

CODE OF PRACTICE



Canine Recreational Pool Guidelines:

Professional Guidance for Safe, Fun
and Responsible Dog Swimming



CFSG
Canine & Feline Sector Group

Index

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1. Introduction

Dog swimming is becoming an increasingly popular activity across the UK, valued for its benefits to a dog's physical health and mental enrichment. With the rise in dedicated facilities offering indoor or outdoor, heated or natural dog pools, it is essential to ensure that the welfare of the dogs is consistently prioritised. Although the benefits of swimming are well-documented—particularly as a low-impact form of exercise—there are also inherent risks if facilities do not maintain robust safety, hygiene, and welfare standards.

These guidelines provide best practice recommendations for anyone setting up or operating a recreational swimming facility for dogs. The guidance is closely aligned with the principles of the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which states that all animals must be protected from pain, suffering, injury, and disease, and that their needs must be appropriately met.

Scope of These Guidelines: These guidelines are designed for recreational canine swimming pools, where the primary focus is fun, fitness, socialisation, and enrichment. They do not apply to hydrotherapy, which is a regulated treatment service delivered under veterinary referral by qualified hydrotherapists.

Intended Audience: These guidelines are for individuals and businesses operating dedicated canine swim centres, dog daycares offering swimming, and pet service providers adding swimming sessions as an enrichment activity. They are not intended for those running hydrotherapy services.

2. Types of Dog Swimming Facilities

There are two main categories of swimming pools that accommodate dogs:

Recreational Canine Pools are facilities designed for leisure use, offering swimming as a form of physical exercise, mental stimulation, and social engagement. These pools can be indoor or outdoor, and staff may or may not hold formal animal care qualifications. However, they must have a strong understanding of dog behaviour and water safety to operate responsibly. While these are not subject to their own licensing structure, those running pools retain a duty of care to the dogs using the pools, and every effort should be made to safeguard welfare,

Hydrotherapy Pools, on the other hand, are clinical environments in which swimming and aquatic exercise are provided under the direction of a qualified hydrotherapist. These sessions are typically prescribed by a veterinary professional and are used in the rehabilitation of injuries or chronic conditions such as arthritis. Hydrotherapy is regulated through voluntary industry bodies such as the Canine Hydrotherapy Association (CHA) and the National Association of Registered Canine Hydrotherapists (NARCH).

It is crucial that these two categories remain distinct. Recreational swimming does not substitute for medical treatment under the direction of a qualified hydrotherapist and must never be promoted as hydrotherapy.

3. Dog Assessment & Suitability Screening

Before any dog enters the pool, a structured health and behaviour assessment must be carried out. This assessment should be based on a detailed pre-session questionnaire completed by the owner, discussing aspects such as age, breed, physical condition, medical history, and temperament. Dogs must be screened for conditions that may contraindicate swimming, such as recent surgeries, heart problems, respiratory issues, open wounds, or seizure disorders. Owners should be made aware of the risks before using the service.

Certain breeds require special consideration. Brachycephalic dogs, such as Bulldogs and Pugs, may have restricted airways that affect their ability to breathe during physical exertion. This is a significant welfare threat in hot weather or during exercise, when the dog may need to breathe more. Similarly, heavy-coated breeds may tire quickly in water, and dogs with joint problems may require extra support. The goal of the assessment is to ensure that each dog will be safe, confident, and able to enjoy the swimming session.

Under no circumstances should a dog be forced, thrown, or dragged into the water. All dogs must enter the pool voluntarily, using gradual introductions supported by positive reinforcement techniques.

4. Staff Competence and Training

All swimming sessions must be supervised by a staff member who is confident and competent in handling dogs in aquatic settings. Ideally, two staff members should be present during every session—one in the pool with the dog(s), and one observing poolside. This enables quick responses in case of an emergency and ensures continuous observation of behaviour and safety.

Staff should receive regular training in canine water safety, recognising signs of fatigue, distress or panic, and handling emergencies such as cramp, bloat, water intoxication, or dry drowning. They must also be trained in Canine First Aid, with certification renewed at least annually. Maintaining a training log for all staff is essential to demonstrate due diligence and preparedness.

5. Behaviour and Welfare Management

Understanding and responding to dog behaviour is central to maintaining a safe and positive environment. Operators must be able to recognise signs of fear or overstimulation, such as cowering, refusal to enter the water, excessive barking, or attempts to escape, and how to manage them. Conversely, signs of enjoyment include relaxed posture, wagging tails, and confident swimming behaviour.

Dogs should be introduced to the pool gradually. For first-time swimmers, one-to-one sessions are advisable to build confidence and ensure the dog feels secure. For group sessions, dogs must be assessed for compatibility in advance. Group sizes should remain small to prevent overcrowding, with facilities providing calm-down areas if dogs become overstimulated.

Providing adequate rest during and after sessions is important. Fatigued dogs are more prone to panic, accidents, and injuries.

6. Session Structure

Recreational swimming sessions should be carefully timed to balance enjoyment and safety. The maximum duration of a single session should be 30 minutes, which includes time for entry, acclimatisation, swimming, rest, and exit. Active swimming should not exceed 20 minutes per dog.

During and after each session, staff must monitor dogs for signs of overexertion, including cramping, vomiting, extreme fatigue, or unusual behaviour. Any dog showing these signs should be removed from the water and monitored closely, if symptoms persist veterinary services should be sought.

7. Water Quality and Hygiene

Maintaining excellent water quality is critical. **Recreational dog pools cannot rely on standard human pool treatment systems**, such as chlorine or saltwater, which can be harmful if ingested and irritating to the skin and eyes.

A safe and effective water treatment system should include high-capacity sand filtration, a dog-safe biocide, and regular non-chlorine shock treatments. The water must be tested daily for clarity, bacteria, pH balance, and temperature. All test results and chemical usage should be logged in detail.

In the event of an accident, such as faeces, vomit and diarrhoea, the pool must be evacuated and appropriate cleaning measures must be undertaken immediately. This includes shock treating the pool and, in the case of diarrhoea, closing the pool for at least 30 minutes to ensure disinfection.

8. Life Jackets and Floatation Aids

Life jackets can provide support to dogs new to swimming, or to those with limited buoyancy, but they must not replace active supervision or trained assistance. They should not be routinely used for leisure swimming as dogs may become reliant on them. Jackets should be well-fitted, checked before every use, and used judiciously. It may be useful to discuss this with the owner before the pool session, so that they can help familiarise the dog.

Some breeds, including Dachshunds and French Bulldogs, may be more likely to flip or struggle while wearing a jacket. Staff should be aware of breed-specific issues and should never rely on life jackets as a substitute for close observation and skilled support.

9. Facility Design and Safety

Swimming areas must be designed with canine safety as a priority. Good practice suggests that each dog should have at least 100 square feet of space in the pool to swim safely and avoid collisions. For example, a pool measuring 32ft x 16ft can accommodate up to five dogs at a time; a 24ft x 12ft pool fewer than 3 dogs.

Pool surrounds and platforms must be made from non-slip materials. Platforms or docks must be fully enclosed with at least 5ft ridged material to prevent falls from height. The entire pool area should be enclosed by a secure fence at least 4ft high to prevent escape. Entry and exit ramps should be wide, gently sloped, and secured to avoid shifting during use.

Additional facilities, such as fresh drinking water, waste bins, and drying stations, should be available to support the dog's comfort and hygiene before and after sessions.

10. Owner Responsibilities

Owners play a crucial role in ensuring the safety and enjoyment of their dog's swimming experience. They should provide full disclosure of any health issues or behavioural concerns during the booking process. Feeding should be avoided in the two hours leading up to a swim to reduce the risk of bloat.

Owners should supervise their dogs at all times when present on site and must follow all instructions given by staff. They should bring vaccination records, towels, a lead, and any approved toys. Children must be supervised closely and should not be allowed near the pool edge unsupervised.

11. Legal and Insurance Requirements

Operators are legally responsible for the safety of the dogs in their care, as well as for protecting their staff and clients. The following legislation must be complied with:

- **Animal Welfare Act 2006:** Requires that animal needs are met, and they are protected from harm.
- **Health & Safety at Work etc. Act 1974:** Ensures employee and public safety, including risk of slips and chemical exposure.
- **COSHH Regulations 2002:** Requires safe handling and storage of pool chemicals.
- **Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (PUWER):** Applies to any equipment, including ramps and platforms.

Operators should hold valid public and employer liability insurance and should regularly review compliance with planning permission, building regulations, and local authority requirements. Clear booking policies, risk assessments, and emergency procedures must be in place and regularly reviewed.

12. Record-Keeping

Keeping accurate records helps ensure operational transparency and legal compliance. Operators must keep:

- Signed owner consent forms
- Pre-session dog assessments
- Daily water testing and treatment logs
- Incident and injury reports
- Staff training records
- Staff logs
- Cleaning and maintenance schedules

These records should be securely stored.

13. Environmental Considerations

Operators must manage environmental impact carefully. Waste water containing hair, biocide, or dog waste must be disposed of responsibly, in accordance with local environmental regulations. Energy efficiency should be prioritised through measures such as using insulated pool covers and heat-efficient systems. All faeces and hair must be disposed of hygienically.

14. Operator Summary

DO:

- Supervise all sessions with trained staff
- Keep detailed logs of water quality and cleaning
- Provide clear emergency procedures
- Educate owners and respond to dog behaviour appropriately

DON'T:

- Leave dogs unattended
- Allow DIY or unsupervised sessions
- Use human pool chemicals or unsafe equipment
- Ignore signs of distress, illness, or fatigue.

CFSG Members





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