

BRIEFING: WESTMINSTER HALL DEBATE ON THE EFFECT OF THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK ON ANIMAL WELFARE

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KEY MESSAGES

- COVID-19 has had a profound impact on the animal welfare sector, both operationally and financially.
- Nine out of ten (87%) of rescues reported a drop in income, with a third losing over half their income.
- We've seen an increase in impulse purchases - 31% of people who acquired a dog or cat during the first lockdown had not been considering becoming pet owners before. This could lead to increased health and behavioural problems.
- We are expecting a surge of animal relinquishment when new pet owners return to workplaces in large numbers, putting additional strain on the animal welfare sector.
- 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.
- Domestic abuse crimes by current partners recorded by the Metropolitan Police increased by 8.5%. Dogs and cats are also at higher risk of harm in abusive households.

THE IMPACT ON THE ANIMAL WELFARE SECTOR

In January 2021, Battersea partnered with the Association of Dogs and Cat Homes (ADCH) to survey 107 rescue organisations. COVID-19 has changed the way in which rescue centres operate:

- 41% of those who responded to the survey had had to close their doors to all but emergency intake which has also impacted staffing levels,
- 46% of rescues reducing numbers of paid staff.
- 61% have made use of the furlough scheme, which they say has offered a vital lifeline.
- Worryingly, 13% of respondents have had to reduce access to essential veterinary treatments, with an additional 37% reducing access to non-essential veterinary treatment.

The impact of the COVID-19 on finances has been stark. Nine out of ten (87%) rescues reported a drop in income, with a third losing over half their income. Rescues have made cutbacks and have made use of reserves, but they are in dire need of support. Lockdowns forced charity shops to close and resulted in vital fundraising events being cancelled, postponed, or moved online. This has led to 67% of respondents saying the pandemic has left them unable to fundraise.

Rescues have adapted to the challenge of COVID-19, but for many of these adjustments were painful, with paid staff losing jobs and funds being depleted to worrying levels. Funds and grants have provided some much-needed relief. Over half (54%) of respondents said they had applied for Government grants and 62% had applied for other grants such as those offered by ADCH and Battersea. **The rescue sector is calling for help, with 80% of respondents calling for a Government support package for rescues, similar to the support that has been provided for other sectors such as zoos.¹ No such support has been made available so far, with measures such as the Frontline Charities Relief Fund not accessible for animal charities.**

'PANDEMIC PUPPIES' – THE NEW COHORT OF LOCKDOWN PETS

Demand for pets drastically increased during the first lockdown period following the COVID-19 outbreak. Battersea research shows that in February 2020 there was an average of 725,160 online searches to buy a dog

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-100m-zoo-animals-fund-opens-for-applications>

which increased to 1,574,380 in April, a 217% rise. Whilst only a proportion of searches will have been converted into purchases, it is clear that interest in dog and cat ownership has increased more than normal during this period.

The average asking price for a dog/puppy has also increased, reflecting the increase in demand. The average asking price on the Pets4Homes website during lockdown more than doubled, from £800 to £1,900.² This is likely to generate problems in 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.³ This raises serious concerns about the future behaviour and welfare of this cohort of dogs.
- **Red flags ignored or missed** – 19% of new owners regret their decision to acquire a dog or cat, mainly because of costs, demands on their time and behaviour of their pet.⁴ Such regrets are likely to be high for ‘pandemic pup’ or kitten buyers, 31% of whom 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 red flags about the decision:
 - 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,⁵ 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.⁶
- **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.⁷
- **Rescues are preparing** for problems to emerge once people start returning to workplaces. The fear is many of these new pets, dogs especially, could end up in rescue centres.

However, lockdown restrictions appeared to have a positive impact on the number of stray dogs and dog nuisance. Local Authorities have a statutory duty to deal with stray dogs. In a Battersea survey, Local Authorities reported a 48% reduction in the number of stray dogs dealt with in the three months April to June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. An increased number of people at home could have meant more people being affected by neighbours’ pets, 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.

PET IMPORTATION

The start of the first national lockdown at the end of March 2020 had a profound effect on the numbers of dogs entering the UK, with a sharp decrease in April for Intra-Trade Animal Health Certificates (ITAHCs). Whilst the number of animals entering the country via PETS remained low due to travel restrictions, commercial movements increased. The number of ITAHCs issued for dogs from May to August 2020 was 15,953, almost double the 8,208 for the same period in 2019.⁸ **The heightened demand during lockdown combined with static UK supply is encouraging buyers to turn to overseas breeders. This increased demand likely also signals more illegal and low-welfare puppy importation into the UK,**⁹ with all the health and welfare risks that are known to accompany such activity.¹⁰

PET THEFT

² Information from correspondence with Pet4Homes

³ https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/research/research-papers/201020_covid%20report_v8.pdf

⁴ Battersea OnePoll survey of 2,000 UK dog and cat owners; August 2020

⁵ <https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/media-centre/2020/august/the-covid-19-puppy-boom-one-in-four-admit-impulse-buying-a-pandemic-puppy>

⁶ <https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/media-centre/2020/august/the-covid-19-puppy-boom-one-in-four-admit-impulse-buying-a-pandemic-puppy>

⁷ <https://www.actionfraud.police.uk/news/animal-lovers-looking-for-pets-in-lockdown-defrauded25-of-nearly-300000-in-two-months>

⁸ <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-06-01/52515>, <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2020-09-04/85115>

⁹ <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>

¹⁰ <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/news-events/news/2019/heavily-pregnant-dogs-are-latest-victims-of-horrifying-puppy-smuggling-trade>

The rapid increase in value of puppies and dogs has raised fears that thefts of dogs to be sold on will increase.¹¹ However, Battersea's survey of all UK police forces found little evidence of this happening to a significant extent in the early stages of the pandemic. In the six-month period March to August 2020, there were 783 thefts of dogs 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.

However there have been significant spikes within the areas covered by some individual police forces 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 include more than one animal. One recent case involved 22 dogs being stolen, suggesting there may be an increase in organised crime around dog theft.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Domestic violence towards humans or animals is hard to detect even in 'normal' times. It is made much harder by lockdown restrictions that isolate people at home. Domestic violence rose during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of lockdown periods and required social isolation. In the UK, calls to domestic violence service Refuge's helpline were up 49%.¹² Police interventions increased, with domestic violence crimes by current partners recorded by the Metropolitan Police up by 8.5% over the April to June 2020 lockdown period, and cases in one week up by 18.5% compared to 2019.¹³

This raises a red flag for companion animal welfare. The link between domestic violence and animal abuse is now well established.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ In one survey, 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.¹⁶ Animals are suffering now, making it more important than ever to pass the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill and increase the maximum sentence for animal cruelty to five years.

VETERINARY CARE

All veterinary practices restricted their work to emergency or urgent treatment only during the April to June 2020 lockdown. Within two weeks of this lockdown:¹⁷

- 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
- for cats, testing for viruses like calicivirus and enteritis reduced substantially.

The number of dogs and cats neutered and microchipped has greatly reduced during lockdown periods. As non-essential procedures, access to these services at vets or rescue centres 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 microchipped 77% fewer dogs in April to June 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. This reduction in neutering and microchipping means there will be more stray cats, more unwanted litters and more stray dogs in the future.

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53078401>

¹² <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5801/cmselect/cmhaff/321/321.pdf>

¹³ <https://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp578.pdf>

¹⁴ <https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/uploads/userfiles/files/mcintoshcalgarystudy.pdf>

¹⁵ <http://nationallinkcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/NSPCC-Review.pdf>

¹⁶ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232858858_Battered_Women's_Reports_of_Their_Partners'_and_Their_Children's_Cruelty_to_Animals

¹⁷ <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/media/livacuk/savsnet/Impact.of.COVID-19.on.companion.animal.veterinary.practice.report.1,20apr20.pdf>

RECOMMENDATIONS

- There is a strong case for Government financial support to sustain critical capacity in the sector.
- 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.
- Support the passage of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill which will increase the maximum sentence for animal cruelty to five years.
- Strengthen controls on puppy importation, e.g., by banning the import of puppies under six months of age into the UK.
- Ensure buyers are aware of the legal obligation on puppy breeders to microchip their animals.

ABOUT BATTERSEA

Established in 1860 to care for abandoned animals, Battersea aims to never turn away a dog or cat in need of help. In 2018, we helped around 7,000 animals including 4,009 dogs and 2,848 cats. Click [here](#) for more information on Battersea's work.

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home (Battersea) is registered in England and Wales (company no. 278802, charity no. 206394). Our registered address is 4 Battersea Park Road, London, SW8 4AA.