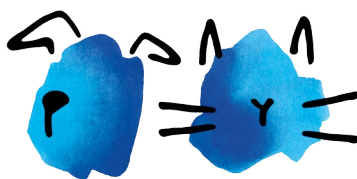




THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

ON COMPANION ANIMAL
WELFARE IN THE UK

November 2020



BATTERSEA

HERE FOR EVERY DOG AND CAT



FOREWORD

2020 has been a difficult year for almost everyone. The Coronavirus pandemic has completely reshaped the way we all live and work, placing severe restrictions on how we carry on our daily lives. Lockdown across the world, the wholesale wearing of masks in public, cancelled events and mass gathering of all sizes, routine social distancing and isolation from our friends and loved ones, have all become part of our daily lives this year in a way previously unimaginable.

And while attention has rightly focused on the impact on humans of this disease, it would be wrong to dismiss or not look to understand the impact on animals – the sharp uptake in pet ownership, the uncertainty over availability of key services to care for them, and the reduced ability for animal welfare charities to raise money to keep providing their essential safety net for animals.

For Battersea, whilst we of course remained open for emergencies and those who needed us most, the fight against COVID-19 necessitated the shutting of our doors to public visitors for first time in our history, at the same time we were due to celebrate our 160th anniversary.

Battersea is just one rescue charity in a network of hundreds across the UK, performing a vital social function in every community. Each one has its own story of difficult decisions that were made to protect frontline services, and safeguard animal welfare in a way that is consistent with people’s safety and the ever-changing requirements of the law.

As both Chief Executive of Battersea and Chair of the national membership body for rescues, The Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH), I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge, recognise and thank, not only Battersea’s teams, but those staff and volunteers in the many hundreds of other rescues across the nation, for how they adapted so positively to these changes to allow us all to continue our vital work for animals throughout this extremely difficult time.

However, if we are to continue to protect animal welfare it is important that we understand the changes that have come to pass this year. That is why Battersea has commissioned and produced this report, which finds that there have been two main impacts on our sector’s work – financial and on the welfare of animals themselves.

Both Battersea and ADCH have done what we can to help keep the sector supported and working throughout.

Alongside key corporate and sector partners, we worked to build a knowledge, resource and information hub, offering access to key help and advice. We also established an emergency relief fund, to help smaller rescues and those in most urgent need with short-term grant aid. We’ve been able to support the nationwide sourcing and distribution of free pet food supplies and we’ve kept a sector talking to each other, sharing solutions and mutual support and ensuring, that by working together with Government, that rescues have been able to operate their most urgent and vital frontline services throughout. But a challenging winter for all of us awaits.

This report is clear that as a sector we will need targeted financial support from the Government if rescues are to survive – which has not as yet been forthcoming. Funding is now needed more than ever, particularly as, at the time of writing this report, we are in the midst of our second national lockdown period in England.

And the welfare implications resulting from this year of extreme challenge, could be profound.

Our report examines the impact of social isolation on our animals, the trends in relation to stray numbers and abandonments, the impact of owners not seeking or able to access veterinary treatments, and assesses whether pet theft really is on the rise. It also looks at one of the biggest underlying issues of this year – the rising demand for dogs and cats, and how as a nation, we can sustainably and safely meet this demand whilst also promoting good welfare.

This is the first of two reports from Battersea on COVID-19, looking at the impact of the pandemic from March through to the end of October 2020.

The second will be launched in 2021, looking at the longer-term financial and social impact of the outbreak on animal welfare, and the health of the organisations which exist to protect animals.

I hope and trust that you will find it to be an instructive resource, and that it will play a part in ensuring the impact of this pandemic on dogs and cats is properly recorded and understood.

Claire Horton CBE Chief Executive

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	3
1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
RECOMMENDATIONS	9
2. INTRODUCTION	12
STAY AT HOME: A NATIONAL LOCKDOWN	12
VIRUS CONTROL POST-LOCKDOWN	12
THE COVID-19 RECESSION	13
3. THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 FOR COMPANION ANIMAL WELFARE	15
HOME ALONE NO MORE	15
COMPANION ANIMAL HEALTH CARE	17
SOCIAL ISOLATION	20
4. THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 FOR COMPANION ANIMAL WELFARE	33
LOCKDOWN IMPACT ON THE WELFARE SECTOR	33
THE LIKELY IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 RECESSION	34
5. CONCLUSION	41

FIGURES	
Figure 1	Number of stray dogs taken in by Battersea; January–August 2019 and January–August 2020
Figure 2	Number of new applications to rehome a Battersea dog; January 2019–October 2020
Figure 3	Average monthly Google search volumes for adopting or buying dogs and cats; September 2019–August 2020
Figure 4	Number of Intra Trade Animal Health Certificates issued for dogs entering the UK; February–August 2019 and February–August 2020
Figure 5	Number of thefts of dogs and cats recorded by UK police forces; March–August 2018, March–August 2019 and March–August 2020
Figure 6	Number of stray dogs ¹ dealt with by UK Local Authorities; 1996/97–2018/19
Figure 7	Number of unwanted stray dogs collected by UK Local Authorities since 1996/97 and forecast to 2024/25

TABLES	
Table 1	Rehoming rates for Battersea dogs; 1975–1980 and 1982–1987
Table 2	Expected and actual number of stray dogs collected by UK Local Authorities over five years; 2008/09–2012/13

¹ Stray dogs that cannot be reunited with their owners, destined for rehoming

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 23 March 2020, following the outbreak of COVID-19 in the UK, the UK Government and its counterparts in the devolved nations instructed all citizens to stay at home. All but essential services were closed. Full national ‘lockdown’ lasted two months while localised restrictions continued in many locations. Through October and November, different constituent countries of the UK managed the pandemic in different ways; and at the time of writing Wales, Northern Ireland and England have all returned to a form of national lockdown for a defined period. The UK consequently entered recession, with unemployment forecast to rise to 8% by the end of 2020.² All administrations have put in place restrictions on businesses and household mixing based on the prevalence of infections. This report examines the impact on companion animal welfare of ‘Phase one’ of the virus control strategy: the national lockdown.

One of the consequences of the lockdown has been that the care and control of dogs appears to have improved in some ways, as more owners spend more time at home and fewer walk their dogs off lead. In April, May and June 2020 Local Authorities dealt with 48% fewer stray dogs than in the same period the previous year, and veterinary data suggests fewer dogs may have been injured in road traffic accidents and caught infectious diseases.

However, microchipping rates have dropped significantly – primarily as a result of fewer strays being picked up. Local Authorities microchipped 77% fewer dogs during lockdown, vets around the country stopped providing non-emergency treatment; and the continued lower than normal numbers of veterinary consultations suggests that microchipping rates may not recover quickly as pet owners potentially choose to visit vets only for urgent care. This will potentially impact on ability to reunite stray dogs with their owners quickly in the future, resulting in additional costs to the welfare charities and Local Authorities.

THE IMPACT OF SUCH A MAJOR NATIONAL LOCKDOWN HAS HAD SOME POTENTIALLY CONCERNING CONSEQUENCES:

- **Pet ownership increased during lockdown.** In the three months April–June 2020, Battersea received 40,392 applications to rehome dogs, an increase of 53% compared to the previous three months.
- **31% of people who acquired a dog or cat in this period had not been considering becoming pet owners before lockdown.**³ This cohort of new pets is at potential risk of health and behaviour problems; there are reduced opportunities for socialisation during lockdown and owners – many of whom bought on impulse – may have bought poorly-bred animals from low welfare dealers or breeders.
- **Overseas breeders have become a more significant source of puppies and kittens, to meet the significant spike in UK demand.** Legal imports of dogs increased by 94%, indicating that illegal, cross-border puppy smuggling is also likely to have increased, enticed by the lucrative profits in a high-demand market where prices have rocketed.

² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/931711/Forecomp_September_2020.pdf

³ Battersea OnePoll survey of 2,000 UK dog and cat owners; August 2020



- **Domestic abuse crimes by current partners recorded by the Metropolitan Police increased by 8.5%.⁴** The link between domestic violence and animal abuse is now well established. We know from research⁵ that pets, especially dogs and cats are at high risk of harm in abusive households, as perpetrators direct their anger at them and use them to manipulate and control their human victims.
- **Interest in staking a legal claim to the pet dog increased,** likely in the context of couple or family break-ups, reflecting the stronger pet-owner bond during lockdown.
- **Theft of dogs and cats in the six months March–August 2020 is up by 6%** compared with the same period in 2019 but is 6% lower than in 2018,⁶ suggesting that thefts have not become a significant source of supply in this market – in spite of increased media coverage of pet theft.

Our experience of the last major recession in 2008 indicates that as the UK likely enters a second recession as a result of this pandemic, we can expect a 27% increase in the numbers of stray and unwanted pet dogs. This would lead to 25,500 more animals in need of care and rehoming over this period.

In these uncertain and challenging times of high coronavirus infection rates, social restrictions and recession, the capacity of the charitable welfare sector to meet this demand is at risk. In a survey undertaken by the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH), nearly half (47%) of 142 UK rescue organisations have reported an income drop of more than 50%⁷ and the recession will make recovery difficult. For small organisations, this is an existential crisis. With events cancelled and charity shops closed, one in five only had funds to survive until the end of 2020 and 22% didn't know how long they could keep going. There is a real and valid concern that for many smaller rescues in particular, who perform such a vital social and welfare function, the pressure of increased demand and reduced incomes will prove too great.

⁴ <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp578.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.thelinksgroup.org.uk>

⁶ Battersea Freedom of Information request to all UK police forces

⁷ https://www.adch.org.uk/wordpress_shop/wp-content/uploads/FINAL.Covid-Impact-Survey-2-Report.pdf



RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. There is a strong case for Government financial support to sustain critical capacity in the sector.** Many animal welfare sector organisations were not eligible for the Government support provided through the original £750m Frontline Charities Relief Fund launched in April 2020 and have therefore received no support. Alongside the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH), the larger organisations such as Battersea and other sector stakeholders have done much to help and support the wider sector through this financial crisis, for example coming together to establish an Emergency Fund to support smaller organisations in most financial distress. This fund is limited however, and we cannot meet the challenges on our own. There are 150 ADCH rescue organisations in all corners of the British Isles. 94% have an annual income of less than £1m and for many the situation is critical. The wider sector includes many hundreds more. If the sector shrinks while demand increases, these small rescues around Britain will all be facing similar financial hardships. If these organisations fail, responsibility for abandoned, lost and stray animals will fall on Local Authorities who lack the resources even to fully carry out their existing range of functions. We need to work in partnership with the Government to ensure the sector is able to meet the demand that is likely to increase over the winter as a result of COVID-19.
- 2. Potential new dog and cat owners should be reminded of the benefits of getting their animal from a rescue centre, as opposed to the risks inherent to buying from unknown sources online.** The rapid increase in interest in owning a dog or cat has led to a surge in online buying. Acquiring a new pet should always require buyers to do their research and undertake the proper checks themselves to ensure they are buying a healthy animal. Rehoming a pet from a recognised rescue organisation helps buyers avoid unscrupulous dealers, breeders and traders that pose such a threat to the health, welfare and happiness not only of the animal, but of the whole family. A rescue pet will be healthy, having received any necessary medical treatment and will be vaccinated and microchipped. Owners may also receive lifetime support, helping with the move and any training and behavioural work at home.
- 3. Increased awareness among landlords of the benefits of allowing their tenants to keep a pet dog or cat.** COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the value of a pet dog or cat in times of stress and hardship, particularly helping with feelings of isolation and loneliness. In May 2020, Battersea surveyed 2,000 UK pet owners with 75% saying their rescue pet had helped to ‘rescue them’ during lockdown.⁸ The impact of the pandemic on mental health is a concern.⁹ Good mental health is linked to good physical health, both of which support positive social and economic outcomes. The support of a pet is not available to many

⁸ Battersea OnePoll survey of 2,000 UK dog and cat owners; May 2020

⁹ <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/blogs/emerging-evidence-on-covid-19s-impact-on-mental-health-and-health>



in the rented sector, but landlords can play their part in supporting their tenants through this crisis by allowing them, wherever possible, to keep a pet dog or cat. Traditionally, pet owners stay longer in tenancies and develop stronger community ties than non-pet owners, often making them reliable tenants. This is a clear benefit for both landlords and tenants.

4. **Ensure controls on puppy importation strengthen as the UK exits the EU.** Overseas breeders have become a more prominent supply source for puppies to the UK during lockdown. This demand will only perpetuate the illegal trade in puppy smuggling, unless the UK acts to enforce and strengthen current controls on cross-border movement of companion animals. It is essential that the UK legislates to increase the waiting times post-vaccination for puppies coming into the UK. This would make it impossible to bring in underage puppies, making the unscrupulous puppies for profit trade economically unviable.
5. **Ensure buyers are aware of the legal obligation on puppy breeders to microchip their animals.** COVID-19 has seriously impacted on dog microchipping rates as it is not classed as an essential veterinary service, and new owners are anxious about presenting their animals at veterinary practices. However, while all owners have a legal duty to update the microchip database with their contact details, it should not in fact be necessary for many of them to have the animal implanted with a microchip in the first place. This should already have been done by the breeder or the previous owner. Ensuring this is one of the vital checks that buyers undertake before getting their pet will limit the impact of COVID-19 control measures on microchipping. If puppies are not being microchipped at the current time, this means that breeders are not being held accountable for the health and welfare of their puppies.

2. INTRODUCTION

2020 saw the worst public health crisis in the UK for 100 years. Unprecedented measures taken by the UK and devolved governments to control the COVID-19 pandemic have had serious social and economic consequences for residents, businesses, public and third sector organisations. This report examines the impact of these measures on companion animal welfare, focusing on the first phase of restrictions: the national lockdown.

STAY AT HOME: A NATIONAL LOCKDOWN

On 23 March 2020, the UK and devolved administrations instructed all citizens in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to stay at home. At that time, deaths from COVID-19 were averaging 213 a day and growing rapidly;¹⁰ evidence on the ground indicated that the NHS would be overwhelmed with severe cases, and modelling by the Imperial College COVID-19 Response Team concluded that approximately 510,000 people would die if nothing was done to stop transmission of the disease.¹¹

Full national lockdown lasted for two months and all but essential services were closed. Schools stayed open only for vulnerable children and children of key workers. People were allowed out only to shop for basic necessities, to exercise once a day alone or with members of their household, for any medical need, and to travel to and from work only if that was absolutely necessary and could not be done from home. Weddings and mass gatherings, including sporting events, were banned. The UK Government introduced a package of financial measures to support businesses through this period, including a furlough scheme for employees, various grant and loan schemes and other relief packages.¹² The furlough scheme alone had cost the Government £35.4bn by 16 August, with the final bill estimated at £47bn by the time the scheme was initially set to close on 31 October.¹³

By the end of August, hospitalisations across the UK for COVID-19 dropped from a weekly average of 3,115 in April to 94, and deaths reduced from a weekly average of 973 in April to just seven.¹⁴

VIRUS CONTROL POST-LOCKDOWN

As COVID-19 cases fell, national lockdown measures were eased. In June, shops reopened. Pubs and restaurants reopened in July, workers were encouraged to return to the office in August; while schools and universities resumed face-to-face teaching in September. However, infection rates soon began to grow rapidly again. By 11 October, weekly averages for COVID-19 hospitalisations had risen to 799 and deaths to 99.¹⁵

Since the first national lockdown, the virus control strategy has been a mixture of national and local rules. Social distancing, face coverings, limits

on household mixing and self-isolation for suspected or diagnosed COVID-19 cases remain national measures to control infection rates. However, the level of restrictions on businesses and household mixing are, at the time of writing, locally based, determined by the prevalence of infection rates, with the tightest restrictions reserved for local and regional areas where infection rates are rising rapidly. The detail on how this approach is implemented is constantly evolving:

- In England, a tiered system was introduced for determining the level of local restrictions¹⁶ – areas designated medium risk (tier 1) were subject only to the basic national rules; measures in high risk (tier 2) areas included banning household mixing indoors; and in very high risk (tier 3) areas, pubs and bars were closed. However, on 31 October the Prime Minister announced his intention to introduce a four-week second national lockdown for all but essential movement of people to run until 2 December.
- In Scotland, all licensed premises in the central belt were originally closed until 26 October, although this has been extended until a new tiered strategy is implemented.¹⁷ Household mixing indoors is banned across Scotland.¹⁸
- In Northern Ireland and Wales, temporary national lockdowns were introduced, closing all pubs, bars, restaurants and close-contact services such as hairdressers and banning household mixing indoors. These were timed to coincide with the school half-term which was extended in Northern Ireland. In Wales, household mixing was also banned outdoors and all non-food retail businesses were closed. The Northern Ireland lockdown was planned to last for four weeks,¹⁹ the Wales lockdown for two weeks.²⁰

THE COVID-19 RECESSION

The first phase UK national lockdown measures triggered one of the largest ever shocks to the UK economy,²¹ with Gross Domestic Product falling by a record 20% in April.²² The unprecedented level of Government financial support for businesses helped to cushion the immediate consequences, but the full economic repercussions of lockdown began to emerge as this support tapered away. Unemployment, for example, is set to rise to 8% by the end of 2020,²³ double the pre-lockdown rate in 2020 of 4%.²⁴ The Government's forecast for 2021 is for 7% growth in the economy, with unemployment dropping slightly to 6.5%.²⁵ This is, however, very much dependent on progress in eradicating COVID-19.

¹⁰ <https://coronavirus-staging.data.gov.uk/details/deaths>

¹¹ <https://spiral.imperial.ac.uk:8443/bitstream/10044/1/77482/14/2020-03-16-COVID19-Report-9.pdf>

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/financial-support-for-businesses-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

¹³ <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/COVID-19-cost-tracker-2020-09-08.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://coronavirus-staging.data.gov.uk/details/healthcare>

¹⁵ <https://coronavirus-staging.data.gov.uk/details/deaths>

¹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-new-local-covid-alert-levels>

¹⁷ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-protection-levels>

¹⁸ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-protection-levels>

¹⁹ <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-what-restrictions-mean-you>

²⁰ <https://gov.wales/national-coronavirus-fire-break-to-be-introduced-in-wales-on-friday>

²¹ <https://obr.uk/fsr/fiscal-sustainability-report-july-2020>

²² <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/gdpmonthlyestimateuk/june2020>

²³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/919323/Forecomp_September_2020.pdf

²⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/timeseries/mgsx/lms>

²⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/919323/Forecomp_September_2020.pdf



3. THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 FOR COMPANION ANIMAL WELFARE

HOME ALONE NO MORE

The proportion of workers who worked exclusively at home in the UK rose from 5.7% just prior to lockdown to 43.1% in April.²⁶ By June, a further 9 million workers were at home, temporarily away from work under the Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough). The home working experience looks likely to lead to a culture shift in working practice. Productivity has not been significantly affected, and 47.3% of workers want to continue to work at home often or all the time after the COVID-19 restrictions have been lifted.²⁷

This meant many fewer dogs and cats were left alone during lockdown. The proportion of dogs left alone for three or more hours at a time dropped from 48% to 5% and more than half of dogs (58%) were not left alone for any period of time, up from 15% before lockdown.²⁸ This has had some benefits for pets.

Behaviour change

Owners responding to a recent Dogs Trust survey²⁹ reported noticeable behaviour changes in their dogs during lockdown:

- Owners generally felt that their dogs were more relaxed and settled for most of the day.
- Dogs displayed fewer separation-related behaviours such as scratching furniture, urinating indoors, pacing around, barking and whining, and chewing non-food items.
- Dogs were walked fewer times per day during lockdown, but the amount of time spent walking did not change. They were less likely to be let off lead, less likely to interact with other dogs, and owners felt that walking their dog was more enjoyable and less of a 'chore'.
- Owners played with their dogs more often.
- Attention-seeking behaviours were more frequent, such as being very clingy around the house, whining or barking when someone was working or being shut behind a door or gate.
- There was an increase in problematic behaviours such as jumping up on people when excited, and snapping or nipping during play or when handled by children. These behaviours, however, remained rare and the reported rise could be due to more opportunity to observe and interact with the dog.

²⁶ https://wiserd.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Homeworking%20in%20the%20UK_Report_Final_3.pdf

²⁷ https://wiserd.ac.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Homeworking%20in%20the%20UK_Report_Final_3.pdf

²⁸ https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/research/research-papers/201020_covid%20report_v8.pdf

²⁹ https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/research/research-papers/201020_covid%20report_v8.pdf

LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS APPEAR TO HAVE HAD A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE NUMBER OF STRAY DOGS, HEIGHTENING A TREND THAT HAS BEEN ONGOING FOR SOME TIME.

NUMBER OF STRAY DOGS

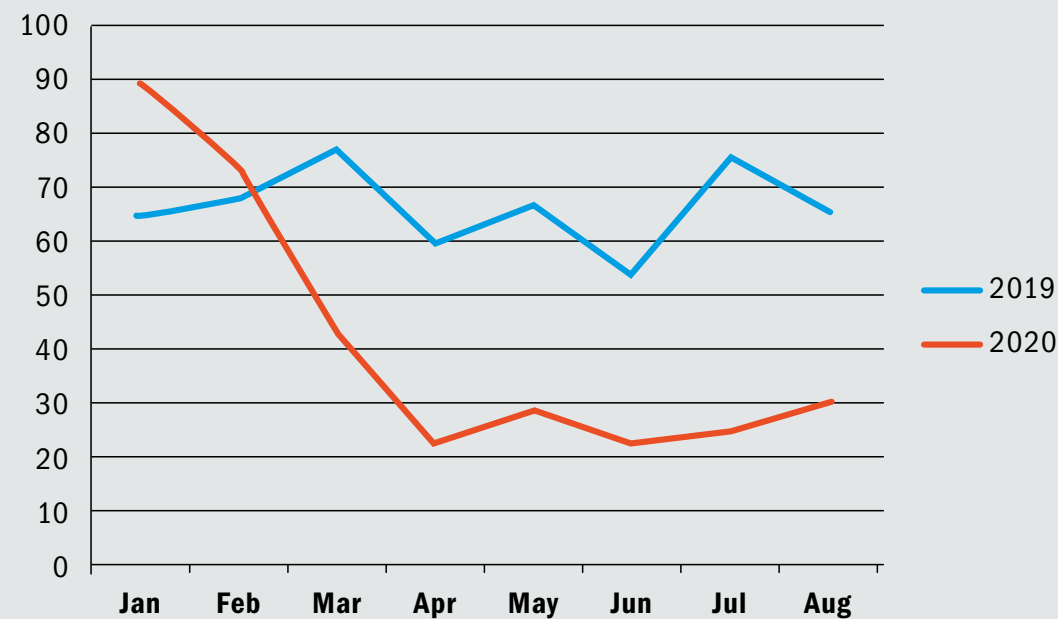


FIGURE 1
Number of stray dogs taken in by Battersea; January–August 2019 and January–August 2020

87%
of rescue centres stopped rehoming animals.

80–90%
reduction in veterinary consultations during lockdown.

77%
fewer dogs microchipped by Local Authorities in April–June 2020 compared to 2019.

23%
drop overall in service requests to the animal welfare team.

48%
reduction in the number of stray dogs dealt with by Local Authorities in April–June 2020 compared to 2019.

71%
of rescue shelters closed to the public.

Stray dogs

Lockdown restrictions also appear to have had a positive impact on the number of stray dogs, continuing a trend that has been ongoing for some time.

In a recent Battersea survey, Local Authorities reported a 48% reduction in the number of stray dogs dealt with in the three months April–June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.³⁰ This has also been Battersea’s experience, as Figure 1 shows.

Figure 1 shows that the number of stray dogs taken in by Battersea dropped sharply in March and April 2020 and numbers remained low through to August, with 59% fewer strays in this period compared to 2019.

Local Authorities have a statutory duty to deal with stray dogs. Some may have restricted access to their service while they developed COVID-safe operating procedures. However, given their statutory duty, this is likely to have been for a short period and would not fully account for the drop in stray dog numbers across the UK over this three-month period.

There are a number of explanations for this sustained reduction in strays. The increased time owners are now spending at home has improved the supervision and management of their dogs so fewer escape. Bored dogs are more likely to stray; while dogs with regular company are less likely to get bored. Also, in order to maintain social distancing while walking their dogs, fewer are allowed off lead, reducing the opportunity for dogs to run away and get lost.

Dog nuisance

An increased number of people at home could have meant more people being affected by neighbours’ pets. In Battersea’s survey, however, Local Authorities reported a 4% drop in complaints about noisy dogs and a 23% drop overall in service requests to the animal welfare team which would include complaints about stray dogs, barking, fouling, cats, and welfare concerns. This provides further evidence that pet behaviour and management has improved in lockdown as owners spend more time at home with them.

COMPANION ANIMAL HEALTH CARE

Veterinary care

All veterinary practices restricted their work to emergency or urgent treatment only. Within two weeks of lockdown:³¹

- overall consultations had reduced by 80–90%;
- vaccination consults reduced by 75%;
- for dogs, there were large reductions in tests for viruses and diseases such as parvo, distemper and leptospirosis; and
- for cats, testing for viruses like calicivirus and enteritis reduced substantially.

³⁰ Battersea Freedom of Information request to all UK Local Authorities; September 2020
³¹ <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/savsnet/Impact,of,COVID-19,on,companion,animal,veterinary,practice,report,1,20apr20.pdf>



Consultations began to increase from mid-April as restrictions began to ease, but by September were still down by 25–40%, including presentations for gastroenteric, respiratory, pruritus, trauma and tumour symptoms.³²

It is plausible that social distancing has reduced the incidence of infectious diseases. Contact between animals has reduced as fewer dogs are allowed to run off lead or play with other dogs when being walked.³³ Furthermore, advice approved by the Government discouraged people from interacting with other people’s pets while out walking. These conditions may also have been diagnosed effectively at home through increased use of telemedicine, and then treated, reducing the need for face-to-face consultations.

It is also plausible that lockdown has reduced the incidence of trauma cases involving dogs. One of the most common causes of blunt trauma in dogs is road traffic accidents (RTA).³⁴ During April, the volume of road traffic dropped by 73%.³⁵ In addition, fewer dogs were being walked off lead and the number of stray dogs is much reduced. This suggests fewer dogs would be injured or killed in RTAs while these lockdown and social distancing measures are in place.

However, it is unlikely that lockdown would reduce the incidence of tumour symptoms. A continuing reduction in consultations for these conditions more likely reflects anxiety about presenting such animals at veterinary practices because of COVID-19, delaying their treatment and indicating a negative impact of COVID-19 on companion animal welfare. For those shielding from COVID-19, or self-isolating, getting their animals to veterinary practices presents particular problems.

Rescue care

A survey by the ADCH of their 150 dog and cat rescue organisation members across the UK in April revealed that over 90% reported taking measures to deal with the COVID-19 risk:³⁶

- 71% closed down their shelters to the public;
- 54% stopped taking in animals; and
- 87% stopped rehoming animals.

While most organisations stopped rehoming animals during the most restrictive month of lockdown, many (46%) continued to take in unwanted animals and strays. This potentially creates a net increase in shelter populations, and subsequent pressures on their health, welfare and shelter costs.

However, the increased desirability of pets during lockdown has led to more people wanting to foster or rehome a dog or cat, which will help to alleviate such pressures as lockdown restrictions ease. 65% of organisations in the national survey reported that more people wanted to foster a dog or cat and 35% reported more interest in rehoming.

Across the country, however, the picture for rescues has been uncertain and will continue to be so as the months roll forward. After many months of lockdown, rescues have often struggled to meet rehoming demand, with would-be owners buying puppies from a variety of sources. If those puppies then struggle – either through strong separation anxiety as owners return to work or through health issues not revealed at the time of purchase – then typically rescue centres will pick up the pieces.

An uncertain winter awaits; this potential increase in demand for their services will come at a time when the amount of resources available to manage it has significantly reduced. This will be explored further in section 4: The economic consequences of COVID-19 for companion animal welfare.

Neutering and microchipping

The number of dogs and cats neutered and microchipped has greatly reduced during the lockdown period. As non-essential procedures, access to these services at vets or rescue centres would have been severely restricted, and owners may also have been unable or worried about trying to neuter or microchip their pets for fear of the virus. Battersea’s survey of Local Authorities found they had microchipped 77% fewer dogs in April–June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019, and issued 61% fewer 21-day enforcement notices; which are the first step in enforcing the Microchipping of Dogs Regulations. 81% of rescue organisations said that they had severely reduced access to these services. Blue Cross reported that cat neutering figures are down 67% and microchipping numbers are down 73%.³⁷

If many owners remain anxious about presenting their animals to veterinary practices because of continued COVID-19 risk, and if services remain reduced, it may take many months for neutering and microchipping rates to recover, if they do at all. Where COVID-19 infection rates remain high, these services may still not be available so that owners may be unable to comply with the law even if they tried. This means more stray cats, more unwanted litters and fewer stray dogs reunited with their owners in the future.

³² <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/savsnet/Impact,of,COVID-19,on,companion,animal,veterinary,practice,report,5.pdf>
³³ https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/research/research-papers/201020_covid%20report_v8.pdf
³⁴ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/vec.12704>
³⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/transport-use-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic>
³⁶ https://www.adch.org.uk/wordpress_shop/wp-content/uploads/coronavirusimpactsurvey-updated-27042020.pdf
³⁷ <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/sites/default/files/d8/2020-09/Covid-19%20Pets%20and%20pet%20owners.pdf>

SOCIAL ISOLATION

The aim of lockdown is to significantly reduce social contact, and particularly to eliminate contact between households. Such extreme social isolation carries significant welfare risks, including for companion animals, some of which will be long term.

Pet desire

Pets have become more desirable during lockdown, as people appreciate the bond, support and companionship they provide, particularly during times of stress and loneliness. Consequently, there has been increased interest in getting a dog or cat during lockdown to help with the isolation. Figure 2 shows the impact of the impending lockdown on applications to rehome a dog from Battersea.

The graph shows a steady increase in applications to rehome a Battersea dog from August 2019. However, there was a steep change in the number of applications during the lockdown months. In the three months April–June 2020, Battersea received 40,392 applications to rehome a dog, an increase of 53% over the previous three months. Other rescue organisations report similar experiences:

- Blue Cross reported a 45% increase in fostering of rescue animals in the week before lockdown;³⁸
- enquiries to Wood Green increased by more than 253% during lockdown;³⁹
- 68% of rescue organisations across the UK reported in May that more

people wanted to foster a dog or cat and 58% reported more interest in rehoming a dog or cat;⁴⁰ and

- the RSPCA had more than 1 million visits to its rehoming pages at the start of lockdown.⁴¹

In relation to buying a puppy, the Kennel Club report a 168% increase in people searching for puppies via its ‘find a puppy tool’ between 23 March and the end of May compared to the same period last year.⁴² Figure 3 shows clearly the impact of lockdown on interest in buying a dog or cat online, with website searches more than doubling within a month of the instruction to ‘stay at home’.

³⁸ [https://www.bluecross.org.uk/sites/default/files/d8/2020-09/Covid-19 Pets and pet owners.pdf](https://www.bluecross.org.uk/sites/default/files/d8/2020-09/Covid-19%20Pets%20and%20pet%20owners.pdf)
³⁹ <https://www.pfma.org.uk/news/pfma-confirms-dramatic-rise-in-pet-acquisition-among-millennials->
⁴⁰ https://www.adch.org.uk/wordpress_shop/wp-content/uploads/FINAL.Covid-Impact-Survey-2-Report.pdf
⁴¹ RSPCA response to the Animal Welfare Commission consultation, not available online
⁴² <https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/media-centre/2020/june/warning-as-scammers-cash-in-on-impulsive-pandemic-puppy-buying>
⁴³ Battersea analysis of keywords used to search with Google

THERE HAS BEEN AN INCREASING INTEREST IN ACQUIRING A DOG OR CAT DURING LOCKDOWN TO HELP WITH THE ISOLATION.

NUMBER OF NEW APPLICATIONS

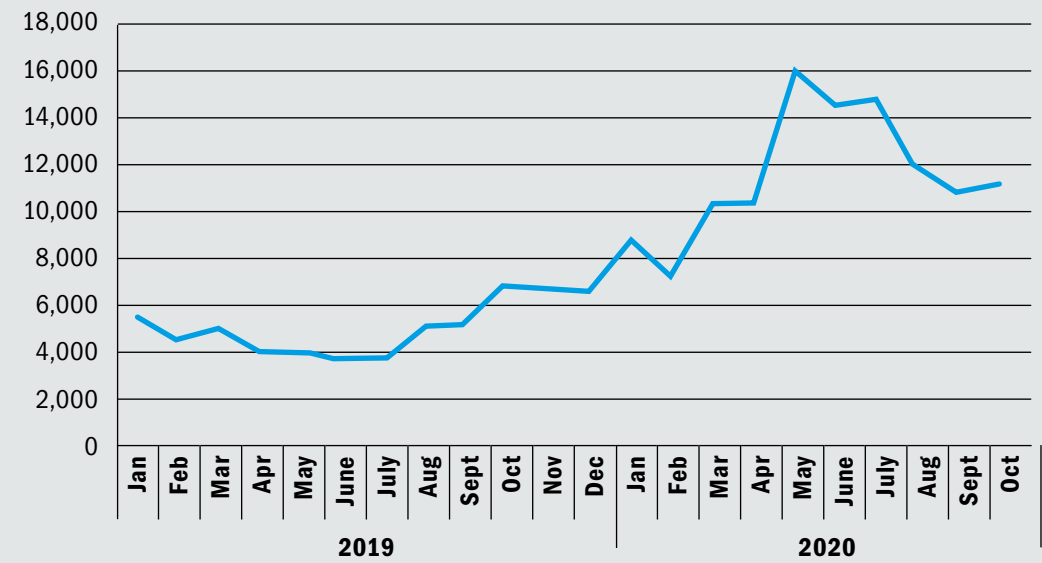
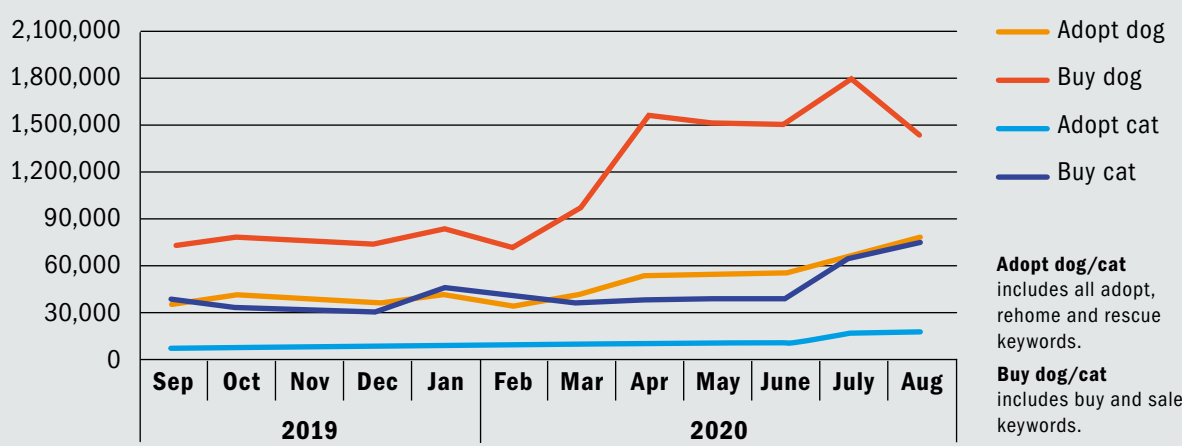


FIGURE 2
Number of new applications to rehome a Battersea dog; January 2019–October 2020

WEBSITE SEARCHES SHOWING INTEREST IN BUYING A DOG OR CAT ONLINE HAVE DOUBLED WITHIN A MONTH OF THE INSTRUCTION TO ‘STAY AT HOME’.

NUMBER OF GOOGLE SEARCHES



Source: SEMrush and Google Ads Keyword Planner

FIGURE 3
Average monthly Google search volumes for adopting or buying dogs and cats; September 2019–August 2020⁴³



While only a proportion of these searches will have converted into actual purchases, it seems clear that interest in dog and cat ownership has increased more than normal during this period:

- The average asking price for a dog or puppy advertised on the Pets4Homes website during lockdown more than doubled, from £800 to £1,900, reflecting a spike in real demand.
- A recent survey by Battersea of pet owners found that 31% of people who had acquired a dog or cat during lockdown had not been considering doing so before lockdown, and 38% had brought forward their decision to get one.⁴⁴
- Dogs Trust's survey of dog owners found that 1% of dogs had been acquired – either adopted or purchased – during the first six weeks of lockdown, and 5% in February or March before the official lockdown date.⁴⁵
- The Pet Food Manufacturers Association (PFMA) reported from its annual pet population survey in October that 11% of households had already acquired a new pet in 2020, 57% of these being dogs and 38% cats. There had been a particular increase in pet acquisitions during lockdown amongst young adults aged 24–35.⁴⁶

The effect of the pandemic on mental health is a concern.⁴⁷ From Battersea's work on Pet Friendly Properties, we know that pet ownership can have significant benefits for an individual's mental and physical health, helping to support people in times of loneliness and isolation and bringing people together within their local community.⁴⁸ It is estimated that pet owners save the NHS £2.45bn every year by making 15% fewer trips to doctors.⁴⁹ This saving could be increased if more pet-friendly housing was made available in the rented sector. Increased pet ownership during the COVID-19 pandemic is, therefore, both unsurprising and potentially very supportive in such uncertain and lonely times.

However, as we move into a new phase of lockdowns and a changing furlough system, this will potentially add new financial pressures to recent pet owners. Many may have no choice but to give up their pet, particularly those who find themselves having to move into rented accommodation where there may be restrictions on keeping an animal. Housing is one of the main reasons why people bring their pets to Battersea. Property website Zoopla claims that only 7% of landlords list their properties as suitable for pets.⁵⁰ However, it is clear that there are significant benefits to landlords of allowing their tenants to keep a pet where possible. Typically, pet owners stay longer in their tenancies, develop stronger community ties and are more willing to support and help others locally.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Battersea OnePoll survey of 2,000 UK dog and cat owners; September 2020

⁴⁵ https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/research/research-papers/201020_covid%20report_v8.pdf

⁴⁶ <https://www.pfma.org.uk/news/pfma-confirms-dramatic-rise-in-pet-acquisition-among-millennials>

⁴⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

⁴⁸ <https://www.battersea.org.uk/support-us/campaigns/pet-friendly-properties>

⁴⁹ <https://www.lincoln.ac.uk/news/2016/12/1300.asp>

⁵⁰ <https://www.zoopla.co.uk/discover/renting/renting-with-pets>

⁵¹ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-06-21/pet-owners-make-stronger-neighbour-ties-uwa-study-finds/8638432>



Such a rapid increase in pet ownership under lockdown conditions also means there will have been more impulse buying. This is likely to store up a number of problems for the future:

- **Weaker socialisation of puppies** – Battersea’s survey found that 77% of dogs acquired in lockdown were puppies. Lockdown and social distancing restrictions will limit opportunities for socialising these animals, particularly habituating them to traffic and people.⁵² This raises serious concerns about the future behaviour and welfare of this cohort of dogs.
- **Red flags ignored or missed** – 19% of owners regret their decision to acquire a dog or cat, mainly because of costs, demands on their time and behaviour of their pet.⁵³ Such regrets are likely to be high for ‘pandemic pup’ or kitten buyers, particularly for the 31% of new lockdown owners who had not been considering getting a dog or cat before lockdown. In their eagerness to buy a puppy or kitten, they are very likely to have missed or ignored red flags about the decision, raising concerns for the future of these animals, and the number destined for rescue and rehoming:
 - 42% of ‘pandemic pup’ buyers had not seen the puppy’s breeding environment prior to purchase, and 27% had paid before even seeing the puppy,⁵⁴ increasing the risk of buying an underage and poorly-bred puppy from unscrupulous breeders, leading to costly and upsetting health and welfare problems in the future.
 - 20% said they had not fully considered the long-term implications, such as how they would look after the puppy when they returned to work, and 15% admitted that in hindsight it was a mistake.⁵⁵

The Government provides comprehensive advice on what to consider when buying a pet, how to avoid the pitfalls and ensure as far as possible that you are acquiring a healthy and happy animal for the future.⁵⁶ Battersea provides a list of questions that potential owners should ask themselves when considering buying a puppy⁵⁷ or kitten.⁵⁸

- **Fraud** – buyers’ eagerness to acquire a pet exposes them to deposit fraud where sellers ask for money up-front and then fail to deliver the pet. Action Fraud reported that 669 people lost a total of £282,686 in March and April 2020, after putting down deposits for pets advertised online. Over 500 of these reports were received in April, three times the number for March.⁵⁹ Asking for a deposit is common practice so does not on its own signal a fraudulent advert. One way to protect against this is for a trusted third

⁵² https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/research/research-papers/201020_covid%20report_v8.pdf

⁵³ Battersea OnePoll survey of 2,000 UK dog and cat owners; August 2020

⁵⁴ <https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/media-centre/2020/august/the-covid-19-puppy-boom-one-in-four-admit-impulse-buying-a-pandemic-puppy>

⁵⁵ <https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/media-centre/2020/august/the-covid-19-puppy-boom-one-in-four-admit-impulse-buying-a-pandemic-puppy>

⁵⁶ <https://getyourpetsafely.campaign.gov.uk>

⁵⁷ <https://www.battersea.org.uk/dogs/finding-right-dog-you/questions-ask-when-buying-puppy>

⁵⁸ <https://www.battersea.org.uk/cats/kitten-season/kitten-checklist>

⁵⁹ <https://www.actionfraud.police.uk/news/animal-lovers-looking-for-pets-in-lockdown-defrauded-of-nearly-300000-in-two-months>

party to hold the deposit, releasing it to the seller only when all the terms of the transaction have been met. Pets4Homes reports that 50% of litters advertised on their site now use their Deposit Escrow Service.

- **More puppy smuggling** – overseas breeders have become more prevalent suppliers of puppies in this market. Figure 4 compares the number of Intra Trade Animal Health Certificates (ITAHCs) issued for dogs entering the UK for sale in 2019 and 2020.⁶⁰ ITAHCs are required for the commercial movement of animals between EU member states.

Figure 4 shows a 94% increase in ITAHCs issued for dogs in May–August 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. It seems that high demand is encouraging buyers to turn to overseas breeders, and this increased demand likely signals heightened illegal and low welfare puppy importation into the UK,⁶¹ with all the health and welfare risks that are known to accompany such activity.⁶²

- **Limitations of third party sales ban** – to improve the welfare of puppies and kittens, the UK Government has made it illegal in England for them to be sold commercially by third party sellers. The aim of the law is to force buyers to: (a) buy direct from breeders so they can see the environment in which the animal has been bred and weaned; or (b) to adopt from a reputable rescue organisation. However, the law only applies to licensed sellers, who cannot sell puppies and kittens they have not bred. Although the scale of this is unknown, there are suspicions that during lockdown, puppies were being bought by private buyers and then resold for a profit, making this a legal third party sale (because they weren't reselling in the course of a business) but continuing to prevent buyers from seeing the

conditions in which the animal was bred. This is a problem that needs further investigation to ensure that the ban on third party sales is as strong as it can be.

- **Pet theft** – although there is considerable dispute on the scale of any increase in pet theft, and considerable media interest in this story, police evidence suggests stolen dogs do not appear to have become a major source of supply to meet this heightened demand nationwide. There have, however, been significant spikes within the areas covered by some individual forces. Dogs are stolen for many reasons, including by ex-partners in dispute over ownership, for ransom, for breeding and for dog fighting. Some will be stolen to be sold on, and the rapid increase in value of puppies and dogs has raised fears that these thefts will increase.⁶³ ⁶⁴ However, Battersea's survey of all UK police forces has found little evidence of this happening to any significant extent so far, as Figure 5 shows.

⁶⁰ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-06-01/52515>
⁶¹ <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/news-events/news/2020/pups-drenched-in-oil-are-latest-to-be-rescued-by-dogs-trust-as-cruel-puppy-smuggling-trade-continues-during-lockdown>
⁶² <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/news-events/news/2019/heavily-pregnant-dogs-are-latest-victims-of-horrifying-puppy-smuggling-trade>
⁶³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53078401>
⁶⁴ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8564999/Callous-thieves-steal-litter-seven-cocker-spaniel-puppies-worth-2-000-EACH.html>

IT SEEMS THAT HIGH DEMAND IS ENCOURAGING BUYERS TO TURN TO OVERSEAS BREEDERS, AND THIS LIKELY SIGNALS HEIGHTENED ILLEGAL PUPPY IMPORTATION INTO THE UK.

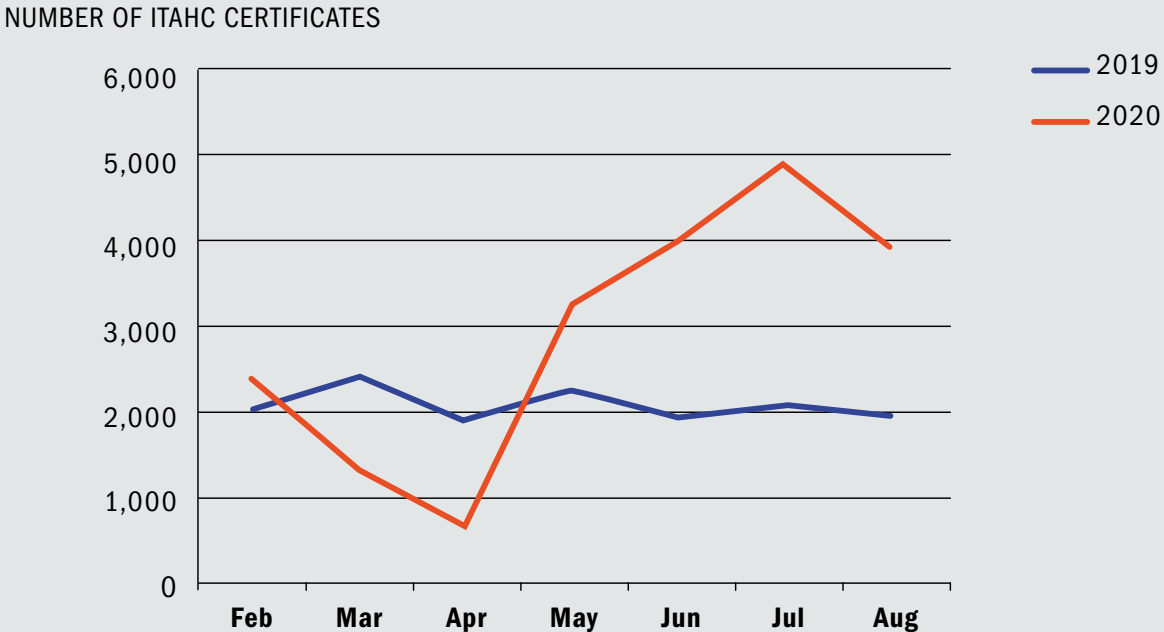


FIGURE 4
Number of ITAHCs issued for dogs entering the UK; February–August 2019 and February–August 2020

POLICE EVIDENCE SUGGESTS STOLEN DOGS DO NOT APPEAR TO HAVE BECOME A MAJOR SOURCE OF SUPPLY TO MEET THIS HEIGHTENED DEMAND NATIONWIDE.

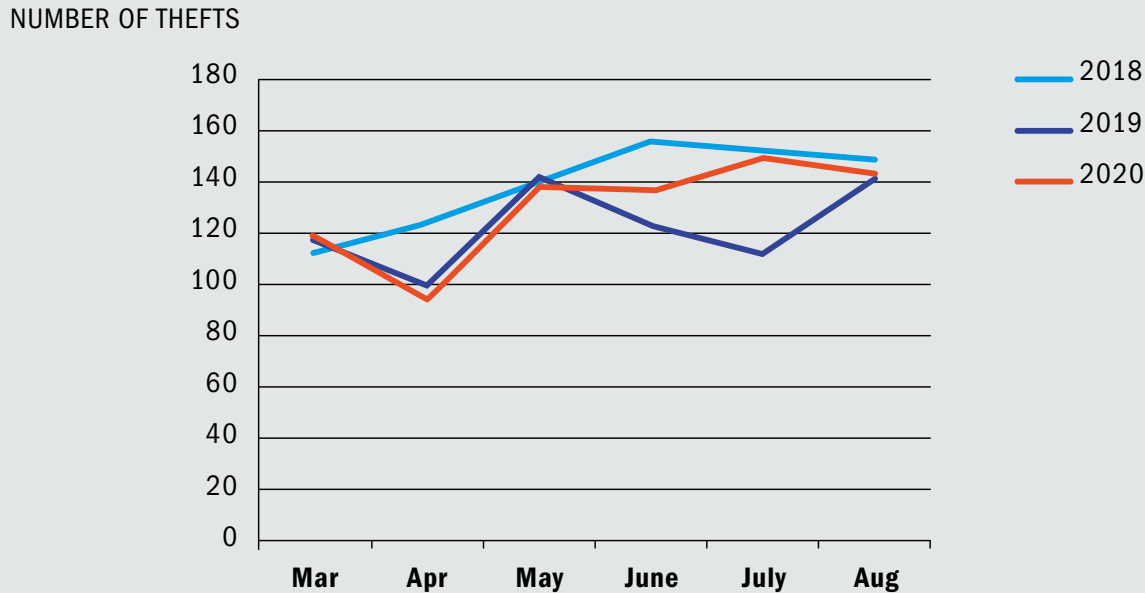


FIGURE 5
Number of thefts of dogs and cats recorded by UK police forces; March–August 2018, March–August 2019 and March–August 2020



In the six month period March–August 2020, there were 783 thefts of dogs and cats recorded by the 39 UK police forces that provided figures. This is 6% higher than the 737 thefts recorded in the same period in 2019, but 6% lower than the 837 thefts recorded in 2018.

There is, however, some evidence of local spikes in 2020. In Northumbria, for example, the 52 thefts in 2020 were more than twice the number in 2019 and 79% higher than in 2018. In Cambridgeshire, the 22 thefts recorded in 2020 are 83% and 69% higher than in 2019 and 2018 respectively. Incidents recorded as a single theft case can also include more than one animal, for example, one case involved 22 dogs stolen. More research is needed to better understand the specific problem of dogs and cats stolen for selling on, and to examine the number of animals stolen as well as the number of incidents.

It is entirely plausible that the large increase in the value of pets could have prompted more thefts. That this has not obviously happened to any significant extent, is likely due in part to the greater supervision and management of dogs. More owners are at home for longer, pets are more engaged through greater contact with people and more owners are walking their dogs on the lead.

- **Ownership disputes** – when couples break up, guardianship of the beloved pets becomes a significant issue. One of the consequences of COVID-19 and lockdown is that there has been more interest in staking a legal claim to the dog. Pet law solicitors Doglaw⁶⁵ reports that between April and July 2020, viewings of its website pages on this issue nearly tripled from 2,920 in 2019 to 8,042, reflecting the increased value of pets to their owners. In Battersea’s survey, 56% of owners said they had become closer to their pet during lockdown.

Domestic violence

For some, home is not a safe place. Domestic violence rose globally during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of home isolation.⁶⁶ In France, for example, domestic violence cases increased by 30%.⁶⁷ In the UK:

- Calls to domestic violence service Refuge’s helpline were up 49%.⁶⁸ Calls to the Metropolitan Police rose by 11.4% compared to the same period in 2019, mainly from third parties such as neighbours.⁶⁹
- Police interventions increased, with domestic violence crimes by current partners recorded by the Metropolitan Police up by 8.5% over the ten-week lockdown period, and cases in one week up by 18.5% compared to 2019. Domestic violence crimes by ex-partners, however, fell by 9.4%, reflecting the restrictions on movement outside the home.⁷⁰
- 67.4% of survivors reported the violence had got worse.⁷¹

⁶⁵ Personal communication

⁶⁶ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmhaff/321/321.pdf>

⁶⁷ <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-supporting-%E2%80%98trapped%E2%80%99-domestic-violence-victims-during-covid-19-pandemic>

⁶⁸ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmhaff/321/321.pdf>

⁶⁹ <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp578.pdf>

⁷⁰ <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp578.pdf>

⁷¹ <https://1q7dqy2unor827bqjls0c4rn-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-impact-of-Covid-19-on-survivors-findings-from-Women%E2%80%99s-Aid%E2%80%99s-initial-Survivor-Survey.pdf>



The easing of lockdown is a risky period for survivors as perpetrators may intensify their harmful behaviour to retain control.⁷² Domestic violence also rises during recessions, particularly when the onset of recession is rapid and deep.^{73 74}

This raises a red flag for companion animal welfare. The link between domestic violence and animal abuse is now well established.⁷⁵ Pet dogs and cats are at high risk in abusive households as perpetrators direct their anger at them and use them to manipulate and control their human victims.⁷⁶ In one survey, for example, 71% of women with pets seeking refuge in a shelter reported that their partner had threatened and/or physically hurt or killed one or more of their pets.⁷⁷

Domestic violence, whether of humans or animals, is hard to detect even in ‘normal’ times. It is made much harder by lockdown restrictions that isolate people at home.

In order to connect with and support survivors of domestic violence in such difficult circumstances, in France, Germany, Italy, Norway and Spain, pharmacies and supermarkets have become safe ‘go-to’ places where the utterance of a code word (for example ‘Mask 19’) signals an urgent request for protection from domestic abusers. These locations are often the only services open during lockdown, and shopping for essential groceries is the only accepted reason for people to leave their homes.⁷⁸

Dogs in police care

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on the operation of the criminal justice system in England and Wales. During April, no magistrates’ court trials or jury trials in the Crown Court took place. Since jury trials resumed in May, social distancing guidelines have meant that three courtrooms are required for each trial rather than the usual one, making progress in clearing cases slow.

This disruption has created a huge backlog, with 41,599 outstanding cases in the Crown Court by the end of June and 510,599 in the magistrates’ courts.⁷⁹ Such a backlog raises welfare concerns for dogs seized under the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, who will have to spend longer in police kennels before their cases come to court. The experience of law firm Doglaw is that, fortunately, at the time of writing the backlog of Dangerous Dogs Act cases is beginning to ease.⁸⁰

⁷² <https://www.scie.org.uk/care-providers/coronavirus-covid-19/safeguarding/easing-lockdown-domestic-violence>

⁷³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743520302103>

⁷⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4860387>

⁷⁵ <https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/uploads/userfiles/files/mcintoshcalgarystudy.pdf>

⁷⁶ <http://nationallinkcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/NSPCC-Review.pdf>

⁷⁷ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232858858_Battered_Women's_Reports_of_Their_Partners'_and_Their_Children's_Cruelty_to_Animals

⁷⁸ <https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/un-supporting-%E2%80%98trapped%E2%80%99-domestic-violence-victims-during-covid-19-pandemic>

⁷⁹ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmjust/519/51905.htm>

⁸⁰ Personal communication



4. THE ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF COVID-19 FOR COMPANION ANIMAL WELFARE

The companion animal welfare sector faces an economic double whammy from COVID-19:

- lockdown has severely impacted the sector’s income as face-to-face events and fundraising, rehoming and other services were suspended; and
- the subsequent recession will compound these problems, creating a challenging environment for the sector’s recovery at a time of increasing demand for its services.

LOCKDOWN IMPACT ON THE WELFARE SECTOR

The lockdown measures introduced on 23 March 2020 have severely impacted the companion animal welfare sector’s trading operations and income:

- applications for probate dropped by 50% in May,⁸¹ slowing the rate at which cash is received from legacy gifts (legacies are a major source of income for the sector);
- charity shops were closed;
- events, including fundraising challenge events, open days and volunteer recruitment were cancelled;
- customer-facing fundraising activities, rehoming and other services were suspended; and
- income from investments dropped.⁸²

The major welfare organisations’ financial forecasts for 2020 are bleak:

- PDSA – a £20m deficit;⁸³
- Dogs Trust – a fall of between 15–30% in donations and legacy income;⁸⁴
- Blue Cross – a loss of £4m in income;⁸⁵
- The RSPCA – a 12% fall in donations and a 9% reduction in legacies;⁸⁶
- Battersea – a £4m loss in fundraising income over the next 18 months.

These are challenging times for the larger organisations to navigate, with very difficult financial decisions being taken regularly. **For smaller organisations this is an existential crisis.**

94% of the 150 rescue organisations that are members of the ADCH have an annual income of less than £1m. A wider survey of rescues in May 2020⁸⁷ found:

- 47% of the 142 respondents reported a reduction of more than 50% in

⁸¹ <https://www.lawgazette.co.uk/news/probate-applications-halve-during-lockdown/5104257.article>
⁸² <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/pdsa-faces-20m-deficit-this-year.html>
⁸³ <https://www.civilsociety.co.uk/news/pdsa-faces-20m-deficit-this-year.html>
⁸⁴ https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/about-us/audited-accounts-annual-reviews/annual-report/180520_annual%20review_final%20spreads.pdf
⁸⁵ <https://www.bluecross.org.uk/sites/default/files/downloads/Covid-19%20Pets%20and%20pet%20owners.pdf>
⁸⁶ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/3367/pdf>
⁸⁷ https://www.adch.org.uk/wordpress_shop/wp-content/uploads/FINAL.Covid-Impact-Survey-2-Report.pdf

- their income, and 30% reported a drop of between 20% and 50%. This was mainly due to the cancellation of fundraising events, a drop in individual giving donations and the closure of charity shops. Legacies make up only a small proportion of income for these smaller organisations.
- 20% had sufficient funds to survive only until the end of 2020 and a further 22% didn't know how long they could keep going.

The furlough scheme has helped cushion the shock of lockdown on the sector: 61% of organisations had reduced staff numbers in an effort to manage their finances, mainly through the scheme. The future for many of these organisations, however, will be very concerning as this support tapers away and the recession takes hold. Despite the introduction of a new Government Job Retention Scheme which will last until March 2021, for many organisations the reductions in staffing levels will become permanent.

THE LIKELY IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 RECESSION

Recessions last well beyond the point at which the economy starts to grow again. The contraction of the economy in 1980 was followed by six years of unemployment rates in excess of 10%, and it took five years for the economy to recover from the financial crash of 2008.⁸⁸ According to the Office for Budget Responsibility it could take four years for the economy to fully recover from the COVID-19 recession and return to its pre-lockdown level.⁸⁹

The following examines the impact on the companion animal welfare sector of the major recession of the 1980s and the ‘Great Recession’ of 2008, to understand the likely consequences of the COVID-19 recession on income, animal relinquishments and adoptions, and stray dogs.

Charity income

The Charity Commission reported in 2010 that investment income was the source of income most affected by the 2008 economic downturn, with 62% of charities seeing this decrease. 29% of charities also reported a reduction in income from fundraising activity as a result of the 2008 recession⁹⁰ and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) reported that individual giving donations fell by 11% in 2008/09.⁹¹

In relation to individual giving, however, historical analysis challenges the link with the economy. Figures from the USA, Canada and the UK show that individual giving goes up as well as down in periods of recession. For example, in the UK between 1974 and 1994, individual giving went up in four years – 1980, 1984, 1986 and 1991. Two of those (1980 and 1991) were recession years and in one, 1984, unemployment was at record levels.⁹²

⁸⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/articles/the2008recession10yearson/2018-04-30>

⁸⁹ <https://obr.uk/fsr/fiscal-sustainability-report-july-2020/>

⁹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/315540/economic_downturn4.pdf

⁹¹ <https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-publications/ukgivingreport2009.pdf>

⁹² <https://www.philanthropy-impact.org/article/what-gives-recession-historical-perspective>

The COVID-19 recession is not, however, a normal recession. Lockdown and the ongoing high rate of infection has meant that Battersea, along with other charities, has already had to cut much of its fundraising activity, including events such as our Muddy Dog Challenge, our face-to-face fundraising, and our special events. The uncertain future means there is as yet no end in sight and we have to find new ways to engage the public in fundraising. We have managed to instead hold virtual events such as a virtual Muddy Dog Challenge, where entrants can run or walk 2.5km or 5km with their dog, in any location.⁹³

Pet relinquishments and adoptions

During the 2008 recession, animal welfare organisations were widely reporting an increase in the number of dogs being relinquished, mainly due to housing problems, and a marked drop in the willingness of people to rehome animals.^{94 95}

In the wake of the same global recession, a US study of a large animal shelter in Chicago in 2011 found a more subtle effect. The recession affected both relinquishments and adoptions, but had a greater impact on adoptions and on older dogs:⁹⁶

- cat relinquishments did not change;
- relinquishments of older dogs increased, costs being the main reason;
- fewer cats and dogs were adopted, although this effect was more significant for dogs; and
- ultimately more dogs were put to sleep.

These outcomes are not, however, inevitable. Table 1 shows the rehoming rate of Battersea dogs before and during the 1980s recession.

Table 1: Rehoming rates for Battersea dogs; 1975–1980 and 1982–1987

	1975–1980 (pre-recession)	1982–1987 (recession)
Mean unemployment rate	5.5	11.2
N dogs taken in that were not claimed by owners	91,049	102,623
N dogs rehomed	45,239	60,028

Table 1 shows a 13% increase in the number of stray dogs that were not claimed and apparently abandoned by their owners during this recession. However, the number of dogs that were rehomed during the recession also increased by 33%.

The picture for the 2008 recession is similar. Battersea rehomed 3,050 dogs in 2009 compared with 2,116 in 2008 and 2,802 in 2007. Also, academic research published in medical journal *Vet Record* found no significant

⁹³ <https://muddydog.battersea.org.uk>

⁹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/oct/31/recession-pets-animal-sanctuaries>

⁹⁵ <https://metro.co.uk/2012/10/31/more-than-40000-animals-abandoned-as-recession-bites-for-pet-owners-rspca-611052>

⁹⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/221736650_Impact_of_the_Economic_Recession_on_Companion_Animal_Relinquishment_Adoption_and_Euthanasia_A_Chicago_Animal_Shelter's_Experience

WHILE THE RECESSION IS A PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATION FOR THE INCREASED NUMBER OF UNWANTED STRAYS, IT DOES NOT ACCOUNT FOR THE INCREASED NUMBER OF UNRELINQUISHED STRAY DOGS THAT ARE REUNITED WITH THEIR OWNERS.

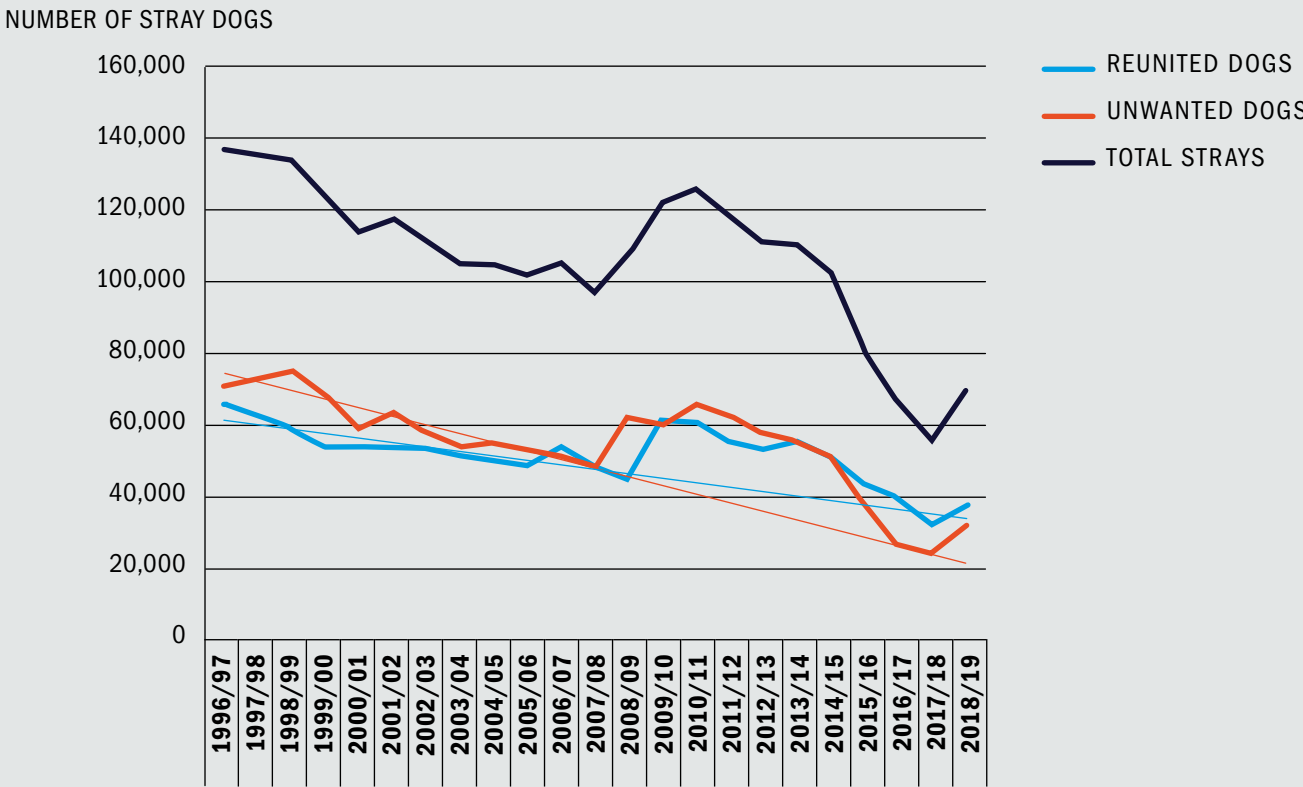


FIGURE 6
Number of stray dogs dealt with by UK Local Authorities; 1996/97–2018/19⁹⁸

47%
of rescue survey
respondents reported a
reduction of more than
50% in their income.

£4m
– the expected loss in
Battersea’s fundraising
income.

40%
of people buying puppies
said that they had not
previously considered
getting a dog.

difference in the number of pet dogs and cats owned by UK householders between 2006 and 2011. There was a suggestion of an increase in the number of pet dogs, but this did not reach statistical significance.⁹⁷

It seems that while some people clearly struggle to keep their pets during a recession, others seem very willing to become new pet owners and adopt abandoned animals.

Abandoned stray dogs

There is evidence of increased numbers of abandoned stray dogs as a result of the 2008 recession.

Figure 6 shows the total number of stray dogs handled by UK Local Authorities each year since 1996/97. Figure 6 also shows separately the number of strays subsequently reunited with their owners, and strays that were not reunited, assumed therefore to be unwanted and abandoned.

There was a marked, sudden and long-term increase in stray dogs after 2008. At the height of the recession effect in 2010/11, a total of 126,000 dogs were dealt with by Local Authorities across the UK – 30% more than in 2007/08 and 50% more than would have been expected on the basis of the pre-recession trend.

However, Figure 6 shows the same pattern of increase for both groups of strays. While the recession is a plausible explanation for the increased number of unwanted strays, abandoned because their owners can no longer afford or are able to keep them, it does not account for the increased number of unrelinquished stray dogs that are reunited with their owners.

The increase in unrelinquished strays more likely reflects a change in the law that took effect in 2008. Prior to 2008, the police and Local Authorities had joint statutory responsibilities for accepting stray dogs. This stopped on 6 April 2008 when Section 68 of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act 2005 commenced. This repealed all statutory duties for the police in relation to stray dogs, making Local Authorities solely responsible for dealing with strays.⁹⁹

Impact assessments made by Local Authorities at the time indicated that this legislative change would have a major impact on the number of strays they were currently handling. For example:

- Thurrock anticipated a 250% increase in the number of dogs they would have to handle each year;¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ <https://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/177/10/259>

⁹⁸ Dogs Trust annual stray dog survey

⁹⁹ [https://modgov.sefton.gov.uk/moderngov/Data/Cabinet%20Member%20-%20Environmental%20\(meeting\)/20071205/Agenda/Item%2008A.pdf](https://modgov.sefton.gov.uk/moderngov/Data/Cabinet%20Member%20-%20Environmental%20(meeting)/20071205/Agenda/Item%2008A.pdf)

¹⁰⁰ [https://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/Data/Cabinet/200803121900/Agenda/\\$8663%20-%209986.doc.pdf](https://democracy.thurrock.gov.uk/Data/Cabinet/200803121900/Agenda/$8663%20-%209986.doc.pdf)

ON THE BASIS OF THE TREND OVER THE PREVIOUS 23 YEARS, LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND RESCUE ORGANISATIONS CAN EXPECT TO HAVE TO DEAL WITH 25,500 MORE STRAY DOGS THAN EXPECTED OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS AS A DIRECT RESULT OF THE COVID-19 RECESSION.

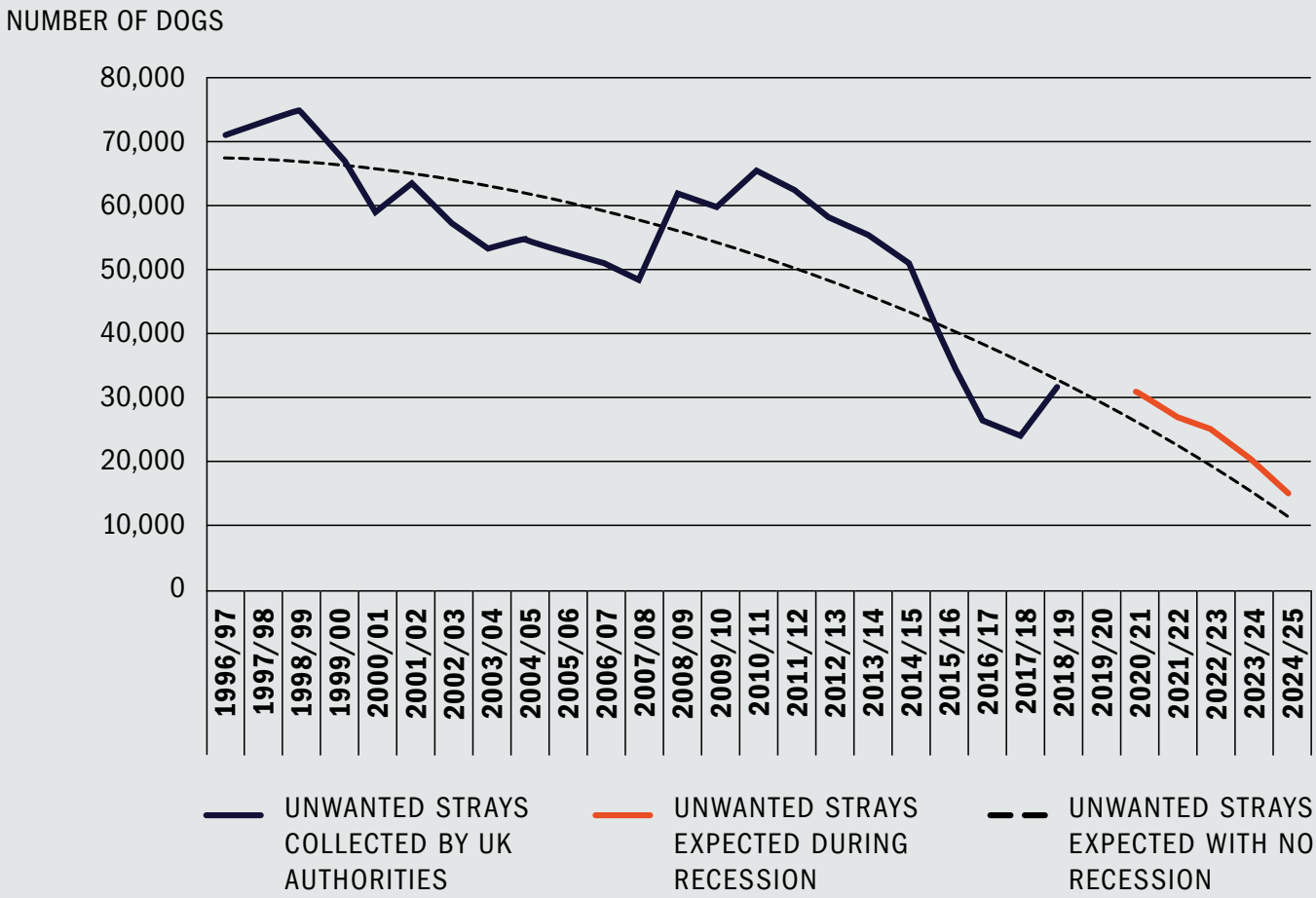


FIGURE 7
Number of unwanted stray dogs collected by UK Local Authorities since 1996/97 and forecast to 2024/25

26%

increase in number of reunited strays during 2008–2012 recession period on the basis of the pre-recession trend.

53%

increase in unwanted dogs, abandoned as strays in 2008-2012 recession period, twice that of reunited dogs.

25,500

estimated number of stray dogs expected as direct result of COVID-19 recession.

- Gravesham anticipated a 60% increase;¹⁰¹ and
- Rotherham expected a 100% increase,¹⁰² close to the reality of a 72% increase.¹⁰³

This legislative change is clearly a significant factor in explaining the increased numbers of strays dealt with by Local Authorities after 2008.^{104 105 106}

Table 2 shows the number of unwanted stray dogs and reunited stray dogs during the five-year recession period 2008/09–2012/13, and the number that would have been expected on the basis of the pre-recession trends (shown earlier in Figure 6).

Table 2: Expected and actual number of stray dogs collected by UK Local Authorities over five years; 2008/9–2012/13

	Expected number 2008/08– 2012/13	Actual number 2008/08– 2012/13	% change
Reunited dogs	219,500	276,380	+26%
Unwanted dogs	201,000	307,620	+53%
Total strays	420,500	584,000	+39%

Table 2 shows that:

- The actual number of reunited strays during the recession period was 26% higher than would have been expected on the basis of the pre-recession trend. This is most likely due to the change in the law, making Local Authorities solely responsible for dealing with stray dogs.
- The number of unwanted dogs, abandoned as strays in this five-year recession period was 53% higher than would have been expected, twice that for reunited dogs.
- Assuming that the 26% increase in reunited dogs reflects the legislative change effect and that this applies equally to unwanted dogs, then the residual **27% increase in unwanted stray dogs over this period can be attributed to the recession.**

Figure 7 shows that a continued decrease in the number of unwanted stray dogs beyond 2020 would be expected on the basis of the trend over the previous 23 years, with 94,500 unwanted strays forecast over the five years 2020/21–2024/25. Experience from the 2008 recession is that this number will increase by 27% as a result of the COVID-19 recession, also shown on Figure 7. This means Local Authorities and rescue organisations can expect to have to deal with **25,500 more stray dogs** over this period than expected as a direct result of the COVID-19 recession. However, what is difficult to model as each recession is different, is when that significant upturn will be seen.

¹⁰¹ <https://democracy.gravesham.gov.uk/documents/s2205/Report%20for%20Cabinet%20Stray%20Dog%20Service%20110208.pdf>

¹⁰² <https://moderngov.rotherham.gov.uk/documents/s26179/Dog%20Control%20June%202008.pdf>

¹⁰³ <https://moderngov.rotherham.gov.uk/documents/s37041/Stray%20Dog%20Arrangements.pdf>

¹⁰⁴ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmenvfru/writev/dogcontrol/dog.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ <http://dogstrustblog.blogspot.com/2009/09/stray-dog-survey-2009-numbers-increase.html>

¹⁰⁶ <http://www.carodog.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Dog-registration-report2.pdf>



5. CONCLUSION

In these times of high rates of COVID-19 infection, lockdown restrictions and recession, the future is very uncertain for the welfare of companion animals in the UK. Lockdown has brought some benefits for pets. With their owners spending more time at home and walking their dogs on leads more often, they are happier, their behaviour has improved, they stray less, are involved in fewer road traffic accidents, and contract fewer infectious diseases. If, as seems likely, the home working experience becomes more permanent, this is good news for pets.

However, it is clear that COVID-19 has had some very concerning consequences for companion animal welfare which the recession will only compound in the long term:

- **Health care** – many people are still anxious about presenting their animals to veterinary practices. Returning to normal levels of veterinary care, including neutering and microchipping, will be slow while people remain anxious about COVID-19 and the recession adds financial hardship. This means more animals suffering, possibly dying as conditions are not treated promptly, and more unwanted litters, particularly of cats.
- **The ‘pandemic pup’ cohort** – the impulse buying of pets under lockdown conditions is likely to create long-term welfare problems for these animals. Concerns include behavioural issues arising from limited opportunities for socialisation during lockdown, post-lockdown regrets about buying a puppy and more unscrupulous selling of underage and poorly-bred puppies leading to serious health problems in the future. Many in this cohort are likely to be given up or abandoned as their owners become unable to cope – particularly as a result of behavioural issues that develop after periods of lockdown.
- **Abandoned stray dogs** – the evidence from previous recessions is that the number of unwanted dogs abandoned as strays that would normally be expected over the next five years will increase by 27% as a direct result of the COVID-19 recession. This is likely to be exacerbated by the ‘pandemic pup’ issues which may also lead to more being abandoned and given up. It is, therefore, reassuring that interest in adopting rescued animals seems less affected by recession than might be expected and that lockdown may have prompted greater interest in rehoming a rescue dog or cat.
- **Domestic violence** – for some dogs and cats, lockdown is likely to have been an extremely fearful and abusive experience. Increased incidents of serious domestic violence will mean more pet dogs and cats threatened and physically harmed. This is likely to get worse, not better, as lockdown eases and the recession takes hold.

These problems are very likely to compromise owners’ ability to meet the five welfare needs of their animals which they must provide for under the law.¹⁰⁷ These are the need:

- for a suitable environment;
- for a suitable diet;
- to be able to exhibit normal behaviour patterns;
- to be housed with, or apart, from other animals; and
- to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.

¹⁰⁷ The Animal Welfare Act 2006; the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006; the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

In order to meet those needs in such challenging and uncertain times, there is likely to be increased demand for low-cost veterinary care, advice and support to deal with animal behavioural problems at home, and for rehoming services where owners sadly decide they are no longer to fully provide for all of their animal's welfare needs.

It is therefore concerning that the economic consequences of lockdown for the companion animal welfare rescue sector jeopardises its ability to fully meet these demands in the future. For some of the smaller rescues this is an existential crisis. If the sector shrinks while demand increases, these problems will fall on Local Authorities who are the only organisations with statutory duties in relation to animal welfare; yet without the resources to fully carry out their existing range of functions, let alone pick up the slack from a contracted welfare sector, the effect this could have on animal welfare is unclear.

With that in mind, Battersea proposes the following recommendations for a partnership between Government both local and national, animal welfare organisations and the public:

1. There is a strong case for Government financial support to sustain critical capacity in the sector. Many animal welfare sector organisations were not eligible for the Government support provided through the original £750m Frontline Charities Relief Fund launched in April 2020 and have therefore received no support. Alongside the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH), the larger organisations such as Battersea and other sector stakeholders have done much to help and support the wider sector through this financial crisis, for example coming together to establish an Emergency Fund to support smaller organisations in most financial distress. This fund is limited however, and we cannot meet the challenges on our own. There are 150 ADCH rescue organisations in all corners of the British Isles. 94% have an annual income of less than £1m and for many the situation is critical. The wider sector includes many hundreds more. If the sector shrinks while demand increases, these small rescues around Britain will all be facing similar financial hardships. If these organisations fail, responsibility for abandoned, lost and stray animals will fall on Local Authorities who lack the resources even to fully carry out their existing range of functions. We need to work in partnership with the Government to ensure the sector is able to meet the demand that is likely to increase over the winter as a result of COVID-19.

2. Potential new dog and cat owners should be reminded of the benefits of getting their animal from a rescue centre, as opposed to the risks inherent to buying from unknown sources online. The rapid increase in interest in owning a dog or cat has led to a surge in online buying. Acquiring a new pet should always require buyers to do their research and undertake the proper checks themselves to ensure they are buying

a healthy animal. Rehoming a pet from a recognised rescue organisation helps buyers avoid unscrupulous dealers, breeders and traders that pose such a threat to the health, welfare and happiness not only of the animal, but of the whole family. A rescue pet will be healthy, having received any necessary medical treatment and will be vaccinated and microchipped. Owners may also receive lifetime support, helping with the move and any training and behavioural work at home.

- 3. Increased awareness among landlords of the benefits of allowing their tenants to keep a pet dog or cat.** COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on the value of a pet dog or cat in times of stress and hardship, particularly helping with feelings of isolation and loneliness. In May 2020, Battersea surveyed 2,000 UK pet owners with 75% saying their rescue pet had helped to 'rescue them' during lockdown. The impact of the pandemic on mental health is a concern. Good mental health is linked to good physical health, both of which support positive social and economic outcomes. The support of a pet is not available to many in the rented sector, but landlords can play their part in supporting their tenants through this crisis by allowing them, wherever possible, to keep a pet dog or cat. Traditionally, pet owners stay longer in tenancies and develop stronger community ties than non-pet owners, often making them reliable tenants. This is a clear benefit for both landlords and tenants.
- 4. Ensure controls on puppy importation strengthen as the UK exits the EU.** Overseas breeders have become a more prominent supply source for puppies to the UK during lockdown. This demand will only perpetuate the illegal trade in puppy smuggling, unless the UK acts to enforce and strengthen current controls on cross-border movement of companion animals. It is essential that the UK legislates to increase the waiting times post-vaccination for puppies and kittens coming into the UK. This would make it impossible to bring in underage puppies, making the unscrupulous puppies for profit trade economically unviable.
- 5. Ensure buyers are aware of the legal obligation on puppy breeders to microchip their animals.** COVID-19 has seriously impacted on dog microchipping rates as it is not classed as an essential veterinary service, and new owners are anxious about presenting their animals at veterinary practices. However, while all owners have a legal duty to update the microchip database with their contact details, it should not in fact be necessary for many of them to have the animal implanted with a microchip in the first place. This should already have been done by the breeder or the previous owner. Ensuring this is one of the vital checks that buyers undertake before getting their pet will limit the impact of COVID-19 control measures on microchipping. If puppies are not being microchipped at the current time, this means that breeders are not being held accountable for the health and welfare of their puppies.

Further Information

Barry Webb – Researcher

D: 020 7501 2632

E: B.Webb@battersea.org.uk

BATTERSEA DOGS & CATS HOME

4 BATTERSEA PARK ROAD
LONDON SW8 4AA

BATTERSEA OLD WINDSOR

PRIEST HILL, OLD WINDSOR
BERKSHIRE SL4 2JN

BATTERSEA BRANDS HATCH

CROWHURST LANE, ASH
KENT TN15 7HH

0800 001 4444

INFO@BATTERSEA.ORG.UK

BATTERSEA.ORG.UK

Patron HRH The Duchess of Cornwall, GCVO
President HRH Prince Michael of Kent, GCVO