

Dogs at Northern Ireland Environment Agency Properties

NIEA manages many properties throughout Northern Ireland to which the public have access. These include Country Parks, Nature Reserves and State Care Monuments. Annual visitor numbers range from many tens of thousands at popular sites near large urban areas, to perhaps only a few hundred for the smaller and more remote sites.

The different types of site offer differing visitor experiences and facilities but in general we either actively encourage use of our sites or facilitate limited access where practical. In striving to provide the best possible customer care, we aim to provide a safe and enjoyable visit for all our visitors.

Dogs in the countryside

Part of the appeal of many of our sites is the open space and countryside experience they offer and this is particularly attractive to dog owners who may have otherwise limited opportunities to exercise their dogs. Some research indicates that around one in three visits to the countryside is accompanied by a dog or dogs and this seems to be an increasing trend. NIEA is happy to encourage the health benefits of quiet countryside recreation and by and large we can accommodate everyone but, potential problems can arise when many different types of visitor use a site in very large numbers and interactions between users occur. Our aim to provide a safe and enjoyable visit experience for all may be at risk.

Issues associated with dogs

Feedback from Visitor Surveys has shown that there is significant public concern over dogs and dog fouling at Country Parks, even though visitors are required to keep any dogs under control and ensure that public areas are not fouled. This is currently one of the key issues in countryside management. Some dog owners are simply unaware that not everyone wants to have dogs around or even near them. For example; parents of young children, the elderly, joggers, cyclists, or horse riders, etc. At busy times, dogs not under control can also present a traffic hazard.

Many dog owners do act responsibly with respect to other users and NIEA welcomes these, but even so when the numbers of dogs at certain sites reaches its current level there are other issues to consider.

- In some places dog fouling constitutes a significant health and safety issue and clean-up costs are considerable. In other areas the nutrient enrichment it brings can have measurable negative effects on sensitive ecosystems.
- Disturbance to wildlife by dogs is another problem, with birds or mammals sometimes unsettled to the extent that breeding attempts are abandoned.
- Quite a few NIEA properties are grazed by livestock at certain times of year and worrying of stock can be a problem. Bio-security measures can be another reason why access by both visitors and dogs needs to be controlled.

The way forward – managed access

NIEA aims to offer something for everyone at a wide range of properties. We realise that visitors accompanied by dogs represent a significant proportion of our site users and are keen to accommodate them. However, increasing numbers of people are using our sites and issues involving dogs are being brought to the attention of our site managers more frequently. Managing or zoning access may therefore be a possible solution at some of our most heavily used sites. At its simplest this would entail marking areas where onlead, off lead or exclusion would apply.

In return for facilitating access NIEA does require certain standards of behaviour from visitors in general and those accompanied by dogs are no exception. As a minimum we expect:

- Dog owners to **clean up after their dogs**. Many sites now have dog waste receptacles to facilitate this.
- Dog owners to **keep their dogs under control**, the degree of control required being appropriate to the circumstances.
- **Compliance with zoning policies**, i.e. not to take dogs where they are excluded for site management reasons at certain times of year, or from specific areas.

- An understanding that **a dog's owner is responsible in law for both the welfare of the dog and its behaviour.**

As a last resort, faced with continued blatant non-compliance, NIEA would reserve the right to remove offenders from sites and refuse future admission.

There are many sources of information on responsible dog ownership, from which advice on training, welfare, relevant law, insurance, etc., is available. These sources include local authorities, libraries and voluntary organisations.

NIEA site managers will seek to work with dog owners as individuals and with representative bodies to promote a common sense approach to managing access to the countryside at our properties, so that we can continue to provide opportunities for outdoor exercise suited to a wide range of fitness, mobility and interests.

Please contact your local NIEA property manager for more information on bringing your dog to our sites.

www.ni-environment.gov.uk