

THIS IS AN EXTRACT FROM THE COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES.

7.2 DOG WALKING IN MERRI-BEK - CONSULTATION SUMMARY AND STAGE 1 PILOT IMPLEMENTATION

Executive Summary

This report outlines the policy context, background, consultation process and proposed next steps for improving how dogs and their owners share Merri-bek's open spaces with other users as part of the *Dog Walking in Merri-bek* project.

Dog ownership in Merri-bek has tripled since 2018, with over 14,000 registered dogs and increasing demand for dog-friendly infrastructure - particularly in high-density areas. While Merri-bek leads neighbouring municipalities in the number of off-leash areas (54), there are growing concerns about conflicts between dog walkers and other park users and impacts of dogs on biodiversity as population density increases.

As Stage 1 of a two-stage process, Council identified ways to better manage dog walking in open space at nine sites to improve safety, accessibility and environmental protection. These include zoning of reserves, shared timed access, fenced dog areas and habitat protection zones.

Through March, April and May 2025 Council conducted extensive community engagement including surveys, park pop-ups, focus groups and stakeholder sessions on these Stage 1 proposals. Feedback highlighted both strong community support for dog-friendly spaces but also concerns about dogs in sensitive environmental areas, near playgrounds, and during sports events. The need for clearer signage, greater enforcement and increased education were consistently raised. The consultation has resulted in several proposed changes to the implementation of Stage 1, including removing one area from the trial.

In summary, there are new designated dog off-leash areas in GE Clarke Reserve in Glenroy, Robinson Reserve, Harmony Park and Tate Reserve in Coburg and at Lorne Street Reserve in Fawkner. Modifications are proposed to the designated dog off-leash areas at Gilpin Reserve and Fleming Park in Brunswick, and addition of lighting at Robinson Reserve, Coburg. A proposed new dog off-leash area at Bababi Djinanang in Fawkner has been removed from the pilot following community feedback.

The nature of the feedback meant that it was not possible to meet all requests. This was particularly the case at Tate Reserve in Coburg, where the adjusted approach seeks to account for strongly held differing views; on one hand, dog walkers were unhappy with the original proposal to retain the dog on-lead status of the reserve, arguing it operates now (despite its on-lead zoning) as an off-lead area, while those speaking for the environmental qualities of the area observed degradation of habitat due to dogs and considered it a priority to retain and strengthen dog on-lead requirements. The officer recommendation for this site seeks to strike a balance; to have a fenced, larger-than-originally-shown area prohibiting all dogs in the most sensitive vegetated areas adjacent to a dog off-leash corridor.

The Stage 1 approaches and interventions will be piloted for six months. The pilot will be evaluated and used to inform Stage 2 (review of the remaining dog off-lead areas) and guide long-term policy on dog access in public spaces.

As part of the 2025/26 Budget Council has allocated \$150,000 to support the implementation of the Stage 1 pilot through the provision of temporary infrastructure, minor permanent upgrades and additional staff engagement activities. Additional funding of \$160,000 has been allocated to adjustments of the Gilpin Reserve dog park facilities, which will be permanent improvements.

This project represents an important opportunity to ensure our open spaces remain safe, inclusive, and sustainable for all members of the Merri-bek community.

Officer Recommendation

That Council:

1. Adopts the Council Order at Attachment 1 (Dog Off-Leash and Dog Prohibited Areas) and directs for it to be published with tracked changes accepted in the Victorian Government Gazette with an effective date of 28 July 2025, noting that the Order creates five new designated off-leash areas and modifies two.
2. Endorses the implementation of the Stage 1 pilot program across eight identified parks that support the Council Order to trial draft principles and interventions for improved management of dog access (Attachment 2) for a minimum of six months, utilising capital funding of \$150,000 set aside in 2025/26 for this purpose
3. Notes that the community has participated significantly in consultation on Stage 1 of the *Dog Walking in Merri-bek* project summarised in Attachment 3 of this report and that officers will continue to engage with the community during the pilot.
4. Receives a future report at the conclusion of the Stage 1 pilot on outcomes, learnings and future recommendations as part of the preparation of Stage 2 of the *Dog Walking in Merri-bek* project (remaining off leash reserves).

Resolution

Cr Abboud moved, Cr Svensson seconded -

That Council:

- 1. Revises Attachment 1 and Attachment 2 so that they reflect changes to Tate Reserve to increase the area zoned as No Dogs, still retaining a corridor for Dog Off-Leash along the western side of the No Dogs area.**
- 2. Adopts the Council Order at Revised Attachment 1 (Dog Off-Leash and Dog Prohibited Areas) and directs for it to be published with tracked changes accepted in the Victorian Government Gazette with an effective date of 28 July 2025.**
- 3. Endorses the implementation of the Stage 1 pilot program across eight identified parks the support the Council Order to trial draft principles and interventions for improved management of dog access (Revised Attachment 2) for a minimum of six months, utilising capital funding of \$150,000 set aside in 2025/26 for this purpose.**
- 4. Notes that the community has participated significantly in consultation on Stage 1 of the Dog Walking in Merri-bek project summarised in Attachment 3 of this report and that officers will continue to engage with the community during the pilot.**
- 5. Receives a future report at the conclusion of the Stage 1 pilot on outcomes, learnings and future recommendations as part of the preparation of Stage 2 of the Dog Walking in Merri-bek project (remaining off leash reserves).**

Carried unanimously