

Puppy and Kitten Smuggling

Key Information

- The RSPCA is urging the Government to introduce powers to increase the age at which puppies and kittens can be legally imported to six months, ban the import of dogs and cats with mutilations and ban the import of pregnant animals.
- The RSPCA would encourage the UK Government to introduce a Bill to tackle the issue of puppy and kitten smuggling as soon as possible.

Background

During the pandemic, legal commercial imports of dogs rose by nearly 60% to over 70,000 dogs in 2021¹ and trends in illegal imports could be expected to be similar. Whilst imports have now fallen back as demand has reduced, the pandemic experience, where demand massively outstripped supply, shows the problems with enforcement and identification of dogs. Therefore highlighting that a simpler system is required.

Under the EU Pet Travel Scheme (PETS), a single individual can import five puppies/kittens. In theory, this would enable five individuals in a single vehicle to import twenty-five puppies/kittens with minimal border checks. Non-commercial imports have been a significant concern for years as a major route for illegal puppies and kittens to enter Great Britain. Data from the Animal Health & Plant Agency (APHA) shows that between 2015 and 2019 there was an 86% increase in the number of dogs entering the country via PETS once the UK relaxed their quarantine border controls in 2012 and 2015. Figures continue to be high post Covid; over 282,000 dogs entered the UK in 2022 under PETS.

Age of Animals Imported

There are numerous concerns around the importation of young puppies and kittens that are well documented including a higher risk of developing illnesses, suffering early deaths and development of behaviour issues². There have been reports of puppies as young as four weeks old being imported³. Raising the minimum age for bringing puppies and kittens into the UK from the present 15 weeks to six months will ensure they are not taken from their mothers too soon and will allow them to develop further, ahead of travelling on potentially long and stressful journeys which can have a lasting impact on their behaviour. It will also

¹ Defra/APHA 2020, 2021, 2022 Import statistics

²<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2017/11/scoping-research-sourcing-pet-dogs-illegal-importation-puppy-farms-2016/documents/00527436-pdf/00527436-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00527436.pdf>

³ <https://www.bva.co.uk/news-and-blog/blog-article/bva-live-should-the-uk-stop-dog-imports/>

⁴ Nadine Chersini, Nathan J. Hall & Clive D. L. Wynne (2018) Dog Pups' Attractiveness to Humans Peaks at Weaning Age, *Anthrozoös*, 31:3, 309-318, DOI: 10.1080/08927936.2018.1455454

⁵<https://www.pdsa.org.uk/what-we-do/pdsa-animal-wellbeing-report/paw-report-2022>

⁶ Moving animals across borders - Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee - House of Commons (parliament.uk)

⁷ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1828051X.2022.2043194>

help enforcement officers as identifying a dog at six months is easier than assessing if they are 14 or 15 weeks old.

We know that very young dogs represent the biggest potential profits for puppy dealers because of the emotional pull of the 'cute factor'⁴ and so cutting off this part of the trade, if properly enforced, would be a huge step forward. The RSPCA supports raising the minimum age to six months.

Mutilation

Mutilation includes acts such as tail docking, ear cropping and declawing. Ear cropping and other mutilations such as declawing have been illegal for over 20 years in England and Wales. However, the RSPCA reported a 1,243% increase in the incidents of ear cropping in dogs reported to it between 2015 and 2021. We know from our investigations that the present loophole where dogs with cropped ears can be imported, gives anyone illegally ear cropping in the UK a defence to avoid being prosecuted for acts illegal under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Recent rises in celebrities buying dogs with cropped ears has fuelled this market. The clear connection between the trade and increases in illegal ear cropping in the UK has fuelled public demand to do something. This year alone, 14,423 supporters took action on the RSPCA campaign calling for an end to ear cropping.

Similarly, declawing is an extremely painful and distressing procedure that prevents cats from exhibiting normal scratching behaviour. The PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report 2022 states that *"alarmingly, 5% of cat owners who got their cat from abroad, equating to 31,000 cats, told us that they chose to get their pet from abroad because they wanted them to be declawed"*⁵.

Import of Pregnant Animals

Moving an animal while they are pregnant, especially in their final trimester, can be highly traumatic and increase the death rate at birth⁶. Additionally, transportation is stressful⁷ which can impact on the welfare of the mother as well as the offspring. Furthermore, there are wider biosecurity concerns around several zoonotic diseases in imported puppies, including rabies, *Echinococcus multilocularis* and a growing concern in *Brucella canis*.

The RSPCA therefore believes that pregnant animals should not be imported.

RSPCA's Recommendations

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