Up to 90% of UK puppies may come from unregulated sources, new investigation finds

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Naturewatch Foundation urges UK Government to deliver on promise to “end puppy farming” as most puppies continue to be bred outside of dedicated breeding regulations.

As many as nine in ten puppies in the UK may be bred outside the licensed breeding system, according to new research by Naturewatch Foundation, raising questions about how much of the UK's puppy trade is regulated.

The investigation, based on Freedom of Information requests to local authorities across the UK and Republic of Ireland, found that just 10.5-14% of UK puppies are estimated to come from licensed breeders.

This suggests 86-89.5% of puppies could come from other sources. This includes breeders who fall below the legal licensing threshold, illegal breeders and puppy smuggling operations.

Naturewatch Foundation is urging the UK Government to deliver on its commitment to “end puppy farming” and bring forward its promised public consultation on dog breeding regulation in England.

The investigation also raises concerns about the traceability of breeding dogs, with more than 5,500 fewer female breeding dogs recorded in the system than in Naturewatch Foundation's 2025 research.

Thousands of breeding dogs exit the system

Data obtained by Naturewatch Foundation shows around 17,395 female dogs are kept for licensed breeding in the UK - a dramatic decrease of over 5,500 dogs since 2025.

While the data suggests licensed breeders are moving towards smaller operations with fewer dogs, which the charity welcomes, they are concerned that such a large number of female dogs have apparently exited the system in a short period of time.

Licensed breeders in England and Wales are expected to make rehoming arrangements for ex-breeding dogs, but this is not the case in other nations.

Naturewatch Foundation says this needs to be addressed.

A fragmented puppy trade

The research also highlights the varying scale of licensed breeding operations across the UK and Ireland.

? While the majority of licensed breeders were found to keep 10 or fewer breeding dogs, 27 licensed breeders are permitted to keep more than 50 breeding dogs. Around two-thirds of these larger-scale operators are located in Ireland.
? In Great Britain, the largest licensed breeder identified by the research is authorised by the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk to keep 88 female and 12 male dogs for breeding.
? Three establishments in Northern Ireland are licensed to keep 200 breeding dogs each, making them the largest in the UK. The largest licensed breeding establishment identified in the Republic of Ireland is licensed to keep 300 dogs for breeding.
? The research also found 60 local authorities, including 36 in England, have no licensed dog breeders registered within their areas at all.

UK Government promise to “end puppy farming”

In December 2025, the UK Government published its Animal Welfare Strategy for England, which included a commitment to “end puppy farming” and promised a consultation on improving dog breeding regulation.

Naturewatch Foundation is concerned about the pace of progress since the strategy was published and is calling on the Government to now bring forward the promised consultation without delay.

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Natalie Harney, Campaign Manager said:

“We're deeply concerned that so much of the puppy trade continues to take place outside of regulation. While the current system is far from perfect, that regulation exists to promote animal welfare and provides some level of oversight and accountability.

“The reality is that we have very little visibility of where most puppies are coming from, how they are being bred or the conditions in which they and their parents are being kept. That uncertainty creates risks not only for dogs, but also for the public.

“These findings paint a worrying picture about the UK puppy trade and show why the government must urgently move forward with its commitment to end puppy farming. Dogs are cherished members of many families and they all deserve the best possible start in life.”

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