

The reality of responsible dog breeding

Striking a balance between regulating and encouraging dog breeding



Introduction

The reality is that finding a puppy to suit a potential dog owners' lifestyle is time consuming. Statistics show, year on year, that many don't do their research and in turn suffer the consequences of this.

[Read more](#)

Dog breeder licensing hasn't necessarily helped because over half of dog breeder licences are being issued to ultra-low volume breeders (those breeding one or two litters per year or fewer) who the Regulations were not intending to capture, as opposed to commercial large-scale breeders.

With so many dog owners failing to do their due diligence, and local authorities woefully under resourced, there remains a market for irresponsible breeders to profit from. As long as there is a demand for puppies, it is crucial for their long-term health and welfare, that this demand is met by responsible, loving and high welfare breeders.

As the only welfare-centric organisation representing dog breeders, we are hearing all too often about how breeding dogs has become more burdensome, that a one size fits all approach in terms of Regulation isn't working and that costs are spiralling. We want to explore options for how these breeders and others like them, can be encouraged to continue with their passion for dog breeding.





Background to the dog breeding sector

The dog breeding sector is unique inasmuch as it is very much a cottage industry, with over 90% of our customers breeding one or two litters per year or less. The Kennel Club registers approximately a quarter of a million puppies per year from around 40,000 breeders. This equates to roughly one third of all puppies. Dog breeding is not a 'business' in the traditional sense as it is difficult to accurately predict 'profit' due to the many dependants and unknowns.

For example, when a bitch may be in season is unpredictable, what health testing requirements may be necessary, unplanned veterinary expenses, the cost of travel, the cost of artificial insemination or importing, licencing fees (owing to the complication of the business test, addressed later). On top of these expenses, how large a litter may be can have an impact – some bitches will only produce one or two puppies, whereas others will produce eight or ten, and how many puppies a breeder may want to keep can have an effect on finances.

Given these variables, it becomes clear that for many breeders, particularly those operating on a smaller scale, dog breeding is not primarily driven by profit but rather by passion or a deep commitment to the health and welfare of the dogs.

The cost of breeding dogs responsibly

We asked a group of ultra-low volume dog breeders how much it costs them to breed a litter, and the outlay is extensive and includes the following:

Item	Cost
Health testing	Varies depending on tests required. For example DNA tests range from £60-£150, eye testing is around £70 and hip and elbow scoring is approximately £150. As per our Health Standard, detailed later on, testing required varies but can be extensive.
Vet fees, vaccinations, worming medication and vitamins	£1500
Equipment (bedding, dogs gates, toys)	£250
Kennel and whelping facilities	£250
Food, light, water, heat	£200 approximately
Semen import and storage (if applicable)	£2000 approximately
Cost of imports (if applicable)	Variable but costly
Stud fee	£700 approximately
Breeder licence fees (if applicable)	Range from £70 - £1500 approximately
Microchipping	£50 approximately
Kennel Club registration	£100 approximately

The costs will nearly always outstrip the income and start at least 17 weeks before any income is made back from sales. The time spent breeding dogs is non-recoverable and involves being with puppies 24/7 from when they are born to finding them a new owner. For four weeks breeders often will not leave the house. This will often involve time off work from a paid job.

Moreover, a good breeder is committed to potentially having the puppies they have bred back if a new owner can no longer look after one. The Kennel Club encourages breeders and new owners to make use of puppy contracts to this effect as breeders will not want their puppies to end up in rescue centres.

Puppy contract of sale

| Motivations for breeding dogs well

For our community, dog breeding is usually carried out for the love of that breed, the love of dogs, to continue a line and have a family of dogs of all generations. It could also be for reasons of bolstering the population of vulnerable breeds, for showing or working purposes, and/or to provide good quality and healthy examples of the breed to those who want a puppy, as some consider themselves a 'guardian' of their breed. From speaking to our community however, it is clear that they do not breed for 'the money', as despite them being over the trading income threshold of £1000, their outlay is significant, and they will rarely make any profit.

| Motivations and additional costs for breeders who import puppies

There is currently much discussion around puppy imports as many are imported by puppy smugglers in cramped unsanitary conditions, potentially with mutilations including illegally cropped ears and/or docked tails, and without having had necessary vaccinations. Importers can sell puppies because often the puppy buyer will feel they're 'rescuing'/'saving' the dog. This not only fuels the puppy import trade, but also results in dogs ending up in rescue due to the high cost of veterinary care etc, and takes people away from purchasing dogs in a responsible manner and ending up with a healthy pet.

However, there are also valid reasons why some breeders rely on being able to import young puppies including to further the health of their breed by widening gene pools and enabling more genetic diversity. Genetic diversity is crucial to responsible breeding and is actively encouraged by The Kennel Club. As part of our new Health Standard (explained later) several breeds have been listed within it as having genetic diversity concerns as a priority, which may be due to historical breeding practices or due to small population numbers. Breeders of these must prioritise genetic diversity, such as by breeding below the average inbreeding coefficient. By widening genetic diversity, breeders not only protect the health of their dogs but also ensure the future viability of the breed itself.

The recently published report from the Animal Welfare Committee on Specialised Canine Reproductive Practices also concurs: *"where a high coefficient of inbreeding occurs, this reduces genetic diversity and increases the risk of significant health and welfare problems becoming established within a breed"*. [Opinion on the welfare implications of specialised canine reproductive practices - GOV.UK](#)

Import costs add significantly to the cost of breeding, but good breeders are motivated to do so for the overall long-term health improvement of their breed or to establish new breeds of dogs in the UK.

| How have the Licensing of Activities Involving Animals Regulations impacted responsible dog breeders

Dog breeding is the only example of an activity which has a two-part licensing requirement – a litter threshold of three, and a business test, and this has caused confusion for dog breeders and local authorities alike. Defra's own Post Implementation Review (PIR) of the Regulations clarified: *"This two-part test was intended to enable local authorities to differentiate between commercial dog breeders – the Regulations' focus – and small-scale breeders, who were not intended to be captured within the Regulations' scope."* It goes on to state that *"the business test can be difficult to apply to breeding that is not captured by the litter threshold"* and acknowledged that *"these impacts were considered to compound the impact of the business test on small-scale home-based breeders, and to have contributed to some such breeders exiting the sector."* [**The Animal Welfare \(Licensing of Activities Involving Animals\) \(England\) Regulations 2018 Post Implementation Review**](#)

We recently carried out a Freedom of Information request project to ascertain if Regulations were targeting commercial breeders and if the number of licences issued to 5 plus litter breeders had increased. Instead, we found that nearly two thirds of licences are being issued to one and two litter breeders, and the number of licences being issued to those breeding three or more has dwindled significantly.

The cost of licences vary hugely, with the PIR documenting that *"on 1st April 2022, the lowest cost for a dog breeding licence in England was £66 for a three-year licence, and the highest cost for a dog breeding licence was £1,564 for a one-year licence."* [**The Animal Welfare \(Licensing of Activities Involving Animals\) \(England\) Regulations 2018 Post Implementation Review**](#)

Anecdotally, from speaking to groups of one to two litter breeders, there are delays in the system as there is a shortage of vets to carry out inspections which are not breed specific or specific to litter sizes. Of those who didn't have a licence, most stated they would stop breeding if a licence were required. Their reasons included a lack of confidence in local authorities' competence, negative experiences shared by others they knew, or disagreements with certain requirements they felt did not apply to home breeders.

As long as the licensing regime continues to operate as it is, there is very little incentive for low volume breeders to want to be licensed. The system is bureaucratic, costly, not applicable to small scale breeders, and has become a postcode lottery depending on where a breeder resides. It has not been effective in tackling rogue breeders as too much resource is being lent to those breeders who come forward to their local authority, despite the likelihood of not having to do so.

That is not to say that there is no place for dog breeding Regulations. There are unscrupulous breeders, puppy farmers, and illegal importations, and as long as there remains a market for poorly bred puppies with health and welfare issues, this creates several problems for the responsible home breeding community. For example, it is hard for people to differentiate between a 'good' and 'bad' breeder. Responsible breeders do not want to be 'tarred with the same brush' as unscrupulous ones. Naturally, if Governments were able to truly clamp down on poor breeding practices it may motivate those who believe they could breed well as it would create more space in the market for them to sell their puppies more easily.

Additionally, it is not the case that all home breeders are responsible, and all volume breeders are not. However, it is overall more likely that someone breeding one or two litters per year or less in a home environment isn't motivated by financial gain, as explained above. It is more likely that commercial breeders would breed away from the home and in a more commercial environment which lends itself better to a regulatory regime.

With calls to expand licensing to actively include one and two litter breeders, we would like the Government to consider alternative measures. Reducing the litter licensing threshold, (especially without removing the business test), could have a detrimental impact on the responsible breeding community and drive even more breeders away from breeding completely, opening the floodgates for those who will continue to flout the law.

We fully agree with the Government's assertion that *'any significant reduction in legitimate domestic breeding capacity has the potential to adversely impact the marketplace – either driving up prices and inviting inexperienced breeders to enter the market who are attracted primarily by the potential for financial reward, incentivising illegal low-welfare high-volume 'puppy farming', or by driving the import of puppies to meet the domestic demand, which may be subject to lower welfare standards.'* [**The Animal Welfare \(Licensing of Activities Involving Animals\) \(England\) Regulations 2018 Post Implementation Review**](#)



| The Kennel Club Health Standard

With the vast majority of breeders who register with The Kennel Club breeding one litter a year (80%), and an increasing number breeding just once every five years, there was a need to provide broader support, education and resources for every experience level and to signpost more clearly to a broader spectrum of responsible breeders in a way that was more suited to them than a generalised licensing model.

The Health Standard, developed using extensive scientific research and breed community input, describes and improves awareness about the health testing priorities for every breed, for all breeders and puppy buyers. It has been developed by making use of Breed Health and Conservation Plans, the ongoing collation of 1.6 million health testing and screening results based on prevalence and trends data – so individual tests will naturally change category over time, as new evidence and tests become available. The priority level assigned to a health test has been simplified into two categories – ‘good practice’ and ‘best practice’.

Breeders registering puppies with The Kennel Club are strongly encouraged to adhere to our Health Standard and complete the relevant tests for both the sire and dam of any litter and follow breeding advice accordingly. Incentives for doing so have been put in place by The Kennel Club, such as breeders who fully health test appearing higher up on our Find a Puppy advertising platform. Unlike Government Regulations, the Health Standard is breed specific and details exactly which health tests are required on a breed-by-breed basis. Whilst The Kennel Club does not register cross-breeds, the health standard remains a useful tool as it enables breeders to prioritise tests for breeds relating to their chosen cross-breed.



Kennel Club health tests and screening - examples

- **BAER (Brainstem Auditory Evoked Response) testing** - used to check the hearing of a dog by seeing how the brain responds to noise (usually a clicking sound), this test is most commonly conducted on puppies before rehoming but can also be conducted on adults.
- **BVA/KC Chiari-like malformation/syringomyelia (CM/SM) screening** - recommended to be repeated over a dog's lifetime, at an age of one year, three to five years, and over five years.
- **DNA tests** - the noted DNA tests in the Health Standard have been proven to accurately predict a dog's likelihood of developing the disease associated with the mutation and is for a relevant and notable condition in a particular breed.
- **Elbow grading** - conducted under the BVA/KC Elbow Dysplasia Scheme. Where estimated breeding values (EBVs) are available, breeders should use the estimations from these as a complementary tool, as well as the results from the screening scheme. This test is undertaken once in a dog's lifetime.
- **Eye testing** - carried out under the BVA/KC/ISDS Eye Scheme, it is recommended that examinations should be within 12 months prior to the date of mating to allow for breeders to be aware of any conditions affecting their dog. Gonioscopy testing - for predisposition to glaucoma (also known as pectinate ligament abnormality, or PLA) should be repeated every three years due to the progressive nature of the disorder.
- **Genetic diversity tools** - all breeders should refer to inbreeding coefficient calculators of a potential litter to assist them in making balanced breeding decisions. Breeders can use The Kennel Club's [Inbreeding Coefficient calculator](#). Breeders should always take into consideration the number of generations used to produce the calculation, whether dogs have been imported recently within the lines, and the number of offspring already sired by the male.
- **Hip scoring** - should be conducted under the BVA/KC Hip Dysplasia Scheme. Where estimated breeding values (EBVs) are available, breeders should use the estimations from these as a complementary tool, as well as the results from the screening scheme. This test is undertaken once in a dog's lifetime.
- **The Kennel Club and University of Cambridge Respiratory Function Grading scheme** - available for French Bulldogs, Bulldogs and Pugs, and should only be carried out by an approved regional assessor. The scheme must be used for all breeding stock over the age of 12 months, and repeated every two years, for as long as the dog is being used for breeding.
- **The Kennel Club/Dachshund Health UK IVDD Scheme for all varieties of Dachshunds** - used on dogs between 24 and 48 months of age at the time of X-ray.
- **The Kennel Club Heart Scheme for Cavalier King Charles Spaniels Supported by the Veterinary Cardiovascular Society** - to screen for mitral valve disease. The scheme should be used for all breeding stock over the age of 18 months, and repeated every two years, for as long as the dog is being used for breeding.

The voluntary measures put in place by The Kennel Club go over and above the current regulatory regime in relation to the breed specific health of puppies, due to the breed specific nature of the health tests referenced.



| Kennel Club

puppy contracts

Our free puppy contract enables puppy buyers to have peace of mind that breeders do their utmost to ensure the health and welfare of the puppy by:

- Providing an assurance that genetic health checks and health screening set out in the puppy information pack have been carried out on the puppy's parents and an explanation of what this means for the puppy is provided.
- Checking the puppy is in good health.
- Communicating within the puppy information pack about the possible consequences of buying the puppy given the dog's health information, the genetic health checks and health screening carried out on the puppy and the particular considerations that are likely to affect the puppy given its breed.
- Providing information on what opportunity to socialise with dogs, humans, and other animals the puppy has experienced and what sounds and experiences of typical family life have they become accustomed to.

Puppy contract of sale

I Recommendations for the future

Breeding dogs with full regard to their health and welfare is an activity that the Government should encourage. For good breeders, the emotional and financial strain is not always worth it. Breeders within our community often take long breaks before breeding again if indeed they do at all. This opens the floodgates for low-welfare, commercial breeders to thrive.

A one size fits all regulatory framework isn't working and even benefiting backstreet breeders. We would therefore advocate for a tiered approach to breeding regulations whereby for example, the regulatory framework would vary depending on the volume of litters a breeder breeds. For those breeding one or two litters a year or less, the complex business test could be avoided, and they could instead be required to register their litters at a minimal cost with their local authority - as is the case in France. For those breeding three or more litters a year, a model similar to the current framework is more applicable. More flexibility could be brought into the regime to consider whether health testing and screening has been acknowledged.

To further encourage good breeding practices, the Government could work more closely with The Kennel Club and breed clubs to facilitate a mentoring programme whereby those who breed more frequently or have more knowledge of breeding dogs are paired with people who are planning their first litter of puppies.

To assist puppy buyers, puppy contracts similar to The Kennel Club puppy contract should be mandated to help ensure all breeders are adhering to basic health and welfare standards, including taking their puppy back if the new owner is unable to look after it, to relieve the strain put on rescue centres. A contract, supported by an educational/behavioural change campaign, would provide some form of assurance that their breeder is reputable.

Additionally, to follow what has been put in place in Scotland, the Government could develop a Code of Practice for those looking to purchase a puppy to try to ensure the process is fully considered.





THE KENNEL CLUB