

Summary Briefing

Recommendations on Strengthening Enforcement and Regulation of Dog Breeding Licences in the UK

Prepared by FOUR PAWS UK
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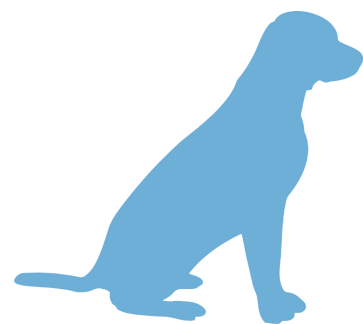


Background

The UK dog breeding industry is regulated by the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (LAIA) Regulations, which were introduced to improve animal welfare and regulate dog breeding practices. These regulations require anyone breeding three or more litters of dogs annually to hold a valid licence issued by their local authority. Updated rules, implemented across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland between 2013 and 2018, were designed to reduce illegal breeding, ensure better oversight, and uphold high welfare standards. However, the enforcement of these regulations has been inconsistent, with significant variations in their application of the rules across different regions and local authorities.

The problem

Despite the existence of these regulations, a Freedom of Information (FOI) survey conducted in 2023 and 2024 reveals serious deficiencies in the enforcement of dog breeding regulations. These include a lack of specialist expertise, inconsistent enforcement practices, and a failure to follow up on public complaints. With over 3,000 licensed breeders in the UK and growing concerns about illegal puppy farms, the current system of oversight is not fulfilling its purpose in protecting animal welfare. The regulations are poorly enforced, with overwhelming approval rates for licences and low levels of formal action taken against non-compliant breeders. There is also a lack of coordination between enforcement bodies and insufficient training for local authority officers, contributing to the failure to regulate the industry adequately. Urgent reforms are needed to improve enforcement and ensure the protection of animal welfare.



Key issues

Inconsistent Enforcement and Approvals

There is a postcode lottery in terms of enforcement capacity across local authorities resulting in an inconsistent enforcement regime characterised by high licence approval levels and low numbers of licence revocations. Between 2018 and 2023, only 35 licences were revoked or suspended out of the 9,882 licences issued, highlighting the lack of action taken.

Local authorities primarily focus on denying new applications or not renewing licences rather than taking more effective actions like revoking existing licences. Licence renewal approvals were extremely high, with rates of 100% in Wales and Northern Ireland, 97% in Scotland, and 94% in England. This suggests that once breeders are licensed, there is little scrutiny and inspection beyond the initial application.

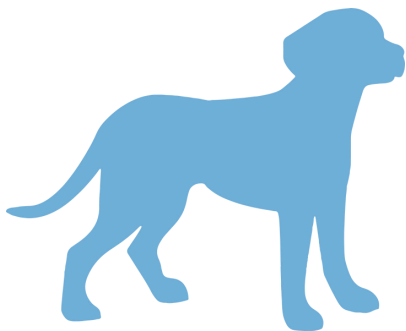
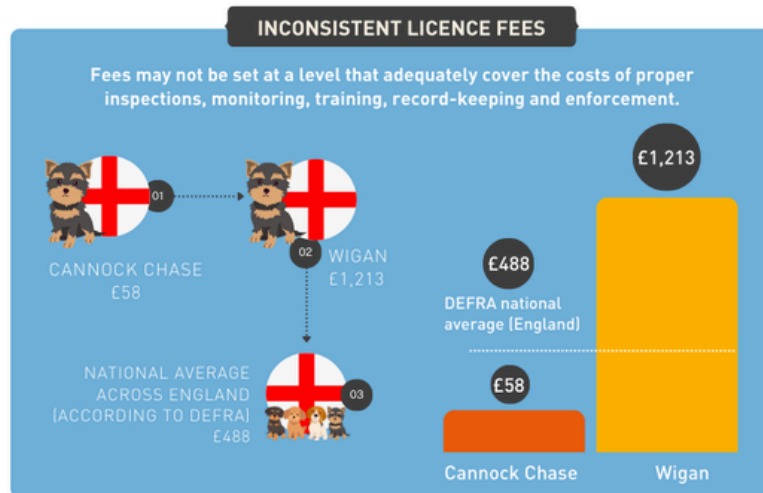
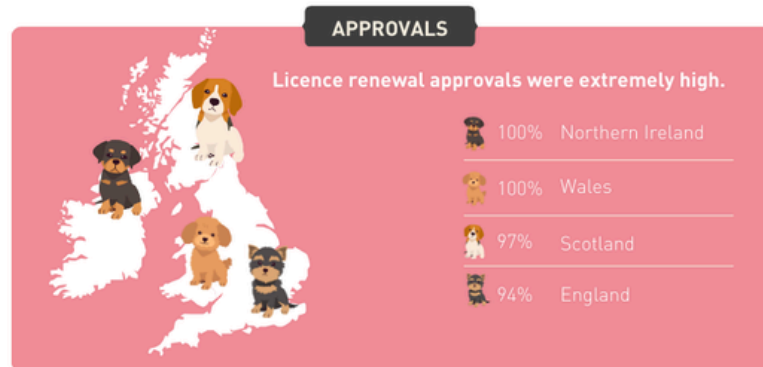
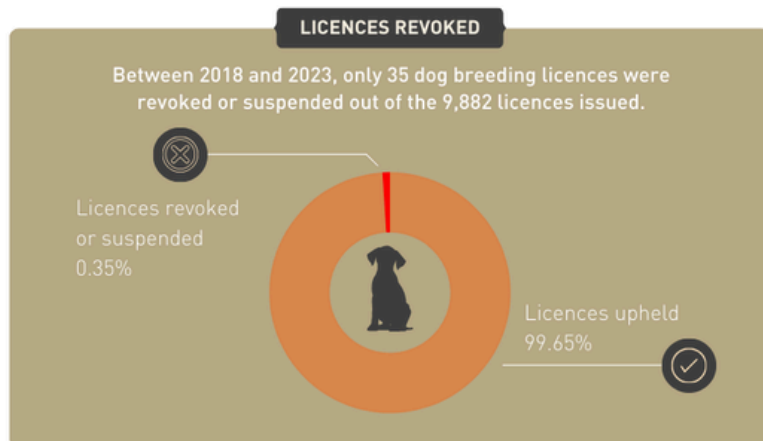
Inspection Deficiencies

While inspections are required by law, the number conducted by Local Authorities has consistently been below expectations. Between 2019 and 2022, Scotland and Northern Ireland had fewer inspections than the number of licences issued.

Even when inspections are conducted, only the minimum statutory inspections are often performed, with few unannounced or follow-up visits. This lack of proactive inspection efforts means many breeders are not monitored effectively, and animal welfare standards are not adequately enforced.

9,882

LICENCES ISSUED NATIONWIDE BETWEEN 2018 AND 2023



Lack of Proactive Enforcement and Follow-up on Complaints

Public complaints about breeders, which numbered 4,164 in England and 449 in Wales between 2018 and 2023, have not led to increased inspections or enforcement actions. Complaints are often dismissed as “unfounded” or categorised as civil matters, with little to no further action taken. There is a significant gap between the number of complaints received and the number of inspections conducted, underlining a lack of follow-through on public concerns about breeders operating under poor conditions.

Specialist Expertise and Data Gaps

The lack of specialist animal welfare expertise among local authority officers is a major issue of concern. 68 authorities have dedicated licensing officers with animal-specific job titles.

This shortage of animal-specific expertise has led to inconsistent enforcement and incomplete record-keeping, with many local authorities unable to track essential data such as litter numbers (a key determinant for requiring a licence). A mere 69 local authorities have consistently recorded litter numbers, a factor that is vital to ensuring compliance with licensing regulations.

Additionally, discrepancies in local authority records and incomplete data reporting highlight the need for better coordination and data management. The variation in reported figures—such as the large difference between DEFRA’s figures and those obtained through FOI requests—suggests that improved data collection and greater transparency are essential to ensure accountability and provide a clearer picture of the industry.

Inconsistent Licence Fees

Licence fees across the UK vary greatly, with some local authorities charging as little as £58 (Cannock Chase), while others charge over £1,000 (Wigan - £1213) for a one-year newly granted (entry level) licence. The average fee for a newly granted licence in England, according to DEFRA’s own figures, is £488. In Wales, Rhondda Cynon Taf charged £120 for a new licence in 2024 and Blaenau Gwent charged £471. In Scotland, South Lanarkshire charged £138 for a new licence in 2024 and West Dunbartonshire charged £467. In Northern Ireland, licence fees are based on numbers of breeding dogs - less than ten, £150, 11-25 - £200, 26-50 - £250 etc.

This disparity suggests that fees may not be set at a level that adequately cover the costs of proper inspections, monitoring, training, record-keeping and enforcement, further undermining the effectiveness of the system and raises questions about the adequacy of funding for local authorities to perform their duties properly.



Conclusions

The system of enforcing dog breeding regulations is fragmented, under-resourced, and ineffective. The LAIA regulations need urgent reform.



STRENGTHENING ENFORCEMENT

Local authorities should take more robust action to revoke or suspend licences for bad breeders.

STANDARDISE DATA

Authorities should consistently record litter numbers and better maintain inspection and complaint and/or resolution records.



LICENCE FEES

Local authorities should ensure that licence fees are adequate and proportionate to cover the full costs of inspections and enforcement activities.

COORDINATION & GUIDANCE

The Government should introduce clearer guidelines for local authorities on enforcing the LAIA (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) regulations.



Without these urgent reforms, the UK dog breeding industry will continue to suffer from inconsistent enforcement and ineffective monitoring, leading to welfare risks for puppies and continuing exploitation of regulatory loopholes by unscrupulous breeders. FOUR PAWS UK is calling on the Government to reform the LAIA regulations and for local authorities to take more robust action with enforcement.

Contact

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FOUR PAWS is the global animal welfare organisation for animals under direct human influence, which reveals suffering, rescues animals in need and protects them. Founded by Heli Dugler and friends in Vienna in 1988, the organisation focuses on companion animals including stray dogs and cats, farm animals and wild animals kept in inappropriate conditions as well as in disaster and conflict zones. With sustainable campaigns and projects, such as its own sanctuaries, FOUR PAWS provides rapid help and long-term protection for suffering animals. www.four-paws.org.uk