

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home 2016

Microchipping where it matters most



Foreword

As one of Britain's best-loved dog rescue charities, Battersea Dogs & Cats Home has called for compulsory microchipping across the UK for many years. Northern Ireland led the way in 2012, and we very much welcome its introduction across England, Scotland and Wales in April 2016.

This is a highly important piece of legislation. By more reliably linking dogs and their owners, it promises to improve their wellbeing in many ways – saving stray dogs from the stress of lengthy separation from their owners as they are returned home, raising standards of care and welfare as irresponsible owners and poor breeders are more easily traced and freeing up Battersea resource so we can do more in the community to prevent these problems from happening in the first place.

While the much quoted statistic that 80% of dogs are now microchipped could be seen as reassuring, Battersea's research reveals a very different picture at the sharp end of dog welfare, dealing with strays, which is where microchipping matters the most. This is why we have worked with 50 Local Authorities from across the UK to determine a clear, national picture on the microchipping of stray dogs.

This report reveals that only 45% of strays taken in by these Local Authorities in February 2016 had a microchip, and the contact details were inaccurate in more than half of these. Like many of our partners across the canine welfare sector, Battersea has invested heavily in offering free microchipping, but our resources are wasted if records are not kept up-to-date.

This change can make a big difference financially to both Local Authorities and rescue centres across the UK. It will ensure neither is required to spend days caring for an animal that has a perfectly loving family which wants them home, as they can be reunited with their dog very quickly. The introduction of compulsory microchipping has been estimated to save society almost £50million in the first seven years, through reduced kennelling costs for Local Authorities and charities.

The situation should improve after April 2016, as the Regulations take effect, but progress needs careful monitoring to ensure compliance rates are driven up as fast as possible, and that this legislation becomes the success story it deserves to be.



Claire Horton
Chief Executive
Battersea Dogs & Cats Home



Acknowledgements

Battersea would like to thank the 50 Local Authorities who so willingly agreed to participate in this survey. We would also like to thank Mark Berry, Chair of the National Companion Animal Focus Group, for his help in facilitating the survey.

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Executive Summary

From 6 April 2016, it becomes law that all dogs in England, Scotland and Wales must be microchipped. This will enable more strays to be returned home and irresponsible keepers and breeders to be traced more easily.

Whilst some sources have claimed that around 80% of dogs in the UK are now thought to be microchipped, this survey reveals a very different picture in relation to stray dogs, where microchipping matters most.

This Battersea survey of 1,154 stray dogs collected by 50 Local Authorities across the UK found:

- Only 20% of stray dogs had microchips with accurate details
- 45% of strays had a microchip, but the contact details were out of date in more than half of these
- 69% of records with incorrect details had wrong phone numbers or addresses
- In Northern Ireland (Belfast), where microchipping has been compulsory since 2012, only 28% of stray dogs had accurate microchip records

There is a long way to go to achieve the level of compliance needed to ensure this important legislation makes a real difference to the welfare of dogs and all stakeholders have a role to play.

Making microchipping work – who needs to do what

Keepers/Owners*	need to ensure not only that their dogs are microchipped but also that they register their details on a microchip database and keep those details up-to-date
Local Authorities/Police	have responsibility for enforcing the regulations after 6 April 2016. Publicising early enforcement examples will help to raise awareness in local communities. Local Authorities should also consider routinely recording microchip statistics for strays, to monitor progress
Welfare sector	the sector has invested heavily in microchipping and raising awareness of the need for microchipping. Continuing with events and offers after 6 April 2016, particularly in areas with high numbers of strays, will help to raise awareness and take up rates further
Database companies	could examine the business case for reducing the fee for amending records and sending out annual reminders, to ensure records are kept up-to-date
Government	should provide to Local Authorities guidance on how they should enforce the new regulations. This would ensure best practice across the country. Others, such as vets, also need guidance on how they should respond if they come across animals without microchips or with inaccurate records. Awareness campaigns should be supported to help buyers understand they should never buy an unchipped dog from a breeder.
Breeders	must ensure the dog is microchipped by the time it is eight weeks old and before it is sold.

*Please note that the term keeper is used in relation to the person in charge of a dog, as this is the term used in Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015.

1. Background

By 6 April 2016, all dogs in England, Scotland and Wales must be microchipped and the details registered on a compliant database, as has been compulsory in Northern Ireland since 2012. Anyone who fails to have their dog microchipped or update their contact details can be fined up to £500.

The aim is to enable Local Authorities to return more stray dogs back home, and make it easier to trace irresponsible keepers and breeders.

Why has compulsory microchipping been introduced?

With irresponsible dog ownership still a problem, costing Local Authorities and welfare organisations £32.8m a year, improving the ability to identify and trace those responsible for a dog is clearly a key issue. Microchipping is a simple, safe and permanent way of achieving this.

After a Government consultation in 2012, it was decided to require all dogs to be microchipped by 6 April 2016. Of those responding to the consultation, 96% supported compulsory microchipping, as did animal welfare organisations, veterinarians and the Police. It was estimated that this would produce net savings to society of £49.7million over the period 2016-2023. These would be achieved mainly through reduced costs to Local Authorities and rehoming organisations, as more stray dogs are returned home quicker.



Take-up

The animal welfare sector has contributed significantly to supporting this new legislation. Battersea has been microchipping every dog it rehomes since the 1990s, and offers free microchipping to all keepers by appointment at its three centres, and at community-based events. In 2014, Dogs Trust funded the microchipping of 264,240 dogs¹ and the Kennel Club pledged microchip scanners to every Local Authority in England and Wales.

It is suggested that this has led to a growth in voluntary take-up over the last few years, from 66% of dogs being microchipped and registered² in 2013 to around 80% in 2015^{3 4 5}.

This is not however, what Local Authorities see at the sharper end of animal welfare, where much lower levels of microchipping for stray dogs are reported^{6 7}.

Stray dogs are much less likely to be microchipped than other dogs

Battersea takes in dogs for rehoming that are “gifted” into the charity (eg. where their keepers have died or can no longer provide a suitable home) as well as strays collected by the public and Local Authorities.

In 2015, 72% of the dogs that were gifted in to Battersea were microchipped, in contrast with only 42% of those that came in as strays. So while figures for the general dog population may show high compliance rates, the rate for stray dogs, where microchipping matters most, is actually much lower.

As Local Authorities are not required to record whether or not strays are microchipped, there is currently no useful assessment of the picture for stray dogs nationally, including the crucial question of whether microchip records are accurate.

That is why Battersea conducted this survey, to assess the scale of the gap in microchipping for stray dogs and the challenges ahead.

1. <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/about-us/audited-accounts-annual-reviews/annual-report/dogs%20trust%20digitally%20signed%20annual%20report1.pdf>

2. http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukia/2014/313/pdfs/ukia_20140313_en.pdf

3. https://www.petlog.org.uk/media/23773/petlog_web_version.pdf

4. <http://www.petcareadvice.co.uk/future-of-the-pet-industry/the-facts-about-dog-microchipping>

5. <https://www.pdsa.org.uk/get-involved/our-current-campaigns/pdsa-animal-wellbeing-report>

6. <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/whats-happening/news/stray%20dogs%202014%20report.pdf>

7. <https://www.petlog.org.uk/local-authorities/local-authority-survey/>

2. Survey findings – the microchip status of stray dogs

Across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, a total of 50 Local Authorities participated in Battersea's survey. For every stray dog collected in February 2016, each Local Authority was asked to record whether it was microchipped; if the microchip record was accurate, and if not, why not. They also noted whether the dog had a collar and tag with accurate contact details, as this remains a legal requirement for any dog in a public place.

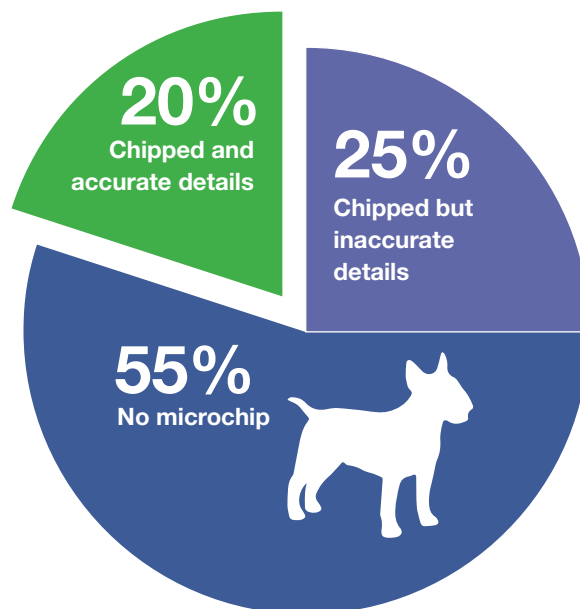
In total, 1,154 stray dogs were scanned and checked for this survey.

How many strays have accurate microchip records?

The evidence compiled from our survey reveals that:

- Only 20% of stray dogs had microchips with accurate details – ie. 80% strays had either no microchip or an inaccurate microchip
- 45% of strays had a microchip, but the contact details were out of date in more than half of these
- 69% of records with incorrect details had wrong phone numbers or addresses
- In Northern Ireland (Belfast), where microchipping has been compulsory since 2012, the figure was marginally higher with only 28% of stray dogs having accurate microchip records

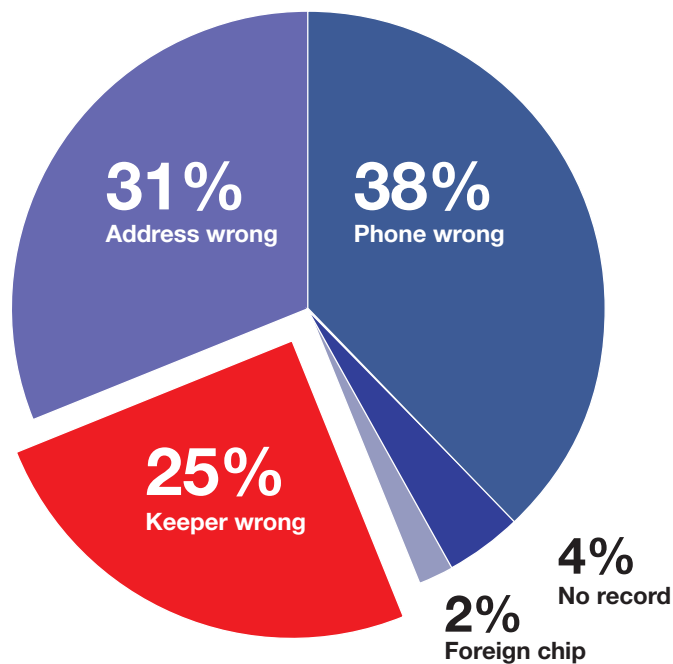
Figure 1
The microchip status of stray dogs in England, Scotland and Wales in February 2016



What details are wrong on the database?

The main problems on the database are wrong address and wrong phone number. While much of this arises from keepers moving address or changing their phone number and failing to update the database, a significant proportion (25%) involves the dog being sold or given to a new keeper.

Figure 2
Profile of database
inaccuracies



People have cited the following reasons to Local Authorities as examples of why microchip records become out-of-date:

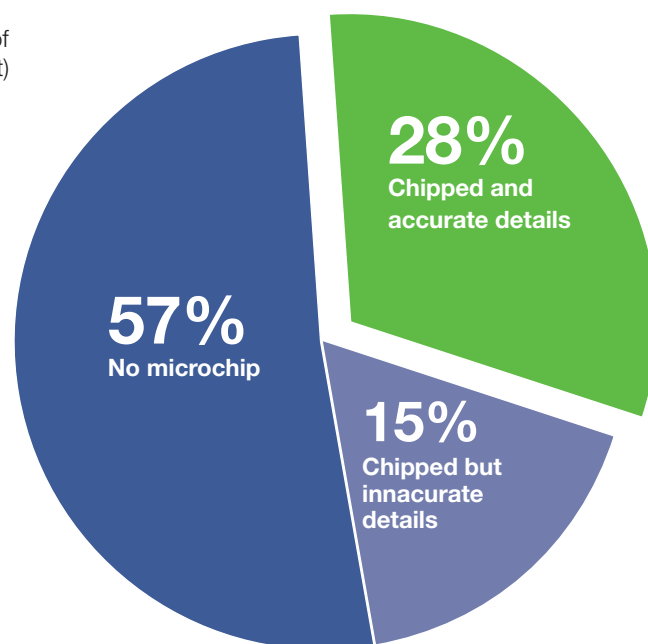
Chip not registered with a database company after it has been fitted
Recently bought the dog
The dog was given/sold to another member of the family
Fear of 'big brother' when registering personal details
Homeless/no permanent address
The dog is caught up in a spouse separation situation
Unwanted dog

Microchipping in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, microchipping has been compulsory since 2012. It therefore provides an insight into what the picture might look like in England, Scotland and Wales in three years time.

Belfast City Council collected 81 stray dogs in February 2016. Only 28% had accurate microchip records. This is better than the 20% figure for England, Scotland and Wales, but not as high as might have been hoped after three years of the legislation. While we have to be cautious about drawing conclusions from a small sample, it does suggest we cannot be complacent about the impact the threat of a modest fine will have on compliance rates after 6 April 2016.

Figure 3
Microchip status of
stray dogs (Belfast)



3. Implications and next steps

High compliance rates are critical to ensuring the success of compulsory microchipping in improving the welfare of dogs, enabling more stray dogs to be returned home and making it easier to trace irresponsible keepers and breeders.

Case studies

Michelle & Marley

Marley was only one year old when his keeper, Michelle McFetridge from Peckham, lost grip of his lead. Within seconds, Marley had sprinted across the road and vanished. Michelle called local dog wardens in the area immediately, put up missing posters and made a “lost” report at Battersea. She’d only rehomed Marley from a rescue centre in Scotland a few months earlier.

Michelle said “I was so shocked when I got the call from Battersea, because I honestly thought I was never going to see Marley again. I went there straight away to collect my baby and I just couldn’t stop crying when I saw him. It’s so important to get your dog microchipped and it really is the best chance you have of being reunited with your dog.”

The very emotional reunion, after spending two months apart, has been captured on video⁸



Mark & Clifford

Clifford was only one and half years old when he escaped from his home in Enfield in 2008, after the door was accidentally left open. Keeper Mark Lapinid spent months searching for him, but as the years passed, Mark began to lose hope of ever seeing him again. However, four years later, Clifford was brought into Battersea by a member of the public. Battersea staff scanned him for a microchip and quickly located Mark’s details.

Mark explains: “When I heard from Battersea I came straight down to the centre, I couldn’t believe it, and my whole family were so excited. We all thought Clifford was gone forever.”



8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKUM3W1syA0>

This Battersea survey highlights the true scale of the challenge in achieving high compliance rates on microchipping, particularly in relation to stray dogs, where it matters most. While the focus to date has been on getting dogs microchipped, it is clear from our evidence that ensuring microchip records are kept up-to-date is an equally significant issue that needs addressing.

Of course ultimately, it is the keeper's responsibility to ensure their dog is microchipped and the record kept up-to-date. It is after all their pet and they should comply with the law – they face a penalty if they do not. However, experience from Northern Ireland shows it is clear that we cannot be complacent about the impact a modest fine will have as a deterrent, and that all stakeholders have a role to play in driving up compliance rates, by emphasising the benefits of accurate up to date microchipping to the public.

Local Authorities/Police

Local Authorities and Police will have responsibility for enforcing the regulations from 6 April 2016. Publicising early enforcement cases will help focus the attention of keepers and raise awareness in local communities. Many Local Authorities found this survey useful and some plan to continue to record these figures to monitor progress. Battersea recommends this would be good practice for all Local Authorities to consider adopting.

The animal welfare sector

Only 45% of strays examined in this survey were microchipped in the first place, showing there is clearly a need to continue to raise awareness, and encourage take-up by the public through free microchipping events and campaigns after 6 April 2016. These should be targeted in areas with high numbers of stray dogs.

The database companies

The accuracy of the microchip database is critical, yet less than half of microchipped strays had accurate contact details. Whilst as discussed above, this responsibility lies with the keeper, and this must be tackled through enforcement action to deal with deliberate avoidance, there are some obstacles that the database companies can help to overcome:

- Cost – this may deter some people from updating their record. The database companies could therefore examine the commercial case for reducing their fees – lower fees may encourage more update transactions and increase both business and utility

- Reminders – database companies could send out annual reminders to registered keepers to ensure their details are up to date. This will have the additional benefits of removing registrations that are no longer current. An example of a similar system is how garages remind car keepers about their MOTs

Government

Local Authorities will have a significant enforcement burden after 6 April 2016. It would be helpful to them if guidance were issued by the relevant Government on how to deal with non-compliant cases. This would help ensure correct, standard practice across the board. Best practice might also be shared in due course, as those Local Authorities with high numbers of strays quickly build up experience. Other practitioners such as vets and street cleaning teams who remove dead animals from public land, would also benefit from Government guidance on scanning protocols, and how to respond to dogs with no chip or incorrect details.

Mark Berry, Chair of the National Companion Animal Focus Group said:

“Whilst Local Authorities have received no additional resources to help in the implementation of these regulations, some concise and clear guidance from DEFRA, covering procedures and protocols to be followed with standardised notices and documentation, would greatly assist Local Authorities and other practitioners in ensuring the new rules are enforced in a consistent and transparent manner nationwide”



Appendix: Local Authorities that participated in the Battersea survey

Barnet
Barnsley
Basildon
Basingstoke & Deane
Bassetlaw
Belfast
Birmingham City
Bradford
Brighton & Hove
Broxbourne
Camden
Cardiff
Chorley
Coventry
Croydon
Durham
East Hampshire
Eastleigh
Fareham
Gosport
Harrogate
Hart
Havant
Hillingdon
Hounslow

Hull
Hyndburn
Inverclyde
Islington
Kirklees
Lambeth
Lewisham
Manchester
New Forest
Newham
North Lincolnshire
Northumberland
Portsmouth
Reading
Rotherham
Rushmoor
Sheffield
Southampton
Southend on Sea
Stockton on Tees
Test Valley
Trafford
Wandsworth
West Lancashire
Winchester

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