



The illegal trade in puppies: the issues and potential solutions

Ensuring animals have a good life by advocating on their behalf

Key facts...

- ★ The RSPCA supported the two recent changes to legislation intended to help stop third party sales of puppies. However, loopholes we highlighted in 2019 are making the third party ban largely ineffective due to dealers exploiting these loopholes and poor enforcement.
- ★ Brexit provides an opportunity to close one loophole and the Government could raise the age for imported puppies to 24 weeks.
- ★ The Government also needs to fast track the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill to provide a deterrent to dealers and bring in mandatory licencing for rescues and sanctuaries as Scotland has done, as well as require all those who breed puppies to be registered.
- ★ Finally effective enforcement of the law by all agencies, with adequate resources provided, will be crucial to addressing this issue.

Background

The current dog population is estimated to be around 12 million¹. In 2015, around 10% of the market was thought to be supplied by licensed breeders² but following the introduction of the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018, this will have risen due to a lowering in the threshold of litters bred



for which breeders need to be licensed. No accurate data exist but it is still likely to be under half the puppies entering the market are from licensed breeders, leaving the other half to be filled by unlicensed English breeders or imported puppies including those from Wales, Ireland and central Europe.

The RSPCA supported the 2018 Regulations that implemented a ban on the selling of puppies bred in England by third party sellers and the extension in 2020 to include all puppies under six months being sold in England aside from those sold by the breeder or from a rescue centre. However this legislation has two key loopholes namely: lack of licensing of animal rescue centres and lack of requirement for all dog breeders to be registered which has effectively nullified it. In addition, the imports data suggest that the legislation has not had any impact on the illegal trade or sale of puppies in England in the past six months and it is not clear if any enforcement action has occurred under the new law.

The impact of lockdowns on the puppy trade

The demand for puppies increased exponentially as people wanted companionship or exercise under the recent Covid-19 lockdowns. During the first lockdown, Google searches for 'Puppies near me' increased more than six times (650%) with 15,000 searches in July 2020 compared to 2,000 in January 2020. The figure was also five times higher than the same month in 2019. This resulted in a reported shortage of puppies³ and the price increased dramatically in a short period of time. For example, internet searches found prices of French bulldogs increased from the usual price of £1500-2000 to £7000⁴.

As English breeders were not able to satisfy the immediate demand quickly, the trade in imported dogs rose dramatically and there was a worrying trend in legal and illegal trade from third countries, in particular Romania.

¹ PfMA [pet population data](#) 2021

² Battersea [report on dog breeding](#), 30 September 2015.

³ Financial Times. [UK faces puppy shortage as demand for lockdown companion soars](#), 22 May 2020.

⁴ Puppy prices soar in Covid-19 lockdown. Vet Rec. 2020;187(1):4-5. doi:10.1136/vr.m2755

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In May 2020, the non-commercial movement of dogs under PETS fell by 88% compared with May 2019 due to travel restrictions⁵ however the commercial movement of dogs (measured by ITAHCs issued⁶) rose by 43% compared with May 2019^{6,7}. This change in trade continued over the summer of 2020. Indeed five of the six highest recorded months for commercial imports of dogs were June-October 2020. Similar demands for dogs within rescue centres were observed⁸ - 66% of rescues surveyed by the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes in April 2020 stated an increase in people wanting to foster dogs and a decrease in dogs being abandoned⁹. Likewise, the RSPCA's online 'Find A Pet' saw a surge in visits during lockdown, increasing 129% to more than 3,700,000 searches compared to 1,600,000 in 2019.

The health and welfare issues concerning this trade have been well documented and the RSPCA remains concerned about the demand for puppies and sources of these puppies that could result in diseased puppies lacking in adequate or appropriate socialisation.

Darker side of the puppy trade

There is a criminal element in the puppy trade but the degree of large scale organised crime involvement is unknown¹⁰. The RSPCA has seen links between puppy dealers and both animal welfare criminal behaviour such as badger baiting and other criminal behaviour such as drugs. Criminal elements are attracted to the trade as the risk of getting caught is low and even when caught punishment is low compared to drugs or people smuggling. Against this, large profits can be made; a puppy worth €40 in Romania can sell for €700 in the UK and income is high - one dealer prosecuted by the RSPCA was earning £3 million annually. This money is hidden but when investigated, monies reclaimed by the Government can be substantial - HMRC reclaimed £5.3 million for 257 cases over a four year period¹¹.



What measures are needed?

If the trade is to be reduced the UK Government needs to take measures to counter the loopholes:

- 1. Increase the maximum sentence** under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to five years by fast tracking the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill through Parliament. This should act as a better deterrent to dealers.
- 2. Introduce mandatory licensing of rescue organisations/centres** to prevent commercial third party dealers using these as 'fronts' to circumvent the law. The RSPCA is aware of a couple of dealers who have done this. Scotland will be introducing mandatory licensing in 2021 and Wales has already introduced a voluntary code.
- 3. The 2018 Regulations need further amendment** to require all breeders of puppies regardless of how many litters they produce or whether they are deemed 'commercial vendors' to be registered.
- 4. The Government should raise the minimum age to six months for importing puppies from the current 15 weeks.** This should prevent importers from bringing puppies into the UK. Other countries, including the USA have successfully used it as a method to curb the illegal trade in puppies.
- 5. Effective enforcement of the law** is crucial if we are to make a difference. This means properly resourced council teams and also through HMRC tax investigations as well as Border Force prioritising this issue to disrupt the trade. Joint working with all agencies will be key.

⁵ [Parliamentary Question](#) 52515. 8 June 2020

⁶ Intra-Trade Animal Health Certificates

⁷ [Parliamentary Question](#) 85115. 9 September 2020

⁸ Morgan, L., Protopopova, A., Birkler, R. I. D., Itin-Shwartz, B., Sutton, G. A., Gamliel, A., Yakobson, B., Raz, T. [Human-dog relationships during COVID-19 pandemic: booming dog adoption during social isolation](#). (5 June 2020)

⁹ ADCH. 2020 Survey of 134 rescues in UK and Ireland

¹⁰ Eurogroup for Animals. [Report on the illegal pet trade: Game Over](#). 2020

¹¹ HM Revenue and Customs. [Millions raised from tax evading dog breeders](#). 2019

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