

ASHINGTON AND BLYTH LOCAL AREA COUNCIL

DATE: 21ST APRIL 2022

Petition requesting a dog ban on the playing fields at Hirst Park, Ashington

Report of the Director of Local Services, Paul Jones

Cabinet Member: Councillor John Riddle, Environment and Local Services

Purpose of report

To acknowledge and respond to the petition and seek the views of the Local Area Council.

Recommendations

It is recommended that members consider the report and:

a) note that a dog control Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) is already in place across the whole of Northumberland and acknowledge that enforcement action can be (and is already) taken against dog owners at Hirst Park who do not clean up after their dogs;

b) note that a proposal by the Council to ban dogs from Hirst Park would be very unlikely to meet the evidential criteria and support required to enable its implementation;

b) support the installation of additional signage at Hirst Park reminding dog owners of the penalties for not picking up and asking residents to report details of irresponsible owners to the Council's Animal Welfare Team and Environmental Enforcement Team, and;

c) support the increased promotion of positive behaviour among local dog owners by running Green Dog Walking events at Hirst Park in 2022 and 2023 and by providing information and raising awareness through the Friends of Hirst Park Facebook page.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the "We want you to love where you live" priority included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2020-2021.

1. Key issues

- 1.1 Hirst Park is one of a number of cherished local parks owned and managed by Northumberland County Council. The park has recently undergone significant capital improvement with funding and support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Ashington Leisure Partnership and Ashington Town Council.
- 1.2 The football pitches at Hirst Park are of significant historic importance, having been home turf for local football legends Jackie Milburn and Jack and Bobby Charlton. The pitches are currently home to Ashington Town Football Club who field numerous youth teams including under 10's, juniors and girls teams.

- 1.3 Hirst Park is popular with dog owners who regularly walk and exercise their dogs in the park. The playing fields offer dog owners a more open setting than is the case in the more formal areas of the park.
- 1.4 A dog control Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) is in place across the whole of Northumberland. Enforcement Officers are already able to impose penalties on dog owners at Hirst Park who do not pick up after their animals.
- 1.5 To put in place an order banning dogs from Hirst Park is unlikely to be able to be achieved. The level of evidence required to institute a ban is unlikely to be met, and there would almost certainly be numerous and substantial objections from dog owners and dog owners' organisations
- 1.6 Banning dogs from an area of public open space would exclude from that area the majority of dog owners who act responsibly and clear up after their dogs.

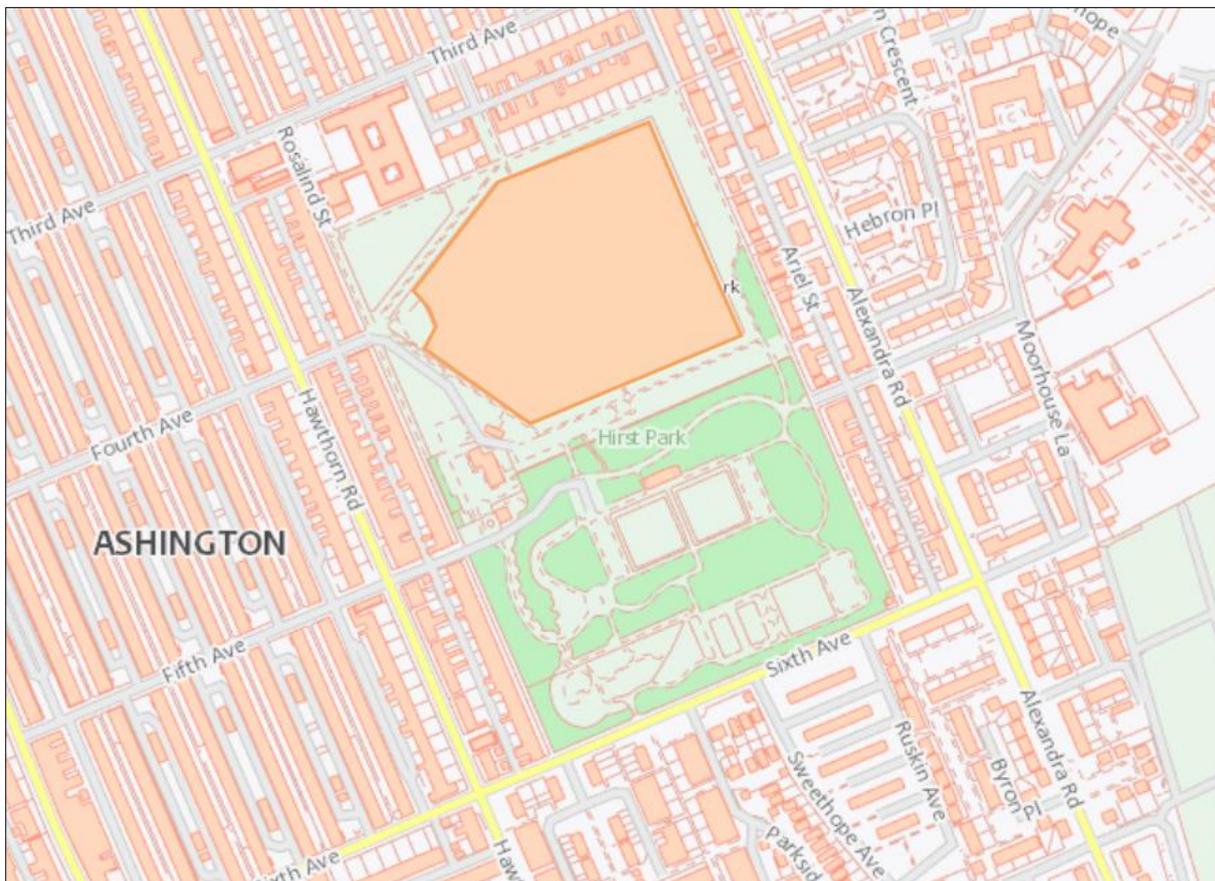


Fig 1: Hirst Park with playing field area shaded orange.

2. Background

2.1 Whilst most dog owners pick up after their dogs, some owners continue to allow their dogs to foul on and around the playing fields at Hirst Park.

2.2 The playing fields at Hirst Park are used by Ashington Town Football Club who field a number of teams, including teams of younger players. The continuing

presence of dog faeces on the playing surfaces is of considerable concern to the football club, as well as local residents.

2.3 A request for an e-petition was received by Northumberland County Council on 17th January 2022 and an e-petition entitled 'Make Hirst Park Playing fields a no dog area' was opened for signatures on the 19th of January 2022. The statement accompanying the petition was as follows:

Over 200 young people between 8 and 17 use Hirst park playing fields every week to enjoy organised grass roots football. Each week coaches pick up over 30 doggy bags full of dog mess before and during games to ensure NFA requirements are met and to keep our young people safe. The lack of respect from dog owners and unwillingness to clean up after their dogs is becoming a major concern. Please make this a no dog area and keep gates locked so the children of Ashington and surrounding areas can enjoy playing football at the heart of Ashington without this hazard.

2.4 The petition closed on 22nd February having gained 278 signatures.

2.5 Officers have reviewed the measures in place to control dog fouling at Hirst Park and propose to undertake the following actions:

- Install additional and improved signage reminding dog owners of the penalties for not clearing up after their dog and encouraging reporting of irresponsible owners to the Council's Animal Health Team and Environmental Enforcement Officers.
- Host Green Dog Walkers awareness events in 2022 and 2023. At these events dog owners are encouraged to sign up as Green Dog Walkers and provided with a supply of dog bags. Green Dog Walkers are encouraged to act as ambassadors for the scheme.
- Raise awareness of the concerns and how to report irresponsible dog owners through the Friends of Hirst Park Facebook page.

Implications

Policy	None.
Finance and value for money	The cost of installing additional signage can be met through existing budgets.
Legal	Enforcement Officers can operate using powers conferred by the existing PSPO.
Procurement	None
Human Resources	Enforcement staff already patrol the area and we will target enforcement activity using intelligence gathered from the community to help identify the routines of regular offenders.
Property	The site is owned and managed by the County Council.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	None.
Risk Assessment	None
Crime & Disorder	None.
Customer Consideration	A ban is likely to encounter strong opposition from stakeholders and stakeholder groups. Local support and information from the community to identify the routines of offenders is invaluable in supporting effective enforcement activity.
Carbon reduction	None
Wards	Hirst

Background papers:

None

Report sign off.

	Initials
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Lynsey Denyer obo Suki Binjal
Service Director Finance & Interim S151 Officer	JW
Relevant Director	RM
Deputy Chief Executive	CMc
Portfolio Holder(s)	JR

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