

The Bearded Collie Breed Liaison Committee



Summary Report on the Breeders Regional Workshops

A INTRODUCTION

This is a short report on the Breeders Regional Workshops jointly organised by the JBLC and breed clubs and held between August 2016 and February 2017. A longer version of the report is available on request from the Secretary of the Joint Breed Liaison Committee (JBLC). The workshops were held to enable Bearded Collie breeders, stud dog owners and other Bearded Collie enthusiasts to meet and discuss the challenges facing the breed. The specific aim of the workshops was:

'to provide a forum for attendees to meet, share issues and concerns, and identify effective ways of balancing breeders' interests and motivation and the action needed to secure long term sustainable breeding. All thoughts, ideas and information from these workshops will be taken forward to develop a strategy for the breed, in conjunction with best available external advice as appropriate.'

A total of 104 people took part in the workshops, five of whom attended two separate events. Although called 'Breeders Workshops', the workshops were publicised as being open to all breed enthusiasts, and the participants covered a range of interests including current and former breeders, stud dog owners, judges, obedience/working tests, behavioural experts, aspiring breeders, and owners committed to the best interests of the breed.

B WHAT CONCERNS/ISSUES DID PEOPLE IDENTIFY?

Although the concerns identified in each workshop varied, there was considerable commonality between them. To get an idea of how widespread particular concerns were, each concern was classified under one of 28 topics, grouped into 13 areas

The 'top five' concerns (broadly based on number of times they were identified) were:

Loss of **genetic diversity/popular sires**/concern about **inbreeding**

Lack of honesty and openness about health issues; existence of a **blame culture**

The **adverse impact of the show ring**

The **shortfall in newcomers to the breed** who will form the next generation of owners, breeders and judges

Auto-immune disease.

Other frequently-raised concerns were:

Changes in **breed type**

Changes in **temperament** (including behaviour issues)

Concerns about **health information, records and testing**, including concerns about availability and cost, understanding etc; also health surveillance

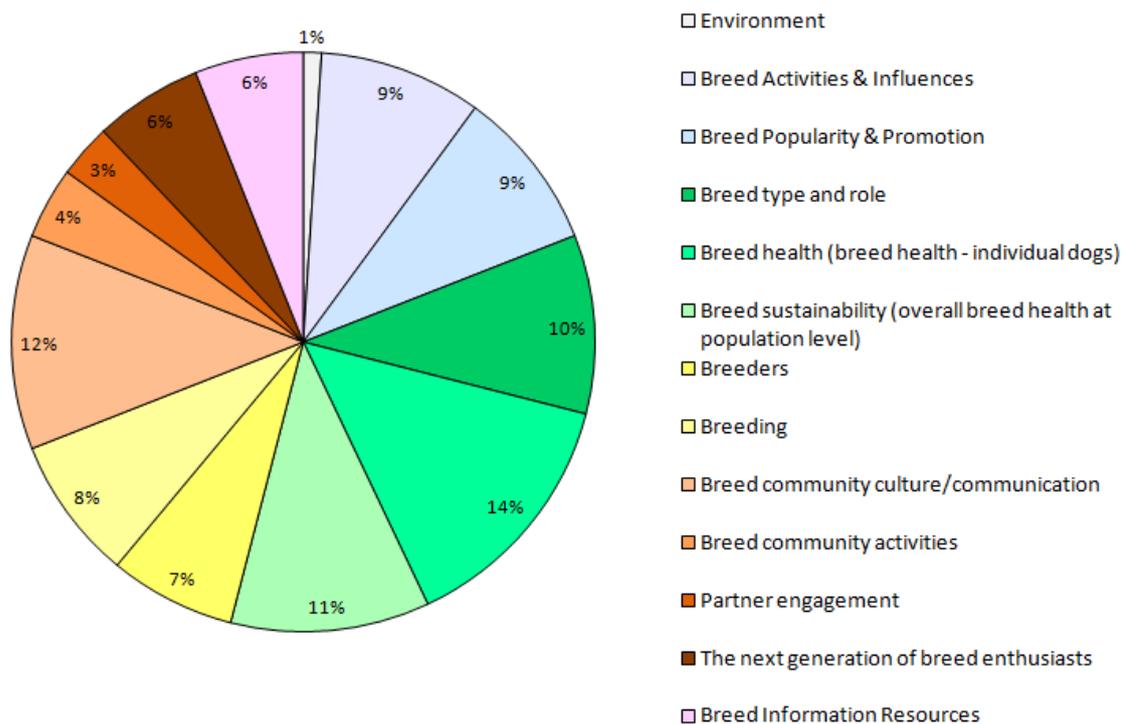
Breeders' **motivation, attitudes and impact**

Knowledge/education of owners, breeders/stud dog owners, and judges

Decline in **breed popularity and population size**, including concern about (i) general market trends/environment (ii) what buyers want, (iii) how to promote the breed and avoid/address negative perceptions.

Chart 1 (next page) shows the issues/concerns raised in the workshops, summarised under broad headings.

Chart 1: Concerns/Issues raised (% in each Topic Area)



C THE MAIN CONCERNS/ISSUES : What causes were identified and what actions were suggested?

There was not time in the workshops to identify causes and agree action on every area of concern, so each workshop group chose one or two topics or areas for further consideration. For each of these topics/areas, the **underlying causes** were discussed along with any other **reasons/factors hindering action**, and **actions** to deal with them were suggested. Because of the overlap between some of the topics/areas chosen, they are reported here under four headings:

- Loss of genetic diversity, over-use of popular sires and the impact of the show ring
- Lack of reliable health information, advice and guidance
- The decline in breed popularity and number of litters being bred
- The shortfall in newcomers to the breed who will form the next generation of owners, breeders and judges.

1. Loss of genetic diversity, over-use of popular sires and the impact of the show ring

The main cause of loss of genetic diversity in Beardies is the result of too little of the genetic variation present in one generation being passed on to subsequent generations.

The **underlying reasons** for loss of genetic diversity identified were:

- **over-use of popular sires**
 - **repeat matings** - these were noted as a cause but not discussed in detail in the workshops.
- Inbreeding** is also a form of loss of genetic variation.

Concerns about reductions in libido, fertility and litter size were raised at all of the workshops, with some people making the connection with **inbreeding**.

Other factors hindering action:

- **lack of understanding of COIs and inbreeding**

1.1 Over-use of Popular Sires

The **underlying reasons for over-use of popular sires** were:

- the **impact of the show ring**
Note: The impact of the show ring was a significant concern in its own right because of the range of effects it was felt to have on the breed.
- **practical reasons**
- **lack of knowledge**

Suggested actions on the over-use of popular sires

- Limit the permitted number of matings for stud dogs**
Support exists for putting a proposal to Breed Club AGMs and adding it to the Code of Ethics, but it was felt that enforcement would be difficult without the support of the Kennel Club.
- Alter show ring incentives**
Alter the influence of the show ring by increasing the likelihood of winning with dogs not over-used in the breed.
- Introduce semen banking**
The idea of semen banks was felt to be worth taking forward as a way of reducing the impact of popular sires and preserving genetic diversity.

1.2 Lack of understanding of COIs and inbreeding

The workshops identified confusion about the different calculation methods/sources for COIs (KC, BCX, individual breeders etc), which is making it more difficult for people to tackle inbreeding effectively.

Suggested actions on lack of understanding of COIs and inbreeding

- Help breeders understand and make better use of COIs**
- Provide incentives for reducing inbreeding**
Offer classes and prize money to provide incentives for breeding dogs with low COIs.

1.3 Other suggested actions on loss of genetic diversity

A number of other actions were suggested which do not directly target the reasons that the groups identified for the loss of genetic diversity.

- Encourage people to use a wider range of dogs at stud**
- Bring in genetic diversity from outside the KC-registered breed (Working Beardies)**
Further work would be needed to find out whether it is possible to create a 'win-win' situation, from which both the registered breed and Working Beardies stand to gain.

2. Adverse Impact of the Show Ring on Breed Type/Character, Popularity and Sustainability

The **influence/impact of the show ring** was identified as an important **underlying cause** of a range of other issues and concerns.

- people's desire to win is the main cause of the **over-use of popular sires** (see above)
- **judges decisions dictate breed type**; their interpretation of the standard was felt to be **weakening the original breed type and character**
- the **amount of coat** is **putting pet owners off the breed**
- the **amount of coat** can also disguise **faults in structure and movement**
- current **handling styles and presentation** – these make it possible to **disguise the temperament** of the dog and can **favour breeding a more passive temperament**.

3. Lack of reliable health information, advice and guidance

In all the workshops, concerns were expressed about the difficulty of getting health information and the lack of authoritative/ consistent 'plain English' advice and guidance on important health issues. The collective impact of these concerns is that people are uncertain about whether health issues are increasing or not, and feel disempowered or frustrated at being unable to act on health risks or judge the

risk of particular breeding choices. This has deterred some people from breeding, and caused others to leave the breed.

The **causes/underlying reasons** for this situation are:

- **lack of openness and honesty** about health issues
- **gaps in health reporting**
- **lack of consistent 'plain English' advice and guidance** on important health issues
- no individual or group has **responsibility for leading health improvement**.

3.1 Lack of openness and honesty about health issues

This was **the single biggest concern in the health area**. The workshops identified a potent range of reasons why people are deterred from openly sharing information about health issues.

The **underlying reasons for lack of openness and honesty about health issues** were:

- breeders **not asking** in case they are refused the sire as a result of being thought disrespectful by the stud dog owner
- fear of **scapegoating by the breed community**, especially on social media
- fear of **blame by pet owners** (and possibly litigation)
- **not wanting to start a witch-hunt** by being open and honest
- **peer pressure not to be open** because of the impact on the breed's reputation
- fear of **loss of reputation**
- fear of **discovering problems in their own line**
- **financial reasons** (puppy sales fall; stud fees fall).

Suggested actions on lack of openness and honesty about health issues

i. Introduce a checklist/protocol

Introduce a checklist or 'aide-memoire' setting out the expected exchange of health information between the two owners, with the option of agreeing that the information supplied (on one or both sides) was to remain confidential between them unless agreed otherwise.

ii. Written information exchange

Introduce a form with a list of questions including history of previous matings, to be completed and signed by both parties. This suggestion raised issues about legality and was felt unlikely get practical buy-in.

3.2 Gaps in health reporting

The **causes/underlying reasons** identified were:

- some pet owners don't inform breeders about health issues
- the decision by a sizeable number of breeders and stud dog owners not to contribute to BeaCon
- concerns about the cost of health testing
- some breeders/stud dog owners don't submit x-rays for scoring.

Suggested actions

i. Improve health reporting

All the workshop groups suggested actions to improve health reporting, particularly about auto-immune conditions and their incidence, and most groups also commented on the need to 'provide something back'. Although everyone agreed there needed to be a simple, widely-available process to try and reach pet owners as well as show people, there was no overall consensus on the process to be used.

ii. Gather information using a cohort study

Groups at two of the workshops favoured gathering health information using some form of cohort study. It was mentioned that two other breeds were attempting something similar and advice could be taken from them. A disadvantage of the proposed study was the length of time before results are available.

iii. Increase DNA testing

Encourage breeders to include DNA testing kits in their puppy packs

iv. **Provide more feedback on surveys and other initiatives**

It was pointed out that providing more feedback would highlight the work being done and encourage breeders 'buy-in' and help reduce concerns about sample bias.

3.3 People are unable to get, or use, advice and guidance on key health issues

The **causes/underlying reasons** identified were:

- there is a **shortage of health information that ordinary people can understand**, especially about health conditions, genetics and the inheritance of genetic disease
- in some cases the available advice is **contradictory**
- there is **no single source for breed-related** health information and guidance.

Suggested actions

A number of actions were proposed for making health information easier to understand and simpler to locate.

- i. **Simplify research reports and information about health conditions and genetics** into a language that the lay person can understand
- ii. **Publicise the genetic guidance given to the breed** to ensure breeders have it and understand it
- iii. **Make health information relevant to the breed easier to locate** - ideally have a website that is accessible to everyone and has all the relevant health information and reports
- iv. **Consider how health information is communicated** - as well as written information it was suggested inviting an expert to one of the breeders' meetings to provide further information on genetics.
- v. **Adopt a joint Code of Ethics**

3.4 No clear leadership

The **cause** identified was simply that the breed community has not decided who should provide leadership on health improvement.

4. The decrease in breed population

There was general agreement that the decrease in population is the result of a **reduction in both supply (fewer litters are being bred)** and **demand (fewer people want to buy a Beardie)**.

4.1 Reduction in supply (fewer litters being bred)

The **underlying reasons** for the situation are:

- **fewer litters** are being bred by **existing** breeders (breeders are **getting older** and either **retiring from breeding or breeding less often**)
- there are **fewer new breeders**.

Other **reasons acting as a barrier to action** which affect both new and existing breeders

- breeders are becoming **unwilling to breed** in case the puppies develop problems – breeders fear being blamed, or discovering problems in their own line (this affects both new and existing breeders)
- **lack of support for (and negative attitude towards) newcomers/pet owners** who want to show and/or breed

Suggested actions – see the concern about shortfall in the next generation of breed enthusiasts

4.2 Reduction in demand (decrease in breed popularity)

The **causes/underlying reasons** identified were:

- **fashion trends**, including the rise in popularity of smaller breeds and crosses/designer breeds
- **raised public awareness of health issues** in pedigree breeds
- **changes in lifestyle and demography** mean fewer people want, or can manage, dogs with a high-maintenance coats like the Beardie
- **competition from working Beardies** – this particularly affects the younger buyers market, including people who want a Beardie for agility, flyball etc

- **reduced interest in showing** as a hobby.

Other factors reducing demand:

- **breeders' approach to selling** – some breeders are being over-cautious about vetting potential owners and about informing them of the positives and negatives of the breed. As a result, potentially suitable owners are being turned away/put off.
- there are **too few Beardies about** for people (particularly the younger generation) to be familiar with them as a breed.

Suggested actions

- find new ways of raising public awareness of the breed and its character to ensure there is a market for puppies
- improve website promotion
- convert owners to enthusiasts.

5. The shortfall in newcomers to the breed who will form the next generation of owners, breeders and judges

This was looked at this as part of discussions on the decline in the Beardie population or was briefly commented on under other topics; none of the groups dealt with the issue in depth.

Underlying reasons: not discussed.

Other factors:

- Lack of support for (and negative attitude towards) newcomers/pet owners who might want to show and/or breed.

Suggested actions

- Encourage new owners to get involved in showing**
Provide new owners with information about local clubs that offer puppy socialisation combined with ringcraft; encourage them to come to shows and have a designated person to welcome them; provide ongoing show ring mentoring via sessions at shows.
- Provide mentoring and support for new breeders/stud dog owners**

6. Other Important Issues and Concerns

A number of points which appear likely to be of long-term importance were not discussed in the workshops because of time constraints; these need discussing before the long-term plan is agreed .

- Changes in breed type, character and temperament
- Maintaining Irena's Pedigree Database
- Seeing the complete/bigger picture
- 'Governance' and leadership

D HOW WILL THE WORKSHOP FINDINGS BE TAKEN FORWARD?

The next steps are to:

- make the results of the workshops widely known to people in the breed community
- use the results and other advice/information to identify what positive future prospects to aim for and the priorities for action
- prepare a draft strategy/long-term plan and consider what kind of organising and leadership arrangements are needed for future 'stewardship' of the breed.

An open meeting to discuss the strategy/long-term plan and hear expert advice on it has been arranged for 13th May.

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