

# Taking on key roles to help brachycephalic dogs

**Dr Dan O'Neill**, Brachycephalic Working Group chair, introduces the background to the group's work and the strategy to improve brachycephalic dog health collaboratively.

## Background

Improving brachycephalic health is recognised as a key canine welfare goal. While conformation-related welfare impacts vary across brachycephalic breeds and amongst individual dogs within breeds, research consistently shows serious health issues at a population level linked to flattened head shapes, such as breathing difficulties or problems with eyes, skin or teeth.

Hugely increased demand for some brachycephalic breeds in the UK, including the French Bulldog, Bulldog and Pug, has caused more poor quality breeding practices and both legal and illegal importation of puppies to supply a booming UK market for these dogs. This complex phenomenon, involving health issues of individual dogs and welfare concerns related

to high-volume breeding and importation practices, has conspired to create a brachycephalic welfare issue that is now recognised as one of the most pressing welfare issues for dogs.

In response, the major stakeholders in dog welfare in the UK formed a single body called the Brachycephalic Working Group (BWG) in 2016, to work together to reduce the negative welfare impacts from brachycephaly on dogs.

## Who are the Brachycephalic Working Group?

Eliminating health issues linked with brachycephaly is a shared goal of everyone who cares about dog welfare, and the BWG recognises we all have a part to play, from veterinary professionals and the Government, to dog owners and breeders.

The BWG therefore comprises leading UK charity organisations (PDSA, Dogs Trust, Blue Cross), veterinary organisations (BVA, BSAVA), The Kennel Club, scientific and social researchers (RVC, Cambridge University), Defra, and relevant breed club representatives. The BWG has agreed and published a joint strategy for action which tackles all facets of this issue. Its primary aim is to work collaboratively to reduce the negative impacts of brachycephaly on the current generation of dogs, and to breed towards healthier dogs for future generations, while curbing the current trend of rising demand.

## An evidence-based approach to improving health

At its inception, BWG focused on the importance of generating evidence for, and awareness of, these health problems, and of addressing their causes and effects. In a peer-reviewed study from 2015, up to 60% of owners of dogs with Brachycephalic Obstructive Airways Syndrome (BOAS) did not recognise their dog's clinical signs as a problem (Packer et al., 2015). Similarly, veterinary professionals often describe

conditions resulting from brachycephaly as 'normal for the breed'. Failing to recognise or 'normalising' these health problems reduces the imperative to make improvements, both for affected dogs and future generations.

Today we have a growing body of scientific evidence relating to clinical brachycephalic dog health, their growing popularity and human motivations for owning these dogs, developed both by members of the BWG and others outside the group over several years.

This research enables evidence-based actions and the development of tools to help those best placed to improve and protect brachycephalic dog health. For example, many will be aware of ground-breaking research into BOAS from Dr Jane Ladlow, who is a founding member of the BWG, which has led to the development of The Kennel Club/University of Cambridge Respiratory Function Grading Scheme for breeders and owners of Bulldogs, French Bulldogs and Pugs. Based on extensive research at the University of Cambridge, this scheme is a vital step forward to help breeders, owners and vets to improve brachycephalic dog health and breed healthier dogs in the future. The scheme also collects vital data which enables better understanding of complex conditions like BOAS.

Elsewhere, research from the VetCompass programme, funded in part by The Kennel Club Charitable Trust, enables breeders, vets and owners to better understand health problems which affect brachycephalic dogs, and steps they can take to protect and improve their health. A recent VetCompass paper\* analysing Bulldog health showed that the top four health conditions suffered by the breed could be addressed by better owner care, such as maintaining a healthy weight. Raising awareness of the common health issues that can impact some of these dogs, especially if they are bought by less informed pet owners from a breeder who has not prioritised health, will mean an improved quality of life for the current population of dogs, and this is part of what the BWG continues to work to do.

Whenever there is new, reliable evidence on issues relating to brachycephalic dog health and welfare, the BWG develops position statements – encapsulating a consensus view and any accompanying recommendations or actions – from across the group's wide spectrum of perspectives and experiences and coordinates its members to generate media coverage on the issue to help raise awareness. For example, supported by several VetCompass publications, BWG developed a position on heat-related illness (heatstroke) in dogs that highlights the increased risk



Heidi Hudson/The Kennel Club®

**“We have a growing body of scientific evidence relating to clinical brachycephalic dog health, their growing popularity and human motivations for owning these dogs”**

of this condition in breeds with brachycephaly and gives advice on how to protect these dogs.

## Curbing trends: 'Stop and think'

Alongside this, the BWG joint messaging works towards achieving smaller numbers of better-informed owners acquiring the healthiest examples within these brachycephalic breed types.

As part of this, we appeal to anyone thinking about purchasing a brachycephalic dog to play their part and 'stop and think before buying a flat-faced dog'. There are without a doubt thousands of owners getting a brachycephalic dog without full awareness of the potential health and welfare issues they might face,

**Below:** BOAS Respiratory Function Grading assessment. Pictured is Gilbert McKnight BVMS MRCVS.  
**Nick Saffell®**







Heidi Hudson/The Kennel Club®

especially if the dog has been bred indiscriminately to meet demand.

By 'stop and think', we ask the public to:

- Think about whether a brachycephalic breed is the right choice for you
- Research and understand the potential health problems within the breed
- Arrange a pre-purchase consultation with your vet, or your breeder, to discuss breed-specific health issues
- Whichever breed you choose, ensure you purchase from a responsible breeder and use the Puppy Contract, and/or The Kennel Club's Assured Breeders scheme (where Respiratory Function Grading Scheme assessments are mandatory for Bulldogs, French Bulldogs and Pugs), to avoid supporting those that cause misery to so many dogs

We ask vets, as part of this, to offer pre-purchase consultations with prospective owners, so potential health and welfare problems can be clearly outlined and responsible decisions made.

We raise awareness of this call to action through media work, the influence of our membership as a group, and we also ask every organisation and individual with an interest in the welfare of dogs to widely share and explain this important call to action.

Elsewhere, the BWG remains concerned that the unnecessary and inappropriate use of imagery of brachycephalic dogs in the media can encourage

## “While progress has been made, we all recognise there is still a long way to go to safeguard the welfare of these dogs... and to breed towards healthier dogs in the future”

impulsive ownership of these breeds. Part of our ongoing work is urging responsible advertisers, brands, companies and influencers to work with us and play a key role in improving dog welfare by not using imagery of brachycephalic dogs inappropriately as promotional aids in the media.

### What next?

While progress has been made, we all recognise there is still a long way to go to safeguard the welfare of these dogs – both to reduce the negative impacts of brachycephaly on the current generation of dogs and to breed towards healthier dogs in the future. And there is a need for renewed urgency given the unacceptable animal welfare impacts of breeding for brachycephaly and the potential for legislative action in the absence of meaningful welfare change. We are all watching closely developments in other countries – both Europe and further afield – where additional legislation has been introduced to try and improve these issues.

In the UK, the BWG has published its strategy for the next five years, following consultation with stakeholders across the sector. It outlines three core challenges that we must address collaboratively if we are to have a positive impact on brachycephalic dog welfare:

1. Dramatically reduce numbers and popularity of dogs with brachycephaly
2. Promote a more moderate and healthier phenotype of the remaining animals with brachycephaly
3. Reduce the negative impacts of brachycephaly on the current generations of dogs with brachycephaly

How we aim to address these challenges, the actions committed by the Brachycephalic Working Group and the full strategy, as well as additional information about the work and membership of the BWG, can be found at [ukbwg.org.uk](http://ukbwg.org.uk)

*\*The VetCompass Bulldog research can be found at [cgejournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40575-022-00118-5](http://cgejournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40575-022-00118-5)*



### DR DAN O'NEILL

Dr Dan O'Neill is Associate Professor in Companion Animal Epidemiology at the Royal Veterinary College, and co-leads the VetCompass Programme as a research and teaching resource. He chairs the BWG and is a founding member of the International Collaborative on Extreme Conformations in Dogs and of the Dog Breeding Reform Group. He was recognised at the International Canine Health Awards in 2021, run by The Kennel Club Charitable Trust, where he was the recipient of the International Award.