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A mixed-method survey to understand the role of dog welfare organisations in Ireland, including reported challenges and potential solutions

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Abstract

Background This novel study forms part of a larger research programme seeking an improved understanding of aspects of the owned dog population in Ireland. Dog welfare organisations (DWOs) in Ireland are recognised as an instrumental pillar of the animal welfare sector with some receiving substantial public funding. We conducted a survey of DWOs in Ireland ($n = 39$) to gain a better understanding of their role and function, including their policies and procedures and the rehoming of dogs to other regions. In addition, we wanted to get a better understanding of the challenges experienced by DWOs in fulfilling their role and their perspectives on potential solutions to these challenges. The survey questions consisted of closed and open-ended items. Closed items were analysed quantitatively; open-ended items were analysed thematically.

Results Most DWOs (> 80%) had written protocols for important welfare actions including rehoming procedures, assessment of owner suitability and euthanasia. DWOs sent dogs to Northern Ireland (13%), Great Britain (38.5%) and to other countries outside the United Kingdom (36%, including Germany, Sweden, Italy, the Netherlands and Czechia). Reported challenges included a general lack of funding, limited public awareness of the importance of dog welfare and insufficient capacity to handle dog numbers. To address these challenges, the DWOs highlighted the potential contribution of subsidised programmes and access to resources to educate potential owners. In a further qualitative evaluation to capture perceptions of appropriate solutions by DWOs, several themes emerged, relating to legislation, education, an overwhelmed workforce, and funding.

Conclusions This study provides important insights into the roles and functions of DWOs and challenges they experience in Ireland. It is hoped that the findings from this research will inform future research investigating potential solutions to these challenges as well as the development of policy in Ireland.

Table 6 Percentages (%) of 39 dog welfare organisations that feel that selected solutions would be helpful in addressing challenges they experience in fulfilling their roles

Potential Solutions	Response	n (%)
Subsidised programmes (vaccination, neutering & microchipping)	Very or Extremely Helpful	37 (95)
	Slightly or Moderately Helpful	2 (5)
	Not at all Helpful	0 (0)
Access to resources to educate potential owners (i.e., breed suitability)	Very or Extremely Helpful	32 (82)
	Slightly or Moderately Helpful	7 (8)
	Not at all Helpful	0 (0)
Rigorous enforcement of recommendations/policies	Very or Extremely Helpful	30 (77)
	Slightly or Moderately Helpful	7 (8)
	Not at all Helpful	2 (5)
Access to standardised training for volunteers and employees	Very or Extremely Helpful	31 (80)
	Slightly or Moderately Helpful	2 (5)
	Not at all Helpful	6 (15)
Greater clarity on the criteria for government financial grants	Very or Extremely Helpful	30 (77)
	Slightly or Moderately Helpful	8 (20)
	Not at all Helpful	1 (3)
Opportunity to attend conferences or seminars with other welfare organisations	Very or Extremely Helpful	27 (69)
	Slightly or Moderately Helpful	11 (28)
	Not at all Helpful	1 (3)

“By far the biggest issue facing animal welfare in Ireland is over-breeding. In the case of dogs, whether that be the breeds typically associated with conventional puppy farming e.g., ‘Cockerpoos’, Maltipoos etc which are nothing more than mongrels at the end of the day, along with puppy-farmed toy breeds, factor in the strain the Greyhound industry with its culture of overbreeding this causes considerable stress for rescues....Because Ireland has such an established reputation as the puppy farming capital of Europe, there is a strong movement of young breeding dogs brought into Ireland for ‘Backyard Breeding’ too. So a significant/total shut down of commercial puppy farming, including Greyhounds is needed”

Awareness and education

The DWOs highlighted a perceived lack of awareness amongst the general public regarding the importance of dog welfare and the responsibilities of dog ownership. These organisations believed that there was a need to educate the general public about animal welfare and dog breed suitability and highlighted a need for animal welfare elements to be added to the school curriculum at primary and secondary level.

“More education is needed for the general public in terms of animal welfare, and ability to care and manage dogs, especially those dogs that are on the restricted dog breed list.”

In addition to public education campaigns, the DWOs recognised the importance of standardised training for employees and volunteers and acknowledged that training personnel is a labour-intensive task for an already stretched workforce.

“Access to resources and training for those who are involved in animal rescue especially when handling nervous, aggressive, fearful dogs, and injured dogs, and ability to assess behaviour and temperament of dogs.”

Overwhelmed workforce

The DWOs reported feeling overwhelmed with their workload and struggled to keep up with the many moving components required. Participants felt that their organisational structure is reliant on volunteers and that time spent completing paperwork frustrated dedicated individuals.

“The amount of paperwork, forms and unnecessary form filling achieves nothing for me and is seriously crippling. I am putting in a 14 hour day, 7 days a week with no let up.”

“I know from personal experience of running the rescue, and indeed other rescues are the same. It’s all falling on few people, who at this stage are burnt-out.”

Several of the DWOs believed that standards should be harmonised for rescue organisations, to safeguard dog welfare, and that a shared hub or centralised base would be beneficial to encourage collaboration and communication in order to maximise resources.

“There are no standards set for rescues, everyone needs to be coming from the one place.”

“To go forward each welfare organisation needs a Centre/base of its own. Maybe a centralising of one good centre per county would work but welfare people are not good at working together. There is a lot of duplication and also missed opportunities. For example, one organisation has a specific dog, and another has a home for such a dog or breed, there is a huge lack of communication between organisations. Sharing ...expertise in behavioural issues. We need a central hub that we can all feed into to share knowledge and to get help. Ireland is small and I believe we could do a much better job if a lot of things were centralised.”

Funding

The DWOs reported financial strain, including those associated with veterinary bills and having a consistent team of volunteers. Participants believed that financially subsidised vaccination programmes and a financially subsidised programme for staff/volunteers would assist to encourage sustained involvement and to alleviate workforce burden.

“Subsidised vaccination, neutering and microchipping for animal welfare organisations would take a lot of stress away. Less fundraising to do, and more time to deal directly with animal welfare cases”

“The biggest challenge we face is getting volunteers to help out ... if the government offered incentives for people to volunteer to help registered charities, we feel that we would be more effective in the work we do as we would have more available people.”

Discussion

To the authors' knowledge, this study is the first to examine, and gain insights into, the roles and functions of DWOs in Ireland, in addition to obtaining a greater understanding of current challenges experienced by them as well as their views of the suitability of proposed solutions. The results indicated that most organisations care for more than one species. Most DWOs implemented multiple procedures to rehome dogs and conducted follow-up checks, in addition to having written animal welfare protocols. This demonstrates the willingness and engagement of DWOs with procedures to ensure good dog welfare. There was a widespread view

among the DWOs that the main challenges experienced in relation to their work in Ireland related to funding, poorly enforced legislation, limited public knowledge and awareness, and an overwhelmed workforce. Therefore, it is unsurprising that, when participants were asked what would help to make changes, financially subsidised programmes, and access to resources to educate potential owners were considered most helpful.

This study provides insights into good welfare practices amongst DWOs, with most organisations reporting the use of written records in relation to euthanasia, rehoming, adoption, and assessment of potential owner suitability. Half of the DWOs had a written protocol for standard operating procedures such as feeding routines, housing, and cleaning. In the current study, the most popular rehoming procedure included pre-adoption home visits, which is in agreement with other studies [28]. DWOs believed that standardising minimum operational and animal welfare practices for all animal rescue organisations would be beneficial, as current practices vary widely. This is consistent with findings in other studies reporting that rehoming organisations regularly engage in some form of screening process to assess dog suitability but to a lesser extent, the screening of eligible adopters [28, 29]. Moreover, some studies reported concerns in relation to the quality of the rehoming assessment processes, coupled with the variability in rehoming procedures [28]. Standardisation of guidelines and recommendations informed by existing guidelines created by organisations such as the ADCH could encourage a consistent approach to promote dog welfare in Ireland. Membership of ADCH, which aims to “safeguard animal welfare”, requires the provision of minimum standards and standard operational procedures, including care of animals, assessment of animals, and animal departures such as rehoming, fostering and euthanasia (adch.org.uk) [30]. The results of this study also indicate that some charities sent dogs to NI, GB, and other jurisdictions, such as Sweden, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Czechia, similar to findings reported by More et al. [23]. It is evident that there is a lack of consistency in the approach used by DWOs to assess dog behaviour and potential suitability for rehoming. While guidelines and criteria outlined by ADCH are sound, due to their high-level nature, their application and implementation by DWOs is likely to be variable.

Previous studies suggest that the general public both locally and abroad (e.g., United Kingdom, Denmark and the United States of America) have limited knowledge and awareness of the responsibilities associated with dog ownership [1, 29, 31]. Further, within European countries such as Spain, Czechia and the UK, there are differing standards and attitudes towards dogs, suggesting that

both scientific evidence and cultural considerations may be necessary in order to improve the welfare of companion animals [32]. Similarly, in the current study, 80% of DWOs believed that the general lack of awareness of the importance of dog welfare was a substantial challenge. Earlier studies have identified increasing knowledge and awareness as an effective approach to prompting behaviour change with regard to human welfare-related behaviours such as smoking cessation, healthy eating and, more recently, antimicrobial use in agriculture. These studies also highlighted the importance of identification of suitable platforms and tailored educational campaigns as fundamentally important for engagement [33–36]. Therefore, it follows that educational campaigns are a logical approach to increase knowledge among the general public in relation to animal welfare. Studies have assessed the impact of such programmes in a school setting, reporting that involvement in educational programmes on companion animals, wildlife and farm animals increased knowledge in relation to animal welfare, demonstrating the potential for inclusion of such interventions in the school curriculum [37, 38]. Theoretical frameworks such as the COM-B model recognise that education alone is not enough to encourage efficient behaviour change [13], therefore future research should focus on the utilisation of theoretical frameworks to successfully design interventions to achieve this [13].

In the current study, 82% of DWOs believed that access to resources to educate owners on breed suitability would be valuable. This agrees with a recent report highlighting poor matching of breed to owner lifestyle as a problem [39]. However, further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of this type of education in changing human behaviour [13]. The Blue Cross has made information available online to help individuals choose the dog breed appropriate for their circumstances [40]. Similarly, the Peoples Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA) provides a short survey to assess the type of pet suitable to an individual's lifestyle. This platform also has an interactive page where individuals can look at specific elements such as “basic training for puppies” and “canine body language” (Saving pets, Changing lives—PDSA) [41]. Although it is reassuring that these named organisations provide information to the general public, the type, amount, and techniques for delivering knowledge and advice on these platforms varies widely. While results for the current study called for a greater need to increase dog suitability awareness, some DWOs believed that a centralised hub to share information and resources could be an opportunity for dog welfare charities to develop an interactive platform to allow potential dog owners to access reliable and relevant information and advice on regulation, behaviour and breed suitability.

Volunteers play a key role in DWOs in Ireland, with many organisations mainly reliant on voluntary involvement. A variety of reasons motivate volunteers to become involved with charities, including a sense of purpose, increased confidence, self-esteem, and particular skill sets, in addition to serving as a social network with other people passionate about making a positive contribution to a charity's mission [42, 43]. Studies in Australia have acknowledged that the feeling of burnout is frequently reported in volunteers in the form of perceived low accomplishment and emotional and physical exhaustion [44, 45]. In the current study, DWOs reported feeling overwhelmed by the workload and the volume of paperwork associated with being involved with dog welfare, with organisations suggesting that an incentive programme to increase the volunteer workforce would significantly ease workload and reduce burnout amongst affiliated personnel. As previously discussed, DWOs called for standardising minimum operating procedures. In all likelihood however, this would contribute to more paperwork which, as participants have expressed, is already overwhelming. This apparent contradiction will require further inquiry to ascertain which elements of paperwork are deemed ‘unnecessary’ and which elements could be refined and reviewed in the future. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, a centralised hub to encourage collaboration between DWOs could be valuable to provide a supportive network where organisations may share experience and knowledge.

Results of the current study identified aggressive dog behaviour as the most frequent reason for euthanasia in DWOs. Several studies conducted in NI also reported that dogs exhibiting undesirable behaviour were significantly more likely to be surrendered to dog rescue organisations and were more likely to have longer stays in welfare facilities [46, 47]. While the study by Rooney et al. focused on working dogs rather than rescue dogs, the adoption of evidence-based behaviour modification approaches by properly accredited pet behavioural counsellors is likely to benefit rescue dogs as well [48]. Participants in the current study felt that there was a need for standardised training for dog welfare personnel (staff and volunteers), specifically in relation to handling dogs exhibiting undesirable behaviours. There is the possibility that accredited and specialised organisations may be able to assist in this regard, through training and support of the workforce of DWOs. Wells and Hepper supported this concept and reported that dogs rescued from shelters are generally more likely to display behavioural problems leading to their return to DWOs and acknowledged that raising public awareness of the value of behavioural therapy schemes would improve the situation and assist the transition of dogs to new homes [47]. We note that this approach may not be straightforward given the

difficulties in reliably identifying individuals to do the training. Currently, there is no publicly available register of relevant accredited professionals in Ireland.

Previous studies in Ireland and Italy reported that dog owners exhibit limited awareness of their responsibilities to comply with relevant dog welfare legislation, specifically in relation to microchipping and licencing [10, 19, 20, 49]. This is consistent with the findings of the current study, with over 80% of DWOs suggesting that more rigorous enforcement of legislation would be helpful. DWOs reported a lack of awareness among Gardaí in relation to animal welfare issues under the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013. This perhaps suggests a misperception or lack of knowledge about the precise remit of the Gardaí as far as animal welfare is concerned, and a disconnect or communication gap between DWOs and Gardaí. Based on qualitative results from the current study, some DWOs would like increased engagement with local authorities and authorised animal welfare officers in relation to dog cruelty cases. Existing fragmentation of microchip databases, coupled with the absence of a universal database for dog microchipping, has been identified as a major obstacle to accurately ascertaining the size of the dog population in Ireland and the UK [23, 50]. More et al. note that a national database, including dog licence and microchip information, could contribute to increased compliance and assist relevant authorities such as the Gardaí and dog control officers in enforcing legislation [23]. In addition, efforts should be made to address the perceived disconnect between DWOs and authorised officers. For instance, coordination of information between the DWOs, Gardaí, dog wardens and DAFM would be valuable to foster partnerships and strengthen a unified understanding of which actions need to be taken with animal welfare cases.

The DWOs are seeking increased funding to alleviate costs associated with animal welfare expenses such as veterinary bills. Similarly, they highlight the importance of subsidised funding to promote neutering, microchipping and vaccination, as potential solutions to existing challenges. It is important to note that this request is being made in the context of substantial existing government support, noting that each participating DWO currently receives funding through DAFM animal welfare grants, which are utilised to subsidise neutering microchipping and vaccinations. We accept that vaccination programmes are an effective intervention, long established in the animal health care system and recently championed in agriculture, with positive aims including reduced veterinary fees and reduced disease occurrence [36, 51]. The focus of these studies was on commercially managed animals, so further research is needed to determine if the findings are applicable to companion animals.

To our knowledge, this is the first study to utilise a mixed method survey design to investigate roles and functions of DAFM-funded DWOs, and to obtain insights into their challenges and perceptions of potential solutions to these challenges. Given that the reference population included all 68 DWOs that received funding from DAFM in 2021, we accept that participating DWOs may not be representative of those DWOs that did not receive DAFM animal welfare grants. Further, the sample size was small, with a response rate of 57%, which affects the precision of our estimates and may be subject to selection bias [52]. Nevertheless, the weak association between study participation and 2021 funding level, provides confidence that participation was not unduly influenced by the level of funding from DAFM, which sponsored this study. A recent study reported that low response rates in veterinarians may be due to high workloads, which hinder participation in research [52]. It is possible that this could also have been the case for the DWO representatives in this instance. This study provides an initial and important insight and understanding of the roles and functions of DWOs in Ireland, the challenges they face in fulfilling their roles, and their perceptions of potential solutions. This is an understudied field of inquiry and provides direction for future research. The outputs from this study should help to guide future research in the Irish dog welfare landscape in Ireland and to inform the development of policies to address challenges highlighted in this study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, most DWOs self-report the implementation of good practices and a dedication to the safeguarding of dog welfare in Ireland. Overall, the dominant challenges reported by them are linked to perceptions that legislation is poorly enforced, that there is limited awareness and knowledge among dog owners about dog welfare, in addition to concerns about non-uniform organisational procedures, financial constraints and an overwhelmed workforce. In response to these challenges, DWOs report that careful consideration of tailored educational campaigns, both for the general public and DWOs, may help to alleviate these challenges. Moreover, fostering relationships between organisations and other relevant local authorities such as dog wardens and the Gardaí could facilitate collaboration with these key stakeholders in relation to dog welfare. Future research should focus on ensuring behaviour change theories are considered in strategy designed to address challenges, specifically in relation to educational campaigns and strategies focused on strengthening stakeholder relationships.

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13620-023-00249-6>.

Additional file 1. Supplementary material.

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Authors' contributions

This study was reviewed by all authors. CMK collected the data, performed data analyses, and wrote initial and successive drafts of the manuscript. BM, SM1, DMC, NM, LLMcVM, RD, AM, SM2, PR and CL reviewed and edited successive drafts for subject matter content and clarity. SM1 and LLMcVM assisted with statistical analysis. All authors approved and read the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

The survey will be made available upon request from the corresponding author.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of University College Dublin (Research Ethics Reference Number: LS-E-21–279-More).

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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