



Stray dog survey report **2021-22**



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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 strategic initiatives 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. Since 2020 all aspects of the SDS have been managed internally by Dogs Trust staff.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Data collection

The 2021/2022 SDS was administered to all LAs via the online survey platform Qualtrics. The survey link was emailed to contacts in each LA on 24 June 2022 and the survey was closed 31 October 2022. 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 approximately 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 who 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 2021 – 31 March 2022.

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. In previous years, this was done by simply calculating the average number of dogs handled per LA (among those that responded) and multiplying it by the total number of LAs in the UK (from here called the *simple average estimate*). However, this year we employed an additional method of estimating this total, which involved multilevel analysis. The benefit of this type of analysis, compared to the simple estimate from the UK average, is that it uses all available data from each LA when predicting the number of stray dogs for each LA for each year, rather than assigning all LA's the same figure. Thus, LAs can be "weighted" to some extent, based on whether they typically report higher or lower numbers of dogs (called the weighted estimate). For consistency with previous reports, estimates from both methods (the simple average and the weighted estimate) are presented.

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 indicate more dogs in relation to the human population in each area. This adjusts for inevitable differences in total numbers of dogs between heavily and sparsely populated areas.

Previous surveys have reported regional differences by dividing the UK into TV regions. These regional areas have become less widely used over time, so since bringing the SDS in-house we have used 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 free-roaming unaccompanied dog and bringing them in. 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 since the start of the time period covered by the survey, not those that were already in the care of the LA before this period. In future survey we hope to be able to make a clearer distinction between relinquishment and members of the public bringing in stray dogs that they have found.

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

2. Summary of findings

2.1 Response Rate

Overall, 218 LAs responded to the 2021-22 SDS. This represents 59% of the 374 LAs in the UK when the survey was administered, with a range from 36% to 91% across regions (Table 1). The response rate for the 2018-19, 2019-20, and 2020-21 surveys were 49%, 56% and 60%, respectively. Earlier years have had higher response rates (surveys from 2015-2018 had response rates between 70-92%). It is likely that the 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 have been dealing with issues such as staff shortages, meaning they have limited time for tasks outside their core activities. The UK Cost of Living Crisis may also have had an impact on LA activities and priorities.

However, neither of these explanations account for the lower response rate in 2018-19, when unknown factors appear to have contributed to the decline in response rate. Furthermore, these factors do not explain regional variation in response rate.

Table 1: Response rate for LAs in different UK regions - descending order. (2021-2022)

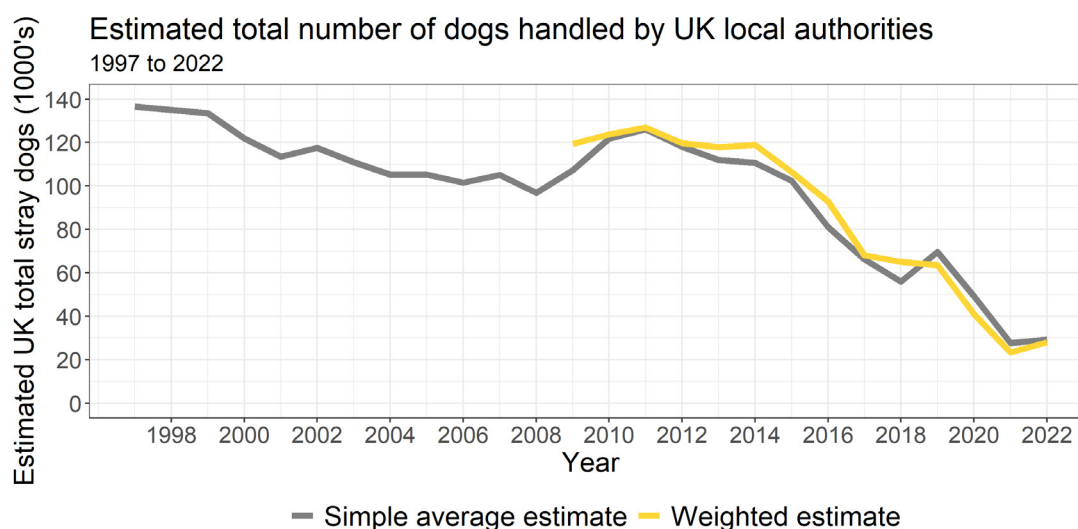
Region	Number of LAs that responded to SDS	Total LAs in region	Response rate
Northern Ireland	10	11	91%
Scotland	26	32	81%
South West England	22	30	73%
South East England	42	64	66%
East England	29	45	64%
West Midlands	19	30	63%
England (All Regions)	172	309	56%
Yorkshire And The Humber	11	21	52%
North East England	6	12	50%
East Midlands	16	35	46%
Wales	10	22	45%
London	13	33	39%
North West England	14	39	36%

2.2 Number of dogs handled

The 218 LAs that responded to the survey reported handling a total of 17,098 dogs in the period between 1 April 2021 - 31 March 2022. On average each LA handled around 78 dogs. These figures are slightly higher than those recorded last year; in the period between 1 April 2020 - 31 March 2021, a total of 16,723 dogs were reportedly handled by the 224 LA's that completed the 2020-21 survey (with an average of 74 dogs per LA). However, these figures are substantially lower than those recorded in the period between 1 April 2019 - 31 March 2020: a total of 28,565 dogs were reportedly handled by the 214 LA's that completed the 2019-20 survey (with an average of 139 dogs per LA).

Based on reported figures from LAs, multi-level analysis provided a weighted estimate of 28,015 dogs handled by LAs across the UK between 1 April 2021 - 31 March 2022. The simple average estimate was 29,199 dogs. Figure 1 demonstrates the decline in estimated numbers of dogs handled by LAs since the SDS was first administered in 1997. The grey line represents the estimates made using the method used in previous reports (i.e., the simple average estimate) and the yellow line represents the weighted estimate (please refer to page 3 for more detailed description). Multi-level analysis could not be conducted for surveys prior to 2009, because we do not have the data for individual LAs before this date (only the nationwide totals).

Figure 1 Estimated total number of dogs handled by UK local authorities 1997 to 2022

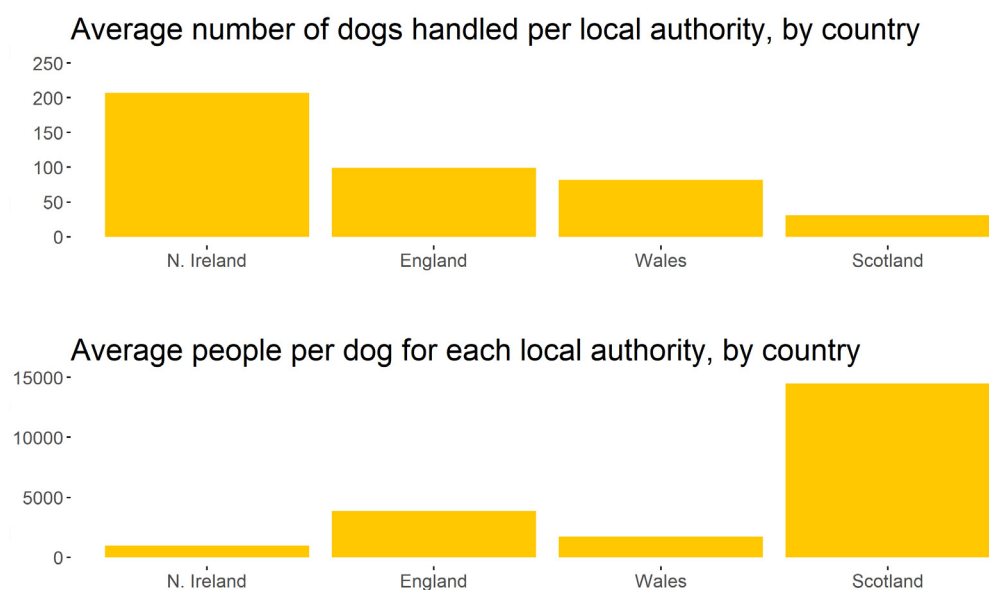


There were regional differences in the numbers of dogs handled (Table 2). As mentioned previously, England is divided by regions, but is also shown collectively in Table 2. Figure 2 shows the differences in average number of dogs handled per LA between the 4 UK countries (top), and the differences in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

Table 2: Regional breakdown of average total dogs handled and people per dog (PPD) per LA - in ascending order of PPD. (2021-2022)

Region	Number of LAs in region (that completed survey)	Average PPD per LA	Average total new dogs handled per LA
Northern Ireland	10	1015	208
North East England	6	1256	280
Wales	10	1738	82
East Midlands	16	3003	66
Yorkshire And The Humber	11	3013	117
North West England	14	3699	95
East England	29	3959	62
England (All Regions)	172	4104	78
South West England	22	4296	82
South East England	42	4468	52
West Midlands	19	4558	90
London	13	6539	47
Scotland	26	14483	31

Figure 2



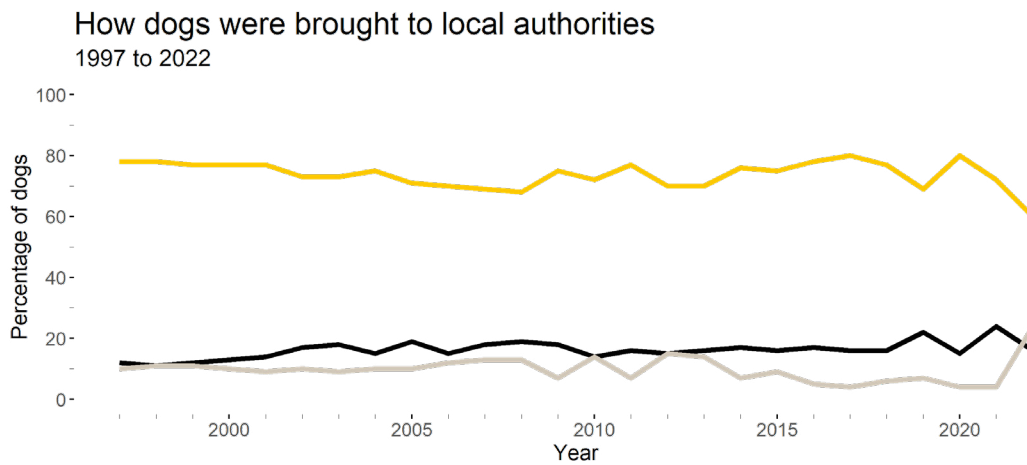
2.3 How do dogs arrive at local authorities?

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 (2021-2022)

Arrival type	Number	Percent
Seized as stray	10314	60%
Brought in by public	2712	16%
Brought in by police	175	1%
Other	607	4%
Unkown	3290	19%
Total dogs handled	17098	100%

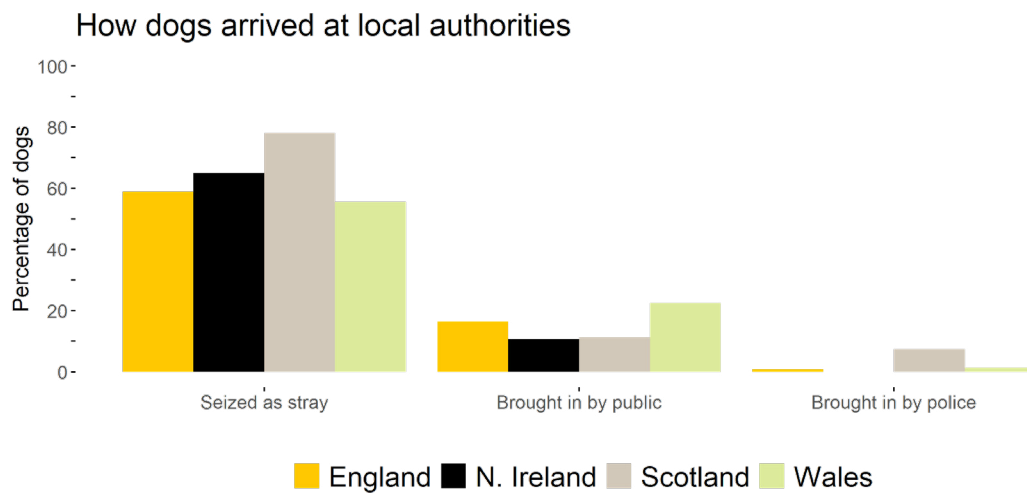
Figure 3



Only 5 councils reported any dogs being seized in response to the Dangerous Dogs Act/Order, with 8 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 54% of dogs taken in by LAs were reunited with their owners during 2021-22 (either reclaimed during the kennelling period or returned without kennelling) (Table 4). This percentage is lower than that recorded in last year's survey (67%). Collectively, LAs reported 240 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 4 dogs who were recorded as being PTS due to the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991), all other recorded reasons for PTS were related to physical health or behaviour of the dog (88 and 61 dogs, respectively). No dogs were recorded as being PTS due to being unclaimed.

The figures in Table 4 include outcomes for all dogs handled during the study period– this includes dogs who were in the care of LAs during the study period, but arrived prior to the study period commencing (pre 1 April 2021). Therefore, the total number is slightly greater than the total taken in during the period. Figure 5 shows the proportions of dogs brought in that met the four most common outcomes across time. Tables 5.a-5.d shows each outcome broken down by country.

Table 4: Outcomes for dogs handled by LAs (2021-2022)

Outcome	Total number recorded in this survey	Percentage of dogs which had this outcome
Dogs reunited with their owners (includes 'a', 'b' and 'c' below)	9235	54%
a Dogs reclaimed during kennelling period	5235	57% *
b Dogs returned without kennelling	2619	28% *
c Unknown	1381	15% *
Passed to welfare organisation	3660	21%
Rehomed by LA	1397	8%
PTS	240	1%
Still with LA after 31st March 2022	337	2%
Other	386	2%
Unknown	1988	12%
TOTAL	17243	

* of dogs reunited

Figure 5

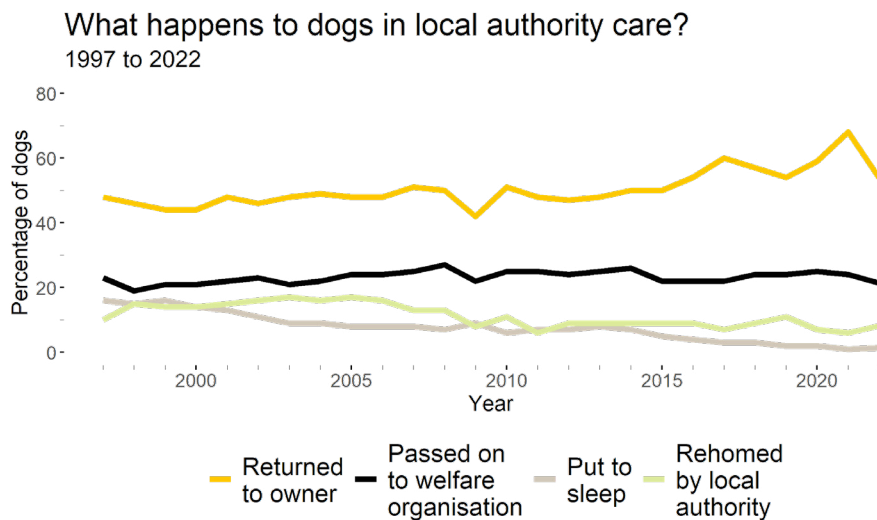


Table 5: Outcomes for dogs handled by LAs broken down by country (2021-2022)

5. a) Reclaimed during kennelling period

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	7387	55%
Northern Ireland	1001	48%
Scotland	513	63%
Wales	334	40%
Whole UK	9235	54%

5. b) Passed on to Welfare organisation

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	2799	21%
Northern Ireland	552	27%
Scotland	92	11%
Wales	217	26%
Whole UK	3660	21%

5. c) Rehomed by LA

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	1055	8%
Northern Ireland	260	13%
Scotland	45	5%
Wales	37	4%
Whole UK	1397	8%

5. d) Put to Sleep (PTS)

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	196	1%
Northern Ireland	25	1%
Scotland	14	2%
Wales	5	1%
Whole UK	240	1%

2.5 Microchipping

Among the LAs that provided information about the microchip status of the dogs they handled, only about half of dogs (6507, 38%) were already microchipped before being handled by the LA. However, many LAs (70, 32%) did not give any figure for number of dogs microchipped. The majority (56%) of the LAs responding to this survey did not offer a microchipping service (Table 6). For comparison; 61% of LAs responding to the 2020-2021 survey, and 47% of LAs responding to the 2019-2020 survey, did not offer this service. Furthermore, in the 2019-2020 survey, 32% of LAs reported that their microchipping service was free for the owner (29% used microchips provided by Dogs Trust), whereas in the 2020-2021 survey and the 2021-2022 survey only 14% and 12% reported that the service was free for the owner, respectively. The reasons for this decrease were not assessed, but may, at least in part, be a result of the COVID pandemic.

Table 6: Responses to “Do you offer a microchipping service?” (2021-2022)

Response	Count	Percentage
No	121	56%
Yes, fully funded (free to the owner)	27	12%
Yes, owner pays the full amount	32	15%
Yes, partially funded (owner pays reduced fee)	22	10%
No Response	16	7%
Total	218	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 can be seen in the table, the majority of LAs did not have this information.

Table 7: Factors influencing dogs being reunited with their owners. (2021-2022)

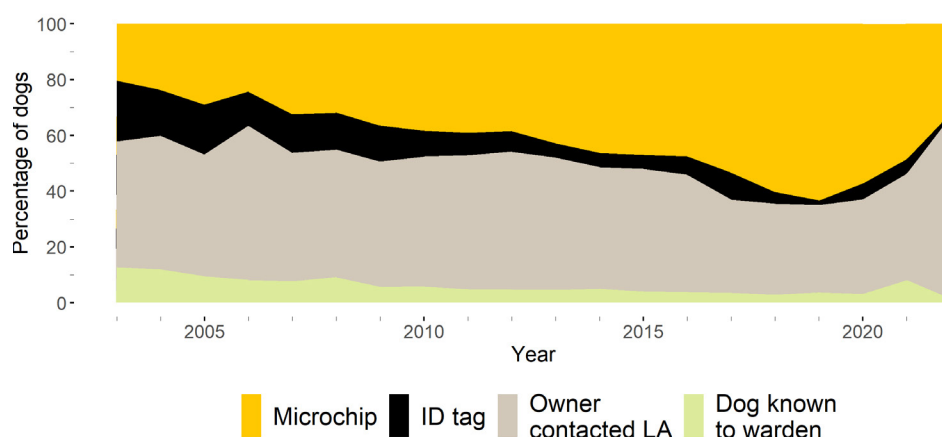
Factor	Total number of dogs	Average number of dogs per LA
Unknown	7246	78%
Owner contacted the LA	1139	12%
Dog had up to date microchip	559	6%
Dog had up to date microchip and/or ID tag (unsure which was primary factor)	188	2%
Dog known to dog warden	25	< 1%
Dog wearing an ID tag	20	< 1%
Other	58	1%

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). Since 2020 there appears to be a decline in the proportion of dogs being reunited by the LAs finding the owner through microchip or ID information. Correspondingly, there has been an increase in the proportion of dogs being reunited through the owner contacting the LA themselves.

Local authorities reported a total of 640 dogs who could not be reunited with their owners due to incorrect microchip details. The true figure is likely to be higher, as only 59 LAs were able to provide this information. Of those LAs who did provide a figure, the average was 11.6 dogs per LA, so it could be estimated that around 4352 dogs across the UK were unable to be reunited with their owners due to incorrect microchip details.

Figure 6

How were dogs reunited with their owners? 2003 to 2022



2.7 Current set up of dog warden services

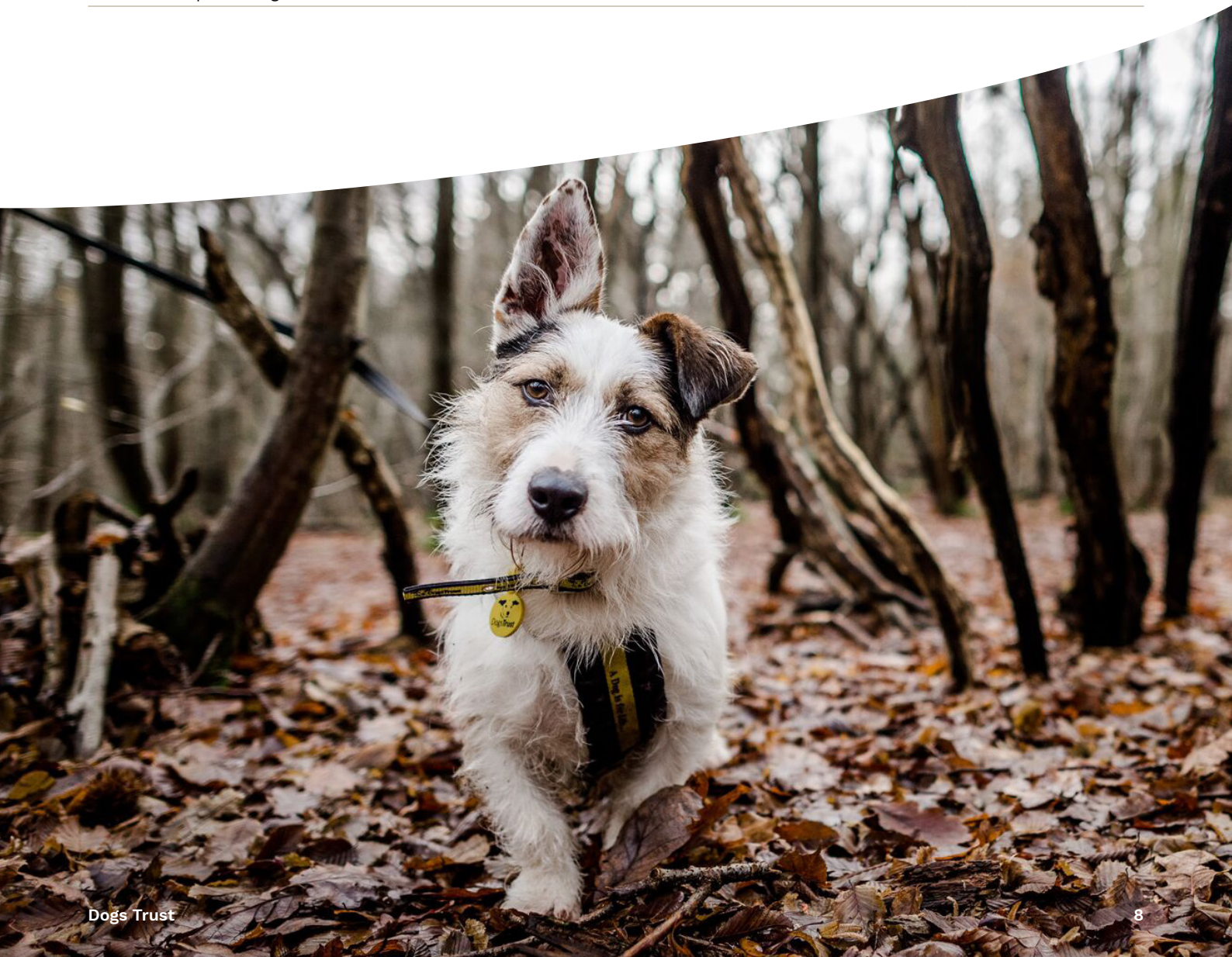
This year, 115 LAs (53%) reported that their dog warden was employed directly by them, compared to 54 LAs (25%) who contracted the service out. These proportions are similar to last year (57% directly employed and 29% contracted out). Furthermore, 11% said they had used a combination of directly employed and contracted services, while 3% said there was no dedicated dog warden service in their LA. This year 48% of LAs reported that dogs were handled by private boarding kennels, 7% LAs used a council-owned pound and 25% used welfare charity kennels to house their dogs. The remainder used a combination of these.

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. 116 (53%) 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 2020-2021 survey, SBTs were also the most commonly reported breed (63%), followed by Jack Russell terriers, lurchers, and cross breeds (34%, 34%, and 28%, respectively).

Table 8: Predominant breed types seen by local authorities - top ten most frequent. (2021-2022)

Breed	Number	Percent
Staffordshire bull terrier (or SBT cross)	116	53%
Lurcher	75	34%
Jack Russell Terrier	70	32%
Crossbreed (unspecified)	65	30%
Terrier (unspecified)	48	22%
Spaniel	23	11%
Labrador	21	10%
Collie (unspecified)	17	8%
“Bull breed” (unspecified)	13	6%
German Shepherd Dog	13	6%



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 increased 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 as a whole. This year we have attempted to reduce this effect by using multilevel analysis to predict the likely figures that would have been reported by LA who did not respond, based on figures they reported in other years. However, although this is likely to give a more accurate estimate than just using the nationwide average, we cannot rule out the possibility that some non-responding LAs might have seen unusually large or small numbers of dogs during missing years, which could not be predicted by figures obtained in other years.

The 2020-21 survey recorded the lowest number of dogs handled by LAs since the SDS began, with a sharp drop in numbers compared to figures recorded in the 2019-20 survey. The period covered in the 2020-21 survey was 1st April 2020- 31st 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 2020-21 survey found that, when questioned specifically about their experiences during the pandemic, 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. This is reflected by the figures seen in the current survey, covering the period between April 2021 - March 2022, which demonstrated a slight increase in estimated numbers compared to last year. This period encompasses the beginning of what has come to be called the 'Cost of Living Crisis', with increases in many household expenses and concomitant stresses on household income. These changes could be associated with the cessation of the decrease, and slight increase, in the number of dogs handled by LAs, similar to the effect seen after the onset of the financial crisis in 2008. Subsequent years' data will be needed to better assess this change.

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 reasonably consistent over the years, with the majority being seized directly by LAs as strays. However, there has been a slight decrease in the proportions of dogs being seized by LAs in the last 2 years. This year the decrease may be attributable, at least in part, to a change in the structure of the questions, where we provided an "unknown" option for respondents to choose. The only substantial regional difference reported was a greater proportion of dogs coming to LAs via the police 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. However, this year saw a sharp drop in proportions reunited compared to last year. It is not clear what has caused this sudden decrease; anecdotally councils have been reporting tight budgets and cuts to services, so a potential explanation is that councils have reduced capacity to reunite dogs with their owners. This may also explain the apparent decrease in dogs being reunited with their owners by LAs using microchip/ID information, and the corresponding increase in proportion of owners contacting LAs to be reunited with their dogs. Councils have also anecdotally reported that there is an increase in the use of social media to reunite dogs, therefore it is possible that some lost dogs may bypass Local Authorities altogether. Another possibility is that the cost-of-living crisis has meant that some owners are struggling to keep up with the costs of dog ownership and have had to make the difficult decision to relinquish them.

There has also been a gradual decrease in the numbers of dogs put to sleep (PTS) by LAs since the SDS began. Although this trend is very good news, we estimated that although just over 1% of dogs in our sample were PTS, this could reflect a UK wide total of over 300 dogs being PTS by LAs in a year. Just over half of the dogs reported by LAs had been reunited with their owners; it is clear that activities to encourage microchipping, updating microchip data, and the use of collar and ID tags for all dogs remain 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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