



Stray dog survey report **2020-21**



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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and objectives

The Dogs Trust Stray Dog Survey (SDS) is administered to all local authorities (LAs) in the UK, and has been undertaken since 1997. The survey collects information about dog related services provided by LAs, and the dogs that they interact with.

The SDS is used to determine the following (not an exhaustive list):

- **The estimated number of stray/unwanted dogs that are handled by UK LAs each year.**
- **How these dogs enter LA care (e.g. handed in by a member of the public, seized as a stray, handed over by the police)**
- **The outcomes for these dogs (e.g. returned to owner, rehomed, passed on to welfare organisations, put to sleep)**
- **Numbers of dogs microchipped**
- **Factors relating to reuniting dogs with their owners (e.g. up to date microchips, collar and ID tag with owner contact details etc.)**

This information is used by Dogs Trust to examine trends over time, and to help determine where to allocate resources for campaigns and interventions.

From 1997-2019 the SDS was managed by an external market research company, on Dogs Trust's behalf. The company distributed the survey to LAs, analysed the data, and produced a report. In 2020 and 2021 all aspects of the SDS were managed internally by Dogs Trust staff.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Data collection

The 2020/2021 SDS was administered to all LAs via the online survey platform SmartSurvey. The survey link was emailed to contacts in each LA on 21 July 2021 and the survey was closed 30 November 2021. If an email bounced back or an automated reply indicated that the mailbox was no longer in use, attempts were made to find a viable contact email by searching the council website and/or by calling the council's general enquires number. Reminder emails were sent on average once per week after the first week of the survey going live. If a LA did not respond to the email reminders, attempts were made to contact them by phone. At least one attempt to contact by phone was made for each LA that had not completed the survey a week before it was due to close. Local authorities were asked to give figures for the time period between 1 April 2020 – 31 March 2021.

1.2.2 Analysis

Summary statistics were calculated for the LAs that responded to the survey. Summary statistics were also estimated for the whole UK. As not all LAs complete the survey, national totals are extrapolated from the figures provided by responding LAs. This was done by calculating the mean for each LA that responded and multiplying it by the number of LAs in the UK. This year's figures are also plotted alongside previous years to show changes over time. The number of "people per dog" (PPD) was calculated by dividing the human population of each LA by the total number of dogs handled. Human population figures were obtained from publicly available data from the Office of National Statistics (ONS). Lower PPD numbers imply more dogs in relation to the human population in each area. This helps account for inevitable differences in total numbers of dogs between heavily and sparsely populated areas.

Previous surveys have reported regional comparisons by dividing the UK into TV regions. These regional areas have become less widely used over time, so this year's report uses the administrative geographical regions used by the ONS¹. England is therefore the only country broken down into regions; Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland figures are reported at the country level (see Table 1 in the next section).

The SDS has previously referred to the total number of dogs handled by LAs as the total number of stray dogs. However, the term "stray" covers a range of meanings. For example, one of the categories for dogs entering LA care is "brought in/ surrendered by general public". This category covers both relinquishment (i.e. an owner handing over their own dog to the LA as they are no longer able or willing to care for them) and a member of the public coming across a stray dog and bringing them in. There is currently no way of differentiating between these two possibilities, but in future surveys we hope to change the wording of the categories so that LAs can make this distinction. In this survey report we refer to the "total dogs handled" rather than strays, to reflect that not all dogs handled by LAs are truly stray. To avoid dogs being counted twice between different surveys, "total dogs handled" only included dogs that had newly arrived at the LA during the time period covered by the survey, not those that were already in the care of the LA before this period.

¹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/administrativegeography>

2. Summary of findings

2.1 Response rate

Overall, 224 LAs responded to the 2021 SDS. This represents 60% of the 374 LAs in the UK when the survey was administered, with a range from 42% to 75% across regions (Table 1). The response rate for the 2018-19 survey was 49%, and the response rate for the 2019-20 survey was 56%; indicating an improvement in response rate over the last two years. Nevertheless, previous years have had higher response rates (surveys from 2015-2018 had response rates between 70-92%). It is likely that the current COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on response rate: Since early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused major disruption across all sectors. Local authorities may be dealing with issues such as staff shortages, meaning they have limited time for tasks outside their core activities. Furthermore, the survey was distributed in July, which may not be an ideal time- we received feedback from LAs that summer can be a busy period, and staff numbers may be lower due to holidays.

However, neither of these explain the lower response rate in 2018-19, when unknown factors appear to have contributed to the decline in response rate.

Table 1: Response rate for LAs in different UK regions (2020-2021)

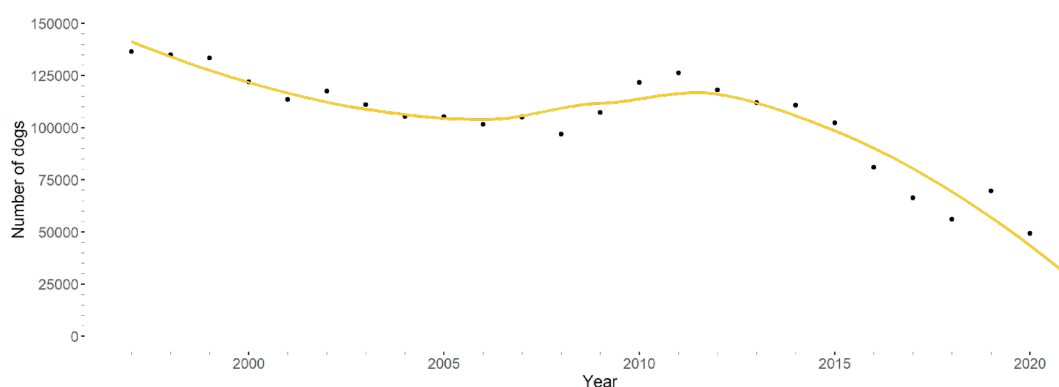
Region	Number of LAs that responded to SDS	Total LAs in region	Response rate
North East England	9	12	75%
Northern Ireland	8	11	73%
Yorkshire and the Humber	14	21	67%
West Midlands	20	30	67%
East Midlands	23	35	66%
North West England	25	39	64%
South East England	39	64	61%
England (all Regions)	185	309	60%
Scotland	19	32	59%
South West England	17	30	57%
Wales	12	22	55%
East England	24	45	53%
London	14	33	42%

2.2 The number of dogs handled

The 224 LAs that responded to the survey reported handling a total of 16,723 dogs in the period between 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021. On average each LA handled around 74 dogs. These figures are substantially lower than those recorded last year; in the period between 1 April 2019 - 31 March 2020, a total of 28,565 dogs were reportedly handled by the 214 LAs that completed the 2019-20 survey (with an average of 139 dogs per LA). This represents a decrease of over 12,000 dogs between the 2019-20 and 2020-21 stray dog surveys, despite more LAs completing the 2020-21 survey.

Based on reported figures from LAs, it was estimated that approximately 27,676 dogs were handled by LAs across the UK between 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021 (compared to an estimated 49,292 dogs the previous year; a drop of 21,616; 44%). This figure is the lowest estimated number since the survey began in 1997. Figure 1 demonstrates the decline in estimated numbers of dogs handled by LAs since the SDS was first administered.

Figure 1 Estimated total number of dogs handled by UK local authorities 1997 to 2021

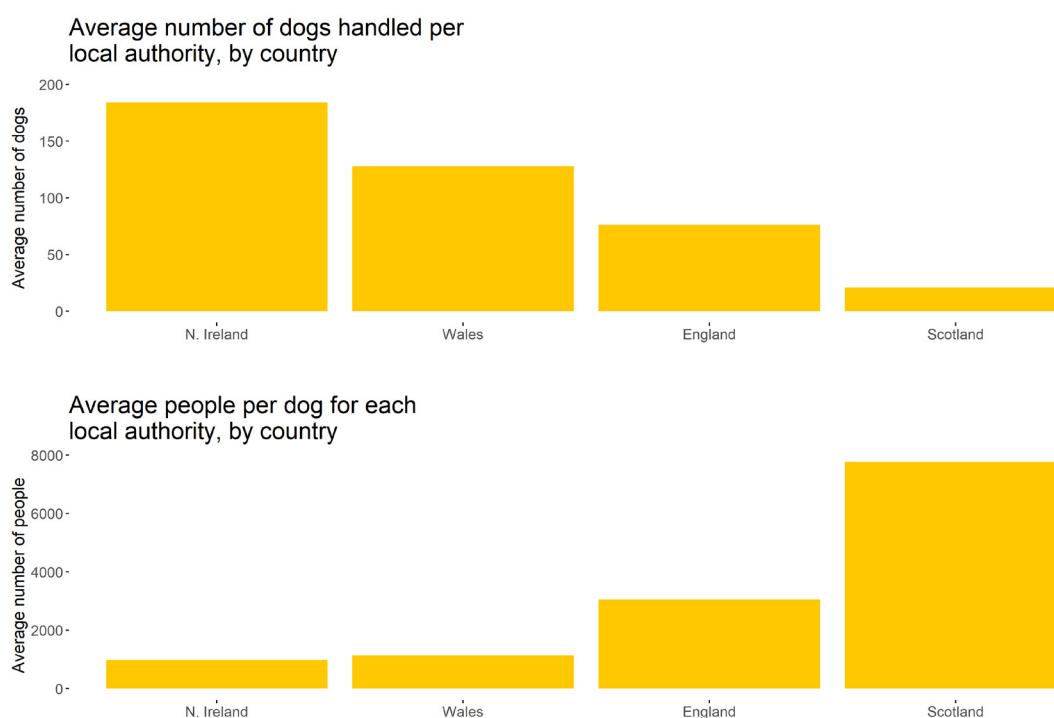


There were regional differences in the numbers of dogs handled (Table 2). As mentioned previously, England is divided by regions, but is also shown collectively in Table 2. Figure 2 shows the differences in average number of dogs handled per LA between the 4 UK countries (top), and the differences in PPD (bottom).

Table 2: Regional breakdown of average total dogs handled and people per dog (PPD) per LA (in ascending order of average new dogs handled) (2020-2021)

Region	Number of LAs in region (that completed survey)	Average PPD per LA	Average total new dogs handled per LA
Northern Ireland	8	985	184
Wales	12	1139	128
East Midlands	23	1189	122
North East England	9	1241	140
North West England	25	2417	87
England (all Regions)	185	2560	72
East England	24	2563	54
West Midlands	20	2964	70
Yorkshire and the Humber	14	3087	77
South East England	39	3173	50
South West England	17	3759	49
London	14	7132	38
Scotland	19	7768	21

Figure 2



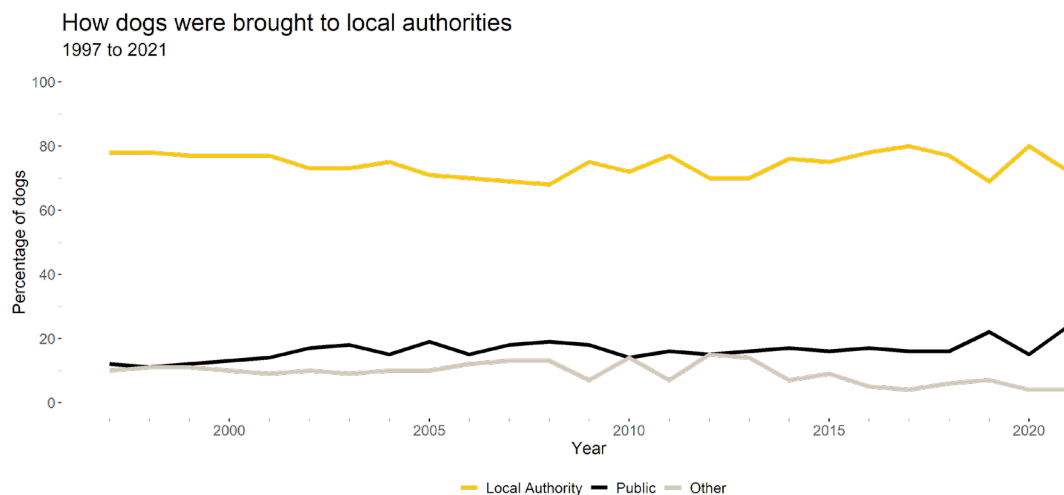
2.3 How do dogs arrive at local authorities?

Dogs come into the care of LAs via different routes (Table 3). Consistent with previous years, the majority of dogs arrive at LAs after being seized as strays by LA staff (Figure 3).

Table 3: How dogs arrived at LAs (2020-2021)

Arrival type	Number	Percent
Seized as stray	12001	72%
Brought in by public	4058	24%
Brought in by police	261	2%
Other	403	2%
Total dogs handled	16723	100%

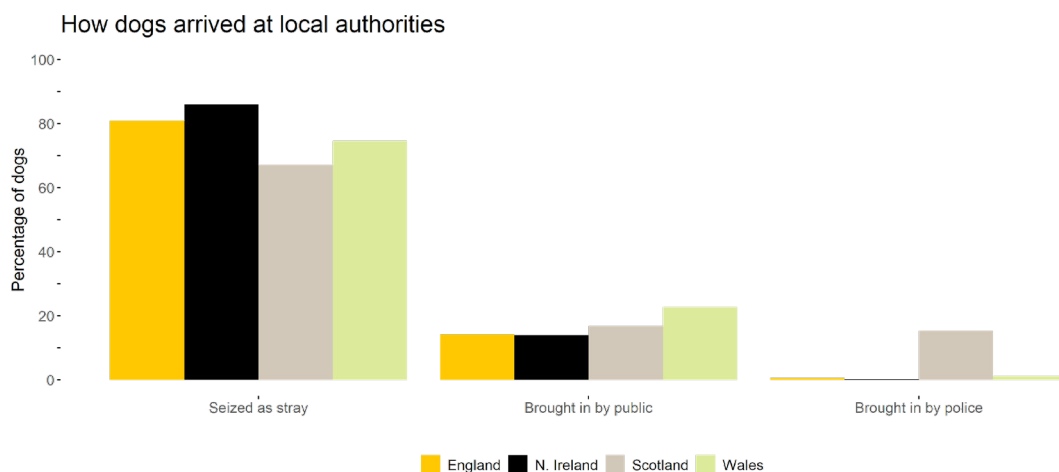
Figure 3



In the current survey, only 10 councils reported any dogs being seized in response to the Dangerous Dogs Act/Order, with 16 dogs in total seized in this way.

There was some regional variation in arrival routes of dogs handled by LAs (see Figure 4). For example, LAs in Scotland reported a higher proportion of dogs being brought in by the police compared to other countries.

Figure 4



2.4 What happens to the dogs handled by local authorities?

In total, approximately 67% of dogs taken in by LAs were reunited with their owners (either reclaimed during the kennelling period or returned without kennelling) (Table 4). This percentage is greater than that recorded in last year's survey (59%). Collectively, LAs reported 224 dogs being put to sleep (PTS) during the study period (approximately 1% of total dogs handled). It is estimated that this translates to around 374 dogs entering the care of LAs being PTS across the UK during the study period, and shows marked reduction over the years that the Stray Dog Survey has been conducted, down from 14% in 2000 and 6% in 2010. Furthermore, aside from 6 dogs who were recorded as being PTS due to the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991), all other recorded reasons for PTS were related to health or behaviour of the dog (86 and 82 dogs, respectively). No dogs were recorded as being PTS due to being unclaimed.

The estimated numbers for the UK provided in Table 4 should be treated with some caution due to the incomplete nature of the data upon which these estimates are based (note: these figures do not add up to the total number of dogs handled by LAs because not all LAs recorded outcomes – we have used the numbers of dogs for which there were outcomes recorded to calculate percentages). Figure 5 shows the proportions of dogs brought in that met the four most common outcomes across time. Tables 5.a-5.e shows each outcome broken down by country.

Table 4: Outcomes for dogs handled by LAs (2020-2021)

Outcome	Total number recorded in this survey	Percentage of dogs recorded in this survey	Mean number per LA	Estimated UK numbers
Dogs reunited with their owners (includes 'a' and 'b' below)	11052	67%	52	19448
a) Dogs reclaimed during kennelling period	7311	44%	35	13090
b) Dogs returned without kennelling	3741	23%	21	7854
Passed to welfare organisation	4007	24%	20	7480
Rehomed by LA	1073	6%	6	2244
PTS	224	1%	1	374
Other	164	1%	1	374
Total	16520	99%		

Figure 5

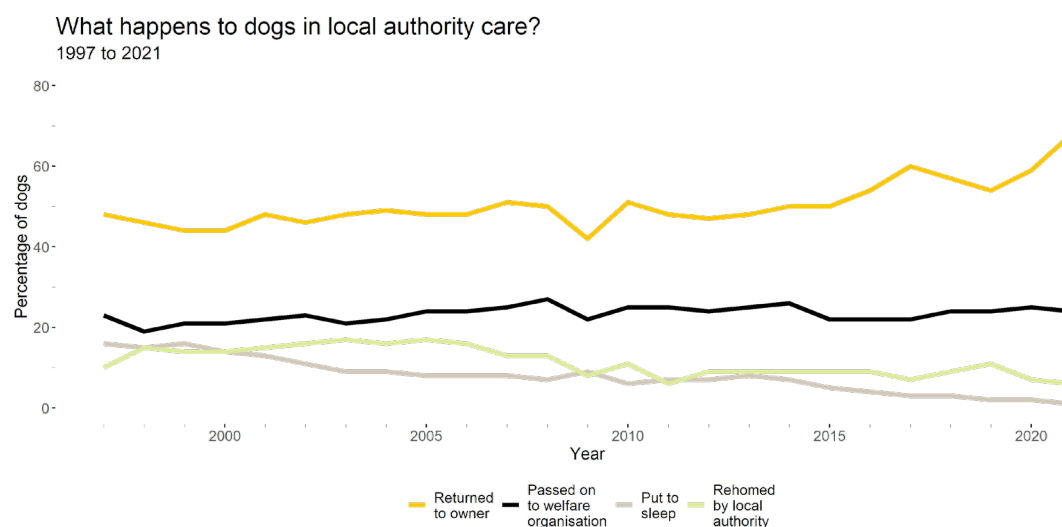


Table 5: Outcomes for dogs handled by LAs broken down by country (2020–2021)**5. a) Reclaimed during kennelling period**

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	6334	48%
Northern Ireland	378	29%
Scotland	140	36%
Wales	459	31%
Whole UK	7311	44%

5. b) Returned without kennelling

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	3021	23%
Northern Ireland	337	26%
Scotland	162	41%
Wales	221	15%
Whole UK	3741	23%

5. c) Passed on to welfare organisation

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	2887	22%
Northern Ireland	388	29%
Scotland	80	20%
Wales	652	44%
Whole UK	4007	24%

5. d) Rehomed by LA

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	752	6%
Northern Ireland	175	13%
Scotland	2	<1%
Wales	144	10%
Whole UK	1073	6%

5. e) Put to sleep (PTS)

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	169	1%
Northern Ireland	41	3%
Scotland	6	2%
Wales	8	<1%
Whole UK	224	1%

2.5 Microchipping

Among the LAs that provided information about the microchip status of the dogs they handled, only about half of dogs (6090, 52%) were already microchipped before being handled by the LA. However, many LAs (65, 29%) did not give any figure for number of dogs microchipped. The majority of the LAs responding to this survey did not offer a microchipping service (Table 6), and this proportion has increased compared to the 2019-20 survey (2019-20= 47%, 2020-21= 61%). Furthermore, in the 2019-20 survey, 32% of LAs reported that their microchipping service was free for the owner (29% used microchips provided by Dogs Trust), whereas this year only 14% reported that the service was free for the owner.

Table 6: Responses to “Do you offer a microchipping service?” (2020-2021)

Response	Count	Percentage
No	137	61%
Yes, owner pays the full amount	26	12%
Yes, partially funded (owner pays reduced fee)	26	12%
Yes, fully funded (free to the owner)	31	14%
No response	4	2%
Total	224	100%

2.6 How were dogs reunited with their owners?

Local authorities were asked to report the number of dogs reunited with their owners as a result of the factors listed in Table 7. This information was collected to determine whether some responsible dog ownership messages, such as the importance of microchipping and ID tags on collars, may contribute to dogs being reunited with their owners. As many LAs did not have this information, the percentages are calculated from the number of dogs reported for each factor as a proportion of the total number of dogs for which factors were reported (rather than the total number of dogs handled).

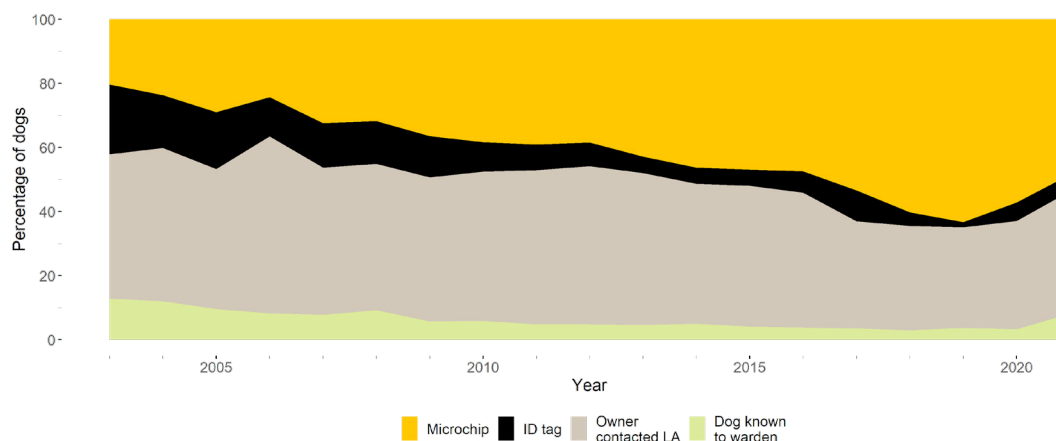
Table 7: Factors influencing dogs being reunited with their owners. (2020-2021)

Factor	Total number of dogs	Percentage of reunions influenced by this factor
Dog had up to date microchip	3081	42%
Owner contacted the LA	2429	33%
Dog had up to date microchip and/or ID tag (unsure which was primary factor)	796	11%
Dog known to dog warden	515	7%
Dog wearing an ID tag	335	5%
Other	162	2%

Local authorities reported a total of 1548 dogs who could not be reunited with their owners due to incorrect microchip details. The true figure is likely to be higher, as only 114 LAs were able to provide this information. Of those LAs who did provide a figure, the average was 13.6 dogs per LA, so it could be estimated that around 5079 dogs across the UK were unable to be reunited with their owners due to incorrect microchip details.

Figure 6 shows how the methods of dogs being reunited with their owners has changed between 2003 to 2021 (this question was not asked prior to 2003).

Figure 6 How were dogs reunited with their owners? 2003 to 2021



2.7 Current set up of dog warden services and data management

This year, 127 LAs (57%) reported that their dog warden was employed directly by them, compared to 66 LAs (29%) who contracted the service out. Furthermore, 4% said they had used a combination of directly employed and contracted services, while 9% said there was no dedicated dog warden service in their LA. This year 58% of LAs reported that dogs were handled by private boarding kennels, 13% of LAs used a council-owned pound and 33% used welfare charity kennels to house their dogs. Compared to 2019-20, this year's figures demonstrate a slight decrease in the proportion of directly employed dog wardens and the proportion of LAs using private boarding kennels (-7% and -12%, respectively).

The year, for the first time, LAs were asked about how they record their dog related data. Responses indicated that 38% of LAs used paper records (the majority of these used paper in conjunction with other methods, only 13 LAs (6%) exclusively used paper records), 60% used electronic documents (e.g. MS Excel), and 39% a commercial online database platform. The most common packages used were Uniform (IDOX; www.idoxgroup.com/uniform/) and CIVICA (www.civica.com).

2.8 Predominant breed types

Local authorities were asked to report the top 3 breeds that are seized/brought in. Table 8 shows the number of LAs that listed each breed as one of their top three (e.g. 142 (63.4%) of the LAs listed Staffordshire Bull Terriers (SBT) or their crosses among their top 3 breeds). Many LAs listed "types" rather than specific breeds, for example; "bull breed types" or "terriers". In the 2019-2020 survey, SBTs were also the most commonly reported breed by a substantial margin (75%), followed by cross breeds, Jack Russell terriers and lurchers (47%, 43%, and 42%, respectively).

Table 8: Predominant breed types seen by local authorities (2020-2021)

Breed	Number	Percent
Staffordshire Bull Terrier (or SBT cross)	142	63%
Jack Russell Terrier	77	34%
Lurcher	75	34%
Crossbreed (unspecified)	63	28%
Terrier (unspecified)	61	27%
Labrador	25	11%
Collie (unspecified)	21	9%
German Shepherd Dog	14	6%
"Bull breed" (unspecified)	10	5%
Chihuahua	9	4%
Spaniel	9	4%
Yorkshire Terrier	8	4%
Shih Tzu	8	4%
Border Collie	7	3%
Husky	5	2%
Bulldog	4	2%
Greyhound	4	2%
French Bulldog	3	1%

3. Conclusions

The number of dogs handled by LAs in the UK, as estimated by the annual Stray Dog Survey, has showed an overall decline since the survey began in 1997. The rate of decline was steady up until the period between 2008-2010, when there was a brief period of increasing numbers. We do not know what caused this increase, but the timing coincides with the global financial crisis of 2008, which caused severe economic downturn in the UK. It could be hypothesised that people may have been unable to care for their pets due to financial difficulties, which may have led to relinquishment or abandonment. The steep decline in numbers between 2015-2018 coincides with the introduction in 2016 of legislation making microchipping mandatory for dog owners in the UK. An increase in microchipping during this period may have made it easier for dogs to be reunited with their owners without being handed over to LAs. These UK-wide figures are estimates based on the numbers of LAs who responded to the survey. As discussed earlier in this report, relatively low response rates in recent years may mean that the UK-wide estimates are less accurate, since they are based on a smaller sample which may not be representative of the UK at large.

The 2020-21 survey recorded the lowest number of dogs handled by LAs since the Stray Dog Survey began, with a sharp drop in numbers compared to figures recorded in the 2019-20 survey. The period of time covered in the 2020-21 survey was 1 April 2020- 31 March 2021; the start of this period was marked by the first restrictions imposed by the government in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with further restrictions and local lockdowns following throughout 2020-2021. It is unclear whether the fall in dog numbers reflects a decrease in the actual numbers of dogs straying or being abandoned, or whether the pandemic has affected LA services to the extent that they have reduced capacity for collecting and housing dogs. The 2019-20 survey found that 62% of LAs reported a decrease in the numbers of dogs handed over or reported as strays. On the other hand, 42% said that the pandemic had made providing dog related services difficult, with many reporting staff shortages due to sickness or furlough, and reduced ability to provide face-to-face services. Welfare charities, including Dogs Trust, saw a rise in numbers of dogs being acquired at the start of the pandemic, and a rise in relinquishments once the UK government lifted most restrictions in summer 2021 (so called "Freedom Day")². It is therefore possible that there could be a rise in the reported number of dogs handled in the next Stray Dog Survey (covering April 2021 - March 2022).

One service that seems to have decreased between the 2019-20 and the 2020-21 survey is microchipping; fewer LAs reported providing any kind of microchip service, and fewer reported providing a fully funded service. This could be an effect of the pressures that the pandemic put on LAs, as detailed above. Another contributing factor may have been that Dogs Trust discontinued its microchip programme at the end of 2020, which previously provided LAs with free microchips.

Regional comparisons between numbers of dogs handled indicated that LAs in Northern Ireland tended to handle more dogs on average, and have a lower number of "people per dog", compared to LAs elsewhere in the UK. These findings are consistent with operational experience, and suggest the need for interventions to address the specific causes for higher numbers of dogs entering LA care within Northern Ireland.

The methods by which dogs come into the care of LAs has remained consistent over the years, with the majority being seized directly by LAs as strays. The only substantial regional difference reported was a greater proportion of dogs coming to LAs via the police, and slightly fewer dogs are seized directly by LAs, in Scotland compared to other regions. This may reflect differences in the ways that LAs work with the police, and perhaps other institutions, between different countries.

In recent years there has been a gradual increase in the proportions of dogs reunited with their owners by LAs. There has also been a gradual decrease in the numbers of dogs put to sleep (PTS) by LAs. Although these trends are very good news, it is still the case that around 33% of dogs handled by LAs are not returned to their owners; either because they are unwanted or because the owners are not able to be found. Furthermore, we estimated that although just over 1% of dogs in our sample were PTS, this could reflect a UK wide total of over 400 dogs being PTS by LAs in a year. Based on these facts it is clear that activities to encourage microchipping, updating microchip data, and the use of collar and ID tags for all dogs are still essential.

² <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/latest/2021/new-advert-reveals-the-heartbreak-of-owners-having-to-give-up-their-dogs-due-to-the-pandemic> (accessed 21/02/2022); Packer et al 2021 <https://doi.org/10.3390/ani11092500>

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