

BREEDING BEYOND DOGS' LIMITS?



CANINE FERTILITY CLINICS IN THE UK

October 2022





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I've recently had a dog in critical condition due to a horrific pyometra as a result of poor insemination practices and the "trained" person that scanned the dog had misdiagnosed it as a healthy pregnancy.

Veterinary surgeon

Report summary

Canine fertility clinics: the latest UK dog breeding phenomenon. The number of businesses selling breeding procedures and related services for people who breed dogs has increased rapidly in recent years.

A surge in pandemic puppy buying and legal uncertainty have helped fertility clinics to flourish. The impacts are being keenly felt by many, especially dogs and their offspring. Whilst some businesses are operating within the law to provide a specialist service, much of the sector is entirely unregulated and unaccountable.

This report briefly examines the canine fertility clinic sector in the UK and outlines findings from Naturewatch Foundation's survey for veterinary professionals. It also suggests a way forward so that we can begin to tackle the challenges posed by this new sector.

Key findings from the survey include:

- 98% of veterinary professionals are concerned about canine fertility clinics.
- Most veterinary professionals think that commonly advertised canine fertility procedures should only be performed by veterinary surgeons and, in some cases, veterinary nurses.
- 94% of veterinary professionals think that dogs used for breeding should have an annual fitness to breed assessment with a vet.
- Less than a quarter of veterinary professionals support the introduction of an exemption order as a method of regulation.
- Veterinary professionals are seeing the impact of canine fertility clinics in practice.

Our recommendations:

- The RCVS should issue a public statement about canine fertility clinics.
- Defra should establish a taskforce to tackle illegal activity by canine fertility clinics.
- Breeding regulations should be strengthened to curtail irresponsible use of artificial insemination and elective caesareans.
- There should be a structured debate about the appropriate role of assisted canine breeding procedures and who should perform them.
- People with a shared interest in dog health and welfare should work collaboratively on initiatives to improve the welfare of dogs used for breeding and their offspring.
- The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 should be reformed.



Acknowledgements

Naturewatch Foundation is grateful to everyone who participated in and shared our survey for veterinary professionals. We'd also like to thank all of the people who have engaged with us about canine fertility clinics in recent months.

A note about images

Within this report we have used images of dogs that illustrate welfare issues. For the avoidance of doubt, we do not support extreme selective breeding or mutilations.



1. Canine fertility clinics in the UK

The canine fertility sector has grown rapidly in the UK in recent years, and includes clinics, course providers, and suppliers.

A dog welfare crisis, fueled by a boom in dog ownership during the pandemic and cost of living pressures, is underway and likely to worsen. RSPCA and SSPCA research shows that owners are concerned about the increasing cost of caring for their animals, with 19% saying they're worried about being able to afford to feed their dog. More pet food banks are being set up, and rescue and rehoming centres are reporting an increase in relinquishments alongside a slow-down in rehoming. It remains to be seen what effect these factors will have on the canine fertility sector. What's clear is that the impact of irresponsible breeding decisions will be more keenly felt in the current climate.

1.1 What are canine fertility clinics?

'Canine fertility clinics' refers to a wide spectrum of businesses that vary in scale and sophistication. Some are mobile, some are home-based, and some operate from fixed business premises. What they have in common is they advertise at least some of the following assisted breeding procedures and breeding services:

- Artificial insemination
- Ovulation testing (progesterone blood testing and/or vaginal cytology)
- Ultrasound pregnancy scanning
- Semen collection, analysis, storage and/or shipping

Some businesses offer additional services, such as whelping support, puppy rearing, microchipping, DNA testing, vaccinations, amongst others. Some businesses also keep their own male 'stud' dogs or advertise stud dogs on behalf of other owners.

Canine fertility clinics target their services at clients who breed dogs, although a small number also advertise services for people who breed other domestic species. In addition to the clinics themselves, the sector includes businesses that offer training courses in how to perform procedures, as well as suppliers of equipment and materials.

The sector is relatively new and has grown rapidly since 2020. There are at least several hundred canine fertility clinics across much of the United Kingdom. The majority are in England, but there's very active clinics in all of the nations of the UK. Some businesses are veterinary led and/or involve registered veterinary surgeons and registered veterinary nurses. However, most businesses do not have veterinary involvement or alternatively use unregistered personnel.

1.2 How are they regulated?

At least some of the activities and services offered by canine fertility clinics are subject to existing regulation, but the current framework is complex and administered by multiple bodies. Crucially, clinics and personnel that are not registered with the RCVS are not accountable to a particular regulator. Like any business or individual, clinics and their personnel will also have relevant legal duties to conform with. The below diagram shows the different areas of regulation that could apply to fertility clinics in England depending on the services offered or the activities being carried out. This is provided to illustrate the diffuse nature of current regulation and oversight. The picture in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland is similar, with the Scottish SPCA (SSPCA) and USPCA investigating welfare matters in Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively.



2. Why are people concerned about canine fertility clinics?

In addition to a lack of dedicated oversight, there are a number of other issues associated with the canine fertility sector, all of which have the potential to negatively impact dog health and welfare.

2.1 Lack of veterinary involvement

At least some of the services offered by canine fertility clinics are acts of veterinary surgery. Under the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, only a registered veterinary surgeon may practise veterinary surgery.¹ There are exceptions to this to enable other professionals to perform certain acts, but it is the norm for such acts to be expressly exempted in law.² ‘Veterinary surgery’ includes:

- the diagnosis of diseases in, and injuries to, animals including tests performed on animals for diagnostic purposes;
- the giving of advice based upon such diagnosis;
- the medical or surgical treatment of animals; and
- the performance of surgical operations on animals.³

This definition in the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 is broad but there is certainty that taking a blood sample, making a diagnosis, and performing transcervical artificial insemination on a dog are considered acts of veterinary surgery. Registered veterinary nurses may draw blood under the direction of a vet.

Some businesses are providing additional veteri-

nary services that they do not advertise publicly, including operations such as caesarean sections and cherry eye removal. Again, registered veterinary surgeons are not always involved.

Personnel who are performing acts of veterinary surgery unlawfully are clearly putting dog health and welfare at risk. However, the RCVS does not have powers to regulate or investigate unregistered personnel. Instead, this falls to Trading Standards or the police.

2.2 Unethical breeding

The sector has a strong association with facilitating the breeding of breeds and types of dog who typically suffer from poor health and welfare, particularly dogs with brachycephaly. A concern is that a large portion of the sector exists to help people breed from dogs who are otherwise unable to mate or whelp due to their anatomy, physiology and/or pre-existing health conditions, which raises ethical concerns.

In addition, some businesses are using assisted breeding procedures to not only overcome dogs’ inability to reproduce, but to help clients breed increasingly extreme ‘versions’ of dogs. Recent extreme trends include ‘fluffy’ Frenchies, ‘fluffy’ pugs, ‘big rope’ Frenchies, ‘big rope’ English bulldogs, ‘pocket’ bullies, and ‘micro’ bullies, amongst others. In these cases, breeding procedures are being used irresponsibly to facilitate the

1 Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (“VSA 1966”), s 19.

2 Such as under sch 3 VSA 1966 or the Blood Sampling Order 1983 etc.

3 VSA 1966, s 27(1).

Canine Fertility Clinics in the UK

most extreme examples of selective breeding for aesthetics.

Some dogs' conformation and physical features are so exaggerated it is difficult to regard this kind of breeding as anything but animal cruelty, given the almost inevitable health and welfare challenges those dogs will suffer from throughout their lives. Perhaps most concerning of all is that some of these dogs appear to be being kept or sold on as future breeding animals, which raises questions about how far some people are prepared to push dogs.

2.3 Illegal or irresponsible use of medicines

Some businesses supply and administer categories of veterinary and unlicensed medicines that they are not authorised to. Of particular concern is the use of POM-V medicines, such as oxytocin, to interfere with or accelerate canine reproduction, and the misuse of antibiotics. Veterinary medicines classified as POM-V are heavily controlled and may only be prescribed by a registered veterinary surgeon. Misuse poses serious risks to animal and human health, and raises questions about where unqualified people are getting their illegal supply from.

2.4 Criminality

Some parts of the sector have links to other forms of criminality. This includes serious organised crime and other animal welfare offending, such as illegal cosmetic mutilations including ear cropping and tail docking. Some businesses also have links to the hugely exploitative illegal puppy trade.

2.5 Impact on the public

There is a tendency for businesses to display or refer to unofficial accreditations and/or qualifications in their advertising. It is unclear whether the client base of clinics appreciate that these are often not markers of quality and do not qualify personnel to perform acts of veterinary surgery. These should largely be regarded as marketing tools that have the potential to mislead the public into believing that businesses are offering a safe and legitimate service. More broadly, there is a risk of public perception of ethical and acceptable breeding being undermined by clinics that do not prioritise health, welfare and temperament.

2.6 Impact on the veterinary profession

Registered veterinary professionals are seeing impacts in practice and will be expected to continue to deal with the aftermath of avoidable, irresponsible breeding decisions. This could impact the morale of a profession that is already under significant pressure.⁴ The veterinary profession is also at risk of being undermined by canine fertility clinics that provide services they should not, particularly if clients and members of the public begin to perceive that providers of veterinary services do not require a high level of skill and training. Registered veterinary professionals train for many years; by contrast, fertility courses typically last a matter of days or even hours.

⁴ Vet Times, 'Plea for profession to 'stand together' amid breaking point fear' (14 October 2022) <<https://www.vettimes.co.uk/news/plea-for-profession-to-stand-together-amid-breaking-point-fear/>> accessed 15 October 2022.



3. Assisted canine breeding procedures and ethics

One of the key issues in the debate about canine fertility clinics is the appropriate and ethical use of artificial insemination.

Canine artificial insemination, if used responsibly, can improve breed health by giving breeders wider access to genetic material.⁵ However, the use of artificial insemination to achieve pregnancies in dogs who cannot otherwise mate or whelp raises serious ethical concerns. Improper use and performance also risks causing physical and psychological trauma to dogs.⁶

European animal welfare and veterinary organisations have adopted formal position statements against the irresponsible use of artificial insemination:

The *Responsible Dog Breeding Guidelines* state that, “Artificial insemination must not be used as a default or to overcome problems due to the inability of the dogs to mate naturally. It may only be considered under exceptional circumstances, and to do so requires strict justification.”⁷

FECAVA and FVE state, “Veterinarians should not perform artificial insemination to overcome physical disabilities of the dog and consider it an accepted necessity for certain breeds. Any dog should be able to mate naturally.”⁸

5 GCW England and KM Millar, ‘The ethics and role of AI with fresh and frozen semen in dogs’ (2008) 43 (suppl 2) *Reprod Dom Anim* <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1439-0531.2008.01157.x>> accessed 28 April 2022.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Welfare in Pet Trade, ‘Responsible Dog Breeding Guidelines’ (3 November 2020) <https://food.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-11/aw_platform_plat-conc_guide_dog-breeding.pdf> accessed 17 August 2022.

8 FVE and FECAVA, ‘FECAVA, FVE Position Paper on breeding healthy dogs: the effect of selective breeding on the health

The Fédération Cynologique Internationale also state that, “Any dog should be able to mate naturally. Artificial insemination should not be used to overcome physical disabilities of the dog.”⁹

FVE and FECAVA also adopt a position on caesareans that, “Breeders and veterinarians should not consider caesarean sections ‘normal’ or ‘breed typical’. Caesarean sections are an emergency procedure and any bitch that cannot give natural birth due to anatomical or inherited features should be excluded from further breeding. If the breeder expects the bitch to need [a] caesarean section beforehand, the bitch should not be mated. Any dog should be able to give birth naturally.”¹⁰

Any decision to use artificial insemination clearly requires careful consideration. Experts England and Millar state that its use should be in the “best interests” of the female dog and that a “comprehensive reproductive assessment” should first be carried out by a vet.¹¹

and welfare of dogs’ (June 2018) <https://fve.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/059_Extreme_breeding_Final_adopted.pdf> accessed 17 August 2022.

9 FCI, ‘FCI International Breeding Strategies’ (February 2010) <<https://www.fci.be/medias/ELE-REG-STR-en-451.pdf>> accessed 28 April 2022.

10 FVE and FECAVA, ‘FECAVA, FVE Position Paper on breeding healthy dogs: the effect of selective breeding on the health and welfare of dogs’ (June 2018) <https://fve.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/059_Extreme_breeding_Final_adopted.pdf> accessed 17 August 2022.

11 GCW England and KM Millar, ‘The ethics and role of AI with fresh and frozen semen in dogs’ (2008) 43 (suppl 2) *Reprod Dom Anim* <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1439-0531.2008.01157.x>> accessed 28 April 2022.

4. Recent developments

What has the UK Government said about canine fertility clinics?

Defra, July 2022

“Fertility clinics which offer the diagnosis of diseases, perform tests for diagnostic purposes, or carry out medical or surgical treatment such as artificial insemination on dogs, are subject to the requirements of The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. The 1966 Act prohibits anyone who is not a veterinary surgeon registered with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) from undertaking any non-exempt procedure. Concerns about a person’s legitimacy to practice should be reported to the RCVS as Regulator for the Act.

“Those operating canine fertility clinics, and owners using their services, are required under The Animal Welfare Act 2006 to protect the animals involved from harm and to provide for their welfare in line with good practice. A breach of these provisions may lead to imprisonment, a fine, or both.

“The 2006 Act is backed up by the statutory Code of Practice for the Welfare of Dogs which provides owners and keepers with general welfare information, including a specific section on how to protect them from pain, suffering, injury and disease. That section of the Code of Practice recommends owners seek veterinary advice before breeding their dogs and that owners should take all reasonable steps to ensure that they are able to provide the care required during pregnancy.”¹²

¹² UK Parliament, ‘Dogs: Animal Breeding - Question for Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs UIN 31248’ (13 July 2022) <<https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-07-05/31248>> accessed 1 October 2022.

Progress in the Republic of Ireland

Earlier this year, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and Marine took evidence from witnesses including veterinarian, Tim Kirby, and the Veterinary Council of Ireland (VCI) about canine fertility clinics as part of the Committee’s post-enactment scrutiny of the Republic of Ireland’s Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013.

Witnesses raised many similar concerns to those being expressed in the UK. Niamh Muldoon, CEO of the VCI, stated as part of her evidence that, “Canine fertility clinics offering services such as taking blood samples, artificial insemination, semen analysis and diagnostic testing, without such services being delivered by a registered veterinary practitioner operating from a premises the subject of a certificate of suitability could be committing an offence and be liable to prosecution.”

The Committee has since recommended that canine fertility clinics should be regulated,¹³ although it has not elaborated on how it thinks this should be done. According to a statement read out during one of the evidence sessions, the Government of Ireland is preparing legislation.¹⁴ The authors of this report have requested further information about this.

¹³ Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, ‘Issues impacting dog welfare in Ireland’ (October 2022) <https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_agriculture_food_and_the_marine/reports/2022/2022-10-13_issues-impacting-dog-welfare-in-ireland_en.pdf> accessed 17 October 2022.

¹⁴ Oireachtas, ‘Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine debate - Wednesday, 23 Feb 2022’ (February 2022) <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/joint_committee_on_agriculture_food_and_the_marine/2022-02-23/2/> accessed 17 October 2022.

5. Veterinary professionals' survey

Between June - August 2022, Naturewatch Foundation surveyed and interviewed veterinary professionals in the UK to gather their views about canine fertility clinics.

The survey consisted of five open and closed questions. In total, 770 UK veterinary professionals responded, and 891 comments were submitted. 21 follow-up interviews were conducted during the survey period. The given profession of the 770 respondents is as follows: 380 veterinary surgeons, 331 veterinary nurses, 59 other veterinary professionals ranging from auxiliary staff to clinical animal behaviourists.

Key finding #1: The vast majority of veterinary professionals are concerned about canine fertility clinics.

The results suggest the vast majority of veterinary professionals are concerned about canine fertility clinics. 98% of respondents expressed concern, with 80% stating they were "very concerned". This was relatively consistent amongst veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses and other veterinary professionals, although it's notable that amongst veterinary surgeons, almost 100% of respondents expressed concern.

In comments, respondents' concerns and observations about fertility clinics can be summarised as follows:

- *Personnel* - the personnel involved generally lack the training, qualifications and/or expertise to provide the services or advice they do.
- *Legality* - unqualified personnel are overstepping into acts of veterinary surgery, including acts of diagnosis, which may be incorrect. Per-

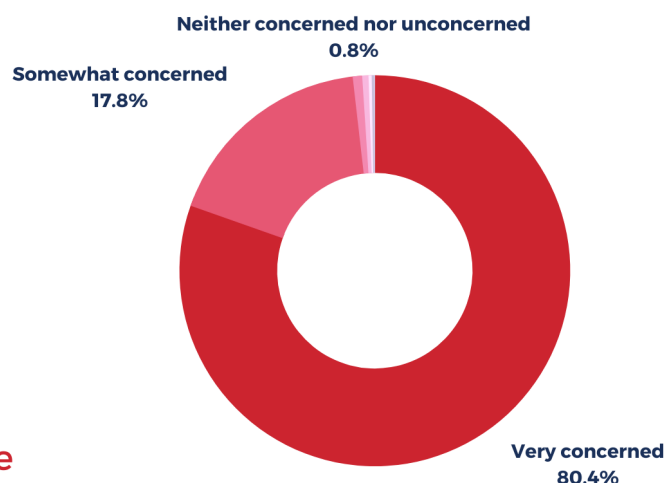
sonnel are portraying themselves as qualified to perform veterinary procedures, which is misleading clients into thinking they are using a quality service. Some clinics have links to organised crime or other forms of illegality, such as ear cropping.

- *Motives* - canine fertility clinics are generally motivated by money, rather than dog health and welfare.
- *Quality of service* - canine fertility clinics generally offer a poor quality service. For instance, personnel do not provide responsible or sound advice to clients. They do not adequately prepare clients for the realities of breeding, including the time and financial commitment involved. In particular, they do not prepare clients for the potential costs and risks should a female dog require an emergency caesarean. They do not provide clients with information about out of hours support.
- *Impact* - canine fertility clinics are impacting dog health and welfare in multiple ways. Dogs are not receiving appropriate care or veterinary intervention due to incorrect attempts at diagnosis. Suitability for breeding is not being taken into consideration and dogs with poor welfare are being bred. Inexperienced and unprepared clients are being encouraged to breed. Intervention, such as caesareans, is being normalised. They are also having a negative impact on breeders' relationships with the veterinary profession, as well as the public's perception of veterinary services and ethical breeding. The veterinary profession is

How do you feel about canine fertility clinics?

98%

of veterinary professionals are concerned about canine fertility clinics



further impacted by the aftermath of treating: 1. dogs who have received poor care or misdiagnosis; 2. dogs who require emergency caesareans; and, 3. dogs who suffer with poor life-long health and welfare due to irresponsible breeding decisions made possible by the use of assisted procedures. The veterinary profession also feels undermined and devalued due to a perceived lack of action by the authorities.

Additionally, ethics was a significant theme throughout respondents' comments. Multiple respondents expressed concerns about:

- Canine fertility clinics promoting and facilitating unethical breeding.
- The types of dogs being bred using canine fertility clinic services, particularly bullbreeds and other dogs with brachycephaly, and their suitability for breeding.
- The use of assisted breeding procedures and reliance on caesareans to enable breeding from dogs who could not otherwise reproduce.
- More generally, decisions to breed in light of the UK's growing dog population and pressures on animal rescue and rehoming organisations.

Some respondents commented that there could be benefits to a well-regulated and ethical sector. For example, if clinics focused on providing clients with high quality advice and support about breeding and reproductive health, this could help improve overall dog health and welfare. However, for some respondents, this is not sufficient justification for a sector which they associate with facilitating low welfare and unethical breeding.

Key finding #2: Most veterinary professionals think that services commonly offered by canine fertility clinics should only be performed by veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.

There are relatively low levels of support amongst veterinary professionals for lay people *with* specific training performing the five services most commonly offered by canine fertility clinics, namely intravaginal artificial insemination, progesterone testing, vaginal cytology, semen collection, and ultrasound scanning to diagnose pregnancy. There is virtually no support for lay people *without* specific training performing any of these services.

These results strongly suggest that most veterinary professionals regard these to be services that

Canine Fertility Clinics in the UK

Intravaginal Artificial Insemination



Progesterone testing



Vaginal cytology



Semen collection



Ultrasound pregnancy scanning



only veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses should provide. It is notable that overall, only 44% of respondents support veterinary nurses performing intravaginal artificial insemination. Amongst veterinary surgeons, this rose to 50%.

Overall, less than one in five respondents support laypeople with specific training performing intravaginal artificial insemination, vaginal cytology and ultrasound scanning to diagnose pregnancy. Only 6% of respondents support lay people with specific training carrying out progesterone blood testing.

The relatively low support amongst veterinary professionals for lay people performing intravaginal artificial insemination is at variance with the RCVS's position that this is a minor procedure suitable for exemption.¹⁵

Who should be involved in providing canine fertility services also often came up in respondents' comments. Most comments reflected the above findings that only qualified veterinary professionals should perform these services, and some respondents stated they would like to see the tasks that registered veterinary nurses can perform broadened to allow them to take on additional responsibilities over and above permitting lay people to carry out certain activities.

Respondents who were in favour of, or open to, lay people having some involvement in providing services emphasised the importance of rigorous training, clarity over what non-vets can and cannot do, and oversight by a registered veterinary surgeon. A small number of respondents made reference to AI Technicians who work in the farming industry, although views about this were mixed. Some thought that following the farming sector could work, whilst others thought that this is an inappropriate parallel due to the anatomical differences between species.

¹⁵ RCVS, 'Report to Defra on the Review of Minor Procedures Regime and paraprofessional regulation' (22 March 2019) <<https://www.rcvs.org.uk/document-library/report-to-defra-on-the-review-of-minor-procedures-regime-and/>> accessed 27 April 2022.

Differences between professionals

There are some variations between professionals in relation to some services. For instance, 27% of veterinary surgeons indicated support for lay people with specific training performing intravaginal artificial insemination. This is in contrast to 7% of veterinary nurses, and 12% of other professionals.

Similarly, 24% of veterinary surgeons indicated that lay people with specific training should be permitted to perform ultrasound scanning. However, this fell to 9% and 14% amongst veterinary nurses and other veterinary professionals respectively.

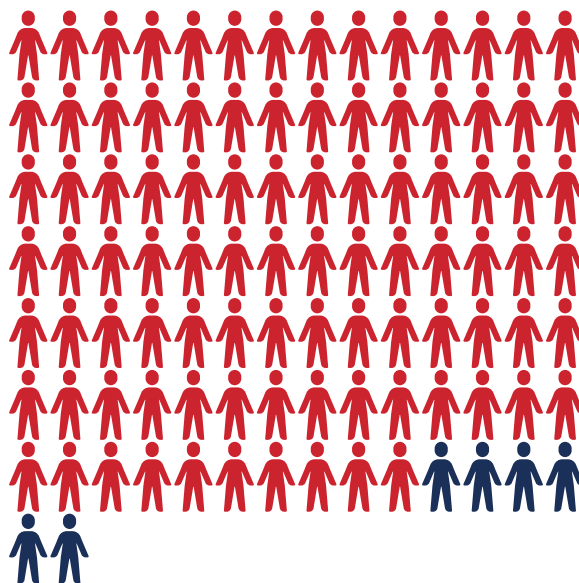
This suggests there may be differences between veterinary professionals' perceptions of the level of skill, expertise and professional judgement required to perform some services.

Key finding #3 The vast majority of veterinary professionals think that dogs used for breeding should have an annual fitness to breed assessment with a vet.

Overall, 94% of respondents agreed that dogs used for breeding should have a mandatory annual fitness to breed assessment with a vet. However, support was slightly lower amongst veterinary surgeons (91%) compared with veterinary nurses (98%) and other veterinary professionals (95%).

Whilst there was generally high levels of support, some respondents who provided additional comments about this question expressed concerns about the challenge of policing this and ensuring veterinary advice is complied with. Others stated that it would be necessary to establish a standard or guidelines. Some also highlighted certain contents or criteria that they thought should be addressed in a fitness to breed assessment.

94% support dogs having an annual fitness to breed assessment with a vet



Key finding #4 Veterinary professionals favour dedicated regulatory oversight by local authorities or the RCVS. Support for the use of exemption orders is relatively low.

In comments, respondents frequently expressed concerns about a lack of regulation, oversight and/or accountability. When asked about specific regulatory options, less than a quarter of veterinary professionals (23%) support the use of exemption orders to regulate the activities of canine fertility clinics, although support was higher amongst veterinary surgeons (27%) compared with veterinary nurses (21%) and other veterinary professionals (15%). Overall, 8% of respondents answered “don’t know” when asked if they were in favour of this regulatory mechanism.

Veterinary professionals showed the greatest level of support for local authority licensing (88%). This was consistent across veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses, although support was low-

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er amongst other veterinary professionals (83%). Overall, 77% of respondents supported regulation of paraprofessionals by the RCVS, although 10% answered “don’t know”.

Respondents were invited to provide additional comments about possible solutions. Less than 10% of respondents did so, but the points raised were mixed. Some respondents raised concerns about the term “paraprofessional” and the involvement of lay people in performing any fertility services. Others were strongly in favour of RCVS oversight. Some comments raised concerns about local authority licensing; these focused on the challenges local authorities currently face regulating dog breeders and/or perceived lack of expertise or resources within local authorities to regulate canine fertility clinics. Some comments focused less on who should regulate, instead highlighting ideal features of any framework, including the need for rigorous training, a system of registration, the ability to impose sanctions, and the ability to inspect businesses.

Clearly, these findings should not be considered in isolation given the low levels of support for lay people performing the most commonly offered procedures shown earlier. However, what these results suggest is that veterinary professionals think that if people who are not registered veterinary

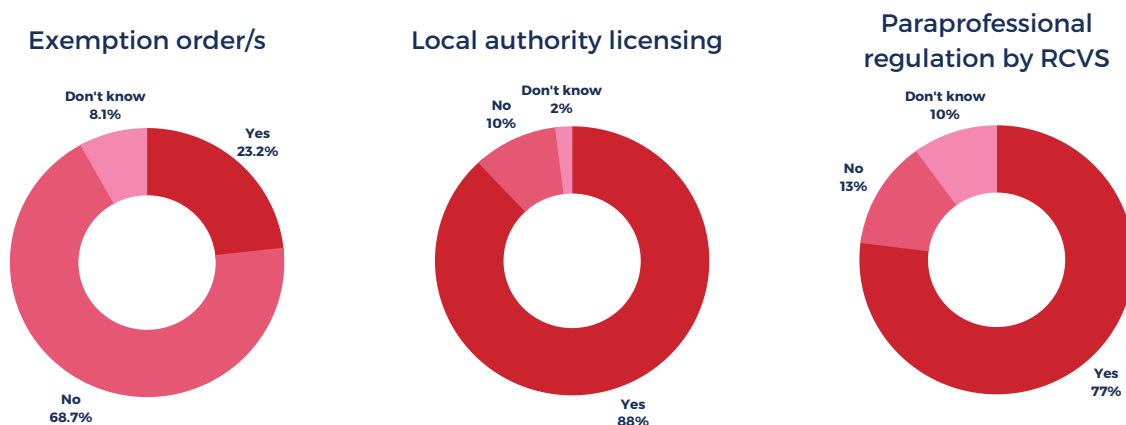
surgeons or registered veterinary nurses are to be involved in delivering canine fertility services, the regulatory framework that governs them should involve dedicated oversight by a regulatory body to which personnel are accountable.

Key finding #5 Some veterinary professionals have experienced negative impacts from canine fertility clinics in practice.

Some respondents highlighted trends they have experienced in practice that they attribute to the impact of canine fertility clinics, including:

- An increase in cases of pyometra (womb infection), which some respondents attribute to poor technique and lack of regard for sterility during the performance of artificial insemination.
- Issues with misdiagnosis by lay scanners, including diagnosing pyometra as pregnancy causing clients to delay seeking appropriate veterinary treatment.
- Issues with lay scanners estimating litter sizes, leading to accusations of vets ‘stealing’ puppies.
- An increase in clients enquiring about elective caesareans.
- Clients following poor advice about puppy

Are you in favour of any of the following methods of regulation?



care and whelping.

- Inadequate aftercare following a caesarean at a fertility clinic.
- Wound infections following treatment at a fertility clinic.
- Orphaned puppies dying due to inadequate care by a fertility clinic or inexperienced breeder following poor advice.
- Misuse of veterinary medicines, including illegal prescribing and overuse of antibiotics.
- Clinics failing to keep or provide client histories.

A number of respondents highlighted specific examples in comments and during interviews, which demonstrate the serious risks that canine fertility clinics can pose:

“I’ve recently had a dog in critical condition due to a horrific pyometra as a result of poor insemination practices and the “trained” person that scanned the dog had misdiagnosed it as a healthy pregnancy.” - Veterinary surgeon

“I have seen a uterus being perforated by a lay-person performing inseminations.” - Veterinary surgeon

“I have personally been contacted by one and asked if they could use my name and RCVS number so that they would appear to be above board - I refused but then realised they know my name so there is nothing stopping them searching for my name and RCVS number online and doing it anyway!” - Veterinary surgeon

“Another client... had a very aggressive dog who had bitten and put someone in hospital. This dog was later chosen to be bred from and inseminated using the sperm of a sibling.” - Clinical animal behaviourist

“The participant has seen a dog with a trauma to the cervix from AI where she had a foreign body that looked like an AI straw stuck in the wall of her

cervix and vagina. This was very challenging to correct. The participant has seen a lot of dogs that have been scanned by lay people and pregnancy has been mis-diagnosed. For example, where pregnancy has been confirmed with multiple puppies but they are actually dead or there’s a very large single puppy. The difficulty giving birth to a large single pup has led to an emergency c-section or dogs being PTS due to the owner not being able to afford this.

“The participant has also seen swelling and haematoma around blood sampling sites. They’ve also seen dogs who have been given human contraception to regulate oestrus which doesn’t work leading to phantom pregnancy and mammary enlargement associated with that.” - Veterinary surgeon

“The participant has had a client with a dog who was a cropped bully (possibly a ‘micro’ bully) and he was under a contract with the breeder. The man who brought him in believed he was under the obligation that at any point, the breeder could recall the dog to a fertility clinic. The dog was taken inside and the owner didn’t know what happened to the dog in the clinic. The participant suspects they were collecting semen from him. The loopholes and ethical questions were huge. They [the participant’s veterinary team] advised the dog should not be bred from as he couldn’t breathe, he had BOAS, he had elbow dysplasia. That animal should not be having semen collected from him, but they would likely be getting a huge amount of money from the dog’s offspring.” - Veterinary nurse

“The participant said they had a client come in who said they were a scanner and they’d decided their dog was pregnant. However, the dog couldn’t stand because their belly was almost touching the floor. The participant said their colleague scanned her and it turned out the dog had a tumour and a belly full of fluid.... The dog had to be put to sleep because it was too late.” - Veterinary surgeon

Key finding #6 Some veterinary professionals are concerned about the relationship between the veterinary profession and the breeding community and would like this to improve.

A number of respondents expressed concern about the relationship between the veterinary profession and the breeding community. Some comments suggested that fertility clinics had exacerbated this, whilst others implied this is a longer-standing issue. Some respondents expressed a desire to see breeders and vets work more closely together so that breeders can access good quality advice and support, and vets can help improve overall dog health and welfare. Some respondents highlighted the importance of taking a collaborative approach to solving some of the challenges posed by fertility clinics to avoid alienating members of the breeding community and/or driving practices out of sight.

6. What next? Our recommendations

Tackling the challenges posed by the growth in the canine fertility sector must be a collective effort. No single organisation or sector can solve these issues. Working collaboratively to protect dog health and welfare is the most important solution.

The RCVS should issue a public statement about canine fertility clinics

The above survey results strongly indicate that veterinary professionals consider canine fertility services to be veterinary services. In light of these findings, and the concerns expressed by respondents, it would be helpful in the short-term for the RCVS to release a statement about the animal welfare risks associated with using unregistered canine fertility clinics that perform acts of veterinary surgery. This statement should include advice for members of the public. There is precedent for this kind of intervention by the RCVS.¹⁶

Defra should establish a taskforce to tackle illegal activity by canine fertility clinics

The growth of the canine fertility sector is complex and multifaceted. The regulatory landscape is diffuse, the potential impacts are many, and there are multiple stakeholder views to take into account. However, parts of the sector are posing serious risks to dog welfare and the wider public and urgent action is required. There should be a coordinated effort to bring together representatives from government, regulatory bodies, and veterinary and welfare organisations to develop and implement proposals to tackle the most urgent challenges posed by the sector.

¹⁶ RCVS, 'A statement on 'anaesthesia-free dental procedures' for cats and dogs' (21 October 2014) <<https://www.rcvs.org.uk/document-library/a-statement-on-anaesthesia-free-dental-procedures-for-cats-dogs/>> accessed 1 October 2022.

Breeding regulations should be strengthened to curtail irresponsible use of artificial insemination and elective caesareans

There is general consensus that using artificial insemination to overcome the inability of dogs to mate naturally is unethical and that caesarean sections should be considered an emergency operation, rather than an inevitable part of breeding for some dogs. To curtail the irresponsible use of artificial insemination and elective caesareans, breeding regulations should be strengthened to ensure that dogs who can reasonably be expected to require this kind of intervention due to their physical inability to mate or whelp are excluded from breeding.

There should be a structured debate about the appropriate role of assisted canine breeding procedures and who should perform them

It is clear that action should be taken to curtail and prevent fertility clinics operating outside the current law and/or risking dog welfare. However, there is also a wider debate to be had about the role of assisted canine breeding procedures and related services. It would be useful for sectors and people with relevant expertise to come together to agree when it may or may not be appropriate for assisted breeding procedures to be used to help prevent misuse, aid understanding and inform future policy-making. Clearly, dog health and welfare should be the overriding concern in this dis-

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cussion. The debate about who should perform procedures should also take place. Whilst some procedures are clearly acts of veterinary surgery, there is less certainty about others, and this must be addressed so that regulation can be developed as appropriate.

People with a shared interest in dog health and welfare should work collaboratively on initiatives to improve the welfare of dogs used for breeding and their offspring

To combat misinformation and unethical practices, groups should come together to ensure that those who are interested in dog breeding can access high quality information. Focus should be placed on ensuring prospective breeders, not just prospective dog owners, are well informed so they can make responsible choices.

The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 should be reformed

A medium- to long-term goal should be reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, which is out of date and ill-equipped to deal with contemporary challenges, such as those posed by canine fertility clinics. Crucially, any new legislation should ensure that any person who is involved in providing veterinary services is appropriately trained, verifiable, accountable, and works to an ethical standard. Penalties for providing veterinary services illegally should also be strengthened.



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