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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Four in five dogs and puppies traded in the UK come from unknown sources, new dog breeding investigation reveals

New analysis by the animal welfare charity, Naturewatch Foundation, has found that the majority of dogs and puppies in the UK still come from unknown sources, including unlicensed breeders, illegal breeders and other supply routes, such as puppy smuggling. The charity says stricter oversight of the puppy trade is urgently needed.

At the end of last year, Naturewatch Foundation submitted freedom of information requests to 391 councils across the UK and Ireland to update its Dog Breeding Map of the UK and Ireland - a unique tool that helps prospective puppy buyers find out about dog breeding in their area.

The findings reveal that there are 2,897 licensed breeders across the UK and Ireland, collectively keeping around 26,000 female adult dogs for breeding – of which just over 23,000 are kept in the UK. With around one million dogs and puppies joining UK households each year, Naturewatch Foundation estimates that only 15-20%* come from licensed breeders. Around 6%** of dogs and puppies are imported commercially, with the rest coming from unknown, unlicensed or potentially illegal sources.

Natalie Harney from Naturewatch Foundation said, “Dog lovers will be shocked to learn that most UK dogs and puppies still come from unknown sources. Despite reforms in dog breeding regulations over the past decade, loopholes and underenforcement remain major issues. Plus, with rules varying across nations, it can be difficult for the public to know when a breeder should be licensed. These issues require urgent attention from regulators.

“We strongly encourage anyone thinking about getting a dog or puppy to adopt from a reputable rescue, where many wonderful animals are waiting for their second chance. If rehoming isn’t an option, though, it’s vital to make sure you know your breeder. Ask: Are they licensed? How many dogs are they allowed to keep? Are they happy for you to visit, meet their dogs and see their premises? These are essential questions any prospective puppy buyer should ask. Make sure you check out the Dog Breeding Map of the UK and Ireland during your research.”

The investigation also found that just 34% of local councils could confirm exactly how many dogs the breeders they’d licensed were permitted to keep. Many councils were unable to confirm details such as the number of male dogs, litters of puppies or ‘other’ dogs (such as retired dogs and pet dogs) permitted in their area.

Whilst Naturewatch Foundation’s investigation found the majority of licensed breeders are registered to keep 10 breeding adult dogs or fewer, some are allowed to operate on an industrial scale. In Ireland, four licences allow over 200 adult breeding dogs. Three of those are licensed by Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, with one single premises licensed to keep a staggering 250 female dogs and 100 male dogs for breeding.

Naturewatch Foundation wants to see improvements to dog breeding regulation across the UK and Ireland, increased transparency and improved enforcement arrangements to better protect dogs used for breeding, their puppies and the public.

Anyone concerned about illegal dog breeding near them should report their concerns to their local council. Reports can also be submitted to Naturewatch Foundation’s Hotline4Pets.

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About Naturewatch Foundation: Naturewatch Foundation is a UK-based animal welfare charity dedicated to ending cruelty and improving the lives of animals through campaigning, education and advocacy. For over 30 years, the charity has led initiatives to tackle illegal and unethical practices, including puppy farming, animal experiments and wildlife crime. By working with policymakers, enforcement agencies and the public, Naturewatch Foundation strives to make the world a kinder place for animals.

Notes for editors

- First launched in June 2024, the Dog Breeding Map of the UK and Ireland helps the public find out about licensed dog breeding in their area, including how many dog breeders near them are licensed, how to check if someone is licensed with the council, and the scale of breeding operations near them.
- According to information released by 384 out of 391 councils contacted, there are 2,897 licensed breeders across the UK and Ireland. 62 councils don't licence any dog breeders currently. At least 25,998 adult female dogs are kept for breeding by UK and Irish licensed breeders, with 23,022 kept in UK nations.
- It is estimated licensed breeders in the UK produce between 138,132 and 184,176 puppies annually, equating to *14.6-19.5% of the ~950,000 dogs who join the UK dog population each year. Approximately **5.8% of UK dogs are commercially imported.
- Naturewatch Foundation's analysis of licensed dog breeding data can be found at <https://naturewatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/Licensed-dog-breeding-in-the-UK-and-Ireland-2025-by-Naturewatch-Foundation.pdf>. The Dog Breeding Map of the UK and Ireland is available at <https://www.naturewatch.org/dog-breeding-map>.
- Members of the public who want to report concerns about illegal breeding can find their local authority at <https://www.gov.uk/find-local-council>. Reports can also be made to Naturewatch Foundation's Hotline4Pets at <https://www.naturewatch.org/animal-crime-report>.