



Stray dog survey report **2022-23**



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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 they interact with.

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

- The estimated number of stray/unwanted dogs 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 the 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 to 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 2022/2023 SDS was administered to all LAs via the online survey platform Qualtrics. The survey link was emailed to contacts in each LA on July 12th 2023 and the survey was closed October 31st 2023. 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 on the council website. A follow-up email reminder was sent two weeks later. If an LA did not respond to the email reminder, then an FOI request was submitted to the LA, with the survey questions attached as a Word document. Some FOI request responses were received after the survey closing date, and these were added to the dataset manually (the last manual entry was made in November 2023). Local Authorities were asked to give figures for the period between April 1st 2022 – March 31st 2023.

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, in 2022 we started to employ an additional method of estimating this total, which involved multilevel analysis. Compared to the simple estimate from the UK average, the benefit of this type of analysis 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 the latest 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, and not all dogs handled by LA's are found straying (i.e. free-roaming and unaccompanied by a human). For example, in some cases, members of the public relinquish their dog directly to the LA. In this survey report, we refer to the "total dogs handled" rather than strays. 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 surveys, 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, 294 LAs responded to the 2022-23 SDS. This represents 79% of the 371 LAs in the UK when the survey was administered, with a range from 73% to 89% across regions (Table 1). The response rate for the 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, and 2021-22 surveys were 49%, 56%, 60%, and 59% respectively. Those 4 years had lower response rates than the current and earlier surveys (surveys from 2015-2018 had response rates between 70-92%). The COVID-19 pandemic likely 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.

This year's survey response rate was the highest it's been since the SDS was brought in-house, bringing it in line with earlier surveys. The use of FOI requests this year likely improved the response rate.

Table 1: Response rate for LAs in different UK regions - descending order. (2022-2023)

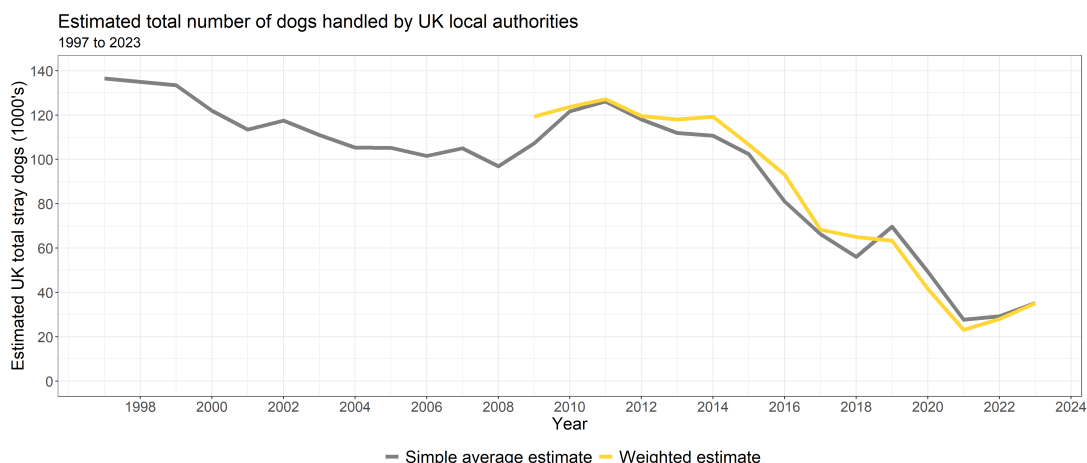
Region	Number of LAs that responded to SDS	Total LAs in region	Response rate
East England	40	45	89%
Scotland	28	32	88%
North East England	10	12	83%
Northern Ireland	9	11	82%
North West England	30	37	81%
South West England	24	30	80%
England (all regions)	240	306	78%
Wales	17	22	77%
East Midlands	27	35	77%
West Midlands	23	30	77%
London	25	33	76%
South East	45	62	73%
Yorkshire and the Humber	16	22	73%

2.2 Number of dogs handled

The 294 LAs that responded to the survey reported handling a total of 27,123 dogs in the period between April 1st 2022- March 31st 2023. On average each LA handled around 95 dogs. These figures are higher than those recorded last year; in the period between April 1st 2021- March 31st 2022, a total of 17,098 dogs were reportedly handled by the 218 LA's that completed the 2021-22 survey (with an average of 78 dogs per LA). However, these figures are lower than those recorded in the period between April 1st 2019- March 31st 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 35,078 dogs handled by LAs across the UK between April 1st 2022- March 31st 2023. The simple average estimate was 35,184 dogs. In Figure 1 (below) 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 a more detailed description of this method). 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



As can be seen in Figure 1, there has been an overall decline in the number of stray dogs since the survey began in 1997. There was a period between 2008 and 2012 where the numbers started to increase, followed by a steeper period of decline from around 2014 to 2018. There was a brief plateau in numbers around 2018-2019, followed by another steep decline. In the last 2 years, the numbers have started to rise again. We cannot be certain of the causes of these patterns, but some possible explanations are discussed in the conclusion of this report.

There were regional differences in the number 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 the 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) (2022-2023)

Region	Number of LAs in region (that completed survey)	Average total new dogs handled per LA	Average PPD per LA
Northern Ireland	9	332	802
North East England	10	213	1392
Wales	17	124	1890
Yorkshire and the Humber	16	143	1981
South East England	45	82	2385
West Midlands	23	110	2741
North West England	30	92	3112
England (All Regions)	240	90	3349
East England	40	74	3446
East Midlands	27	73	4133
South West England	24	75	4672
London	25	66	5333
Scotland	28	40	9366

Figure 2



2.3 How do dogs arrive at local authorities?

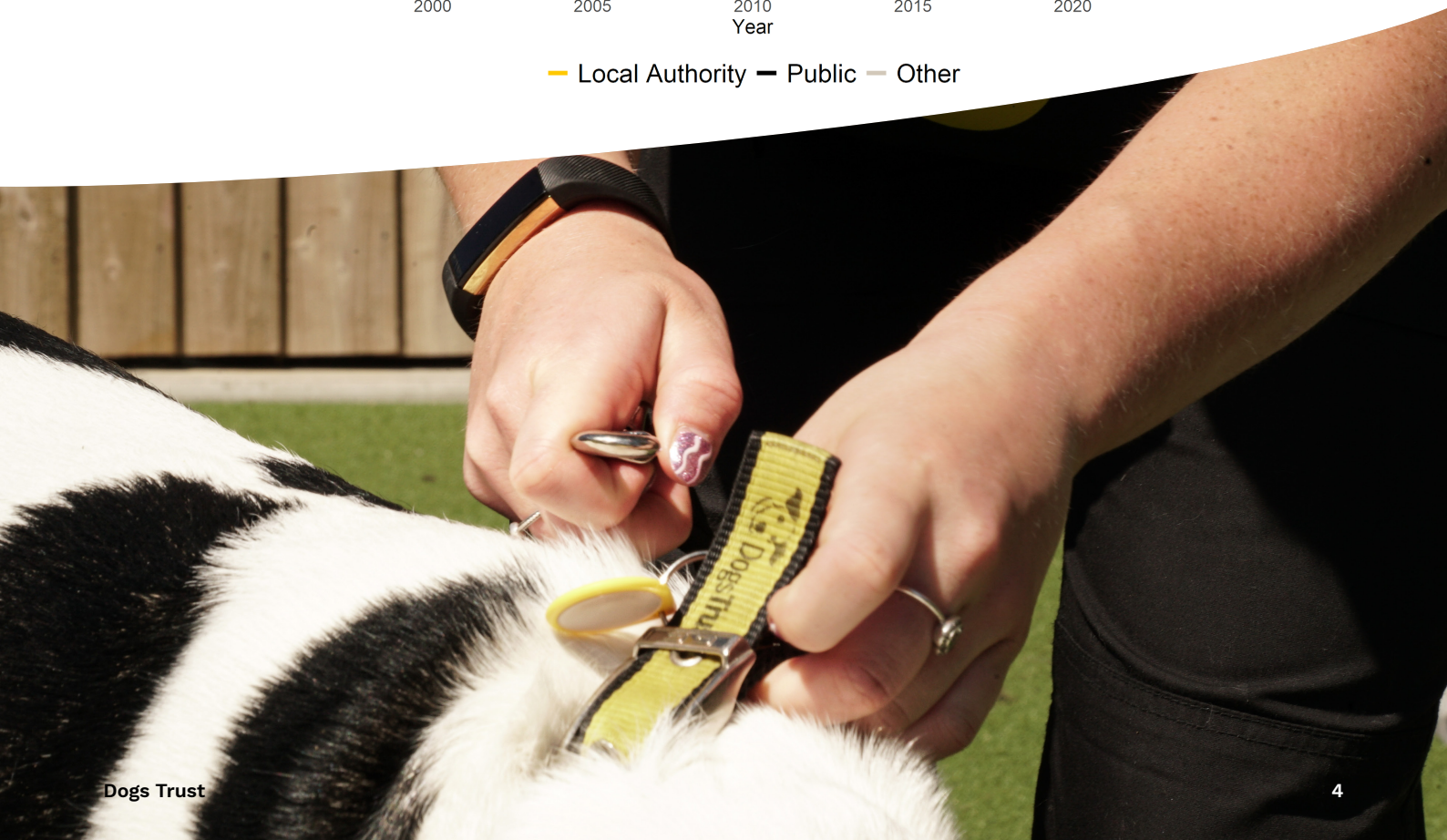
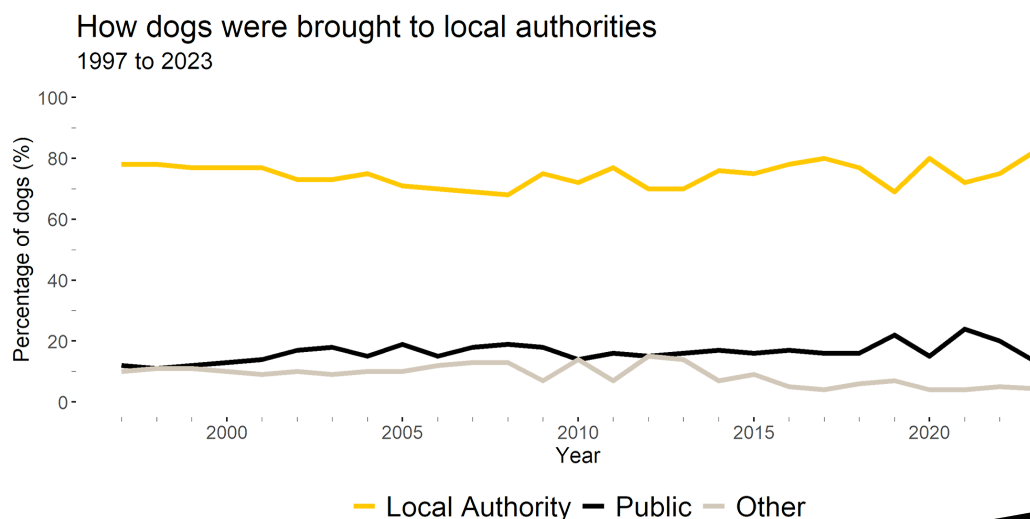
Dogs come into the care of LAs via different routes. Consistent with previous years, the majority of dogs arrive at LAs after being taken in as strays. In previous surveys, LAs were given the option to record dogs “seized as strays” or “brought in by a member of the public”. However, these categories did not differentiate between members of the public bringing in a dog that they had found straying, and people who were handing over (i.e. relinquishing) their own dog. We believe this is an important distinction, so in the 2022-2023 survey we asked if dogs were taken in as strays or relinquished by their owner, then went on to clarify whether strays were brought in by a member of the public, or found/picked up by LA staff. Table 3 shows the breakdown of ways dogs arrived at LAs using this new distinction. However, for Figure 3 we have merged the strays and relinquished dogs brought in by members of the public so that it is comparable to previous years’ data.

Table 3: How dogs arrived at LAs (2022-2023)

Arrival type	Number	Percent
Brought in as stray (includes ‘a’, ‘b’ and ‘c’ below)	21675	80%
a Brought in by member of the public	1989	9% *
b Collected by LA staff	12626	58% *
c Other/unknown	7060	33% *
Relinquished by owner	1193	4%
Brought in by police	211	1%
Other	830	3%
Unknown	3214	12%
Total dogs handled	27123	100%

* of strays

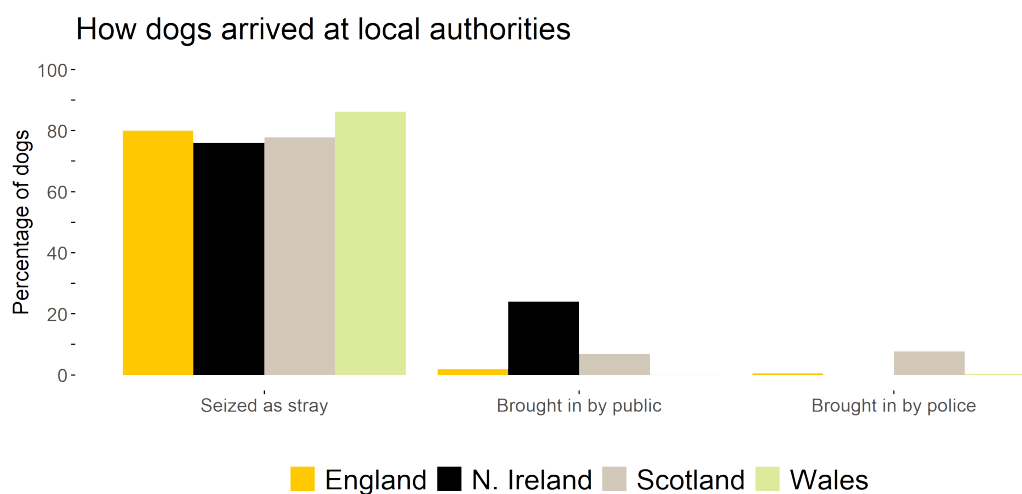
Figure 3



Only 10 councils reported any dogs being seized in response to the Dangerous Dogs Act/Order, with 28 dogs in total reportedly seized in this way.

There was some regional variation in the 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, and Northern Ireland reported a greater proportion being relinquished by members of the public.

Figure 4



2.4 What happens to the dogs handled by local authorities?

In total, approximately 43% of dogs taken in by LAs were reunited with their owners during 2022-23 (either reclaimed during the kennelling period or returned without kennelling) (Table 4). This percentage is lower than that recorded in last year’s survey (54%). Collectively, LAs reported 523 dogs being put to sleep (PTS) during the study period (approximately 2% of total dogs handled). It is estimated that this translates to around 660 dogs entering the care of LAs being PTS across the UK during the study period. There has been an overall reduction in the proportion of dogs being PTS by LAs over the years, down from 14% in 2000 and 6% in 2010. Furthermore, aside from 27 dogs who were recorded as being PTS due to the Dangerous Dogs Act (1991), all other specified reasons for PTS were related to the physical health or behaviour of the dog (176 and 178 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 – these include dogs who were in the care of LAs during the study period, but arrived before the study period commenced (pre 1st 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 (2022-2023)

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)	11889	43%
a Dogs reclaimed during kennelling period	6661	56% *
b Dogs returned without kennelling	2626	22% *
c Unknown	2602	22% *
Passed to welfare organisation	9482	35%
Rehomed by LA	1679	6%
PTS	523	2%
Still with LA after 31st March 2023	329	1%
Other	513	2%
Unknown	2955	11%
Total	27370	

* of dogs reunited

Figure 5

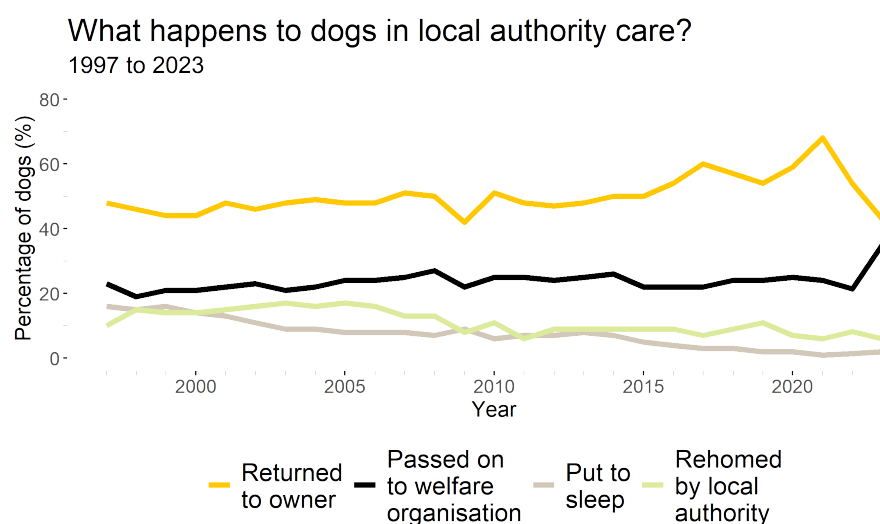


Table 5: Outcomes for dogs handled by LAs broken down by country

5. a) Reunited with original owner

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	9652	45%
Northern Ireland	1125	38%
Scotland	650	57%
Wales	462	25%
Whole UK	11889	43%

5. b) Passed on to Welfare organisation

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	6996	33%
Northern Ireland	1467	49%
Scotland	147	13%
Wales	872	47%
Whole UK	9482	35%

5. c) Rehomed by LA

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	1462	7%
Northern Ireland	89	3%
Scotland	96	8%
Wales	32	2%
Whole UK	1679	6%

5. d) Put to Sleep (PTS)

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	445	2%
Northern Ireland	43	1%
Scotland	22	2%
Wales	13	1%
Whole UK	523	2%

2.5 Microchipping

Among the LAs that provided information about the microchip status of the dogs they handled, approximately 52% of dogs were already microchipped before being handled by the LA. However, many LAs (111, 38%) did not give any figure for number of dogs microchipped. The majority (67%) of the LAs responding to this survey did not offer a microchipping service (Table 6). This demonstrates a more than 10% decrease in the proportion of LAs providing a microchip service compared to last year's survey. Furthermore, in the 2019–2020 survey, 32% of LAs reported that their microchipping service was free for the owner, this has dropped every year for the last three years; from 14% (2021), 12% (2022), and finally just 9% in 2023.

Table 6: Responses to “Do you offer a microchipping service?” (2022-2023)

Response	Count	Percentage
No	196	67%
Yes, fully funded (free to the owner)	26	9%
Yes, owner pays the full amount	30	10%
Yes, partially funded (owner pays reduced fee)	23	8%
No Response	19	6%
Total	294	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. (2022-2023)

Factor	Total number of dogs	Percentage
Unknown	9999	84%
Owner contacted the LA	878	7%
Dog had up to date microchip	654	6%
Dog had up to date microchip and/or ID tag (unsure which was primary factor)	104	1%
Dog known to dog warden	38	< 1%
Dog wearing an ID tag	2	< 1%
Other	214	2%
Total reunited	11889	

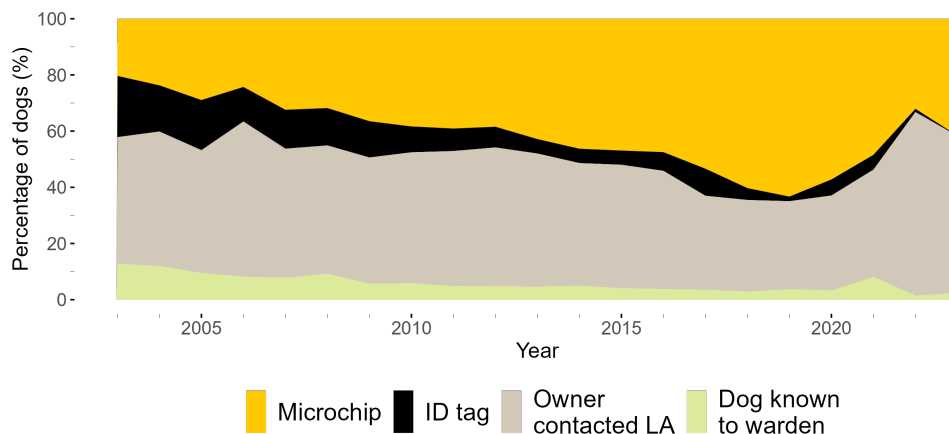
Figure 6 shows how the methods of dogs being reunited with their owners have changed between 2003 to 2021 (this question was not asked prior to 2003). Since 2020 there appears to be a decline in the proportion of dogs being reunited by the LAs finding the owner through microchip or ID information. Correspondingly, there has been an increase in the proportion of dogs being reunited through the owner contacting the LA themselves. Note that the numbers presented in Figure 6 are representative only of LAs who were able to answer this question (i.e. those who gave answers other than “unknown”).

Local authorities reported a total of 1314 dogs who could not be reunited with their owners due to incorrect microchip details. The true figure is likely to be higher, as only 69 LAs were able to provide this information. By dividing the number of dogs who could not be reunited due to incorrect details by the total number of dogs handled by the 69 LAs in this subset, it was estimated that around 26% of dogs handled by LAs could not be reunited due to incorrect chip details.

Figure 6

How were dogs reunited with their owners?

2003 to 2023



2.7 Current set up of dog warden services

This year, 150 LAs (51%) reported that their dog warden was employed directly by them, compared to 82 LAs (28%) who contracted the service out. These proportions are similar to last year (53% directly employed and 25% contracted out). Furthermore, 12% said they had used a combination of directly employed and contracted services, while 4% said there was no dedicated dog warden service in their LA. This year 53% of LAs reported that dogs were handled by private boarding kennels, 7% LAs used a council-owned kennel and 21% 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 were seized/brought in. Table 8 shows the number of LAs that listed each breed as one of their top three (e.g. 151 (51%) 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 2021-2022 survey, SBTs were also the most commonly reported breed (53%), followed by lurchers, Jack Russell terriers, and crossbreeds (34%, 32%, and 30%, respectively).

Table 8: Predominant breed types seen by local authorities (2022-2023)

Breed	Number	Percent
Staffordshire Bull Terrier (or SBT cross)	151	51%
Lurcher	98	33%
Crossbreed (unspecified)	71	24%
Jack Russell Terrier (or JRT cross)	65	22%
Terrier (unspecified)	60	20%



3. Conclusions

The number of dogs handled by LAs in the UK, as estimated by the annual Stray Dog Survey, has exhibited an overall downward trend since its inception in 1997. This decline remained steady until the period spanning 2008-2010, during which there was a brief uptick in numbers. While the exact cause of this increase remains uncertain, its timing aligns with the global financial crisis of 2008, which triggered a severe economic downturn in the UK. It is plausible to suggest that individuals facing financial constraints might have found it challenging to afford to keep their pets, potentially leading to increased relinquishment or abandonment rates. The steeper decline observed between 2015 and 2018 coincides with the implementation, in 2016, of legislation mandating microchipping for all 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.

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 affected LA services to the extent that they had reduced capacity for collecting and housing dogs.

Last year's survey, covering the period between April 2021 - March 2022, revealed an increase in estimated numbers compared to the previous year. This was the first time the survey has shown an increase compared to the previous year since 2014 (according to the weighted estimate). This year's estimate increased again by over 7000 dogs. This rise may be related to the current 'Cost of Living Crisis' in the UK, with increases in many household expenses and associated stresses on household income. Dogs Trust's recent "Dog-flation" report² revealed that dog owners may be disproportionately affected by the Cost of Living Crisis: The report found that costs of everyday essentials for dogs are increasing faster than for other goods and services, putting extra strain on the nation's dog owners. This has been reflected in the record number of people enquiring to Dogs Trust about giving up their dog because they can no longer afford to look after them. According to the 2023 Dogs Trust National Dog Survey (NDS)³, owners are facing the challenge of prioritizing their dog's care requirements, based on affordability: Nearly a fifth of respondents said they may have to consider changing to cheaper pet food in the coming year. About 1 in 7 said they would consider skipping non-emergency vet care.

It is uncertain whether the overall declining numbers of dogs handled by LAs is reflective of a decrease in the number of strays, or a decrease in the ability of LA's to handle strays. In recent years LAs have suffered severe financial challenges, with many having to make drastic cuts to services or risk facing bankruptcy⁴. These challenges have likely restricted councils' ability to provide dog-related services, and therefore could be at least partially responsible for the decline in dogs handled by LAs. 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 LAs altogether.

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. We have attempted to reduce this effect by using multilevel analysis to predict the likely figures that would have been reported by LAs who did not respond, based on figures they reported in previous 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 the model.

Regional comparisons between the 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" than 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. This year, for the first time, we explicitly asked LAs to differentiate between dogs brought in as strays to LAs by members of the public, and dogs relinquished to the LA by their owners. When comparing this year's data to previous years there was a sharp rise in dogs being recorded as seized by the LA and a corresponding decline in dogs being reported as handed over by the public. This suggests that, in previous years, "handed over by public" may have been interpreted as both relinquishment and handing over a stray dog. Therefore, we will continue to differentiate between these in future surveys.

In recent years there has been a gradual increase in the proportion of dogs reunited with their owners by LAs. However, the last 2 years have seen a sharp drop in proportions reunited compared to previous years. It is not clear what has caused this sudden decrease; as discussed above, councils are increasingly under severe financial pressure, resulting in cuts to services, so a potential explanation is that councils have reduced capacity to reunite dogs with their owners. The reduction in dogs being reunited with their owners has been mirrored by an increase in dogs being handed over to welfare organisations. Since the LAs are unlikely to know what the outcomes of dogs are once they have been transferred to welfare organisations, it is possible that some of these dogs went on to be reunited with their owners, facilitated by the welfare organisation. However, it is also likely that many went on to be rehomed to new owners. Another sign that LAs are providing fewer dog-related services is the decline in recent years of microchipping services.

Overall, there has been a gradual decrease in the number of dogs put to sleep (PTS) by LAs since the SDS began, with the numbers remaining fairly stable over the last few years. Although this trend is very good news, we estimated that although only around 2% of dogs in our sample were PTS, this could reflect a UK-wide total of over 500 dogs being PTS by LAs in a year. This coupled with the rise in estimated numbers of dogs handled, and the reduction in dogs able to be reunited with their owners, still paints a potentially worrying picture for the stray dog situation in the UK. This highlights the need for continued partnership and support for dog-related services within Local Authorities.

² <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/about-us/media-centre/dogflation>

³ Dogs Trust (2023) The 2023 National Dog Survey report, December 2023, accessed on 09/04/2024 at: https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/downloads/National-Dog-survey-Results-23_1.pdf

⁴ Butler, P (2023) 'English town halls face unprecedented rise in bankruptcies, council leaders warn'. The Guardian (online). Dec 6 2023. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/dec/06/english-town-halls-face-unprecedented-rise-in-bankruptcies-council-leaders-warn>.

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