



Research Team Year in review 2023

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Welcome from our Head of Research

Welcome. I am delighted to introduce the very first Dogs Trust Research Team Year in Review! Since our Research Team started back in 2017, our aim has always been clear: to lead the way in using the best evidence to help dogs live happier lives, and work with Dogs Trust teams across the UK to make sure that everything we do has the greatest impact for dogs and their people.

Our work helps inform and drive our strategy by understanding how we can practically improve the lives of dogs and making a real difference. Sharing what we learn is an important part of what we do, so can maximise the impact for dogs. In this report, we're sharing some highlights from the past year. From what people told us in the National Dog Survey to new insights about how different dogs live longer, there's lots to discover.

The response to the National Dog Survey was amazing, with nearly a quarter of a million people joining in! Their answers have helped us understand more about the needs of dogs and their owners, and the 2024 National Dog Survey is launching soon. Our research on how long dogs live and which breeds live longest has sparked important discussions nationally and internationally!

Looking ahead, we've got more exciting projects on the way. We're working on an update of how many pet dogs there are in the UK following the COVID pandemic. Plus, our ongoing longitudinal studies, like Generation Pup and the Post Adoption Welfare Study, continue to reveal insights into the Nation's dogs. And with new projects and collaborations underway, we're continuing to gather insights to improve the lives of dogs.

Of course, none of this would be possible without everyone who helps with our research. Whether you've given your time, shared your ideas, or just been interested, you're a big part of what we do. Thank you!

So, let's jump into the world of dog research together. This report will introduce you to lots of fascinating information about the world of dogs and how Dogs Trust is working to make their lives better.



Rob Christley

Head of Research (Interim)



2023: Research outputs in numbers



9

peer-reviewed papers published in scientific journals



19

presentations and posters to national and international audiences



45

internal reports produced to inform Dogs Trust's work



Summary of the Research Team's long-term projects



Generation Pup is a groundbreaking study of dog health, behaviour and welfare. Starting in 2016, we've recruited **8,700 puppies** toward our target of 10,000 puppies.



The National Dog Survey (NDS) takes place once a year. The 2023 survey was completed by **244,478 people**. The findings allow us to learn about the needs of the nation's dogs and how to best support them from as many dog owners as possible.



The annual Stray Dog Survey has monitored dog-related services offered by UK local authorities every year since 1997. In 2023, we estimated that UK local authorities handled a total of **35,078 dogs**, a worrying increase of over **7,000** compared to the previous year.



The Post Adoption Support (PAS) project collects data from PAS phone calls with adopters, helping inform our work to help support adopters of our dogs.



The Post Adoption Welfare Study (PAWS) tracks the wellbeing of Dogs Trust adopted dogs throughout their lives. Owners complete surveys to help us understand how Dogs Trust can best support them to prevent and minimise health and behaviour problems in their adopted dogs.

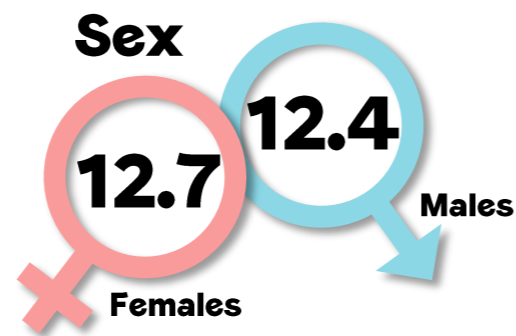
Our featured research

- How long do dogs live?

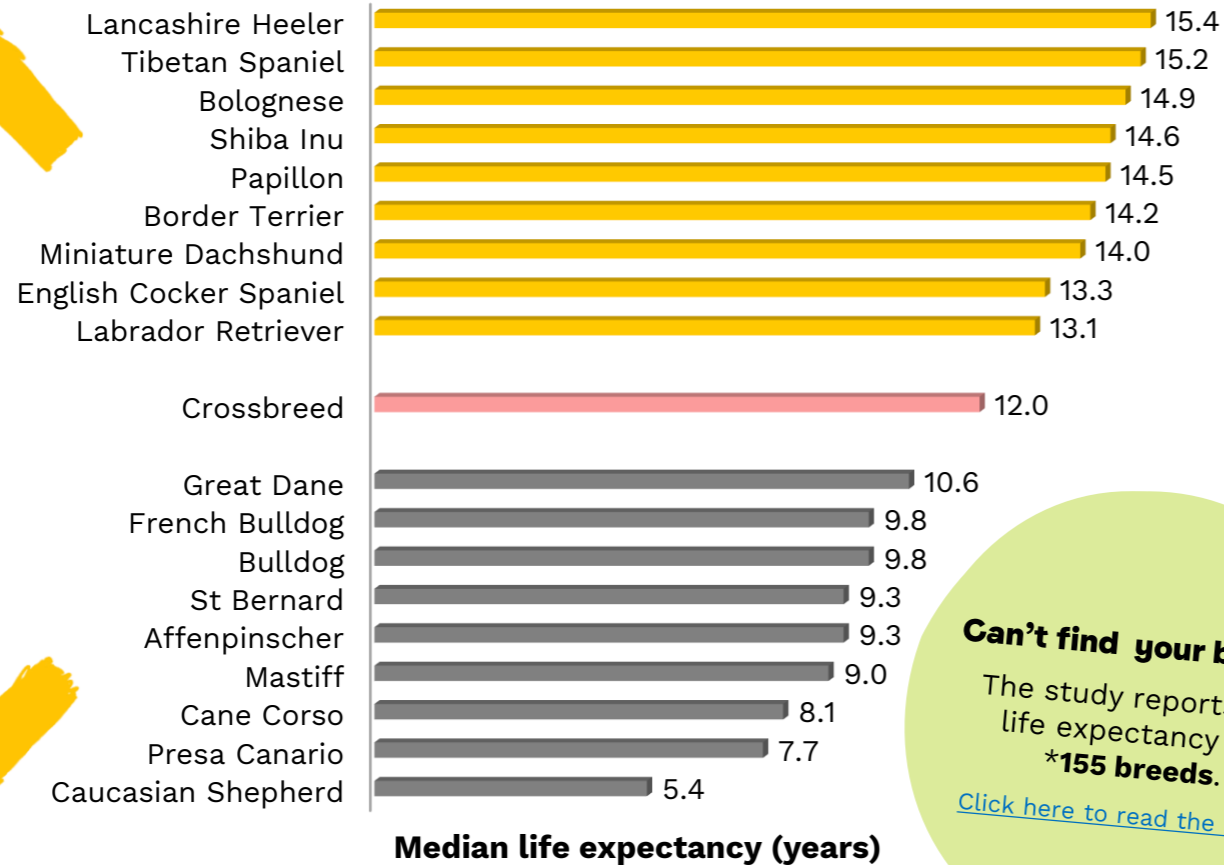
584,734 dogs included in the analysis

18 data sources including charities, vet groups, breed registries, and pet insurance companies.

Life expectancy given in years



Breed: Shortest and longest life expectancy



Can't find your breed?
The study reports the life expectancy for ***155 breeds.**
[Click here to read the paper.](#)

Body size

Large breeds have shorter life expectancy



Face shape

Flat-faced breeds have shorter life expectancy

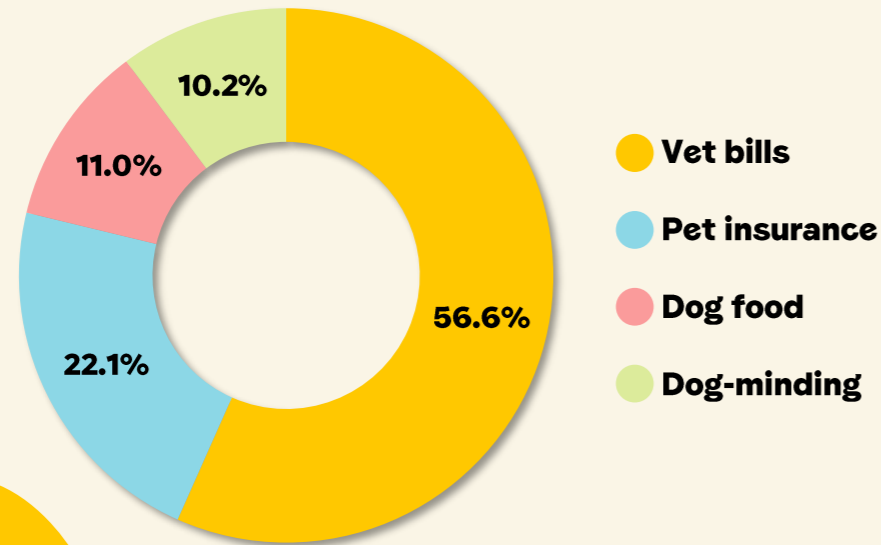


Our work on preventing problems

244,478 surveys completed

Cost of living crisis

The **Dogs Trust National Dog Survey (NDS)** is the largest survey of UK dog owners, and dog lovers without a dog. We asked owners what concerns them the most about dog-related cost pressures:



35% of people said they would consider cutting back on buying toys, training and enrichment items to save money.

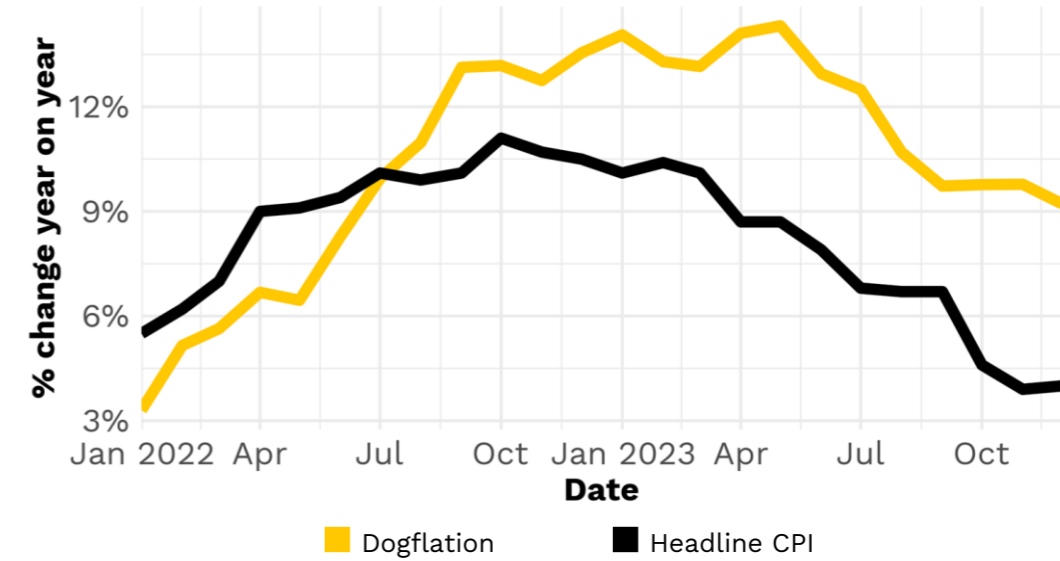
14% of people said they may cut back on non-emergency vet care.

60% of people considering getting another dog within the next year said they were less likely to do so, due to the rising cost of living.



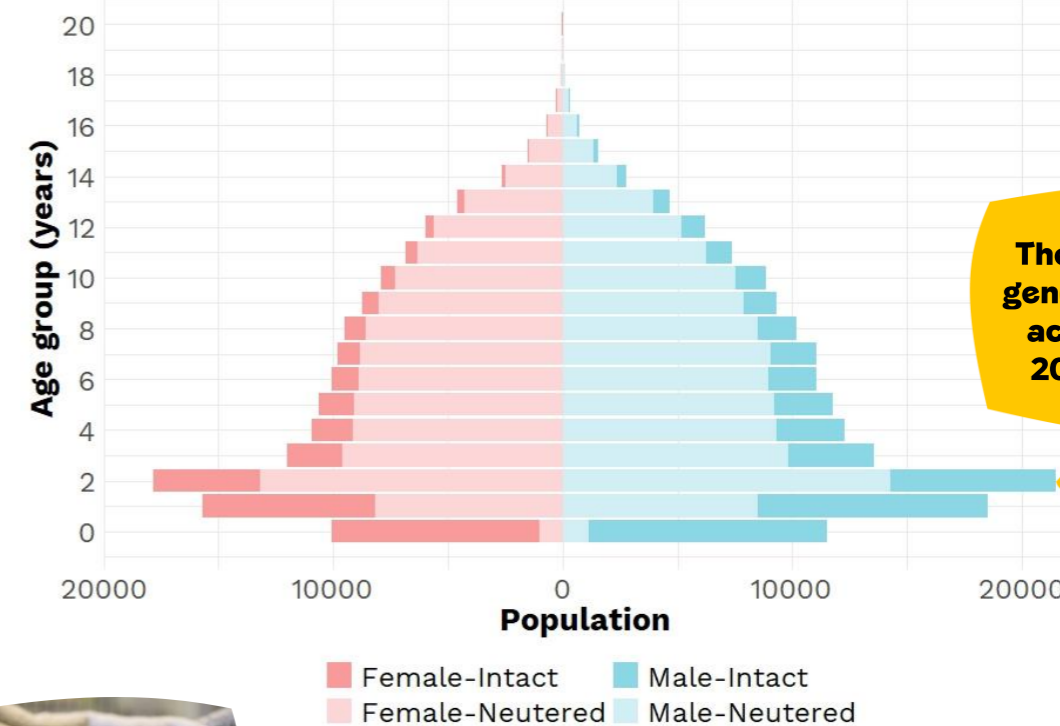
Dogflation

In the **'Dogflation' report**, we looked at the price of goods and services representative of the average costs of caring for a dog in the UK. The graph below shows that, with 'dogflation' outstripping inflation, the costs of everyday essentials for dogs are increasing faster than for other goods and services, putting extra strain on the nation's dog owners



Evidence of the 'pandemic puppy' boom

The **NDS** has identified clear evidence (below) of the much talked about 'pandemic puppy boom', and that purchase of new puppies has fallen back to, or even below, pre-pandemic levels.



The 'Covid bulge' generation of dogs acquired during 2020 and 2021.



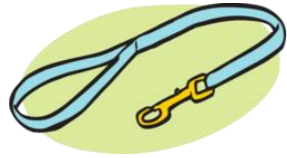
During the Covid lockdown:

- The number of dogs acquired was substantially greater than in previous years.
- More first-time owners acquired a dog than in previous years.

Preventing problems **continued...**

Undesirable behaviours

Our research shows that many owners struggle with unwanted behaviours in their dogs.



In our **Relinquishment Survey**, of **201** people who had relinquished their dog we found:

- **56%** of people had done so due to their dog's behaviour
- **66%** of people who had relinquished their dog due to behaviour said that advice and support with training and behaviour would have helped them keep their dog.

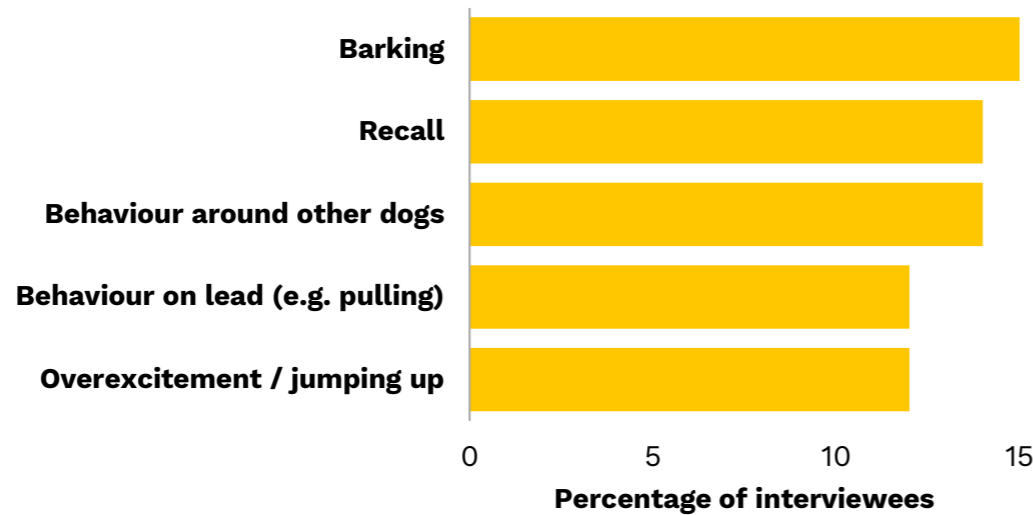
"I feel like I'm always on guard if I leave her off [lead], I can't fully relax"

"He barks at anything that moves past the window"

"He is hit-or-miss with other dogs"

"I moved to a quiet area with her in mind so we could enjoy walks without her barking and trying to get to other dogs"

In our **Community Engagement project**, we interviewed **170** dog owners and found the top **five** unwanted behaviours people worried about were:



How did Dogs Trust help prevent and manage unwanted behaviours and support owners in 2023?

90% and **81%**

of eligible adopters received a check-in call 2-days and 2-weeks after adoption, respectively.

Many adopters who received a call said they felt well supported by Dogs Trust.

Adopters can call our contact centre at any time.

13,000+

Dog School training classes were delivered across the UK.



6,000

owners called our Behavioural Support Line.

95%

were satisfied or very satisfied with the behavioural advice they received.

Training research

Seeking help for training



We surveyed **823** dog owners and asked where or from whom they seek help for training their dogs:

- Owners often use the internet for dog training and behaviour information seeking.
- The use of online vs. in-person advice varies depending on the severity of the issue.
- Our respondents were also most likely to follow online advice when the terms: reward-based, positive-training, kindness-led, force-free, and ethical were used.

As part of our **Post Adoption Welfare Study (PAWS)** study, we asked our adopters about their intentions to use professional training sessions and followed up with them on the training they actually completed:



- The majority of adopters planned to train, or were already training, their dog at home.
- **10%** of adopters had already attended professional dog training within the first 3-weeks post-adoption, with over **80%** of these adopters telling us they felt happy while training their dogs.
- Just under a **fifth** of adopters also told us they didn't intend to attend professional training sessions, however, did then do so in future.



How owners train their dogs

As part of the **NDS** we asked owners how they respond when their dog does something they like. Most owners told us they either praise, treat or play with their dogs as a reward.

Owner concerns

We also learnt from the **NDS** that many owners are concerned about the training of other dogs they encounter out and about. Over **13,000** respondents told us they had concerns around:

- Poor recall of other dogs, and particularly out of control dogs
- The off-lead behaviour of dogs
- The risk of potential dog attacks



Preventing problems **continued...**

Owner attitudes to behaviour

Dog behaviour changes rapidly in the first **two years** of a dog's life. Our previous work has shown how challenging this can be for owners [see this paper], so we explored the experiences of owners participating in Generation Pup during this period.



As **puppies**, many behaviours were considered 'mischievous' and 'unintentional'.

3,577

comments about 1,808 dogs



As **6 to 9-month-olds**, many owners believed that their puppies would "grow out of" challenging behaviour.

As **1-yr-olds**, behaviours were often explained by owners in terms of their dog's personality or described as deliberate actions.



Breed and genetics were used by owners to explain a variety of dog behaviours at all time points.

These findings will enable us to help owners prepare for their new puppy and their behavioural stages. The findings also help us understand the importance of providing advice and guidance about preventative measures owners can take.

Monitoring and Evaluation

In 2023, members of the Research Team ran more than **25** Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) workshops with colleagues from across Dogs Trust and external stakeholders. These workshops help to ensure that Dogs Trust's activities, interventions, and services deliver essential outcomes and impact.

M&E projects in **2023** included:

- **Dogs Trust Dog School Evaluation:** Comparing responses from Dog School participants **before** and **after** the 5-week course showed they increased knowledge and skills (and had a lot of fun!). For example:

An **increase** in the following great practices:

- Using alternatives to food rewards (e.g. toys), and training techniques such as using a clicker.
- Support for reward-based training methods.

A **decrease** in these unhelpful practices:

- The proportion of owners who thought it acceptable to use punishment during training.
- The proportion of owners who reported shouting at their dog if they did something wrong.



85%
"I have a more positive relationship with my dog"

93%
"It's easy to apply the things we learnt at Dog School"

88%
"I achieved what I wanted from Dog School"

- **School workshops:** Dogs Trust has been delivering fun and educational workshops in schools about safe behaviour around dogs for 20 years. When comparing children's scores on our dog safety quiz **before** and **after** the workshop, we found a **16% improvement** following the workshop, indicating that we had a significant positive impact on children's knowledge and attitudes about safety around dogs.



Click to find out more about [Dogs Trust Dog School](#) and [our free educational workshops](#)



Our work on Rehoming

Relinquishment of dogs

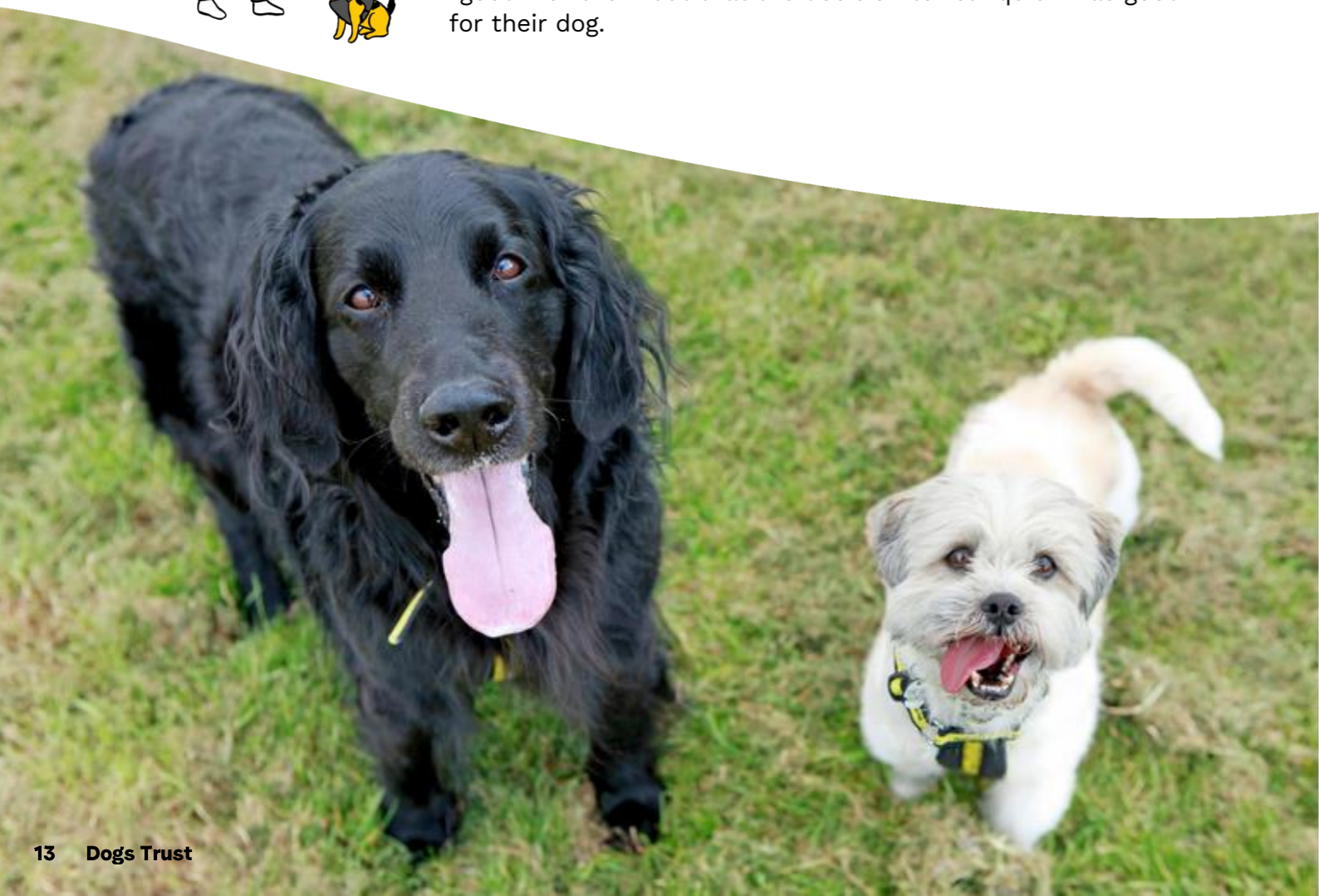
In 2023 we conducted our **Relinquishment study** to understand more about the decision-making and reasons behind owners relinquishing their dog, and their experiences of doing so. We learnt the top 5 reasons for relinquishment were:



1. The dog's behaviour
2. The dog and another household dog/s do not get along
3. Human ill-health (excluding allergies)
4. Member of household scared of dog
5. Not enough time for the dog



Owners of dogs that had been relinquished described the emotional devastation of having to give up their dog. Many owners describing the grief and associated feelings of anguish, guilt, regret, as well as relief. Owners often perceived relinquishment to be better for dogs than for themselves, telling us their decision to relinquish a dog had not been "good" for them but that the decision to relinquish was good for their dog.



Fostering dogs

Dogs Trust run **two** very important fostering programmes:

- **Freedom** is our dog fostering service offering support for people escaping domestic abuse.
- **Home From Home** was set up so dogs could be fostered short-term in households before being permanently rehomed.

Find out more about these programmes on Dogs Trust's [Fostering webpage](#)

We asked people why they want to foster a Dogs Trust dog:



We also learnt:



93% of fosterers found the training provided by Dogs Trust useful.



98% reported feeling happy to have helped a dog in need.



18% owned at least one other dog (4% owned one or more cats).



While **94%** were satisfied with the advice and support received, we have identified new ways to improve our support even more.

Our hot topic - How do fireworks affect dogs?

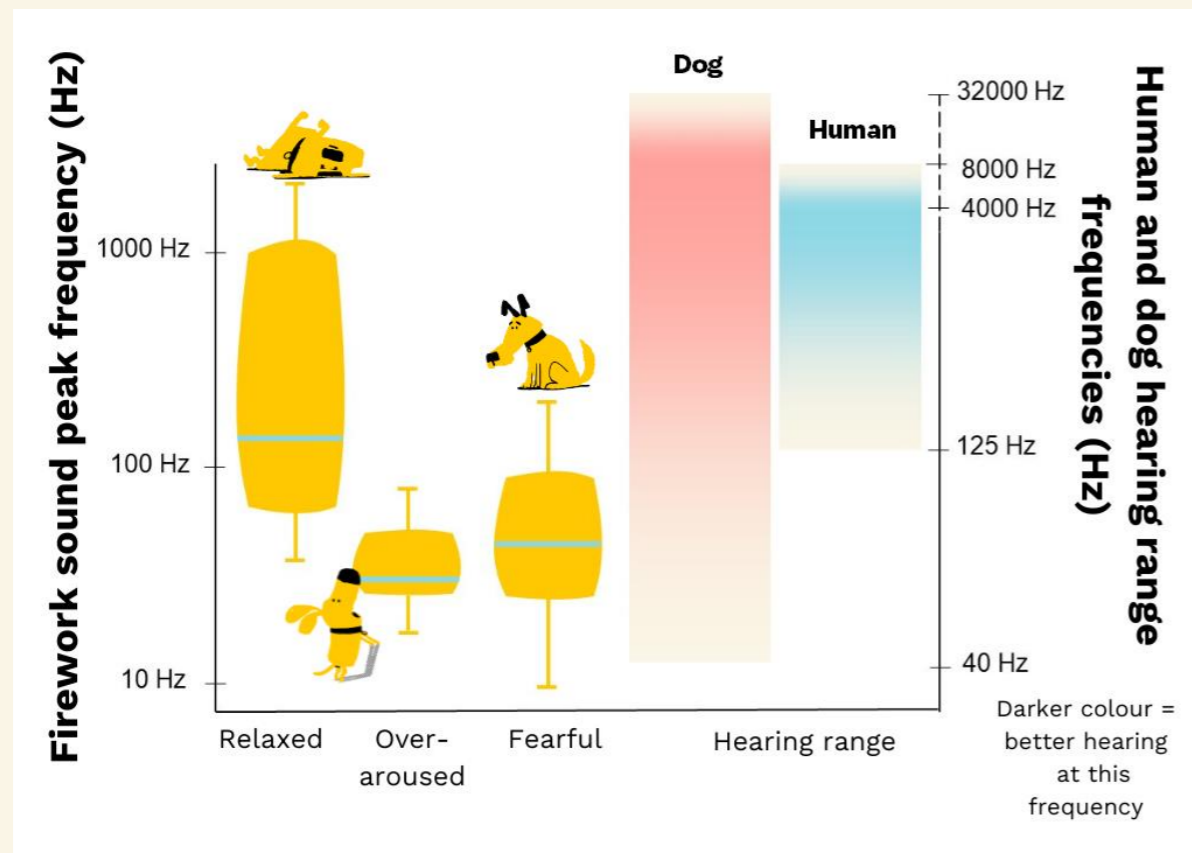
Our **Fireworks Survey** found that dogs showed more fear of fireworks on New Year's Eve when their owners described firework displays as:

- louder and closer,
- lasting longer,
- being heard in the days before New Year's Eve.

In a **collaboration with the University of Salford**, we found that dogs showed more fearful behaviours when fireworks included low-frequency (deep rumbling) rather than high-frequency (squeaky or screeching) sounds. Unfortunately, it's harder to block low-frequency sounds from the home (e.g. by closing windows/curtains).

3,524

surveys completed

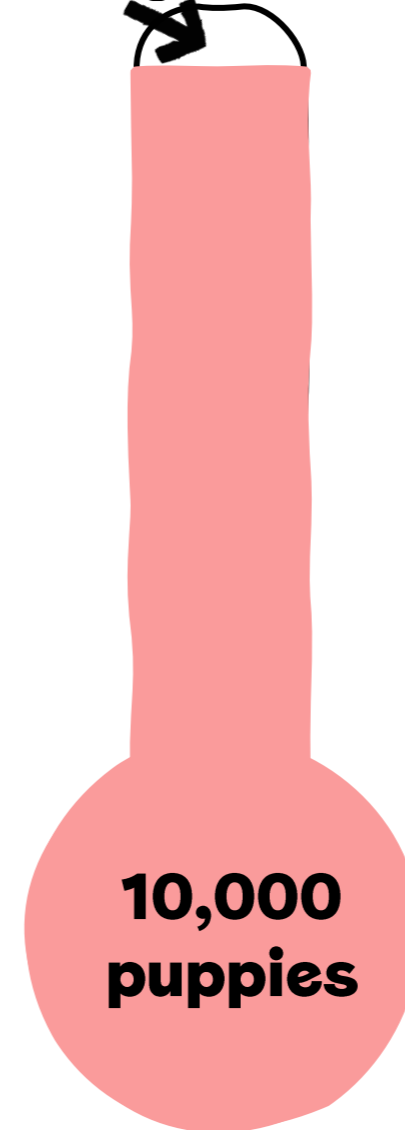


How can we help prevent fireworks fear?

- Planned future studies will investigate ways in which dog owners can effectively mask low-frequency sounds in the home.
- Analysis of the experiences of dogs in our **Generation Pup** study shows that early exposure to sounds at around **12-15 weeks of age** makes them less likely to show fear of fireworks when they are 2.5 years old. Later exposure does not have the same protective effect.

Generation Pup is still recruiting

1,477 puppies left to go



We recruit **puppies** (and their owners) and keep in touch with them throughout their lives using surveys.

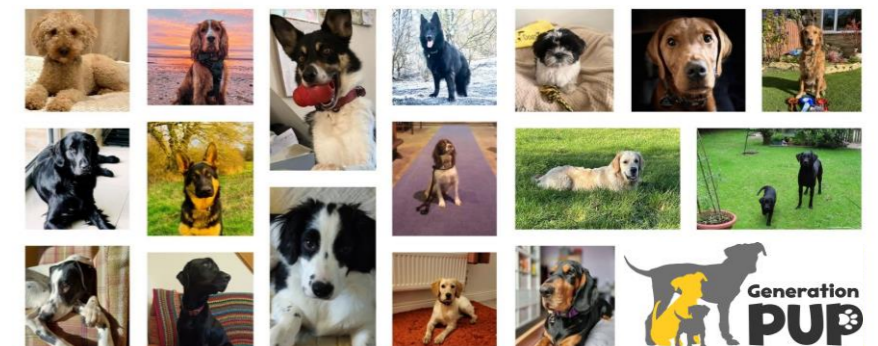
We are aiming to recruit **10,000** puppies to our Generation Pup study, and we are nearly there.

If you have a puppy sign up now so you don't miss out on your opportunity to join our community of dog owners.

To sign up:

- Your puppy must be under **16-weeks-old**, or 21-weeks if they have been through quarantine.
- You must be **16 years** or over and live in the **UK** or **ROI**.

Some of our recruits:



Some of our fun facts:

- We recruit any breed or crossbreed, and have:
 - 44%** crossbreeds
 - 66%** purebreds
- Our oldest dogs are **8** yrs.
- Owners can submit non-invasive biological samples from their dogs (e.g., faeces, urine, and hair) for analysis. We've already had more than **11,500 samples** submitted.

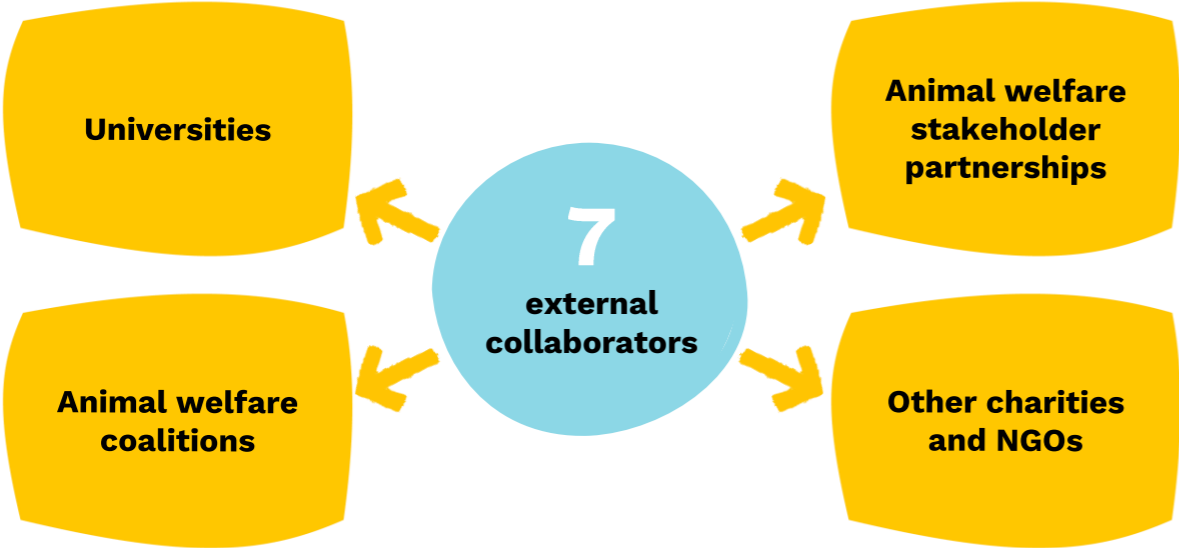


For more information visit:
generationpup.ac.uk or [watch a short video here.](#)

Collaborations with other researchers

We've had the pleasure of working and collaborating with a number of researchers and groups on a host of fascinating and insightful topics!

Who we have worked with:



We've also supported:

1
Undergraduate student

5
Masters students

6
PhD students

1
Internship



Watch this space! in 2024 we will be...



Evaluating the Behaviour Support Line as it reaches its 2nd birthday - making sure we're doing the best for dogs and owners in need.

Investigating the reasons why some dogs' new homes don't work out and they are returned to us - helping us to match dogs to their ideal new families.

Launching the National Dog Survey 2024 - the largest survey of UK dog owners and dog lovers. Keep your eyes peeled for the survey in May to June so you can take part too!

Comparing the effectiveness of in-person and virtual behaviour consultations.

Finding out how low-noise fireworks affect dog behaviour.

Asking dog owners and veterinary professionals how they feel about behaviour medication.

Presenting our work at New Scientist Live (12-14 Oct 2024), with a stand and two talks. We'd love to see you there.

... and much, much more!

**Thank You
for reading!**

Our 2023 publications

[Pooches on a platform: Text mining twitter for sector perceptions of dogs during a global pandemic.](#) This paper describes text mining methods used to identify topics of interest regarding dogs on Twitter during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall findings highlight key topics of interest related to dogs during a global pandemic, and demonstrate that information conveyed, and language used by sectors can have an impact on public perception and therefore should be taken into consideration when communicating topics with the public.

["Do your homework as your heart takes over when you go looking": factors associated with pre-acquisition information-seeking among prospective UK dog owners.](#) This paper investigated factors that influence whether prospective dog owners in the UK conduct preparatory research. About half of the current owners in our sample had conducted research before acquiring their dog, whereas 68% of potential owners had conducted research or were planning to do so (14%). Other factors found to impact research conducted included age of dog acquired, breed of dog, source of dog, age of owner, career involving dogs, and previous dog experience.

[National Dog Survey: Describing UK dog and ownership demographics.](#) This paper provides an overview of Dogs Trust's National Dog Survey 2021. The results provide up-to-date demographic data for both dogs and their owners and highlight patterns and trends both long-term and more recently, since the COVID-19 pandemic.

[Status of instrument development in the field of human-animal interactions & bonds ten years on.](#) This paper explores and assesses the tools used to measure the human-animal bond in research studies over the last 10 years, identifying 30 new tools that have been since the previous reviews on this topic.

["It's like living with a sassy teenager!" A mixed-methods analysis of owners' comments about dogs between the ages of 12 weeks and 2 years.](#) This paper used open-ended survey responses collected through Generation Pup at regular time points from 12 weeks to 2 years to explore owner perceptions of behaviour during puppyhood to adolescence. When dogs were younger owners described their dog's behaviour more as unintentional and mischievous, whilst as they got older it was considered more deliberate.

[In the doghouse? An exploration of online discussions around the challenges of human-dog relationships.](#) This qualitative study analysed posts from online discussion threads about owners' attitudes and responses towards their dogs' behaviour. Owners experienced challenges to relationships with their dogs when they behaved in ways that they did not consider acceptable, often reportedly causing emotional strain, described by owners as "grief", "frustration", and "depression". The paper documents the "puppy blues": a term used by owners to describe feelings of self-reported depression that appear to arise from the emotional pressure to get things "right" in raising their puppy.

[Estimation of the size, density, and demographic distribution of the UK pet dog population.](#) This paper aimed to provide a measure of the overall dog population within the UK and describing its characteristics and dynamics. The study combined a number of data sources regarding UK pet dogs such as from veterinary, insurance, academic, breed registries and animal welfare organisations. From this data, the 2019 UK pet dog population was estimated to be 12.64 million dogs.

[Longevity of companion dog breeds those at risk from early death.](#) This research used a large dataset of dogs (n=584,734) within the UK in order to identify life expectancy between breeds, exploring possible phylogenetic differences. Estimates related to parental lineage, body size, breed, sex and cephalic index were all generated. The results identified differences in longevity likely related to the evolutionary history, domestication and breed selection of the dog which has impacted the lifespan of individuals.

[Owner expectations and surprises of dog ownership experiences in the United Kingdom.](#) This study explored surprises about the realities of ownership experienced by UK dog owners, and the extent to which aspects of ownership met their expectations. Key areas of surprise that were reported to be more than expected included cost of vet visits and rehoming/buying a dog, as well as patience needed for training. The emotional and practical dimensions of dog ownership were also a surprise to owners suggesting dogs occupied a more prominent place in their owners' lives than they had anticipated.

 dogstrust.org.uk/how-we-help/professionals/research

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 [@DTScholars](https://twitter.com/DTScholars)

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