



# Stray Dog Survey report 2019-20



# Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Background and Objectives	1
Methodology	1
<b>2. Summary of findings</b>	<b>2</b>
Response Rate	2
The number of dogs handled	2
How do dogs arrive at local authorities?	4
What happens to the dogs handled by local authorities?	5
Microchipping	7
How were dogs reunited with their owners?	7
Dog warden services	8
Predominant breed types	8
Impact of COVID-19	9
<b>3. Conclusions</b>	<b>10</b>





# 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 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.

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 all aspects of the SDS were managed internally by Dogs Trust staff.

## 1.2. Methodology

### 1.2.1 Data collection

The 2019/2020 Stray Dog Survey was administered to all LAs via the online survey platform SmartSurvey. The survey link was emailed to contacts in each LA on 21 August 2020 and the survey was closed 21 October 2020, giving LAs 2 months to complete the survey. Reminder emails were sent twice a week after the first week of the survey going live. Local authorities that did not respond to the email reminders were attempted to be contacted 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. For stray dog figures, LAs were specifically asked to give figures for the time period between 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020.

### 1.2.2 Analysis

Summary statistics are provided for both the LAs that responded to the current survey and 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 also 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. 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 differences by dividing the UK into TV regions. These regional areas have become less widely used over time, so this report uses the administrative geographical regions used by the Office of National Statistics<sup>1</sup>. 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.

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

## 2. Summary of findings

### 2.1 Response Rate

Overall, 214 LAs responded to the 2020 Stray Dog Survey (SDS). This is an average response rate of 56% of the 379 LAs in the UK when the survey was administered, with a range from 40% to 83% across regions (Table 1). The response rate for the 2018-19 survey was 49%; indicating an improved response in 2019-20. Nevertheless, previous years have had higher response rates (surveys from 2015-2018 had response rates between 70-92%). **There are factors we believe may have contributed to the relatively low response rate this year compared to 2015-2018:**

1. **2020 has been an extraordinary year, with the COVID-19 pandemic causing major disruption across all sectors. The survey was distributed in October, when many organisations had staff furloughed. We know from those who did respond to the survey that staffing was affected by the pandemic, so it is reasonable to assume that other LAs had similar issues.**
2. **As this was the first time we have brought the SDS in-house, the LAs may not be used to hearing directly from us about the survey.**

However, neither of these explain the lower response rate in 2018-19, so there may be unknown factors contributing to the declining response rate.

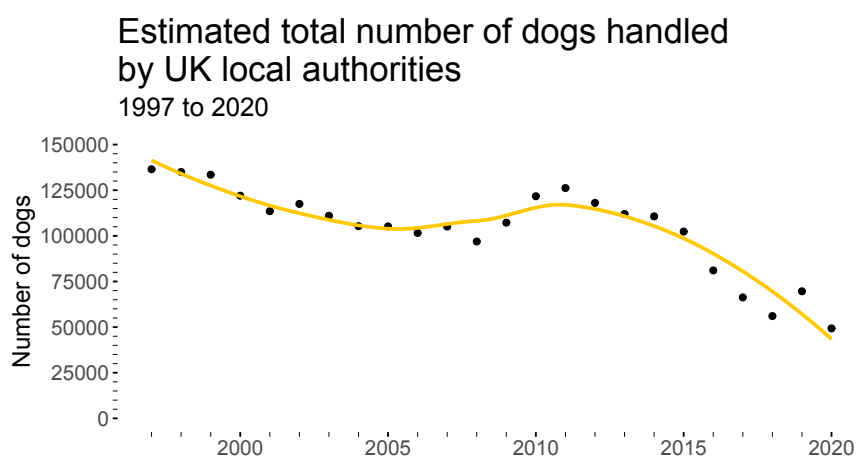
**Table 1. Breakdown of response rate by country and region**

Region	Number of LAs that responded to SDS	Total LAs in region	Response rate
North East England	10	12	83.3%
<b>N. Ireland</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>81.8%</b>
North West England	31	39	79.5%
Yorkshire and the Humber	16	21	76.2%
<b>Wales</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>63.6%</b>
South East England	39	64	60.9%
<b>England (All Regions)</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>314</b>	<b>56.7%</b>
South West England	17	30	56.7%
East Midlands	19	40	47.5%
London	15	33	45.5%
West Midlands	13	30	43.3%
<b>Scotland</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>40.6%</b>
East England	18	45	40.0%

### 2.2 Number of dogs handled

The 214 LAs that responded to the survey reported handling a total of 28,565 dogs in the period between 1 April 2019- 31 March 2020. On average each LA handled around 139 dogs, however there was a wide variation from 0 to 723. Based on these findings it was estimated that approximately 49,292 dogs were handled by LAs across the UK. 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 over the years.

**Figure 1**

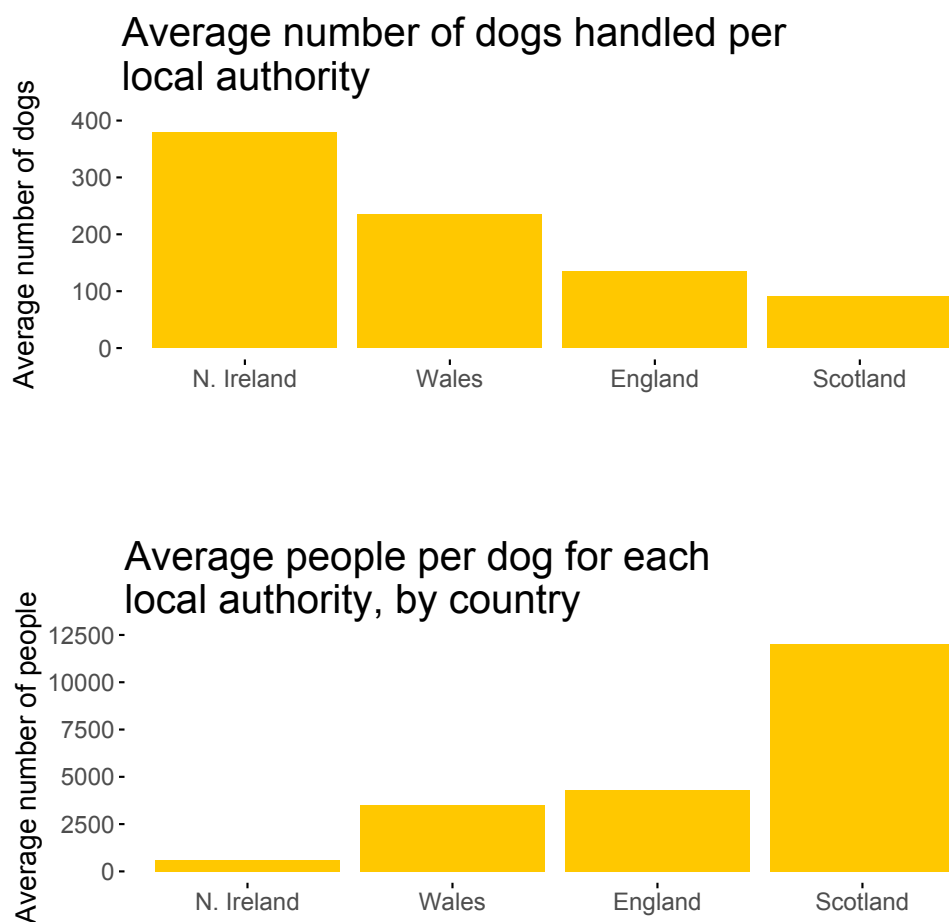


There were regional differences in the numbers of dogs handled (Table 2). Northern Ireland had the highest average number of dogs per LA, and the lowest number of PPD. As mentioned previously, England is divided by regions, but is also shown collectively in Table 2. Figure 2 shows the differences in 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 new dogs handled and people per dog (PPD) per local authority (in ascending order of PPD)**

Region	Number of LAs in region (that completed survey)	Average total new dogs handled per LA	Average PPD per LA
<b>Northern Ireland</b>	9	379	601
North East England	10	248	1052
East England	18	92	2098
South West England	17	99	2561
East Midlands	19	97	2568
<b>Wales</b>	14	234	3507
North West England	31	145	3524
West Midlands	13	212	3614
South East England	39	83	3677
<b>England (All Regions)</b>	178	122	4291
Yorkshire And The Humber	16	149	6117
<b>Scotland</b>	13	90	12028
London	15	81	13676

**Figure 2**



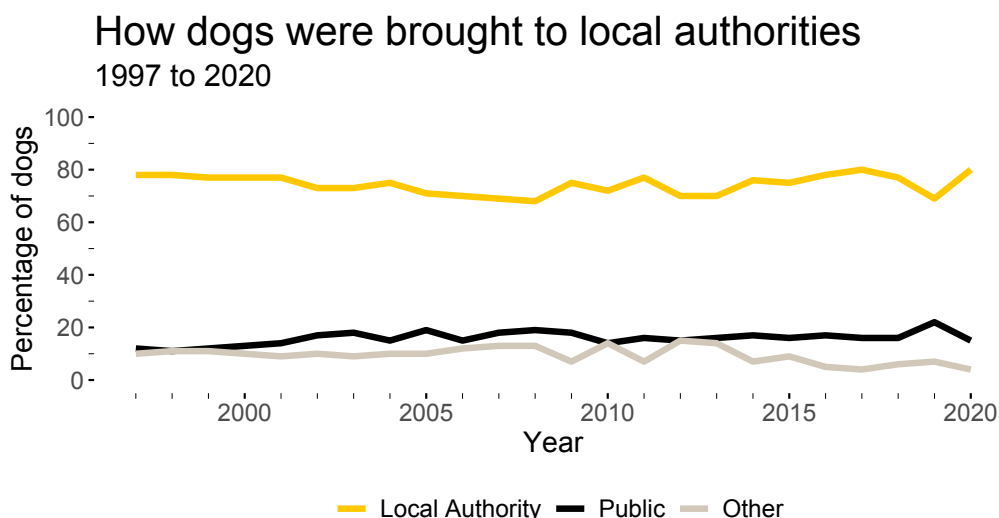
### 2.3 How do dogs arrive at local authorities?

Dogs come into the care of LAs via different routes. Table 3 summarises how many dogs were reported by LAs to have arrived in their care via these routes between 2019-2020. Consistent with previous years, the majority of dogs arrive at LAs after being seized as strays by the LAs. Figure 3 shows the proportions of dogs brought in by different routes across time.

**Table 3: How did dogs arrive at local authorities between 2019-2020?**

Arrival type	Number	Percent
Seized as stray	22904	80%
Brought in by public	4354	15%
Brought in by police	334	1%
Other	973	3%
<b>Total dogs handled</b>	<b>28565</b>	<b>100%</b>

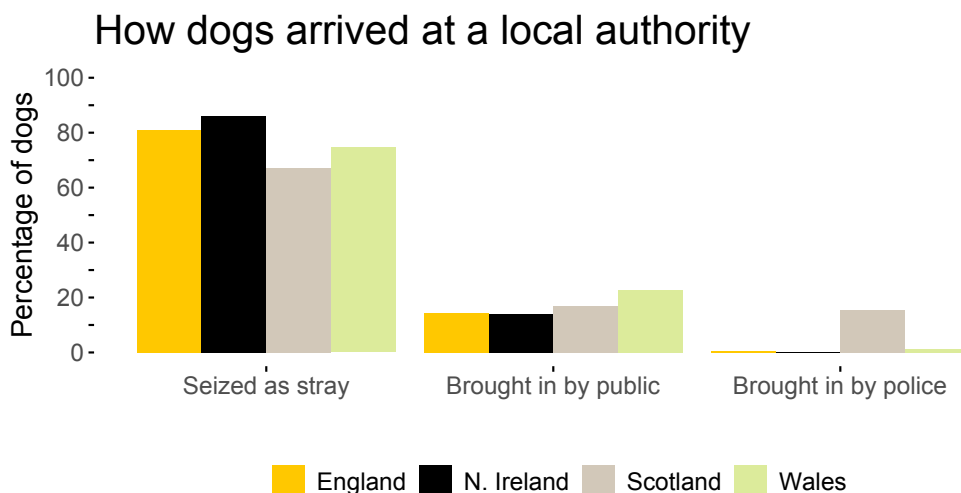
**Figure 3**



Only 18 councils reported any dogs being seized in response to the Dangerous Dogs Act/Order, with 118 dogs in total seized in this way. Of these, eight councils reported 1 case and eight councils reported between 2 and 5 cases. The remaining two councils reported 28 and 55 cases.

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.

**Figure 4**



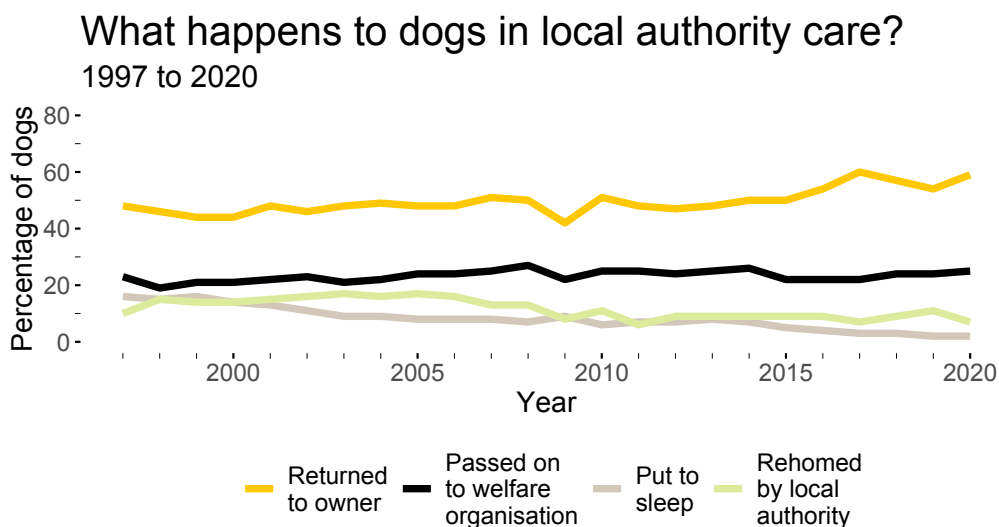
## 2.4 What happens to the dogs handled by local authorities?

In total, approximately 59% of dogs taken in by LAs were returned to their owners (either reclaimed during the kennelling period or returned without kennelling). Approximately 2% of dogs were reported to have been put to sleep (PTS); it is estimated that this translates to around 1165 dogs being PTS across the UK by LAs during the study period. Table 4 summarises the number of dogs for each outcome. However, the data are incomplete as not all LAs recorded outcomes. The estimated total numbers for the UK provided in Table 4 should be treated with caution due to the incomplete nature of the data (n.b. these figures do not add up to the estimated total number of dogs handled by LAs in the UK described in Section 2.2 of this report due to the amount of missing data). 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: What were the outcomes for dogs handled by local authorities in 2019-2020?**

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)	16960	59%	86.1	32629
a) Dogs reclaimed during kennelling period	10900	38%	56.8	21516
b) Dogs returned without kennelling	6060	21%	35.6	13510
Passed to welfare organisation	7067	25%	39.9	15132
Rehomed by LA	2114	7%	13.0	4915
PTS	638	2%	3.1	1165
Other	346	1%	1.6	613
<b>Total</b>	<b>27108</b>	<b>95%</b>		

**Figure 5**



**Table 5: Outcomes for dogs handled by local authorities broken down by country**

**5. a) Reclaimed during kennelling period**

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	8857	42.8%
Northern Ireland	849	24.9%
Scotland	539	45.8%
Wales	655	20.0%
<b>Whole UK</b>	<b>10900</b>	

**5. b) Returned without Kennelling**

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	4368	21.1%
Northern Ireland	581	17.1%
Scotland	283	24.1%
Wales	828	25.2%
<b>Whole UK</b>	<b>6060</b>	

**5. c) Passed on to Welfare organisation**

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	5420	26.2%
Northern Ireland	531	15.6%
Scotland	114	9.7%
Wales	1002	30.5%
<b>Whole UK</b>	<b>7067</b>	

**5. d) Rehomed by local authority**

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	1278	6.2%
Northern Ireland	619	18.2%
Scotland	103	8.8%
Wales	114	3.5%
<b>Whole UK</b>	<b>2114</b>	

**5. e) Put to Sleep (PTS)**

Country	Count	Percentage of dogs handled
England	499	2.4%
N. Ireland	89	2.6%
Scotland	22	1.9%
Wales	28	0.9%
<b>Whole UK</b>	<b>638</b>	



## 2.5 Microchipping

Among the LAs that provided information about the microchip status of the dogs they handled, 55% of dogs (10,632) were already microchipped before being handled by the LA. However, many LAs (77) did not give any figure for number of dogs microchipped. Table 6 summarises the proportion of LAs who offer microchipping service, and how this is funded.

**Table 6: Responses to “Do you offer a microchipping service?”**

Response	Count	Percentage
No	101	47%
Free to owner using Dogs Trust chips	63	29%
Fee passed on to owner	33	15%
Free to owner at a cost to the local authority	9	4%
No response	8	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>100%</b>

## 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 number of LAs able to report these figures is included as an indication of how representative these data are likely to be.

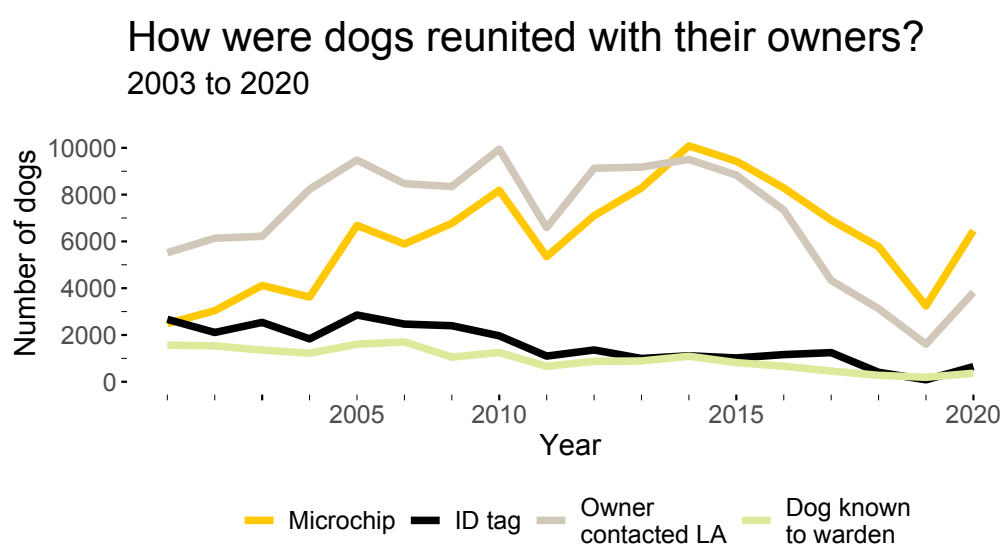
**Table 7: What factors contribute to dogs being reunited with their owners?**

Factor	Number of LAs that responded	Total number of dogs	Average number of dogs per LA
Dog had up to date microchip	142	6464	40.4
Dog had an ID tag	114	696	4.7
Owner contacting pound directly	105	3827	28.3
Dog known to dog warden	92	363	2.5
Other	28	129	0.6

Local authorities reported a total of 1678 dogs who could not be reunited with their owners due to incorrect microchip details. The true figure is likely to be higher, as only 91 LAs were able to provide this information. Of those LAs who did provide a figure, the average was 10.6 dogs per LA, so it could be estimated that around 4000 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 from 2003 to 2020 (this question was not asked prior to 2003). In line with previous reports the raw numbers have been reported rather than percentages.

**Figure 6**



## 2.7 Dog warden services

This year, 137 LAs (64%) said their dog warden was employed directly by them, compared to 52 LAs (24%) who contracted the service out. Both proportions are consistent with results in 2019. 70% of LAs reported that dogs were handled by private boarding kennels; whereas 13% LAs used a council-owned pound and 33% used welfare charity kennels to house their dogs – also consistent with 2019 findings.

## 2.8 Predominant breed types

LAs 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. 160 (75%) of the LAs listed Staffordshire Bull Terriers (SBT) or their crosses among their top 3 breeds).

**Table 8: Predominant breed types seen by local authorities**

Breed	England	% of England LAs	NI	% of NI LAs	Scotland	% of Scotland LAs	Wales	% of Wales LAs	Whole UK	% of UK LAs
SBT*	135	75.8%	6	66.7%	9	69.2%	10	71.4%	160	74.8%
Crossbreed	83	46.6%	6	66.7%	5	38.5%	7	50.0%	101	47.2%
JRT*	80	44.9%	2	22.2%	3	23.1%	7	50.0%	92	43.0%
Lurcher	73	41.0%	3	33.3%	6	46.2%	8	57.1%	90	42.1%
Border Collie	17	9.6%	6	66.7%	6	46.2%	3	21.4%	32	15.0%
American Bulldog	17	9.6%	1	11.1%	2	15.4%	1	7.1%	21	9.8%
Labrador	12	6.7%	1	11.1%	3	23.1%	2	14.3%	18	8.4%
Greyhound	17	9.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	17	7.9%
German Shepherd	11	6.2%	1	11.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	12	5.6%
Husky	7	3.9%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	14.3%	9	4.2%
Terrier (not specific)	8	4.5%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	8	3.7%
Yorkshire terrier	3	1.7%	1	11.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	4	1.9%
Akita	3	1.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	1.4%
Chihuahua	3	1.7%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	3	1.4%
Rottweiler	2	1.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	0.9%
Patterdale	2	1.1%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	2	0.9%
Mastiff	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.5%
Whippet	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.5%
Boxer	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.5%
Retriever	1	0.6%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	1	0.5%

\* JRT (Jack Russell Terrier) and SBT (Staffordshire Bull Terrier)

## 2.9 Impacts of COVID-19

We predicted that the COVID-19 pandemic would have an impact on the activities of LAs. Therefore, in this survey we included questions to assess these effects. Previous questions in the survey referred specifically to the period between 1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020, but the COVID-19 section asked LAs to think about their experiences “since the start of COVID-19 restrictions in the UK (from around mid-March 2020 until now)” (the survey was distributed in August 2020). Overall, most LAs reported that the number of dogs they were handling had decreased or remained the same since implementation of the COVID-19 restrictions, only 7 (3%) reported that the numbers of dogs increased (Table 9).

**Table 9: Impact of COVID-19 on numbers of dogs seen by local authorities**

Response	Number	Percent
Decrease in number of dogs	133	62%
Number of dogs has remained about the same	42	20%
The number of dogs has fluctuated during this time	13	6%
Unknown	10	5%
Other	9	4%
Increase in number of dogs	7	3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>100%</b>

Furthermore, 78% of LAs reported that demand for their services decreased during the first UK COVID-19 lockdown, and just under half (43%) said that it increased again once lockdown was eased, suggesting that the return to “normality” was slower for some.



### 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 then 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.

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 less 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 41% 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 only 2% of dogs in our sample were PTS, this could reflect a UK wide total of over 1000 dogs being PTS by LAs. 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 very much necessary.

Responses to the COVID-19 questions indicated that many LAs experienced a decline in the demand for their dog related services and handled less dogs during the period of lockdown restrictions. The period covered by this survey in terms numbers of dogs handled (1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020) only included a small period of lockdown; therefore we are unlikely to see the impacts of the pandemic reflected in the total numbers of dogs reported. It is hoped that the 2020-2021 report will provide a clearer picture of the impact of longer-term COVID-19 throughout 2020 and into 2021 on stray dogs and LA dog services.

**Next year, 2020-2021, will be the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stray Dog Survey.**

**To mark this occasion, we will be reviewing the survey in the following ways:**

- **Assessing how we can maximise the relevance and usefulness of the data we collect to stakeholders within and external to Dogs Trust**
- **Refining the survey to ensure only essential data is collected**
- **Updating the way questions are asked to ensure data are returned in the most useful format for analysis**
- **Updating methods of analysis to improve the quality of results; for example, using more advanced statistical techniques when calculating estimates.**

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