

# DOG BREEDING PRACTICES MUST CHANGE: Welfare cost of cuteness

## BRIEFING FOR POLICYMAKERS

### POLICY CONTEXT

Some canine breeding practices are leading to animal welfare issues which are in contravention of the [Animal Welfare Act, 2006](#).<sup>1</sup>

Irresponsible breeding or sourcing of animals is the top concern for veterinarians in the UK, with over half (55%) citing it as the most pressing issue.<sup>2</sup>

Unethical breeding practices mean that owners acquire sick, inbred animals, which often live in pain and have behavioural issues. They frequently require expensive veterinary treatment and may be abandoned.

Societal fashion for certain 'cute' characteristics in dogs is leading to unsustainable demand, which in turn is fuelling poor breeding practices, high prices for puppies, the growth of puppy farms, and the illegal importation of pregnant, and potentially diseased dogs.

We urgently need to combine modern technological understanding of genetics with age old breeder skills to selectively breed new traits for health and vigour.

### KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Despite clear evidence that the breeding practices of certain dog breeds lead to animals suffering from a range of different conformational malformations causing pain, discomfort and life limiting conditions, some breed clubs have followed societal fashion for 'cute' dogs, prioritising the aesthetics, rather than the health of animals.<sup>3</sup>

Many breeds are facing painful and life-limiting conditions, requiring expensive veterinary care, which are caused by poor and outdated breeding practices.<sup>4</sup> University of Surrey's research on canine Chiari-like malformation (CM) and syringomyelia (SM) has shone a spotlight on the plight of the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel (CKCS) and other brachycephalic (flat-faced) dogs and the urgent need for change.<sup>5</sup>

The Norwegian Supreme Court has banned the breeding of the Cavalier King Charles Spaniel and placed restrictions on the breeding of Bulldogs.<sup>6</sup> The Dutch have introduced legislation to ban all extremely brachycephalic dogs and rolled out a national campaign against ownership of flat-faced dogs. The Finnish and the Swedish CKCS Club has given the green light for a crossbreeding programme to improve the health of the Cavalier.

Whilst the UK has appropriate legislation, no case has ever been brought to court to test it. Change needs to happen and should not require prosecutions to achieve it.

Canine Chiari Malformation expert resources can be found [here](#) and [here](#).

1. Legislation.gov.uk. (2018). [The Animal Welfare \(Licensing of Activities Involving Animals\) \(England\) Regulations 2018](#)

2. Association, B.V. (n.d.). [Vets call on Government to license unregulated canine breeding services to help clamp down on irresponsible dog breeding](#). British Veterinary Association.

3. Crispin, S. (2011). The Advisory Council on the Welfare Issues of Dog Breeding. *The Veterinary Journal*, 189(2), pp.129-131. Asher, L., Diesel, G., Summers, J.F., McGreevy, P.D. and Collins, L.M. (2009). [Inherited defects in pedigree dogs. Part 1: Disorders related to breed standards](#). *The Veterinary Journal*, 182(3), pp.402-411.

O'Neill, D.G., McMillan, K.M., Church, D. and Brodbelt, D. (2023). [Dog breeds and conformations in the UK in 2019](#). *Vet Compass canine demography and some consequent welfare implications*.

4. Mata, F and Mata, A (2023) [Investigating the relationship between inbreeding and life expectancy in dogs: mongrels live longer than pure breeds](#). *Zoological Science*

5. Rusbridge, C. and Knowler, P. (2021). [The Need for Head Space: Brachycephaly and Cerebrospinal Fluid Disorders](#)

6. Supreme Court of Norway. (2023). [Breeding of Cavalier King Charles Spaniels is a violation of the Animal Welfare Act while breeding of English Bulldogs under a certain breeding program is not](#).

## CONSEQUENCES OF INBREEDING

**“Exaggerated physical features and inherited diseases can cause serious welfare problems in pedigree dogs.”**

*RSPCA<sup>7</sup>*

The impact of extreme dog breeding conformities is well understood in the veterinary community and advances in science have improved our ability to analyse genetics.<sup>8</sup>

In 2008, a BBC One investigative documentary, [Pedigree Dogs Exposed](#), highlighted the impact on animal health that inbreeding can cause. The inherent problem with inbred dogs is linked to the practice of breeding close relatives, including grandfathers with granddaughters. The full closure of the Kennel Club breeder registers in 1971, resulting in a limited gene pool, has inevitably led to declining health outcomes for dogs. By accentuating certain characteristics, animals can suffer a lifetime of wide-ranging physical and mental health problems; owners face unaffordable costs for veterinary services, often for incurable conditions; and the dogs experience lower life expectancy than might be expected from healthy dogs.

In 2009, the RSCPA commissioned an independent report on Pedigree dog breeding<sup>9</sup> and the Kennel Club agreed to review breed guidelines with the individual breed clubs. However, for some breeds, very little has changed, indeed their plight has deteriorated, with social media glamorising flat-faced dogs and exaggerated features in animals, the market for these unhealthy animals has grown rapidly.

### WHEN BREEDING GOES WRONG

There are many health conditions caused by inbreeding.<sup>10</sup> Shining a spotlight on the popular Cavalier King Charles Spaniel (CKCS), as a prime example of a dog which has been bred from a very small gene pool, is illustrative of why practice needs to change.

It is common for CKCS to suffer from multiple health conditions, the median is six conditions per dog at 6 years old.<sup>11</sup> CKCS are known to suffer from the painful disease Chiari-like malformation (CM) and syringomyelia (SM). CM and SM are inherited, and the complex inheritance involves several unknown genes. Syringomyelia is characterised by the development of fluid-filled cavities within the spinal cord. In dogs this is often associated with a complex developmental malformation of the skull and upper neck vertebrae called Chiari-like malformation. CM is a developmental condition which causes a change in the shape of the skull and the bones at the top of the neck, resulting in a reduced space for the brain and spinal cord to fit into. The conditions affect several small brachycephalic (short-nosed) dog breeds but is more seen in the CKCS and Chihuahuas.<sup>12</sup>

Syringomyelia represents a serious welfare concern due to the neuro disability that it causes, including signs of weakness, fictive scratch, scoliosis (twisted spine) and poor balance and coordination. Chiari-malformation is almost ubiquitous in some toy dog breeds and causes pain impacting quality of life. Brain scans clearly show the impact of this condition on CKCS as the brain and spinal cord overcrowding causes the dogs to live in constant pain. Dogs often need to be treated with strong and lifelong painkillers.

Unsurprisingly, pain can cause behavioural problems, frequently leading to Cavaliers being surrendered to rescue centres. 70% of dogs surrendered into Cavalier breed specific rescue centres suffer from Chiari-pain and syringomyelia.<sup>13</sup> The sad fact is that the Cavalier breed is in deep trouble. No amount of selective breeding will help the health of these dogs, there are simply too few healthy specimens left.<sup>14</sup>

7. Rooney, N. and Sargan, D. (n.d.). [Pedigree dog breeding in the UK: a major welfare concern?](#) [online]

8. Broeckx, B.J.G. (2020). [The dog 2.0: Lessons learned from the past](#). *Theriogenology*, 150.

9. Rooney, N. and Sargan, D. (n.d.). [Pedigree dog breeding in the UK: a major welfare concern?](#) [online]

10. Bannasch, D., Famula, T., Donner, J., Anderson, H., Honkanen, L., Batchler, K., Safra, N., Thomasy, S. and Rebhun, R. (2021). [The Effect of Inbreeding, Body Size and Morphology on Health in Dog Breeds](#). *Canine Medicine and Genetics*

11. Health and Welfare Challenges in Cavalier King Charles Spaniels (CKCS): Surrender Reasons and Disease in a Rescue population - R Moseley Poster BSAVA congress 2024 Manchester

12. Knowler, S.P., Anna-Mariam Kiviranta, McFadyen, A., Jokinen, T.S., La, R.M. and Rusbridge, C. (2017). [Craniometric Analysis of the Hindbrain and Craniocervical Junction of Chihuahua, Affenpinscher and Cavalier King Charles Spaniel Dogs With and Without Syringomyelia Secondary to Chiari-Like Malformation](#). *PLOS ONE*, 12(1).

13. See 12.

14. The Institute of Canine Biology. (n.d.). [Cavaliers are in trouble](#).

## PUTTING ANIMAL WELFARE FIRST

The pedigree dog industry is big business. Breeders are often well remunerated for their puppies. Winning show dogs are valuable assets for their owners, not only in prize money but as breed specimens. Dog shows, such as Crufts, continue to celebrate dogs with health problems. Whilst it might be argued there is no safe breeding for some species, demand is such that unscrupulous breeders are profiteering and organised crime linked to puppy farming is a growing reality.

The Kennel Club is the principal organisation in the UK devoted to dog health, welfare, and training. They hold the UK's largest registration database for pedigree dogs, the Pet Log database and certify members of The Kennel Club Assured Breeder programme, the only scheme in the UK to monitor breeders and protect the welfare of puppies and breeding bitches.

The Kennel Club has highlighted the welfare crisis faced by brachycephalic dogs but has been reluctant to advocate for changes to breed guidelines. Recommendations focus on 'collaborative actions' including: 'Health screening; educating uninformed puppy buyers and breeders who place looks over health; mandatory contracts for breeders; and overhauls to Codes of Practices on caring for dogs.'<sup>15</sup> There is no call for compulsory breathing tests or meaningful changes to breed standards. The current breeding paradigm will eventually destroy the most vulnerable dog breeds.

Conditions such as Chiari-like malformation and syringomyelia are complex. Testing for syringomyelia has become available and a traffic light system for breeding dogs has been developed. However, there is no robust system for categorising CM, the only way to test dogs is via MRI scans which are expensive.<sup>16</sup>

Further research by Canine Chiari Group at the University of Surrey has led to the development of AI solutions and CM/SM scorecards that can triage risk of disease before expensive diagnostic tests.

Researchers have also developed the 'Head space' project which aims to take images of animals and use AI to identify facial traits and whether these indicate a likelihood of the condition in that dog or its offspring.<sup>17</sup>

Whilst complex genetic traits defy simple testing, characteristics, such as longer muzzle length, can be cross-bred into pedigree dogs and over generations can lead to healthier animals. However, adhering to strictly prescribed breed guidelines means that these will not be considered pedigree dogs, and therefore will not command pedigree dog prices.

**“Poor breeding practices that lead to debilitating diseases for dogs bring shame to us all.”**

*Professor Clare Rusbridge*



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**Credit:** Louisa Marcombes. Further visuals can be found [here](#).

15. The Kennel Club, [Play Your Part: Breeding, Buying and Bringing Up Brachycephalic Dogs Better](#).

16. Rusbridge, C., McFadyen, A.K. and Knowler, S.P. (2019). [Behavioral and clinical signs of Chiari-like malformation-associated pain and syringomyelia in Cavalier King Charles spaniels](#). *Journal of Veterinary Internal Medicine*, 33(5).

17. University of Surrey. (2023). [Head Space Project](#) | Canine Chiari Group | University of Surrey.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The UK Government must uphold the Animal Welfare Act, 2006.** The spirit of the law is not being enacted; animal welfare is suffering due to the maintenance of unscientific breeding practices.
- **The system for breeding dogs is outdated and must change.** Whilst the Kennel Club retains exterior descriptions for breeds, closed stud books and promotes breed purity, and breeders follow the Kennel Club guidance, the *system* will keep producing sick dogs, with shortened life expectancies, requiring expensive veterinary treatment.
- **Health testing dogs is not sufficient, breeding is a science, not an amateur endeavour.** Cattle breeders already use estimating breeding values. This is the right tool to manage most inherited diseases, dog breeders must do the same.
- **Breeding with small genetic populations with closed stud books is not sustainable.** Crossbreeding and opening the breed registers is the only way to improve animal welfare and save certain breeds from extinction. If we want some breeds to survive, we have to accept they will need to look different to the modern-day appearance.
- **Demand for puppies should be met by stable supply from within a country's own market.** The growth in puppy farms and dog smuggling is fuelled by an insufficient supply of breed dogs. Rethinking breeding guidelines away from pedigree to crossbred dogs will lead to healthier animals and a more stable supply and drive out the illegal puppy trade.
- **Better regulation of dog breeding is the way forward, rather than banning breeds.** Supporting dog lovers who want to breed from their animals, rather than consigning breeding to a select group could ensure a sustainable supply of healthy dogs. Dog breeding needs a renaissance.

**“We can restore health through genetic breeding. It used to be regarded as a skill of a breeder to cross-breed in specific traits and we can encourage this practice. We need to cross-breed these animals for their health and their survival.**”

*Professor Clare Rusbridge*

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