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## SCHOOL DOGS POLICY

**Report by Lesley Munro, Director – Education & Children’s Services**

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### EDUCATION SUB-COMMITTEE

**23 April 2024**

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#### 1 PURPOSE AND SUMMARY

- 1.1 **This report proposes the approval of the School Dogs Policy, agreement with the school dog owner/handler and model Risk Assessment for mandatory use and guidance within Scottish Borders Council schools settings when the school setting is considering a school dog.**
- 1.2 There is a growing body of thought that specially selected and highly trained dogs can be of great benefit to children, especially within academic environments. Within Scottish Borders Council schools, there are currently three “school dogs” already in place in Scottish Borders Council school settings, which bring great joy, along with emotional and academic support to children in those school settings.
- 1.3 This Policy provides important guidance and measures to balance the benefits and the risks of school dogs within the Local Authority’s school provision, in order to set documented standards and controls to be adhered to at all times. Current school dogs have Risk Assessments in place, but there is no guidance or Policy for schools to follow. It is important to have parity across all school settings and it is proposed that this framework would be mandatory for all Council school settings considering the introduction of a school dog to the school setting or with a school dog already in place.
- 1.4 This report also highlights the requirement for adequate insurance for Scottish Borders Council school dogs. It is imperative for a school dog to have adequate public liability/third party insurance for when it is on the school estate, which covers the use of the school dog for training and providing services/assistance with pupils and any interaction on site with any staff or visitors on the school estate. This is a clear requirement within the Policy. At the time of writing the Policy and associated documents, clarity was sought about the insurance cover in place already and whether Zurich Insurance would provide indemnity cover within the existing insurance provision for school dogs whilst in the school setting. Zurich Insurance has clarified that if risk assessments are undertaken and the School Dogs Policy and controls are clearly followed, then indemnity will be

met within the current Policy arrangements to ensure cover for the public liability/third party liability of school dogs within Scottish Borders Council school settings. If cover had not been clear or adequate, Scottish Borders Council would have been required to meet any legal claim and thus, in effect, self-insure the school dogs. This is not the situation. Cover has been advised is currently effective, assuming controls and risk assessments are all in place. The adoption of the Policy and the Model Risk Assessment, along with the agreement with the owner/handler, strengthens the existing risk assessment provisions and brings clarity, guidance and parity to all school settings to ensure clear uniformity across all education settings.

## **2 RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1 I recommend that the Committee approve the School Dogs Policy, associated Agreement with the school dog owner/handler and model Risk Assessment, for use and guidance within all Scottish Borders Council schools.**

### **3 BACKGROUND**

- 3.1 The human/dog bond is a unique and profound connection that has evolved over thousands of years of shared history. Dogs are often referred to as "man's or a human's best friend" and have engrained themselves into the human experience, providing companionship, loyalty, and affection. This bond is rooted in mutual understanding, as dogs are highly attuned to human emotions and body language. The ability to empathise is innate for dogs, and they can offer non-judgemental support which fosters a deep sense of trust and companionship. Studies have shown that interactions with dogs can trigger the release of the happiness hormone "oxytocin" in both humans and dogs and further strengthens this emotional connection with canine friends. Beyond the emotional aspect, the human/dog bond exists to practical areas such as disability assistance and service roles, which highlight the versatility and depth of this remarkable relationship.
- 3.2 There is a growing body of thought that specially selected dogs, who are highly trained, can be of great benefit to children especially within academic environments. Within Scottish Borders Council schools, there are currently three "school dogs" already in place in school settings, which bring great joy, emotional and academic support to children in those schools.
- 3.3 Given these dogs already in place and the trend for "schools dogs" to be used more Scotland/UK wide, it was identified that guidance and clear regulatory policy was required to assist Scottish Borders Council school management teams who may wish to consider a role for a school dog for their educational setting. It is also crucial for parents and carers to understand that, as a Local Authority, Scottish Borders Council have clear policies and procedures in place to protect and safeguard children, staff and visitors within the school setting and to also ensure the continued safety and wellbeing of the dogs themselves. The School Dogs Policy was deemed essential to provide this level of guidance and instruction. It was drafted, taking close cognisance of the Welfare of Dogs: Code of Practice Guidance published by the Scottish Government on 4 March 2010, as a best practice guide to help those responsible for dogs in our school settings, meet the duty of care under the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. It was also drafted closely following the Dogs Trust guidance in relation to dogs in school settings.
- 3.4 There are obvious risks of allowing even highly trained and selected dogs into our school settings and, as such, the risks require to be carefully assessed and managed. The School Dogs Policy (Appendix 1) aims to address this and set clearly documented standards to be adhered to and relied upon at all times in our school settings.

### **4 POLICY**

- 4.1 The Schools Dogs Policy defines a "school dog" as one which has undergone significant training and independent assessment to a satisfactory standard of behaviour and training through an appropriate and identified body such as Canine Concern Scotland/Kennel Club/Dogs Trust, or some other such equivalent body, to be agreed with Council Officers, to then become a

certified and cleared for use, Scottish Borders Council "School Dog". The Policy only applies to certified Scottish Borders Council "School Dogs". It does not affect the school's right to prohibit other dogs on school property. It is Scottish Borders Council policy that dogs are not allowed on school property unless authorised by the Headteacher. For example, a service dog such as a guide dog for the blind for an educational visit or required as a service dog. This Policy only outlines measures put in place to allow an authorised and accredited "school dog" only to be present on the school premises.

- 4.2 It is anticipated that the school dog will likely be resident within the school each day for the majority, if not the whole of the school day. A school dog spends most of their time in the classroom or elsewhere in the school environment, on a consistent ongoing basis. However, attendance in school each day, although "likely", should not however be seen as a "given". Care should be taken to assess and identify should the school dog not wish to attend. The school dog's wishes in attendance each day should be assessed on an ongoing daily basis to ensure that its health, safety, and wellbeing are being monitored and maintained. School dogs who have become accustomed to their role in school will, and should, provide "consent" to their role in school by behaving in such a way to show whether they wish to enter the school each day and it is crucial that due cognisance is taken of those wishes.
- 4.3 The school dog will belong to an owner which will be a member of the teaching staff senior management of the school with whom they form an important bond and live as a member of the owner's family. The owner will also be the specific member of staff assigned to the dog as the handler. The school dog will go home to the owner/handler's home every day after school and overnight along with weekends and school holidays. The school dog owner/handler will be responsible for the overall well-being and safety of the school dog. A school dog will never be left in the school overnight and priority for the school dog will be an integral part of all risk assessments undertaken. The owner/handler will sign an Agreement (see Appendix 2) which not only underlines the owner/handler's responsibilities, but also Scottish Borders Council's responsibilities to ensure adherence to policy and expected standards in order to safeguard the health, wellbeing and safety of the school dog and all children, staff and visitors who may have contact with the school dog.
- 4.4 Scottish Borders Council will have the responsibility to ensure that all schools have the written Policy and generic Risk Assessment (see Appendix 3) for school dogs in their schools.
- 4.5 The Headteacher has overall responsibility for implementing the School Dogs Policy and asking the school dog owner and handler to undertake any further specific risk assessments (for example for any visitors to the school who intimate they have allergies to dogs) as required.
- 4.6 Scottish Borders Council must have an appropriate third-party liability policy in place to cover the school dog on school premises. The owner/handler will have responsibility for obtaining adequate pet insurance for the school dog, which will be distinct from the third-party liability insurance for the use of a school dog on Local Authority premises.

## **5 IMPLICATIONS**

### **5.1 Financial**

Financial concerns will be as below:

- (a) The school dog will be insured by the owner/handler in terms of domestic pet insurance. Adequate insurance is in place for third party liability of the school dog when on school premises. This needs to cover the school dog for providing a service or training within the school premises. This third-party liability policy will need to be renewed and paid for each year by Scottish Borders Council. Zurich Insurance have advised that the current policy covers school dogs in place in school settings, assuming that risk assessments are undertaken, but this will need to be renewed and updated yearly to ensure that adequate cover remains in place.
- (b) The school dog will need to be adequately trained and have undergone an independent assessment to a satisfactory standard of behaviour and training before being certified as a school dog. This training will be undertaken by the owner/handler of the school dog. Funding for this training will be agreed by mutual negotiation between owner/handler and Scottish Borders Council Officers.

### **5.2 Risk and Mitigations**

- (a) Introducing dogs into school settings can offer numerous benefits, such as promoting a positive atmosphere and reducing stress, as well as the educational and emotional benefit to children by increasing their understanding of responsibility and developing empathy and nurturing skills through contact with a school dog. In addition to these benefits, children take great enjoyment from interaction with a school dog, where studies have shown that school dogs can benefit reluctant readers, also providing huge academic benefit also.
- (b) Section 4 of the School Dogs Policy goes into more detail about the perceived benefits of a school dog which sits well with the ethos of the Education Authority with regards to nurture and inclusion. The value of the development of children's well-being and moral and social education is seen to be as important as academic education, and achievement.
- (c) Potential downsides and side effects of school dogs need to be identified and mitigated. Risks may include allergies among staff, pupils and visitors and fear in some individuals and/or disruptions due to the school dog, along with risk of injury from the dog such as biting, knocking over of pupils/staff and dog fouling. We believe that to mitigate such risks, the adoption of a clear policy with associated and thorough risk assessments and responsible training and behavioural strategies for both canine and humans in school can go a long way to reduce these risks.

- (d) Establishment of documented standards and controls which are clearly structured and adhered to can minimise any risks and ensure a safe environment for the dog and children, staff, and children alike. Regular monitoring and open communication channels can further contribute to the successful integration of a school dog, while addressing and managing potential side effects. The School Dogs Policy details the risks and how to reduce those to a level which is acceptable to strike a balance that ensures the benefits outweigh the drawbacks and risks associated with this Policy.

### **5.3 Integrated Impact Assessment**

Implementing and approving the School Dog Policy may raise concerns related to discrimination, particularly if it affects individuals inadvertently with disabilities. An IIA has been completed and it is crucial for the Policy to be as inclusive as possible and considerate of all needs, ensuring that no person is unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged due to allergies, fears, or other conditions. Schools should engage the school community through thoughtful engagement and planning for a school dog, maintaining open communication to address and mitigate any potential concerns or potential discrimination concerns about introducing a dog into a school educational environment.

### **5.4 Sustainable Development Goals**

The UN Sustainable Development Goal's checklist has been completed and it has been identified that the Schools Dogs Policy recommendation would have a positive impact in respect of the goal to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning and opportunities for all. This is in relation to the identification and tackling of barriers to school attendance. A school dog has been identified as a method which is helpful in some settings to tackle non-attendance so to encourage children to school with a meet and greet system. It can be seen as a major positive incentive to attend and interact with the school dog on an emotional and social level to alleviate stress and anxiety.

### **5.5 Climate Change**

Not applicable.

### **5.6 Rural Proofing**

Not applicable.

### **5.7 Data Protection Impact Statement**

There are no personal data implications arising from the proposals contained in this report.

### **5.8 Changes to Scheme of Administration or Scheme of Delegation**

Not applicable.

## 6 CONSULTATION

6.1 The Director (Finance & Procurement), the Director (Corporate Governance), the Chief Officer Audit and Risk, the Director (People Performance & Change), the Clerk to the Council, the Finance Business Partner and Corporate Communications have been consulted and any comments received will be incorporated into the final report.

### Approved by

**Lesley Munro**

**Director – Education & Children’s Services**

### Author(s)

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### Background Papers:

Appendix 1 Proposed School Dogs Policy

Appendix 2 Proposed Agreement between SBC and Owner/Handler of School Dog

Appendix 3 Proposed Generic Risk Assessment School Dogs

**Previous Minute Reference:** Not applicable

**Note** – You can get this document on tape, in Braille, large print and various computer formats by contacting the address below. Marina Urie can also give information on other language translations as well as providing additional copies.

Contact us at Council Headquarters, Newtown St Boswells, Melrose TD6 0SA. Tel: 01835 824000.