

When can the project come off the lead?

Published – LinkedIn 5 January 2026

The programme is a tool that keeps the project under effective control for the duration of the contract.

Principals usually require programmes with regular programme updates from Contractors as part of the contract. This is to give them the confidence that the Contractor is keeping the project under effective control while it is in their care. How much updating and what level of detail of programme is appropriate for establishing and maintaining that control will be best set by understanding and designing the programme requirements to suit the specific nature of the project.

Imagine you are hiring a dog walker to exercise your pet. You want to know that the walker will keep your pet under effective control while putting it through its paces, so you ask them to keep it on a leash. What kind of leash provides the most effective control?

A nervous owner may have read somewhere that a 2-point harness, head-collar and basket muzzle is the only way to keep to completely de-risk the situation and demand that the dog walker use that with their dog. If the dog is a Bichon Maltese cross, this kind of getup will be far too heavy and may prevent it from walking and breathing in comfort and getting any exercise at all. An obedient dog walker will ensure the dog is wearing all the get-up and then stand there while nothing happens. A less obedient and more experienced dog walker, sympathetic to the dog's well-being, will probably work around this by Whatsapping a photo of the dog in the inappropriate get-up to the nervous client and then substituting something more appropriate. The dog gets a walk, the client's nerves are soothed and everyone is happy. Of course, the client is being fobbed off with an untruth, and if the dog walker does not make an appropriate substitution for the harness and something disastrous happens, they are in some serious trouble.



At the other end of the spectrum is the walker who ties your Doberman to a piece of string and tells you not to worry because they have lots of big dog experience. They might, and your Doberman might have an excellent walk that day in the care of a veritable dog whisperer. What if they're not? Specifying the use of a strong harness and a short leash might save both dog, owner, walker and the public an absolute disaster.

A short leash is not the ideal solution for a West Highland terrier whose need to sniff everything is uncontrollable. In this case, an extendable lead that has the flexibility for umpteen dog-led detours to look into any and everything on and off the path will make for a better experience all round.

An owner may think their dog is so mature and predictable and knows the route that they don't need to specify that it's walked on a lead at all. Many dogs are mature and predictable but for one little weakness that drives them wild. Like hedgehogs. Or motorbikes. Or the Jack Russell at number 12. Unless the walker is completely familiar with the dog and can absolutely guarantee that no hedgehogs or other triggers will be discovered during the walk, using a lead will reduce their own risk and the risk to the dog.

So, is it ever safe to take a dog for a walk without a lead, or run a project without keeping an up-to-date programme? Consider the A&P show – a big deal in NZ – think fairground rides, large crowds, candy floss and multiple arenas with the eponymous agricultural competitions, like wood chopping, lawn mower racing and the sheepdog trials.

The dogs in sheepdog trials are controlled effectively without a lead in sight. With their handler, they skilfully demonstrate their training, intelligence and agility by putting a small flock of sheep through a series of obstacles (or not as the case may be. Not everyone has a good day). These are the dogs which allow New Zealand shepherds to muster mobs of sheep in the vast, unfenced high country, much of which is inaccessible to vehicles.

In both the high country and the dog trial, the dog is operating with a familiar handler who has developed an alternative means of control, working at a familiar task. While exposed to the whims of the weather, they encounter only clearly visible obstacles and with nearly zero chance of an unfamiliar, unforeseen, discovery^{*1}. So, the answer is yes, you can skip the lead when working with a known team at a specific task, in a specific environment, with a specific handler who has mastered an alternative method of control and the results can be very impressive.

^{*1} Discovering sheep act like unpredictable idiots is not a discovery. This is a fact already known to both sheepdogs and shepherds.



However, drop those same dogs out, unleashed into the rest of the A&P show with its hundreds of people, small children, food stalls, other animals and noisy rides and no amount of whistling or calls of “that’ll do” is going to be effective. Bear that in mind.

In programme terms, the equivalent of a stout harness and fixed lead are the conditions for a Comprehensive Programme in NZS3910:2013 and 2023 at cl 5.10.4, used with a Specific Condition at 5.10.6 to provide basic progress information monthly against the baseline and updates (meaning rescheduling) on a quarterly basis if actual progress deviates substantially from the baseline.

Like a stout harness and fixed lead, this is a one-size-fits-most approach. Alternatives, with all their risks and opportunities are also available. Many elements need to be considered to find the best fit.

The first priority is specifying the system that best suits what the project or dog needs to do and the environment it's in, the second priority is making sure that the Contractor or handler who is entrusted temporarily with the control of the project or dog is just as comfortable operating the other end of that system. For this, we need a good understanding of

- The nature of the dog (big, small, slow, fast, robust, delicate?)
- The environment it is in (predictable, unpredictable?)
- The experience of the handler with that dog, or type of dog
- The experience of the handler with the control system
- The many variations of control system available to use
- The relationship that needs to grow between the handler and the dog to run it effectively and how the control system can help or hinder this.