

THE SCAS Journal

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Dog activity trails: promoting fitness and fun with your best friend

Following his presentation at IAHAIO 2010 in Stockholm, SCAS member **Stephen Jenkinson** elaborates on his work to promote activity trails across the UK, and how you can get involved

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Dogs out of control. Human and canine obesity increasing. Bored pets disengaged from their owners. Behavioural problems due to insufficient mental stimulation. Wildlife chased by under-exercised canines. The list goes on...

The 21st century's combination of social pressures and ever fewer places to exercise dogs brings to my door a variety of countryside rangers, farmers, bird watchers and exasperated pet owners, seeking quick solutions to problems that have often been a long time in the making.

The traditional approach to these issues by local councils has been to restrict or constrain where dog owners go and what they do. For exasperated owners, the "solution" can be, at worst, the loss of a loved but frustrating pet or, at best, fewer trips to the park, more lead use and entry into the shady world of midnight dog walking when no-one else is about.

But with dogs being taken on nearly half of all visits to the countryside and greenspace across the UK, plus the many benefits of pet ownership that are so apparent to SCAS members, there had to be a better way forward.

I now work with councils and landowners to devise new approaches that are more holistic, effective and enduring – because they promote the good things about dog ownership as well as addressing negative impacts – and one of the most exciting concepts is that of "dog activity trails".

Here's an introduction to the concept, along with information to help you develop a trail in your area.

Integration not exclusion

In the United States the concept of having specific areas – "dog parks" – for exercising canines, particularly off-lead, is well-established and at face value sounds a good idea. But in truth, in many states dog parks are a modest oasis of positive provision, in an overall culture that imposes severe restrictions on dog owners, far greater in extent than anything we have seen so far in the United Kingdom.

In fact, a small dog park may be the only place where off-lead access is allowed for many miles around as, unlike in the UK, there is also scant public access to the wider countryside, state forests and national parks in the US. And where such access does exist, it is again most frequently on-lead, all year round.

Accordingly, there is a growing trend for commercial enterprises to offer extensive out of town areas for off-lead exercise, offering all that we in the UK would expect from a daily walk in the countryside: water to splash in, attractive natural landscapes, and feelings of freedom and



Coatham Wood activity trail.



Coatham Wood activity trail under construction.

openness. But access to such specialist facilities comes at a price and can involve travelling many miles, doing little to be socially-inclusive, particularly for people with lower incomes, disabilities or other socially-excluding circumstances – not to mention increasing pollution from car use and all the other related environmental impacts.

For many residents in US towns and cities, the reality of their off-lead dog park is a paved, wholly man-made area no bigger than a few tennis courts. High fences, rules and regulations make it seem like some embarrassing ghetto for a socially-troublesome activity that is grudgingly tolerated and strictly confined.

Moreover, such a constrained focus of canine activity can result in complaints from neighbours due to the undue concentration of noise and fouling. The limited space available also does little to encourage dog owners to be physically active, at a time when human and canine obesity is relentlessly increasing on both sides of the “big pond”.

In short, in the UK we needed something different. Something that fitted in with our needs, our culture, and our desire to ensure dog ownership remains a mainstream, socially-acceptable part of daily life.

UK activity trails: the concept

Thanks to funding from the Kennel Club and Forestry Commission, the dog activity trail concept was developed, which aims to be more socially-inclusive and environmentally-

friendly in its ethos, construction and management.

The formal aim was to develop facilities that:

“Enhance opportunities for people to experience and enjoy responsible, healthy exercise and interaction with their dogs.”

More specifically, they were to be designed and integrated into existing greenspace so as to:

- give dog owners a sense of being welcome visitors
- encourage dog owners to explore the wider area, rather than be confined to one small zone
- present fun, worthwhile and interesting challenges, to increase levels of physical exercise and longer-term activity in the outdoors in general, and through participation in dog sports
- promote greater levels of positive and rewarding interactions between people and their pets, increasing levels of off-lead control
- accommodate dogs and humans of all different sizes and abilities
- encourage dog owners away from more sensitive places, such as protected areas for wildlife, dog-free picnic areas and children’s play zones
- act as a focal point for delivering messages to owners about responsible behaviour, and fostering peer pressure to challenge unacceptable behaviour

Photo © Stephen Jenkinson



ABOVE: **Cath Brason and Piper at Coatham Wood.**
 BELOW LEFT: **Activity trail at Lee Valley Regional Park.**
 BELOW RIGHT: **Coatham Wood activity trail.**

Photo © Lee Valley Regional Park



Photo © Nigel Whitfield



- minimise conflict with other visitors, wildlife and livestock
- use locally-available natural materials
- minimise maintenance and inspection requirements
- make it clear to other visitors that use of the trail by dogs is intentional and welcomed

Location, location location

To ensure an activity trail promotes the good things about dog ownership and minimises negative impacts, selecting the right location is essential. If badly sited, at best the facility may be little used; at worst, it could just increase conflict, bringing all dog owners into disrepute.

So the first hurdle is finding a supportive landowner with a suitable site, be it the local council, another public or charitable body (such as the National Trust, Forestry Commission, Woodland Trust) or perhaps a benevolent private individual.

While site selection will often be a compromise at a local level, ideally the trail location should:

- be close to sufficient and safe car parking, if most visitors are likely to drive to the trail; some areas of shade are helpful in summer
- be away from dangers and sensitive areas such as: roads, picnic sites, children's play areas, horse riders
- give access to a circular walk of around an hour

- not be too secluded, to avoid creating personal safety concerns or isolated "dog ghettos"
- prevent narrow pinch points between excited dogs arriving and departing
- be close to clean water, waste bins and emergency help
- provide alternative routes for people who wish to avoid interactions with dogs

Pilot trail design

The designs for the activity trail elements were inspired by my own experiences when competing in agility with my border collie, Jess. Whenever we were out for a walk, I'd use natural features of the countryside to integrate training wherever we went: a large rock to jump on; a fallen log to run along; a footbridge across a stream to go under.

And just as those features, albeit safe, were not to official standards, so too do the activity trail obstacles depart from competition dimensions for a number of reasons – and hence why we named these "activity", rather than "agility" trails.

Firstly, the trail had to be safe and robust enough for unsupervised use by a wide range of dog and handler abilities and sizes. Secondly, to comply with safety inspection requirements for outdoor play equipment, the height of the obstacles had to be reduced; otherwise, expensive rubber matting or other impact softening materials would have been required around the base. Thirdly, we wanted a "freestyle" approach to interacting with the trail; as long as it was safe, we didn't want to impose expectations of competition rules and regulations.

That said, if serious agility competitors want to, for example, make their dogs halt at the end of the log walk, as required in competitions, they can still do so; our overriding concern was simply for a fun, free and safe experience for all.

Coatham Community Woodland near Yarm, Teesside, was chosen as the site for the pilot trail, as it met almost all of the above requirements. Most importantly, the wood was managed by a Forestry Commission ranger, Cath Brason, who – along with her dog Piper – was very supportive and keen to become an ambassador for the concept.

And so in March 2008 the building of the jumps, tunnels, dog walks and weaves commenced, using locally produced timber and other materials as far as possible. Unfortunately, Coatham is a recently planted woodland, and so there were no large logs or other fallen timber that would ideally have been used to build many of the structures. So machined timber had to be used instead, with wood glue sprinkled with sand applied to the contact surfaces to improve grip.

The trail elements were located approximately every 300 metres along a circular walk of 2.4 km (1.5 miles). While the first element was specifically located to be obvious from the car park, no other signposting was provided, so as to encourage dog owners to find the other elements for themselves, thus encouraging them to take more exercise and explore other parts of the site.

Overall, the cost of the materials for the seven elements came to just under £1,000. The plastic pipes for the tunnel

accounted for half of that cost; in this situation they were brand new, but the use of secondhand or donated pipes could significantly reduce this cost. Professionally designed and mounted information boards were provided at each activity station and in the car park. While these are helpful, particularly when a trail is first installed and the concept is new, they become less important when the trail's use is established, and so could be omitted if funds were especially tight.

All told, the use of readily available materials means that a trail can be produced at a very modest cost. The elements in most cases can also be readily moved if the ground around them becomes excessively worn or muddy; they are also not expensive to replace or repair if vandalised.

Launch and evaluation

The Coatham Wood trail was officially opened on 13 June 2008, attracting a great deal of positive publicity in the local and national media. The BBC television news coverage of the event can be seen at: www.dogactivitytrail.org.uk.

Six months later, the trail's initial success was evaluated by face to face interviews with 45 dog owners using the site.

In terms of the trail design and management, this showed that:

- 98% felt the trail was safe
- 95% felt it was usable by all sizes of dog

- trail length, difficulty and information was a good compromise between everyone's needs
- 67% wanted more obstacles
- the tunnel was the most popular obstacle with 30% of users; weaves were the least popular with 23%
- 76% felt the amount of fouling had not got worse, despite increased usage of the site by dogs

More importantly, in terms of how the trail had affected owners at a personal level, we found that:

- 76% felt more welcome
- 60% were more active when walking their dogs here
- 36% of their dogs had lost weight
- 69% of people were more sociable with other dog walkers
- 89% recommended the trail to a current non-visitor
- 22% were more likely to participate in dog sports

All told, the pilot trail was very successful, and three years on is as popular as ever. On a personal level, one of the most moving, unprompted – and telling – comments (made by several dog owners who were interviewed) was:

"It's just such a refreshing change for something positive to be done for us; we don't feel we ask for much. All we usually get elsewhere is 'don't' do this, 'don't' go there."

And that, while inspiring, is a telling reflection on how dog owners – despite being the single most frequent, year-round





Information board at start of trail, Coatham Community Woodlands.

visitors to the countryside and urban greenspace – have traditionally been engaged with by many local councils and other landowners.

But there is hope. This first trail was intended to give support and inspiration to others to develop the concept elsewhere across the UK ... and inspire it did.

The next step: Lee Valley Regional Park

Amy Lewis, dog-friendly ranger at Lee Valley Regional Park, Cheshunt, Hertfordshire (10 mins from jct 25 of the M25) was the first to step up and take the concept forward.

While Amy and her colleagues have to deal with problems caused by a minority of irresponsible dog owners, they were also acutely aware they did comparatively little to encourage and support the majority of responsible owners who are loyal, year-round, customers of the recreational facilities and greenspaces they provide on behalf of several local authorities in and around north London.

Taking the initiative, and working with their volunteer rangers, they adapted the initial designs to make them even more robust and naturalistic in this urban fringe setting.

Their ten-obstacle trail was officially launched on 2 October 2010, much to the delight of local dog owners, who again

are now more active with their pets. In addition, dog handlers with the local police and private security firms are making use of the facility, adding to the overall feelings of safety and enjoyment. And as time allows, those professional dog handlers have also been happy to help pet owners with training advice. Training sessions with a local agility instructor have also been organised.

A note of caution

While the provision of any positive facilities for dog owners is generally to be applauded, how it is done, and under what circumstances, can make a big difference to how it is perceived in practice by dog owners, other site users and the local media.

In 2010, East Hertfordshire Council installed seven commercially-manufactured outdoor dog agility obstacles in one corner of Southern Country Park, near Bishops Stortford. While undoubtedly well-meaning in itself, and a more positive step than many local councils would take, the significantly higher cost of the equipment (list price quoted as £7,000) and the recent banning of dogs from a popular, fenced-in and much larger safe training area, led to very public criticism from some local councillors and dog owners in the local and national media.

This incident underlines the importance of taking the wider context into consideration, and the far less



contentious opportunities from lower-cost, locally-produced trails, such as those at Lee Valley and Coatham, which were developed in partnership with volunteers and local dog owners, and integrated into existing access, paths and trails across a site.

The future

At a time when government spending is severely restricted, the opportunities may seem bleak for even the modest funding needed for dog activity trails. However, dog owners working with the local council to build a trail are undoubtedly undertaking the type of “big society” project the current government is seeking to promote. This is especially so given how the trails help people to take more exercise, reducing the burden on the National Health Service.

Equally, negotiations are ongoing to develop more of these trails in and around London as part of the legacy from the 2012 Olympics. The Walk4Life website (funded by the Department for Health) is also keen to promote dog trails within its ever-growing portfolio of attractive and safe local walks across the UK – see www.walk4life.info for more information. Indeed, a trail’s underlying ethos of happy and healthy people and their pets can make a very attractive hook for sponsorship from local vets, pet shops and feed manufacturers.

More unexpectedly, the Europe-wide protection given to some of our rarest wildlife could also be a significant catalyst for dog activity trails in new housing developments. As potential building sites become ever rarer, councils and developers are increasingly looking to build on land close to protected areas for wildlife. This is particularly the case along the M4 corridor to the west of London – the so-called Thames Basin Heaths area.

European laws forbid any building development that could threaten endangered species and their habitats, such as the ground-nesting nightjar and Dartford warbler. Banning dogs from new housing developments is difficult to enforce, socially divisive and thus not seen favourably by the government’s nature conservation agency, Natural England.

Instead, they are demanding that extensive areas of dog-friendly greenspace are provided in and around new developments, so that owners can readily exercise their pets without posing any threat to endangered wildlife. Dog activity trails are now seen as one of the many ways to make these greenspaces as attractive to dog owners as possible. And as the funding for them will come from a levy on each house the builder sells, funding is assured.

What you can do

Feeling inspired? Here’s what you can do.

- Download the design guidance (see below)
- Talk to other dog owners about developing a trail in your area
- Visit one of the existing trails if you can
- Approach the local council and other owners of land where a trail could be located. Tell them how this can

be a low-cost “big society” project to help people keep fit, be more responsible pet owners, and attract dogs away from more sensitive areas

- Speak to local builders or timber merchants about a donation or discount on the timber required, in return for some good publicity in the local press
- Approach local vets, pet shops and other related businesses for sponsorship in return for good publicity
- Start small if money is tight or people are cynical. Weaves and jumps can be readily made from a few round fencing poles – more obstacles can be added later
- Join the Kennel Club’s KCDOG scheme for advice on lobbying and influencing local politicians (email: kcdog@thekennelclub.org.uk, tel: 020 7518 1020)
- Be persistent and positive. Let people know how successful and trouble-free the trails at Lee Valley and Coatham Wood have been

For more information

Design guidance: Download free of charge from the resources section of *Managing dogs in the Wood* at: www.forestry.gov.uk/england-dogs

Project consultant and designer: Stephen Jenkinson, Access and Countryside Management, tel: 08456 439435, email: steve@sjacm.co.uk

Coatham Community Woodland: Pilot trail located on Long Newton Lane, near Yarm, Teesside. For more location information go to www.walk4life.info and search for the trail’s postcode TS16 0QQ.

Lee Valley Regional Park: Activity trail located at River Lee Country Park, Cheshunt Country Walk, Windmill Lane, Cheshunt, Hertfordshire EN8 9AJ. (Turn left into the car park immediately after the railway station level crossing.) See also: www.leevalleypark.org.uk.

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