing that regular woodland walks would keep both themselves and their dog fit and healthy. However, the least active – those who currently take little or no exercise – were less likely to recognise the advantages of woodland walks.

These results suggest that there is a need for better promotion of sites and opportunities and also, a need to find new approaches to target those most in need of exercise. There is clearly potential to get less active people to take more woodland walks, but there are likely to be some barriers too.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY GUIDELINES FOR ADULTS (19–64 YEARS OLD)

Adults should aim to be active daily.
Over a week, activity should add up to at least 150 minutes (2½ hours) of moderate intensity activity in bouts of 10 minutes or more.

For more information visit
www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-physical-activity-guidelines



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The benefits of woodland walks

People who took their dogs to urban woodlands and other green spaces described how much their dogs enjoyed exercising off-lead, running freely, stimulated by a natural environment. Seeing their dogs enjoy themselves in this way gave the owners a great sense of wellbeing and enjoyment for the owners. Vets agreed that exercise in safe and well maintained woodlands is likely to bring physical and mental health benefits to the dogs too.

"The dog gets me just doing exercise and fresh air that I wouldn't otherwise get. In Airdrie I wouldn't go round for a walk round the streets - but I'm happy to walk with the dogs."

Airdrie dog owner

Dog walking in general was found to bring both physical and emotional health benefits to dog walkers. Many people talked about how getting a dog had meant they started exercising and as a result, had lost weight and felt healthier and happier.

Many people described their dog walking time as "me time" and a much-valued antidote to stress. Dog walking also helped people make new contacts and therefore reduced social isolation. Some talked about how alone they felt after their canine companion had died, not only because they were grieving for their dog, but also because they no longer had contact with fellow dog walkers.

"It's time for me to relax and anything I'm working out, I can work it out when I'm walking the dog."

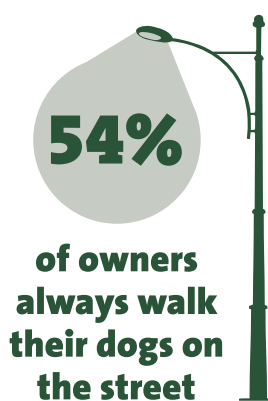
Easterhouse dog owner

HOW OFTEN WERE THESE DOGS WALKED?

This survey of dog owners who were less active than government guidelines found that only a quarter of dogs are taken on a walk every day. Dogs are most likely to get walked three times a week, for an average of 36 minutes and most (61%) are kept on their lead most or all of the time. Walks mainly take place on local streets and many less active people currently never drive (62%) or walk (18%) to a green space or woodland with their dogs.



26%
of dogs are taken
on a walk every day



Messages to promote activity



Most inactive people already know that exercise would be good for them. Messages designed to increase physical activity need to include human benefits of woodland walking that go beyond simply suggesting that exercise is good for you, such as indicating opportunities for social interaction with other dog owners. Targeting the specific benefits for dogs (with the 'right type' of exercise recommended by vets) could be especially important. Any "call to action" also needs to answer the "how" and "where" questions: where to find their nearest local urban woodland and how best to enjoy it.

"If they're out walking and exercising the way they should be, they are going to suffer less from health problems."

Airdrie dog owner

HOW TO MOTIVATE LESS ACTIVE PEOPLE TO VISIT WITH THEIR DOGS

Materials to promote dog walking in urban woodland to the less active should convey clear messages about:

1

The specific benefits of woodland walks for dogs, including the opportunity for beneficial off-lead exercise in a safe, accessible and stimulating environment which has the smells of woodland and wildlife that dogs enjoy.

2

The positive health gains of exercise for dogs, highlighting the potential to live longer, healthier and happier lives and address problem behaviours.

3

The benefits of regular walks in the urban woodland for people, covering both physical and mental health. Messages should describe walking in a woodland environment as 'time out' to de-stress and highlight the feelings of wellbeing experienced through watching your dog at play. The convenience and the low/no cost of walking in local woodlands and the potential to make social connections should also be illustrated.

4

Where to find local urban woodland walking opportunities, including a map of locations. Graded walks and dog-friendly amenities.

Dog friendly



While facilities such as dog-friendly cafés, a place for dogs to swim, or enclosed training areas might all attract dog owners from other areas for a longer leisure visit, that wasn't really the primary objective of this work. Here we're focussing more on what would help to get locals to use their woodlands for routine dog walks. To motivate this target group, the basics are more important: ensuring the urban woodland is clean, safe and welcoming to local people walking with their dogs.

This means:

- Signs to say dogs are welcome and indicate where dogs can be exercised off-lead;
- Sites that are clean, tidy and free from harmful rubbish (especially broken glass);
- Paths that have lots of natural light, with trees well cut back, making walks feel safe;
- Paths that are well drained and so suitable for all-weather use;
- Sites that have trees, bushes, grasses and the smell of wildlife to provide a stimulating off-lead environment;
- Sufficient bins that are regularly emptied and clearly marked to accept dog waste (any bin will do);
- Where possible, enclosed sites so that dogs can't stray onto roads while off-lead.

Reactions to other facility ideas, such as dog activity trails with tunnels and jumps, were more mixed. Around half were enthusiastic about these facilities while the other half believed these would not be suitable for their dog due to their breed or temperament.

"I think some people can be very lonely. I have stayed in Easterhouse for 25 years now and apart from when I was working, there was maybe 10 people that I really knew. As soon as my dog came, there must be about 100 now."

Easterhouse dog owner



Going a little further...

It's not all about attracting new, previously inactive visitors to a woodland. Many existing visitors are also still less active than government recommended guidelines. Information promoting both shorter and longer routes might motivate some people to extend a walk. Providing drinking water for dogs mid-way round a route, having activities (such as wicker tunnels and jumps), benches and destination points to aim for (such as artwork) were also suggested as ways to encourage walkers to go a little further.



Partnerships with vets



Despite vets outlining an “obesity epidemic” in dogs, most described only prescribing exercise when an overweight pet actually needs to lose weight, rather than regularly promoting exercise as part of preventative healthcare. They suggested dogs would benefit from their owners understanding more about canine diet, the importance of regular check-ups and dog first aid.

Dog owners suggested they would be interested in attending on-site dog health talks by vets, covering dog care for families and children. There may then be opportunities to form partnerships with vets, to promote exercise in woodlands as preventative healthcare.

All the vets in the research said they would be happy to promote walking in local woodlands as long as they could be assured the site was appropriate and free from harmful litter (especially broken glass). They suggested a leaflet could be produced that they could give to clients during consultations. They also suggested a Facebook page would be the best way to communicate with clients about local walking opportunities and events; and they could promote these via their own websites.

"You know somebody is smiling at you for no reason, you know just because you've got your dog and they've got their dog; it's nice."

Erskine dog owner

This research has been jointly funded by Forestry Commission Scotland, The Kennel Club and Paths for All. Forestry Commission Scotland will now look to implement these research findings at target sites in Glasgow and evaluate the impact of interventions.



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