

SAFE RETURN



CAN THIS DOG SAFELY RETURN TO THE STREET?



A Dog Desk
Animal Action
Publication

A PRACTICAL ASSESSMENT TOOL FOR ANIMAL WELFARE ORGANISATIONS,
MUNICIPALITIES AND COMMUNITY DOG PROGRAMMES



Contents

3
WHY SAFE RETURN EXISTS

4 HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

5
ASSESS THE DOG

6
BEHAVIOUR

7
INDEPENDENCE

8
VULNERABILITY FACTORS

9
ASSESSMENT OUTCOME

10
DISCLAIMER

Why Safe Return Exists

Returning dogs to the street following sterilisation, vaccination or treatment is a common part of dog population management programmes around the world. However, return should not be automatic.

Not every dog is suited to life on the street. Some may be elderly, injured, disabled or dependent on human support. Equally, not every environment can provide the conditions necessary for good welfare. Factors such as traffic, food availability, community attitudes and environmental hazards can significantly affect outcomes.

Safe Return was developed to encourage evidence-based decision-making. Rather than assuming that every dog should be returned or removed, the framework promotes a simple principle

Not every dog is suitable for return.
Not every environment is suitable for return.
Return should be assessed, not assumed.

By considering the individual dog, the environment and the surrounding community together, Safe Return aims to support welfare-focused decisions that are transparent, practical and grounded in real-world conditions.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Safe Return is designed as a practical tool for:

Animal welfare organisations
Municipal authorities
Veterinary professionals
Community dog programmes
Shelter managers
Rescue workers

The assessment process consists of three steps

Step 1: Assess the Dog

Can the dog safely and independently survive following return?




Step 2: Assess the Environment

Can the environment meet the dog's welfare needs?

Step 3: Assess the Community

Is there sufficient community support to promote positive welfare outcomes?

Once all three steps have been completed, the assessor can determine whether:

-  Return is appropriate
-  Return may be appropriate with additional support
-  An alternative pathway should be considered

This guide is intended to support professional judgement, not replace it.

Every dog is an individual. Every environment is different. Assessment outcomes should always be considered alongside veterinary advice, local knowledge and applicable laws.



Step 1: Assess the Dog

Before considering return, assess whether the dog is physically and behaviourally capable of coping with life in the proposed environment.

Health

Consider:

- Is the dog free from significant untreated injury?
 - Is the dog free from illness that would prevent independent survival?
- Is the dog maintaining a healthy body condition?
- Can the dog move comfortably and without obvious difficulty?
 - Is the dog eating and drinking normally?

Questions to Consider

Does the dog require ongoing medical treatment?

Is the dog likely to experience significant suffering if returned?

Can the dog's welfare needs reasonably be met in the proposed environment?



Behaviour

Consider:

- Does the dog display normal behaviour?
- Does the dog recover appropriately from stress?
 - Can the dog interact safely with people?
 - Can the dog interact safely with other dogs?
- Is there any evidence of significant unmanaged aggression?

Questions to Consider

Is the dog fearful or highly vulnerable?

Does the dog avoid obvious hazards?

Has the dog successfully lived within a community previously?



Independence

Consider:

- Can the dog locate food?
- Can the dog locate water?
- Can the dog navigate the environment?
 - Can the dog avoid common hazards?
- Can the dog function without continuous human assistance?

Questions to Consider

Is the dog heavily dependent on people?

Could the dog realistically survive if support temporarily disappeared?



Vulnerability Factors

Some dogs require additional consideration.

Examples include:

Puppies

Elderly dogs

Disabled dogs

Chronically ill dogs

Dogs recovering from injury

Dogs requiring ongoing treatment

A vulnerable dog is not automatically unsuitable for return.
However, additional assessment may be required.



Dog Assessment Outcome

● Suitable

The dog appears physically and behaviourally capable of coping following return.

● Concerns Identified

Some concerns are present but may be manageable with support or monitoring.

● Significant Concerns

The dog's welfare may be compromised if returned at this time.

Alternative pathways or further intervention should be considered.



Disclaimer

Safe Return is a practical assessment guide designed to help animal welfare organisations, veterinary professionals and community dog programmes evaluate whether an individual dog can safely and humanely be returned to a specific environment.

The guide supports professional judgement but does not replace veterinary advice, local knowledge, legal requirements or site specific assessment. No framework can guarantee a particular outcome.

A finding that a dog is unsuitable for return does not imply that euthanasia is appropriate. Alternative pathways, including treatment, managed care, foster care, adoption and sanctuary placement, should be considered wherever feasible.

Safe Return promotes individual assessment, evidence based decision making and welfare focused outcomes.