

**Veterinary Ireland
Submission to the
Joint Oireachtas Committee
on Agriculture, Food and the Marine on the
Impact of Rising Veterinary Costs on
Dog Ownership/Surrenders and Abandoned Dogs**

We would like to thank the Committee and the Chair for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's deliberations on this subject.

Introduction

Veterinary Ireland is the representative body for the veterinary profession in Ireland with membership encompassing DAFM, Local Authority, Industry, Farm Animal, Equine and Companion Animal Veterinary Surgeons.

The threat to animal health and animal welfare posed by the current increase in the number of unwanted dogs impacts on each of the above sectors in a unique manner. There is currently much public disquiet due to images of neglected dogs on mainstream and social media platforms and at the reported increase in the number of stray and abandoned dogs.

It should be noted at the outset that there is a dearth of information on the supply, trade, and ownership of companion animals of all species and breeds in Ireland. There is little reliable data on the dog population in Ireland. This issue could, at least in part, be addressed by the inclusion of a question relating to household pets in the Central Statistics Office (CSO) Population Census.

This lack of reliable data militates against any rational data analysis and policy formation as evidenced by studies by Simon More & others in 2022 and 2023 in the Irish Veterinary Journal (IVJ), which highlighted in its conclusion the challenges faced when using existing data to gain insights into the dog population of Ireland, and that it was not possible to estimate the dog population in Ireland, although some temporal changes were apparent.¹

Evidence from Surveys

A number of surveys have been carried out by the C.S.O. and welfare organisations which demonstrate a recent pattern in domestic dog ownership that has developed since the Covid-19 Crisis. This is stated as domestic dog ownership, bearing in mind that there are a significant number of working dogs kept in Ireland, for agricultural and other purposes, and these are kept distinct from those owned in a more domestic environment.

In essence, two broad categories of domestic dog ownership now exist. The first is the traditional dog owning family, who see the benefits of pet ownership and who are prepared to adapt their own lifestyle to accommodate the varied needs of a dog.

The second are those owners who take on a dog for initial situational reasons, for example Christmas / birthday presents, for children to learn animal care, companionship during the Covid 19 pandemic, etc., but who then find that expectations are not met and/or pet ownership has a fundamental impact on their lives and lifestyles that they cannot sustain.

A recent CSO online survey of over 10,000 respondents found that 20% of current dog owners had acquired their dog during the Covid-19 Crisis. Against the backdrop of restricted movement, closures of schools and workplaces, remote working / studying and increased time at home, many households turned to pet ownership. With the ending of restrictions and a return to more normal work / school / life balance, there has been an ongoing inherent danger that as these owners return to their previous working pattern, the practical demands of dog

¹ More et al. *Irish Veterinary Journal* (2022) 75:16 "Understanding the dog population in the Republic of Ireland: insight from existing data sources?"

ownership (feeding, toileting, exercising, care during holidays, public control, and health management) have become unsustainable.

Behavioural issues for dogs in situations where the owner has insufficient time or resources to take care of them are well documented. Given the discretionary nature of dog ownership, it is inevitable that a number of dogs in this situation will be surrendered for rehoming, Put-to-Sleep (PTS) or simply abandoned. This premise is verified by the available statistics.

Evidence from Local Authority Pounds

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Stray	6351	3824	2755	5045
Surrender	2489	1485	1515	2064
Dogs PTS	398	171	167	340

Fig.1. Stray, Surrender & Dogs Put-to-Sleep (PTS) at Local Authority Pounds 2019-2022

The number of stray dogs and dogs surrendered to Local Authority Pounds decreased dramatically during the Covid-19 Crisis. However, the number of stray / surrender dogs increased dramatically in 2022, and while figures are not yet available, has seemingly continued on in to 2023. The rate of increase has been so dramatic that many Local Authority pounds are full to over-flowing and experiencing great difficulty in re-homing dogs. In addition, while the number of requests from the public has increased by 300%, Local Authority Pounds are not in a position to accept these dogs. Similarly, many Dog Welfare Organisations are overwhelmed by requests to surrender dogs.

A survey performed by *Keogh et al* published in the Irish Veterinary Journal in 2022 concluded that there is an overall poor awareness among both dog owners and non-dog owners that common dog ownership responsibilities are prescribed by law in Ireland and that there is substantial variation in the level of awareness of the legal status of different dog ownership responsibilities. The authors concluded that it is likely that awareness that the selected dog ownership responsibilities are prescribed by law, is substantially low among the general public in Ireland².

In relation to one aspect of responsibility, figures published in 2019 for dog licences stand out. An online search suggests that the pet dog population in Ireland was measured at approximately 495,000 in 2022³, yet from figures available from Local Authorities only 200,000 dog licences were issued. The hypothesis is that most citizens seem to believe that the dog licence is optional.

It is the role of the Local Authority Dog Warden to ensure that all dogs are licensed, but there is a remarkable variability in how efficiently this is carried out, and the statistics highlight this fact.

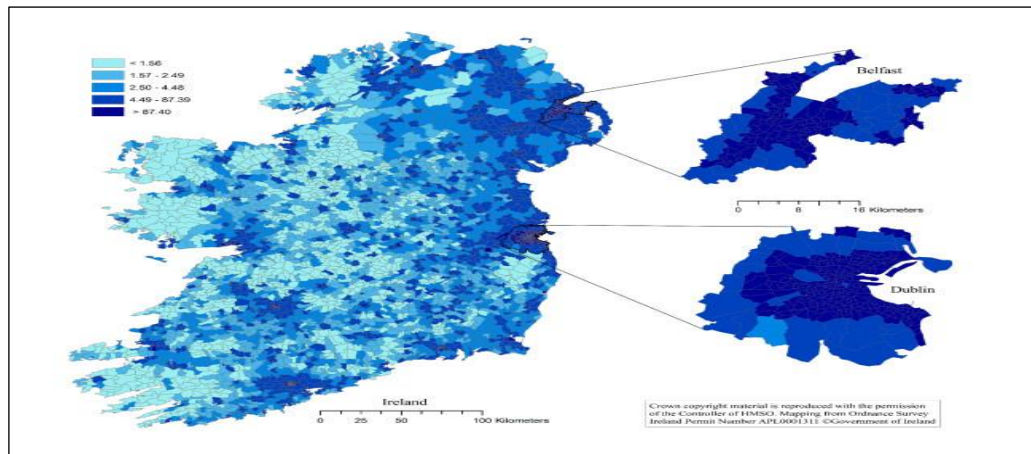
One incomprehensible aspect of dog control is that compulsory microchipping and compulsory dog licences are organised separately to each other, without one database talking to the other, as they are run by separate Government and contracted agencies. Dog licencing data is collated by An Post, providing access to data to each local authority within the Department of Rural and Community Development. Dog microchip and identification data are collected by a number of commercial companies. This is an inefficiency in the State's collection of data. Linking the microchipping data with the dog license would help this situation immeasurably.

² Keogh et al *Ir Vet J.* 2022;75:1–13 "Self-reported awareness of the legal status of eight responsibilities of dog owners in Ireland: are dog owners different from non-dog owners?"

³ www.statista.com – accessed 1st December 2023 (Statista is a global data and business intelligence platform)

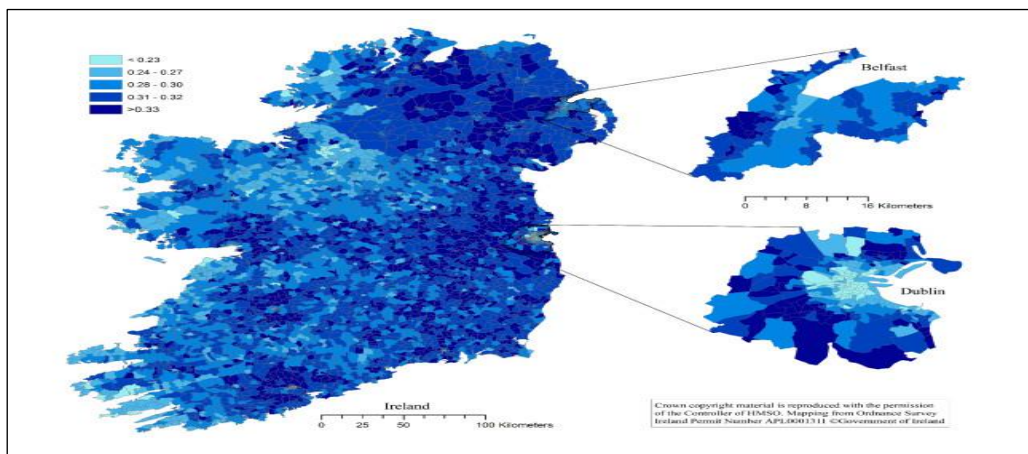
The Distribution of Pet Dog Owning Households in Ireland⁴

The following Map shows the number of pet dog owning households per square kilometre in each electoral unit on the island of Ireland.



Proportion of Households in Ireland Owning a Dog

The following Map shows the proportion of households in Ireland, by electoral unit, owning a dog.



The difference in spatial distribution of dog ownership is a reflection of a generally higher density of households in the east of Ireland and in major cities. The higher proportion of ownership in the west is understandable given the higher proportion of farmers and rural dwellings in this area.

Dogs Trust Information - Introduction & Context

In 2023, Dogs Trust Ireland received a record number of calls and emails from owners seeking to surrender their dog. During the period January to November 2023, Dogs Trust received **3,565** surrender requests for dogs. The most common age of a dog that owners requested to surrender was between **0 to 2 years** with the most common reason cited for surrender being behavioural issues.

The full set of reasons cited by owners for their surrender request are outlined below.

Dog's Trust Information - Reasons for Surrender Requests Jan-Nov 2023

1. Unwanted Behaviour from Dog

The category with the highest number of surrender reasons overall is behavioural issues, with **495** Surrender Requests citing behavioural issues as the main reason for the request to surrender their dog.

⁴ Maps based on data collected using a telephone survey of 1,250 households in November 2007, and on data from the Central Statistics Office in the Republic of Ireland and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (Ref: BMC Vet Res 2011, 7.28).
Veterinary Ireland Submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee 1 December 2023

2. Time Available to Take Care of Dog

Of the total surrender calls received in 2023 to date, **436** people cited that they did not have enough time to take care of their dog appropriately as a reason for seeking to surrender their dog.

3. Accommodation challenges

345 owners cited a change in their accommodation as a reason for surrender. Anecdotally, many are advising they are unable to take their dog with them as rental properties which accept dogs are increasingly difficult to obtain.

4. Owner Health, Allergies, Death in Family

To date, Dogs Trust Ireland have received **247** emails and phone calls from owners wishing to surrender their dog due to owner health reasons. Dogs Trust also received **63** emails and phone calls from owners who have to surrender their dog due to someone in their family having a pet allergy and 22 contacts citing owner deceased, as a reason for surrender.

5. Financial and Medical

24 requests for surrender were recorded for owner financial reasons, with an additional **five** surrender requests recorded for a dog's medical condition. Dogs Trust is seeing an increase of cases for rehoming which may have come in through a Local Authority Pound or as a stray presenting with complex and costly veterinary needs. Since January 2023, Dog's Trust has received **6** requests for financial assistance towards veterinary bills.

6. No Reason Given

Of the total **3,565** contacts received, **342** people preferred not to give a reason.

Financial Assistance Available to Dog Owners with Veterinary Costs

So far in 2023, Dog's Trust has issued 270 vouchers to Local Authority Dog Wardens contributing to the cost of neutering.

The Irish Blue Cross Clinic in Inchicore provides veterinary treatments to up to 40 dogs per day. The service is available to dog owners within a radius of 40km who cannot afford standard veterinary care.

Many Animal Welfare organisations including ISPCA, DSPCA, Madra and Leitrim Animal Welfare provide neutering vouchers and other assistance to dog owners who cannot afford standard veterinary care.

Potential causation of unwanted, abandoned, and surrendered dogs with behavioural and veterinary issues and unethical breeding is a factor that should be considered and explored further.

Dogs Trust Information - Summary

The data supplied by Dogs Trust implies that Financial and Medical Reasons are a minor cause for the surrender of dogs to their organisation. The most prevalent reasons cited by owners include Unwanted Behaviour (24%), Time Available to Take Care of Dog (20%), Accommodation Challenges (19%), No Reason Given (18%), Owner Health & Allergy (16%), Financial & Medical (3%).

Conclusions

The available data presented here indicates that the increase in surrenders and abandonments arises in the main not from the financial aspects of ownership, but in the situational, environmental, and behavioural challenges to those who took on pet dogs, and found that the required amount of time, accommodation requirements and behavioural aspects of their pets are beyond expectations and beyond sustainable attentions.

While a growing concern prior to the start of the Covid 19 pandemic, the impact upon Local Authority Pounds and on organisations such as Dogs Trusts shows that a significant proportion of the dog surrenders and abandonments since 2022 are linked to a reaction during

the pandemic of the felt need to take in a pet dog for whatever personal reasons, and the after-effects of normalisation once the pandemic was over.

There is also a need to both improve the quality and quantity of data on dog ownership and control in Ireland, as well as a perceived need to educate and inform the Irish citizenry on responsible dog ownership, not only on the positive aspects of companionship and affection, but also on the practical demands of responsible dog ownership (feeding, toileting, exercising, care during holidays, public control, and health management), as well as the legislative rights and responsibilities including requirements and rights under the Control of Dogs Acts (e.g. control, fouling, noise/barking nuisance), and microchipping and licencing legislation.

Possible Remedial Actions

This submission has shown the dearth of available reliable and accurate data and information on the ownership and control of pet dogs in Ireland. In the long-term, this issue could, at least in part, be addressed by inclusion of a question relating to household pets in the Central Statistics Office (CSO) Population Census.

While veterinary practitioners in both Private Veterinary Practice and in the Local Authority Veterinary Service can assist in the education and information elements of responsible dog ownership, Veterinary Ireland considers that a nationally coordinated campaign should be conducted by Government agencies to inform, advise and educate on all aspects of responsible dog ownership, including the rights and responsibilities under legislation. The press, TV, radio and social media could be utilised effectively, as well as providing information through other stakeholders, such as the Local Authority Veterinary Service, Private Veterinary Practices, and animal / dog welfare organisations.

Such a nationally coordinated campaign could be directed at all strata of Irish society, including through schools. In 2014, the Veterinary Ireland Companion Animal Society (VICAS) worked with Educate Together (the independent NGO patron body of a network of primary and secondary schools across Ireland) and other stakeholders in the formation of a set of 10 lesson plans and course materials for teachers to use with 3rd - 6th Year primary school students. Under the curriculum areas of Science, English, SPHA and Learning Together (Moral & Spiritual / Equality & Justice) these materials and the 10 lesson plans introduced primary students to the basics of pet ownership/keeping, responsibility, and health and welfare. A similar, updated programme could be considered for all national primary schools in the future.

The remits of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, the Department of Health, Department of Education, and of the Department of Rural and Community Development all include an aspect of the possible remedial actions outlined above.

Veterinary Ireland and its members would be available to work with these, and other Government agencies, in the pursuit of addressing the issues of responsible and compliant dog ownership, and the problems of dog surrenders and dog abandonment currently encountered in Ireland.