

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Pet Welfare and Abuse, HC 1123

Tuesday 4 July 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 4 July 2023.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Dr Neil Hudson (in the Chair); Ian Byrne; Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Robbie Moore; Julian Sturdy; Derek Thomas.

In the absence of the Chair, Dr Neil Hudson was called to the Chair.

Questions 1 - 87

Witnesses

I: Sarah Carr, CEO, Naturewatch Foundation; Dr Melissa Donald, Council Member, Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons; Dr Justine Shotton, Senior Vice President, British Veterinary Association; and Dr Sean Wensley, Senior Veterinary Surgeon for Animal Welfare and Professional Engagement, PDSA.

II: Dr Paula Boyden, Veterinary Director, Dogs Trust; Dr Maggie Roberts, Director of Feline Welfare, Cats Protection; Jessica Stark, Director of Communications and Public Affairs, World Horse Welfare; and Becky Thwaites, Head of Public Affairs, Blue Cross.

Written evidence from witnesses:

- [Naturewatch Foundation](#)
- [British Veterinary Association](#)
- [PDSA](#)
- [Dogs Trust](#)
- [Cats Protection](#)
- [World Horse Welfare](#)
- [Blue Cross](#)
- [Blue Cross - supplementary](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Sarah Carr, Dr Melissa Donald, Dr Justine Shotton and Dr Sean Wensley.

Q1 Chair: Welcome, everyone, to our first session in the pet welfare and abuse inquiry that we are running on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee. In the Chair's absence, Sir Robert Goodwill has asked me to chair the session today. I would like to declare my professional and personal interest in this topic, as a veterinary surgeon, as a Fellow of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and as a member of the British Equine Veterinary Association.

It is pet welfare and abuse, but we have a broad inquiry covering companion animals, very much including animals such as horses as well, so some of the witnesses today will be speaking on that. First of all, I welcome our expert witnesses. Can I ask you to introduce yourselves and say where you are from, and then we will start with the session?

Sarah Carr: I am Chief Executive of Naturewatch Foundation.

Dr Donald: I am a veterinary surgeon and President of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

Dr Wensley: I am Senior Vet for Animal Welfare and Professional Engagement at the veterinary charity PDSA.

Dr Shotton: I am Senior Vice President at the British Veterinary Association.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much for giving up your time today. There will be some overlap in some of the areas that you cover and we have a lot that we want to get through, so, if you find yourself in agreement with your colleagues on the panel, do not feel you have to reiterate what they have just said. Just say, "Yes, I agree on that", and if there are any additional points that you want to make, flag it to me.

Before my first question, are the panel aware and have you seen on ITV this week that the reporters Daniel Hewitt and Sam Leader ran a piece on "ITV News" on a new syndrome called puppy yoga? I don't know whether you have seen that and whether, in your professional bodies and in your groups, you have had any exposure to that and what your thoughts are. Broadly, what this piece has shown is that people are going into sessions doing yoga and there are very young puppies in the room, puppies down to the ages of six weeks of age.

These puppies are spending many hours in the room with these people doing their yoga, often not fed or watered. These animals are potentially not vaccinated and it is raising significant welfare concerns. I want to introduce that to the panel and see if any of you have any thoughts or comments on that piece or that issue that is under way. Justine, I see you nodding there.



Dr Shotton: Yes. We would have serious concerns about the welfare of those puppies. While we have not had a lot of involvement with that, we would be concerned that it is a marketing tool for puppy sales, and irresponsible puppy sales, and might link into some of the other themes we are talking about today. We would be very worried about unvaccinated puppies potentially mixing with other unvaccinated pups and their potential welfare compromise, and the fact that then members of the public might be encouraged to impulse buy these pups without thinking things through.

Q3 **Chair:** What are the implications for the welfare of these puppies? You talked about the vaccinations for these infectious diseases. If they are not covered and they are then mixing with other pups and so on, for our inquiry and for the people watching this, what issues could be raised there?

Dr Shotton: In any mixing of puppies that have not been vaccinated there is a risk of infectious diseases, of those that you can vaccinate against. There is also potential spread of other bacterial infections, for example, and it is not good practice. We recommend good socialisation of puppies, a variety of exposures to sights and sounds of different people, but after the first vaccination. Before then, there are higher risks.

Dr Wensley: We would concur with all that. I am aware of the piece that you mentioned. I don't have a detailed knowledge of it, but, as Justine says, some of the implications and potential welfare risks and themes will recur through other topics that we touch on. Theoretically, from the perspective of pure health and welfare, it could with guidance and enforcement potentially be done in a way that was welfare compatible, but we would definitely recognise a welfare risk. Separate from that, issues of respecting animals and of commodifying cute animals for human gain could be teased apart from those health and welfare risks.

Sarah Carr: One of the things that it demonstrates is that the puppy trade is constantly changing, that there are trends all the time coming through. It is very alarming when there are such animal welfare considerations, but the key point is that we think we are on top of it, we think that there are the latest regulations, and then down the line somebody has come up with a new idea. Some ideas are obviously more about financial incentive rather than welfare, and that is always a great concern.

Q4 **Chair:** I will put my next question to Sean. Do you have a feel for how the UK's pet population has changed over the last five years? Obviously, this inquiry has been set up on the back of the pandemic. In this last five years, have we seen a significant change in pet population and pet ownership?

Dr Wensley: My entry point—and I suppose legitimacy for answering that question first—would largely come from our PDSA data and the PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report, the so-called PAW Report, which PDSA has



been conducting in association with YouGov annually since 2011. It is now the UK's largest and longest running assessment of the extent to which the UK's pet dogs, cats and rabbits have their welfare needs met, coupled with an insight into owner experiences of owning those pets and, pertinent to this question, an estimation of pet populations for those three species.

As an entry point, I would just say that the methodology that we have used to estimate the pet population as part of the PAW Report is peer reviewed in *Vet Record* and the methodology has remained unchanged since 2011. From it we can infer benchmarking data and trends.

There has certainly been a perception of a rapid increase in pet populations in recent years linked to the pandemic. Certainly, we have now seen an uplift to an estimated 11 million dogs from 10.1 million a couple of years ago. Some of the reasons why veterinary surgeons and others feel that there has been a pet population boom will be linked to factors, which we can go on to talk about, around the stresses and pressures of veterinary clinical practice generally. When life seems hectic and spiralling out of control, with poor mental health and so on, that will contribute to a perception that populations have risen rapidly.

We would point out that since 2011 there were an estimated 8.3 million dogs in the UK and there are now 11 million. There has been a general rise towards an increasing pet dog population in that time anyway. There is an apparent background rise.

Q5 Chair: You have given us figures for dogs. Do you have comparable figures for cats and rabbits then over the last few years?

Dr Wensley: Yes. The estimated cat population now is also 11 million, according to our figures, and around one million for rabbits. We have not yet seen the uplift for those two species in the last couple of years that we have for dogs. That is not to say that there will not be a lag phase, and we are open-minded about the prospect of a rise ultimately being demonstrated that could be more persuasively linked to the pandemic.

What we recognise is that demand has risen very rapidly, and there are a lot of so-called new owners for whom this is their first experience of owning this species of pet as an adult. There are definitely population-related risks to welfare through inexperience and rapid acquisition.

Q6 Chair: Thank you. I will now focus in more on the pandemic and open this up to the rest of the panel as well as Sean. What trends in pet ownership emerged during the pandemic? In terms of the types of pets bought and potentially where they were being sourced from, was it the UK or was it abroad? Did that open up things that we will be looking at later on in the session today?

Dr Shotton: We have a couple of references that the Royal Veterinary College published. We were not directly involved in the research, but it



draws some interesting conclusions particularly around dog ownership in the pandemic.

The project compared the experiences of dog owners who were purchasing puppies both pre-pandemic and during 2020. There were two papers that came out of that bulk of research. The first one focused on the owners and their motivations for getting puppies. We found that in the pandemic, so in 2020, owners were more likely to be first-time dog owners, to have children at home, to pay a deposit without seeing the dog—which is worrying—to collect their puppy outside the house, which might be to do with the lockdown rules, and to see the puppy without its litter mates. Some of these can have welfare implications. They were also more likely to pay over £2,000 for the puppy, so that is an increase compared to the pre-pandemic figures.

The second study looked at the health and early life experiences of those puppies. The research found that the pandemic puppies themselves had inappropriate or insufficient socialisation opportunities. They were significantly less likely to have attended training classes or experienced visitors in the home at under four months of age. They were also less likely to have a vet check, less likely to be Kennel Club registered and more likely to be either a designer cross-breed or sold with a passport, which would imply that there might have been a higher number of imported dogs at that point in time. That has links with things like the mutilations that vets have been seeing in practice as well.

Q7 Chair: Did we see an uptick in dogs being imported? As you say, that raises questions that we are going to come on to about ear cropping and things like that and dogs potentially with infectious diseases coming in.

Dr Shotton: In the veterinary profession, the vets on the ground, based on our BVA surveys, are seeing an increase in those infectious diseases and an increase in dogs with cropped ears, for example. The assumption is that those dogs are probably coming in from abroad, but there is a separate problem with cropped ears that we will come on to talk about that means that maybe those dogs could have been illegally cropped in the UK as well.

Q8 Chair: This uptick in pet ownership, was it largely dogs, then, or was there a similar cat and rabbit uptick as well?

Dr Wensley: The uptick that we can substantiate has largely been in dogs. To supplement what Justine said there, some of the PAW data would reflect that trend towards an increasing proportion of dogs being imported from abroad. We found that in 2020 around 4% of dogs acquired in the UK were from abroad; in 2021 and 2022 that was 6% and in 2023 it was 8%.

Chair: We are going to get more on to some of the imported issues later. Sean, the PDSA has said that the welfare of pet rabbits continues to lag behind that of dogs and cats year after year. Do you still hold with that



and, if so, what is happening there? Why is that the case?

Dr Wensley: Yes, absolutely. The welfare of pet rabbits in this country has been described by some as a silent welfare crisis. If we consider companion animal welfare in terms of the five welfare needs that are described and laid out in the UK legislation, they consistently and routinely fail to have several of those needs met. That could be the suitability of their living environment, still a high number living in hutches that are too small without access to an exercise run; their diets are inappropriate; and still just under half are living alone, despite being a highly social species.

By way of trying to explain why that might be the case, what we do see with pet rabbits is that, when we ask owners why they have acquired the species that they own, the reason for rabbits is more commonly cited as, "We got one for the child. We got it as a children's pet". Just under a third say that, which is distinct from dogs and cats.

There was a paper published on 3 July, just a few days ago, in animal welfare that looked at the implications of viewing rabbits as a so-called starter pet and some of the associated and I think interesting perceptions. There is another paper published on animals along these lines around their emotional abilities and their cognitive abilities, their ability to feel pain and, therefore, their deservedness of having certain living conditions and welfare conditions met. There is something about the perceptions of that species that the literature would suggest contributes to them being side-lined, essentially.

Q9 **Chair:** A perception, and perhaps a lack of awareness in people purchasing these pets for their kids, that this is potentially a low maintenance pet that you can stick in a hutch in the garden. Are you then seeing unintended consequences, rabbits getting fly strike and things like that, because they are being fed inappropriately and then kept out in the garden and so on? Are you seeing things like that?

Dr Wensley: Yes. You could approach that question through the five needs as a checklist. Of course, if they are not getting the appropriate diet, then we see a lot of dental and digestive disease, emotional boredom and so on through not having access to enrichment.

Chair: We might come back to this perception of animals and awareness and education for how people look after their animals. Sarah, did you want to come in quickly?

Sarah Carr: On rabbits, there is no local authority regulation for rabbits as there is for dogs and cats. If you want to get a rabbit, there are no guidelines on how to do it or what to do. You just get a rabbit for your child and you have no idea of what you should be doing.

Q10 **Derek Thomas:** Sarah, can I follow up on that? Justine made an interesting point about the social interaction of new puppies and dogs during the pandemic. My question is around the prevalence of



behavioural issues among dogs and cats in particular. Are you seeing these behavioural issue trends in pets, dogs and cats in particular, and what do you think is contributing to that? Does that make sense?

Sarah Carr: I am probably not the best person to answer on behavioural issues myself.

Q11 **Derek Thomas:** No, that is fine. I was just looking at the work you did in the welfare and abuse bit. Who wants to pick up on that? We are talking about the trends around the prevalence of behavioural issues among cats and dogs in particular, if we are seeing any trends.

Dr Shotton: We have some limited statistics on that from our survey asking members of our profession what they were seeing in practice. Over half of our vets in a 2023 survey reported an increase in the number of clients concerned about their dogs, particularly aggressive behaviour. We were asking about aggression in particular. We were trying to get a sense of whether or not that was related to the pandemic and lockdowns and so on.

We do not have statistics to compare prior to this so it is hard to draw any firm conclusions, but we did find that 87% of the dogs reported in that survey were believed to be under three years of age. We have limited data on behaviour in dogs in particular. I don't know if you have anything additional.

Dr Wensley: Again, complementary figures, really. When PDSA has surveyed veterinary professionals, that is vet nurses and vet team members, 60% say that they have seen an increase in dog behavioural issues in the last two years. There is certainly a perception that dog behaviour is not getting better and is probably getting worse. A quarter of owners report that their dogs are growling, snapping, biting and showing signs of fear. That is higher than in previous years; only a couple of per cent higher than in 2022, which was 23%, nevertheless an increase.

Some of the risks that we would recognise from lockdowns in particular and the pandemic puppy period around behaviour were some of the limitations on ability to socialise puppies at that young age, which, of course, is so critical to their future personality and temperament. Now with the cost of living crisis, and probably coupled with the pandemic, it is access to training classes as well. Either they cannot afford them or they were not able to access them.

Thirdly is the drive, linked to the increased demand, to some of the low-welfare breeding practices. When you have poor breeding practices, poor socialisation and poor access or willingness to access training, it is a recipe for disaster. That is bad for the dogs, of course, and for public health because it correlates with the rise in dog bites and strikes.

Q12 **Derek Thomas:** The point made earlier was that some of the people owning these extra dogs—the million-odd dogs that you referred to—have



never had a dog before in their adult life. Is that contributing and is it public awareness and knowledge, saying that, "A dog is not for Christmas. It is for the whole time"? Do you think that that is contributing? The evidence we have so far suggests that, with the cost of living and the fact that people got dogs during the pandemic and they have behaviour issues, these dogs or cats are being abandoned. What do the Government need to be doing, and what should society be doing to address that to ensure that pets are good companions in a home but also for the welfare of the animals themselves?

Dr Wensley: The Government could do more to get these matters of animal welfare and responsible pet ownership on the national curriculum. That is something that we have lobbied for over many years. We do as much as we can, collectively and with charities here in the room, on the pet education partnership and others. We provide curriculum link materials. We make those materials accessible to schools. Animal welfare is not taught on the national curriculum and that could include, allied with it, how to behave safely around dogs in particular. That would be important.

If we look at the pre-acquisition journey, when you have decided that you want to get a pet, again there is a lot of voluntary initiatives that strike to help and influence people to do the right thing, but still they generally do what they choose. At the point of sale, the licensing of activities involving animals' regulation should have tightened up some of the pet vending and pet breeding activities, but I think that we have quite low awareness of that. A lot of people are not looking for whether their local breeders are licensed and so on, so that needs to be tightened up.

Finally, once they come into private ownership behind closed domestic doors, there is the whole issue of whether the five needs are being adhered to. We know that there are routine failings so there could certainly be more done to enforce the existing legislation.

Q13 **Derek Thomas:** If you are picking up those problems, what is the role of a vet in terms of feeding that information in towards you but also to the authorities? Are we seeing a lot of that where households are being effectively reported for animal welfare and abuse issues?

Dr Shotton: We are encouraging our members, members of the veterinary profession, where they are worried about that sort of thing to report it. I think there still can be confusion as to where certain welfare compromises should be reported to. There are often difficulties with what is then the next step. Vets can also have a conflict of interest in what happens to that pet beyond that. It is quite challenging for vets, who are also under a lot of time pressure, to then be able to take the time to report these.

Derek Thomas: Then to hide it even more by driving them away. Thank you.



Q14 Chair: A lot of people got pets during the pandemic and everyone was at home. As people then went back into the workplace, are you seeing people not knowing what to do with those dogs and then those dogs developing behavioural issues like separation anxiety and things like that? Have you had reports of that among your members?

Dr Shotton: We have definitely had reports of increased behavioural issues, including separation anxiety, because of owners going back. We always try to get the message out to think about the lifelong needs of that pet, in particular dogs but all pets, before you get them and try to get that voice out to the public, despite it being quite challenging. There is a combination of factors resulting in the increase in pet abandonment. Accommodation, cost of living, inability to pay for vet care as well as just husbandry care for those pets, combined with behavioural issues, can result in an increase in pet abandonment.

Q15 Barry Gardiner: I want to ask you about the link between unscrupulous breeding and these new things—at least they are certainly new to me in the last 10 years—called canine fertility clinics. Perhaps you could talk us through, Sarah, the link between those two. Why are canine fertility clinics, which were pretty well unknown in the past, now springing up?

Sarah Carr: At Naturewatch Foundation we employ some open source internet animal crime investigators. Just before the pandemic it started filtering through to our investigators, reports coming through of members of the public concerned about practices they were seeing. In 2020 there were 37 such clinics identified, and just this April over 400.

The problem that we see with these clinics is that many of the people involved are not trained in any veterinary qualifications. In fact, they are lay people. Members of the public may be duped or not realise that they are going to a clinic and it is, in fact, lay people. That is a great worry if you have a pet dog and you think you are taking it to somewhere where they have qualifications. Vets have had so many years of study, yet people can set themselves up as canine fertility clinics without any regulation.

Q16 Barry Gardiner: Why is that?

Sarah Carr: There is no regulation for canine fertility clinics of themselves. There are very many different things that are carried out under the canine veterinary clinic name. They could be doing artificial insemination, which should be something that is only done by vets.

Barry Gardiner: They could be carrying out caesarean sections, couldn't they, on dogs?

Sarah Carr: Indeed they could. Yet—

Q17 Chair: Could I just interrupt there? It might be helpful at this point, Barry, if Melissa answered for the regulatory body as to what exactly is going on here in terms of acts of veterinary surgery that are being done



HOUSE OF COMMONS

not by vets. If you could clarify that and then come back to Sarah, that would be helpful.

Dr Donald: Vets is a protected title under the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 and only vets can do certain procedures, including acts of surgery and acts of diagnosis, which is critical. AI is definitely one of the ones that is an act of veterinary surgery.

Chair: Blood sampling as well?

Dr Donald: Blood sampling. Registered veterinary nurses can do that under the guidance of vets, yes, things like that, but lay people cannot do that at all.

Q18 **Barry Gardiner:** My original question was: what is the connection between unscrupulous breeding and the rise of those canine fertility clinics? My understanding is that, if you are breeding certain species for a particular type, large heads, massive chests, short legs, that creates the very problems that you then need a supposed canine fertility clinic to overcome, does it not? If they are not properly regulated, the demand is still going to be there from people who want dogs that look novel and yet they are not then receiving the appropriate medical veterinary care.

Dr Donald: One of our problems is that we do not have access to premises. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons only regulates veterinary surgeons, not owners of practices. Therefore, unless we have a change in the Veterinary Surgeons Act, we cannot access these.

Q19 **Barry Gardiner:** You are here before a panel of MPs who are going to produce a report to Government. What are the recommendations that you believe ought to be in the report to Government?

Dr Donald: We definitely would like a new Veterinary Surgeons Act that is appropriate for the 21st century, which includes access to premises, not necessarily just through the veterinary surgeon, through the owners who actually own it. We need so many different things. We need to be able to increase the role of the registered veterinary nurses. We need to be able to have a vet-led team of para professionals so that we can all work together for starters.

Q20 **Barry Gardiner:** Great. We have these clinics that are still going to be there calling themselves canine fertility clinics. Should there be regulation that says that any such establishment has to display what professional qualifications they have? Should it be the case that there is enforcement on those organisations? Given the animal welfare level in local authorities—I think that 60% of local authorities do not have any animal welfare specialists—how is this new regulation that you are recommending this Committee should call for going to be enforced?

Dr Donald: If we do get a new Veterinary Surgeons Act that allows us to regulate the actual buildings, we can do some of the enforcing.

Q21 **Barry Gardiner:** Great. Who would do the prosecutions?



Dr Donald: The way it works is that we need to gather the evidence. Presumably, there is somebody who is then registered to own that building who is then regulated and, therefore, we have it through our disciplinary system and it can go through that way. However, if it is an actual illegal thing that needs prosecuting, it has to go through to the prosecution services. A lot of these fertility clinics potentially have other issues going on as well and there are multi agencies involved.

Q22 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you. Can somebody tell me what they think of the role of fashion in dogs?

Sarah Carr: Yes. Canine fertility clinics are closely associated with the designer trend in dog breeding. There have been reports of that competitive element between some of the clinics to breed different traits in dogs, to have the ropes and all this, the fashion between them, and then, of course, they can charge huge amounts of money. They can also trade in the semen of these dogs, which also trades in money. One of the key things—

Q23 **Barry Gardiner:** The squashed faces means the dogs cannot breathe. The extra flap of skin means the dogs cannot breathe. The stubby legs, all these things are fashionable acquisitions for somebody. Why is the profession and all the organisations not engaging in public education to say, “For God’s sake, stop buying animals that are mutilated by selective genetic selection”?

Dr Shotton: At the BVA we are doing as much as we possibly can in terms of the public-facing messaging around this. We are engaging with social media where we see inappropriate posts from influencers or people having extreme breeds or mutilated dogs with cropped ears, for example. We are also lobbying for changes not only in advertising but also things like greeting cards with brachycephalic short-nosed dogs on the front or dogs with cropped ears. If we see those things, we will call them out. We have template letters that members of our profession can engage with.

It is extremely challenging because people are so highly influenced by these trends and are not thinking about the animals’ welfare. We do as much as we can in our media work to try to get those messages out that these animals are suffering and responsible breeding is extremely important.

Dr Wensley: PDSA and BVA both sit on the UK brachycephalic working group, which is a multi-stakeholder group looking at this very issue. We fully support the BVA’s breed to breathe campaign. Two of the wins that we have had in recent years was that the company Moonpig made a commitment not to feature some of these flat-faced breeds on their greeting cards, which, as Justine says, can contribute to their normalisation and desirability in society.

Prior to that, the brachycephalic working group made a representation to Disney when it was about to launch its movie “Patrick the Pug”. We had



HOUSE OF COMMONS

grave concerns again that Patrick's image would be all over bus shelters and so on. We got commitments from that engagement to limit the exposure and to have it more responsible. This clearly does not solve the problem but it is activity.

Q24 Barry Gardiner: Is that something that you would wish this Committee to include in its recommendations that there is a higher public awareness campaign from public bodies to discourage that breeding and acquisition?

Dr Wensley: Absolutely. That would help, as perhaps would some further Government representation to the likes of the Greeting Card Association or the overarching umbrella bodies responsible for marketing and film and media, so that there is some compulsion for them to assess potential welfare risks and harms from projects that they have proposed.

Q25 Barry Gardiner: Can I ask our vets on the panel to do something extremely unpleasant? That is to tell us some of the worst experiences that you have either dealt with or heard of involving these canine fertility clinics, and what the impact on the animal and its welfare has been. I do not think that the public really understand what is happening to supply this market in fashionable dogs.

Dr Shotton: I might hand over to my colleagues as well, but in the appendix of one of the evidence submissions we saw some horrible images. It was also in the BBC "Panorama" programme about these dogs that were bred with completely deformed limbs, to the point that they had to be euthanised at a very young age, where people are breeding dogs to look a certain way, where they have extreme conformation.

Different colour morphs can be associated with different problems as well. The skin folds, skin disease, spinal issues, the extreme brachycephaly, that extreme shortening of the face, so that the dog literally cannot walk more than a few steps without being in severe respiratory compromise. These are the things that these dogs unfortunately are experiencing daily. Where people are choosing the most extreme version because that is the trendy thing to do, or a particular look because they like that look, this is where we are seeing the extreme compromise. My colleagues might have more to add.

Sarah Carr: One of the things that we have to face is that for stud dogs, which are used in canine fertility clinics, there is no regulation of their use. They are not included in the local government regulations for dog breeding. The people who have a number of stud dogs, which may have many of these conditions, and they are deliberately breeding from these dogs to get more and more of these extreme conditions, they are just not regulated at all. Stud dog ownership should be brought into the realms of the regulation.

Q26 Barry Gardiner: That is another clear recommendation that you are asking us to put forward. Perhaps you could write to us with a bit of detail about exactly what form such regulation might take. That would be



very helpful.

Sarah Carr: I am happy to. May I also add that, in terms of the canine fertility clinics where they are lay people, the maximum fine for conviction for doing veterinary surgery is £100. There is no incentive not to do it if you think of a clinic that is performing caesarean sections and how much money it could be bringing in.

Q27 **Barry Gardiner:** Give us a sense of how much some of these extreme dogs might be worth and, therefore, the money that is involved. We have had evidence submitted to us that says that there is money laundering involved in this trade, that it is a criminal activity that is going on here, and the high values that some of these animals can fetch is fuelling that. Can you give us some examples?

Dr Shotton: I don't know the exact figures, but I know it is in the tens to potentially hundreds of thousands of pounds for an individual animal from what we have anecdotally heard.

Barry Gardiner: Therefore, a £100 fine is not even a slap on the wrist?

Sarah Carr: It is nothing, is it? If you think of how much money, it is low risk, high reward. Whether people are ignorant or unaware of the regulations or maybe not, there is no disincentive not to take part.

Barry Gardiner: A huge uplift in the financial penalty is another recommendation for us.

Sarah Carr: Yes.

Q28 **Chair:** In terms of the acts that are being performed in these so-called clinics, we are talking about blood sampling to measure hormone levels and artificial insemination. Are you saying that you are detecting that potentially caesarean sections are being performed in these clinics by non-veterinarians in this country?

Dr Shotton: I think that there have been reports of that. I do not have personal information on that, but that is what we are hearing. I think that some of Naturewatch's data have supported that.

Chair: That is a very alarming situation to be aware of in this country.

Sarah Carr: If you think of certain breeds, there should be a condition that if a dog cannot mate naturally, there should not be artificial insemination. It should not be allowed if they cannot mate or whelp naturally.

Dr Wensley: I will just chip in. When PDSA surveyed veterinary professionals, consistently their No. 1 concern in relation to dog welfare is exaggerated conformation in dogs, so just to accept that.

I think that it is right that these fertility clinics can contribute to the desire for the new and the novel and the next best thing. However, we



should not lose sight of the fact that there is high and unprecedented demand for the flat-faced breeds that we already have. Yes, we can be very worried about what is coming down the road, but there are still serious welfare concerns with what we have. Through the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations, we have the requirement that no dog should be bred if it is likely to impair the welfare of the breeding bitch or the progeny, but that piece of legislation has not yet been tested in the UK. Theoretically, it should serve to protect the welfare of some—

Q29 **Barry Gardiner:** What is the role of the breed clubs here?

Dr Wensley: The breed clubs have a very important role.

Barry Gardiner: Your diplomatic hat has just taken over.

Dr Wensley: The UK dog registering body, the Kennel Club, is part of the brachycephalic working group, as are the breed health representatives for pugs, French bulldogs and English bulldogs. I think that we would be doing them a disservice to say that they are not fully engaged in that process. We recognise that it is a multifactorial, wicked problem, but there are certainly steps that we would like to be seen given full weight by the breed health reps and the breed registering body. That is an ongoing process. There is a brachycephalic working group strategy and we also have a dog breeding roundtable chaired by Lord Trees here in Westminster tomorrow.

Dr Donald: You were asking earlier what has brought these canine clinics in. Vets in the register and the nurses all swear an oath to look after animal health and welfare, so they will not help these people who want to breed. This is why this opening for this illegal breeding with these unnatural conformations is happening. Although vets give as much advice as possible, if people do not want to hear that advice and they presumably see the monetary return, that is one of the reasons why this is happening.

Q30 **Chair:** I am going to move on, but your comments about society and popular culture are very important, Sean. You mentioned films and greeting cards and things like that. The Disney Pixar film “Up” is one of my favourite films to watch with my family, but the dogs in that film have been cropped. Similarly so the film last year “Super-Pets”, the DC Comics one; again the lead character was cropped. If these dogs are normalised in society so that people think they are normal, they will want to buy them, and that is one of the real problems. Very quickly, and then I will move on to Ian Byrne for the next question.

Dr Wensley: Very briefly, in support of that point, I remember when the tail docking of dogs was being legislated against a good few years ago. One of the initiatives by BVA and BVA’s charity, the Animal Welfare Foundation, was to produce a poster for vet practice waiting rooms to show some of the commonly docked breeds with a tail, simply to help



normalise that a Rottweiler or a Doberman should look like that and very rarely did at that time.

Chair: It should have a tail, yes.

Q31 **Ian Byrne:** Staying with you, Sean, what trends has the PDSA seen in companion animal imports and to what extent do the public know where their pets are coming from?

Dr Wensley: The data show that the proportion of dogs being imported is increasing. We have concerns for both the welfare of the animals and the public health risk. On this issue of mutilation, there are stats such as 3% of dog owners who got their dog from abroad said that they wanted it from abroad because they wanted the dog to have cropped ears. As we know, that is a mutilation that is illegal in this country but you can import them with cropped ears. Even though that can seem like a relatively low number, it is an estimated 29,000 dogs now in the UK with cropped ears from that source, these mutilations are quite normal in certain parts of the world, such as in certain parts of the US.

Q32 **Ian Byrne:** I think that we are going to come on to cropped ears so can we glide away from that? I know that Rosie Duffield is going to cover cropped ears so I do not really want to go into that. I will let Rosie ask that because it is quite easy to go into her question.

I will go to Justine. What are the current risks from animal imports and the spread of animal and zoonotic diseases, and how well are they being managed? Are you worried?

Dr Shotton: Vets are very worried about the risk of zoonotic and other exotic diseases coming into the UK, particularly from dogs but also any other pets that are being imported. We are also worried about issues around stray dogs being imported that have unknown health histories and how they can potentially bring diseases in that we do not know, as well as having potentially significant behavioural issues and that then resulting in them being rehomed quite early. That can have a very big effect on the number of dogs that are then going into rescue centres.

We found in a survey in 2021 that almost 40% of respondents working in small animal or mixed practice had seen puppies that they thought were being imported illegally, which is up from 29% when we asked the same question in 2018.

We are also asking for a number of different changes to strengthen the current import regulations. We want to see a reintroduction of compulsory tick treatments. That will help with problems such as canine babesiosis and ehrlichiosis. These are tick-borne diseases and we are seeing the potential for the ticks to then take residence in the UK, which is a significant risk for our current dog population as well as potentially human health for zoonotic diseases as well.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

We are asking for the reintroduction of tapeworm treatment for cats as well as dogs. We want to see that treatment window before they come back into the UK reduced, so that we are protecting against echinococcus, which is a tapeworm that has significant public health impact because it is zoonotic as well. We want to see the extension of the waiting time post rabies vaccination go up to 12 weeks. Not only will that help to reduce rabies risk—which is low but is there—but it will also ensure that the puppies are at least 24 weeks by the time that they come in. It should help with some of the illegal young puppy importations that we are also seeing. We want to see mandatory testing in stray dogs that are coming in from other countries so that we are at least testing before we get these dogs into the UK.

Q33 Ian Byrne: Do we have the capacity to do that?

Dr Shotton: It depends on the host country. It would be a question of those countries where the dogs are coming from for the testing to be done, and then they could come within the UK. We are suggesting and working with the veterinary profession around testing of imported dogs, for example, against canine brucellosis, which we are seeing an increase of. Again, it is a zoonotic condition. It is a lifelong condition for the dogs and there is no treatment. The testing and the treatment are very complicated, so we would like to see those tests done, even though they are not perfect, before the dogs come into the UK so there is at least one more step of safeguarding before they come through.

Ian Byrne: Melissa or Sean, would you like to add anything to that?

Dr Donald: No, I don't have anything to add.

Dr Wensley: No, thank you.

Q34 Ian Byrne: Touching on how well you think the rules on imported animals, including pets, are working, how could they be improved?

Dr Wensley: I think that there clearly needs to be a very thorough review and overhaul. We would echo the recommendations that Justine has just laid out from BVA's perspective, because they would tackle the health and welfare issues that we are concerned about.

The other thing is that around things like licensing of dog breeders and dog procurement generally, the pre-acquisition journey, there is low awareness at the moment among prospective dog owners of some of those rules that have come in just in the last couple of years. There needs to be a greater awareness and a greater desire to access that information. This is something of a \$64,000 question, really, motivating people to access pre-acquisition information.

Q35 Ian Byrne: You have touched on the fears and the risks of imports and the spread of diseases. How disappointed were you with the dropping of the animal welfare Bill? Will that increase the potential risks?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Shotton: We were extremely disappointed.

Dr Wensley: Very.

Sarah Carr: Those aspects of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, in terms of the importation of dogs with mutilations, was something that was included. It raised the age of pregnant dogs being able to come into the UK, the age of puppies being imported into the UK. That would all have helped to improve the situation. Now we look forward to new legislation coming forward with those separate parts as quickly as possible because it is incredibly disappointing. That was something that everybody in the animal welfare sector were united on.

Ian Byrne: I think so, yes.

Sarah Carr: Yes, so please can we have that back.

Ian Byrne: That is another good recommendation. Thank you.

Q36 **Rosie Duffield:** I have to declare an interest as the chair of APDAWG, the animal welfare and dog welfare APPG, which is sometimes a difficult job because we have to hear all about these horrible practices but it is very important.

Justine, you have said and we have so much evidence that the call for cropped ears and tail docking and things is on the rise. This is putting you on the line a bit. How much would you say that that is down to influencers and celebrities? I am not blaming them necessarily. They probably do not know what they are doing, but would you say that that is a big part of what is happening?

Dr Shotton: Unfortunately, I think that it is. There is probably a number of things going on and there is just a lack of information. Some people just genuinely think that a dog looks that way; for example, a Doberman looks like it always has cropped ears. They have no awareness that this has been a practice that has been done.

We did ask members in a survey of their clients who chose dogs with cropped ears why they chose them, and the most common response was that they were attractive or fashionable. There were also responses that they had been imported or were rescue dogs, so again that links into the importation and why we should not be allowing importation of dogs with cropped ears. That just fuels the fashion. Unfortunately, however, it was that they felt that this was an attractive and fashionable reason to get their dog, which again goes back to the public education and how we can engage with influencers and so forth.

Q37 **Rosie Duffield:** The BVA has said that it is frustrated by the lack of enforcement of the import situation. What can we do about that?

Dr Shotton: Yes. We would like to see a ban on importation of any animal with a mutilation that is currently banned in the UK. That would be cropped-eared dogs and declawed cats, for example. We also want it



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to be illegal to send a dog abroad so that you can crop its ears. While we are still seeing dogs with cropped ears supposedly coming in from abroad, it is very hard for the UK authorities to prove that that dog has then been cropped in the UK illegally. It can be a smokescreen for illegal cropping that is going on with puppies. There can be falsification of passports and people being sold these dogs supposedly with them being cropped abroad but that is not the case.

Dr Wensley: To briefly complete the point I started before, we should not underestimate the risk of these types of appearances and the mutilations behind them becoming normalised. It is staggering the extent to which they are normalised in other parts of the world. In parts of the US it is completely normal. As a vet, I don't suppose I ever reflected that that would be the case in this country.

These procedures that are painful and have other welfare implications beyond pain, such as communication for the animal, for those to be undertaken purely for human self-interest, human gain, human vanity, is ethically abhorrent and should not be tolerated at all within the UK. If we take a view that these are our animals, they are our property and we will do with them as we please, fine, but that is not the nation that we are. Of course, our legislation reflects that, so I think that we need to take it seriously.

Rosie Duffield: Thank you. That was very powerful.

Dr Donald: It is very clear in our code of conduct and guidance that we do not do these unless there is a real medical reason for it. However, if you see a client coming in with them, if they can still be imported or the poor dogs go abroad to have it done—which is another stressor—at the end of the day, if you are not allowed to bring them in at all it makes it very easy and straightforward. There will be no dogs with cropped ears.

Q38 **Rosie Duffield:** We have talked about importing but, of course, these hideous kits can be bought online. Is that something you think the Government should be cracking down on and that that should be part of the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill or somewhere in legislation, if we ever get back to that?

Dr Shotton: Yes, I would support that ask. I think that that would be extremely helpful. Wherever we have found those kits online we have flagged it to the retailer and they have taken them down, but then they will just crop up—excuse the pun—down the line. It is very hard to keep on top of it, so something like that would be extremely helpful.

Q39 **Rosie Duffield:** Obviously, the main retailers like Amazon should be aware that there is only one reason you would buy those kits, isn't there, really?

There is one more bit to my question. We have talked a lot off the record, when we go on visits with people in various organisations, about the links between organised crime and ear cropping and docking of tails and



things. Is that something that you would all go along with? Is that link justified or is that over-exaggerated, do you think?

Sarah Carr: I don't think that we can comment on the extent of it, but it is quite clear that there is a link between some of the canine fertility clinics and aspects of organised crime—not for all of them, but for some of them—in terms of tax evasion, drug running, and traditional puppy farming as we think of it. A canine fertility clinic I think is more associated as an urban thing, but it actually does link back to the puppy trade.

The key thing is that we have to ensure that any of these things that we see, going back to the artificial insemination and the things that are being done by canine fertility clinics, need some statement from Government to say that lay people should not be running canine fertility clinics and they are the preserve of the veterinary surgeon, not lay people.

Q40 Chair: I want to get on to the veterinary sector now. Our Committee has taken a close interest in this. Our "Moving animals across borders" report made recommendations about veterinary workforce issues in the UK and the need for recruitment and retention. Could you flag to us what you feel the issues related to that are for the veterinary profession moving forward? How well equipped is the UK veterinary sector, the UK veterinary profession, to deal with the current levels of demand for people with companion animals?

Dr Shotton: It is something that we are extremely worried about at the British Veterinary Association. We have seen a workforce crisis over the last few years. That has put our members who remain in the profession under significant strain and risk of burnout. It is then almost like a vicious cycle.

There are problems with recruitment. There are problems with retention. There is a huge increase in the amount of pressure on vets in companion animal practice, because of the numbers of pets that have been added to the pet population in the last few years since the pandemic, and the different ways of working that veterinary teams had to employ during the pandemic to be safe and to keep the public safe. There have also been a number of vets leaving the UK to go back to the EU post-Brexit and fewer non-UK vets coming in. Because of the problems with veterinary surgeons not being able to register in the UK—and Melissa might want to comment on this—we are seeing many fewer EU graduates coming to work in the UK.

We did a survey last spring and found that almost 70% of vets treating pets said that they currently had vacancies for veterinary roles in their practices. Almost 90% of those respondents received three applicants or fewer for each of the jobs, and for almost 40% it took more than six months to fill those vacancies. Those are all up from the previous survey in 2018. There is a huge problem with being able to fill the number of vet



HOUSE OF COMMONS

vacancies that are available, and that then puts an extreme amount of pressure on the vets that remain.

We are doing a lot in the British Veterinary Association to work on how we make veterinary workplaces good and how we encourage people to stay in the profession. We are focusing on things like flexible working and better ways of working. We are doing a lot of public communications around abusive behaviour, because we also run a survey that showed vets who experienced online abuse were much more likely to say that they would be likely to leave the veterinary profession in five years' time compared to those who had not experienced that behaviour. Unfortunately, things like the cost of living crisis might impact that negatively as well. I might see if Melissa wants to comment on the stats.

Chair: Before Melissa comes in, I should just reiterate that the focus of this inquiry is companion animals, but our Committee is very cognisant that there is a need within the veterinary profession for farm animal veterinarians, for people in public health, in academia and veterinary research as well. We are aware, so, Melissa, you might want to touch on that as well as companion animals.

Dr Donald: It is no mystery that we have a workforce issue. We have less than 30,000 people on the active register. The active register means that you can do acts of veterinary surgeons. You can be on the other register where you are still a vet but you are not performing acts of veterinary surgery. We have less than 30,000. That covers the whole scope of the millions of animals and the public health and everything.

There are various trigger points from research. The new graduates are in shellshock at the increase in the number of patients coming through. They don't have time. They don't have the chance to gather their breath and take things slowly compared to when I came through. The trigger point five years on is, "Oh my God, is this what it is all about?" You do not have time to think. You are on that continual hamster wheel. I know that we are not on the minimum wage, but relative pay for what we do. It is a really stressful job. People are saying, "I am not going to stay doing this". These are the real cream of the school students each year who come in.

There are a lot of other better paid jobs. You are exceptionally skilled at communicating and problem solving. It is in big demand, so you do not have to stay as a veterinary surgeon if you do not feel that you are valued. As much as all the practices are trying, it is how we work. If you think that one vet used to do all the day jobs and the out-of-hours, now you may need two or three vets on that register doing that same job. You might have people doing only out-of-hours in the small animal world, and you might have people only wanting to work 27 hours a week, even whatever time of the day it is. You need a lot of vets on the register to cover all those options.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Although we are trying every way possible to keep them in the profession and bring people back, sometimes it is just so hard. We need to increase the role our registered veterinary nurses can do, and we need different ways of people training through university. Five years is a long time. We might need to do things like having not omni potential—in other words, can treat every animal—but look at different options of how to get people through university.

Again, we come back to a new Veterinary Surgeons Act. I am sorry if I keep repeating myself, but we are stuck between a rock and hard place at the moment. We need to value our nurses, let them do more and work with the paraprofessionals. We also need to protect everybody's title, so that everybody who uses these people knows they are regulated and are who they say they are.

Chair: Thank you. That is very helpful, both of you, in terms of articulating some of the pressures and strains facing the veterinary profession moving forward. We touched on this as well in our "Rural Mental Health Report" that was published just a few weeks ago, looking at some of the pressures facing the veterinary profession. I will hand over to Robbie Moore now for the next question.

Q41 **Robbie Moore:** I am moving the line of questioning across to enforcement. Maybe Sean, if I start with you. In your view, how well is enforcement of animal welfare law working?

Dr Wensley: It is conceptually interesting that we have, under the Animal Welfare Act, the duty of care, section 9, that says that UK-wide, looking at the devolved regions as well, pets should have their five welfare needs met. That was rightly recognised as world-leading legislation at the time of introduction and enactment. As we well know from the "PAW Report," veterinary clinical experience and elsewhere the UK's pet dogs, cats, and rabbits at least, and exotics and others, don't have their five welfare needs met. There is some sort of enforcement problem.

It is not just enforcement. There is an education and communication problem. We have looked at various things such as the national curriculum and pre-acquisition journey and so on, but the fact is the existing legislation that we have that ought to be world-leading should see all these pet animals that we are talking about having their five welfare needs met, and they do not. Clearly there is some sort of enforcement problem.

One of the issues there may be that that Act of course did not do away with the existing legislation to protect animals against unnecessary suffering. When there is limited resource, society and enforcement agencies rightly must keep going at the worst cases of animal abuse and those cases of unnecessary suffering and maybe the four issues—such as pet rabbits being kept alone when they should have a compatible companion—go further down the enforcement pecking order. Again, that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is where the work of the charities, the veterinary sector, and all of us here have a role in education, but it could be more robustly backed up by enforcement.

Q42 Robbie Moore: It has been suggested that longer sentences should be included as a deterrent. What is your view, and the view of the panel? If enforcement action is successful then effectively the prosecution that takes place, sentencing, for example, is it your view that longer sentences are forming a good enough deterrent, or what mechanisms would you like to see in terms of a recommendation to us as the Committee?

Sarah Carr: One of the things in terms of sentences is it will be prosecuted by the local authority, or a local authority goes in to remove the pets, but then they have that local authority who has that responsibility to then house those pets that have been taken away. What local authority has the funds to look after all those animals that have been taken away? That is a serious issue that different organisations have looked at in terms of being able to foster some of those animals out in a much shorter timeframe, so that it does not remain the financial burden of the local authority when they are looking into it, or the RSPCA, or whoever is doing it.

When we are doing our investigations as a charity, I find disappointment from members of the public when there is a case that has gone through, an awful case of animal welfare, and at the end it is just a slap on the wrist. That does not give people confidence to know that if they report animal welfare infringements that anything is going to be done. The number of prosecutions is incredibly low.

Q43 Robbie Moore: You are describing the scenario at the moment. What would like you to see Government do more of, in terms of what would be a sufficient deterrent in your view in terms of proper enforcement action if it were followed through, whether it is sentencing or a cost penalty? What in your view would be enough to convince those people who are disappointed in what they see?

Sarah Carr: You are absolutely right. It is low risk, high reward behaviour that people are taking part in. At the end of the day if they get a fine it is minimal. Maybe the fines should be increased. We welcome in terms of sentencing that it has been increased to five years.

Q44 Robbie Moore: Is that enough? Is that a big enough deterrent?

Sarah Carr: We need to see it happen. The guidelines have just come out. Let's see some of those cases where people get sentenced when they commit serious crimes. We have not seen it yet.

Q45 Robbie Moore: I appreciate that, but what I want to push you on is do you think that even that five years is sufficient?

Sarah Carr: I do not know. I will pass that along.



Q46 Robbie Moore: Following on, in your view, Sarah, is there a link between animal abuse and domestic violence? I see you nodding, so could you expand a bit on that and explain?

Sarah Carr: There is a well-documented link between domestic abuse and animal violence. As a charity, one of the things that we have been pushing is that when the police go into a home where there is suspected domestic abuse that they look at the animals that are also involved, to ensure that that person has not been a victim of coercive control. Sadly, animals are sometimes used to keep people in situations where they don't want to be, and if someone is threatened that something might happen to their adored pet dog or cat they will stay in that situation to protect their animals. Such is that strong animal-human bond that we have.

We would like to see much more coming out of the Home Office in terms of that link between domestic abuse and animal violence, to ensure that the police are aware and that it goes on their DARA dashboard to ensure that that is taken into account—have they looked at the animals that are in that household as well?

Dr Wensley: Another enforcement reflection is again going back to the 2018 Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations. There was the requirement under the pet vending section for those selling animals to have a certain minimum standard of training and understanding of the animals they were selling and the type of information that they were going to give to prospective owners. Also, that acceptable quality point of sale information would be available and made available. It is important that that is reviewed to ensure that is happening to the extent it should be. It is a relatively recent piece of legislation, although we are five years on now. I think that is important.

PDSA absolutely recognise the link between abuse of animals and abuse of vulnerable people and some of the complex relationships that can occur in domestic settings, where coercive control, for example, can be executed through the use and involvement of animals. We take that very seriously. I would just say there are lots of good reasons to treat animals and pet animals well. Fundamentally, there is the ethical imperative that they give us so much; they bring so many benefits to human society and in return we should give them a good quality of life. That is what our world-leading animal welfare Acts set out to do. Aside from that pure ethical drive, it is recognised that, if we do not treat animals well, it can have serious implications for other humans and our poor treatment of animals can map on to our poor treatment of others. That is important.

Q47 Robbie Moore: Would you effectively agree with what Sarah has been saying, about wanting to see more done from the Home Office perspective to do with that linkage between animal abuse and domestic abuse, and having more emphasis put on the care of the animals when domestic abuse, if there is an animal in the home, is recognised?



Dr Wensley: Yes. I would defer to others who have a closer involvement with that. Our interest at PDSA is raising awareness of that link and making sure that our 48 hospitals act on our awareness of the link in instances where that type of abuse of humans and animals happens. It certainly sounds sensible.

Q48 **Robbie Moore:** Does anyone else want to come in on those points or add anything before we move on?

Dr Donald: Again, there is clear guidance within our code of conduct of what to do if you suspect it, how to help or step back. We have clear guidance for our members in the code of conduct for that, but there are others far more qualified to discuss this.

Q49 **Chair:** Thank you very much to our first panel. Before I get the next panel in, I am going to do a very quick-fire round for all four of you in terms of your shopping list, your wish list. We talked about the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill now being delivered in different ways, but could you very quickly give us your one, two, three of your wish lists that we make recommendations to Government what you want to come forward? I will start with Sarah.

Sarah Carr: My wish list three points are canine fertility clinics to be staffed only by veterinary professionals, stud dogs to come under the local authority regulations for dog breeding, and my final point is to ensure that those dogs that cannot mate or whelp naturally should not be subject to artificial insemination.

Dr Donald: A new Veterinary Surgeons Act that includes the access to the premises and the vet-led team and the protection of title, but also the increase in funding to vet schools. It is not to increase the number, but to increase the money per student because at the moment they are running at a loss.

Dr Wensley: We would like to see animal welfare taught in the national curriculum in its own, discrete proper evidence-based way. We are here to support but we would like to see that cemented; for the Committee to look at the preacquisition journey and consider whether there could be more to compel people to both seek information and to have it accessible.

There are some recommendations, and I will overlap with BVA and Justine in their recent policy position on non-traditional companion animals that are pertinent. Enforcement as we have just heard of the LAIA regulations and the Animal Welfare Act. Finally, to recognise, as has been said—and we at PDSA absolutely recognise this—the burnout and the pressures on mental health and wellbeing in the veterinary profession. Just as recently as yesterday there was a large Twitter pile-on on to vets. Everyone has the right to express their views, but we would like to make it absolutely clear to everybody here that vets are working



their socks off. They are passionate evidence and ethics-led people who have a tough time on their hands at the moment.

Dr Shotton: We would absolutely support the Veterinary Surgeons Act reform for the reasons that have already been stated. In the meantime, licensing for canine fertility clinics, or canine breeding services as we are calling them now; funding for veterinary education, which is absolutely critical to ensure that we get good vets through the system; and pre-import testing mandatory for particularly stray dogs and better dog import controls.

Chair: Thank you very much to you all for a valuable first half of our session.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Paula Boyden, Dr Maggie Roberts, Jessica Stark and Becky Thwaites.

Q50 **Chair:** Thank you very much to our second expert panel of witnesses before us some of whom, as the previous panel, have been before us before. I welcome you all and will start by asking you to introduce yourselves, where you are from and who you are representing. I will start with Maggie Roberts.

Dr Roberts: I am a veterinary surgeon. I have been a vet for 37 years and have worked in private practice, but in the latter half of my career in the charity sector. I am the Director of Feline Welfare, Cats Protection, which is the UK's largest feline welfare organisation.

Jessica Stark: I am the Director of Public Affairs and Communications for World Horse Welfare. I have been in the role for over 12 years, working across the UK and Europe and internationally on equine welfare issues, and spend a lot of time listening to and hearing about the welfare challenges facing horses in the UK.

Becky Thwaites: I am Head of Public Affairs at Blue Cross, leading our policy and campaign work on animal welfare.

Dr Boyden: I am a veterinary surgeon and Veterinary Director of Dogs Trust. I am also Chair of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group and Chair of the Links Group, which raises awareness of the link between abuse of animals and abuse of people.

Q51 **Chair:** On that point, Dr Boyden, we were talking about that at the last session. If there are any points you want to make on public record through this session, please do go ahead on that.

My first question is to all of you. What trends are you seeing in the prevalence—and we touched on this in the earlier session—of behavioural issues among animals that have been born and acquired during the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

pandemic? Who would like to kick off on that?

Becky Thwaites: At Blue Cross what we have seen is an increase in the number of complex behaviour issues that we see in dogs coming into our care. We see dogs who have a range of behavioural problems. It could potentially be separation anxiety, resource guarding, some issues of dog aggression. We have linked that back to the fact that people chose to purchase a new puppy during lockdown.

They spent 24/7 with that puppy when they first got them because they were working from home. They did not do that important early socialisation; they did not have access to things such as puppy training classes. They were not available. Therefore, at Blue Cross we are particularly concerned that we now have a generation of dogs that are one or two years old that have some of these complicated behaviour issues.

As a charity, it is taking us longer to rehome these dogs. We must spend more time working with them to deal with some of these behaviour issues. We also see increasing numbers of people who are finding these behavioural problems challenging and therefore seek our help. They seek the help of behaviourists and so on. That is difficult to access during a cost-of-living crisis, when services such as that are quite expensive. It has definitely been a real challenge for us to deal with these complicated dogs with difficult problems that we need to solve before we can rehome them.

Q52 **Chair:** Paula, do you see some of these issues in the dogs that come into your shelters?

Dr Boyden: Yes, absolutely. We ran a national dog survey two years ago and we found that 40% of people said that their pandemic puppies were more reactive to people and to other dogs. Certainly, we see that with relinquishments as well. We have seen an increase in dogs between the ages of up to two years that would tie in with those dogs that have been purchased during the pandemic. I completely concur with Becky. We are generally seeing more dogs with challenging behaviour, so now around 30% of the dogs that are due to be relinquished to us the owners are citing behaviour as the primary reason for relinquishment.

Q53 **Chair:** We talked about some of the uptick of dogs being imported through the pandemic and post-pandemic coming in, and potentially dogs that were not socialised in the first place, and maybe street dogs from Eastern Europe coming in, and then when people have taken them into their homes they have not been able to cope. Have you seen that as a feature, that the dogs coming in are almost semi-wild?

Dr Boyden: We have certainly heard that anecdotally. I don't have any specific data to prove that, but you have touched on a good point there. There are organisations that facilitate the rehoming of dogs from overseas, but they do not have a premises in the UK. Therefore, if there



are challenges, such as you describe, they have nowhere to go except the existing UK charities, so that is a real concern.

Dr Roberts: If I come in on the cat side; it is a bit different in cats. Certainly, with the pandemic I would say we are not seeing masses more cats with behavioural problems. It has always been a significant reason why people have relinquished cats to us, usually in the region of 8% or 10% of the cats that come into care, but with cats often it is not that the cats have a behavioural problem: it is that they are behaving normally for a cat, but humans find that unacceptable.

Cats are very misunderstood, and we do have evidence that more younger people have taken on cats, and they are more anxious cat owners. They are often the ones who don't understand cats very well and sometimes their reaction to what the cats are doing. Things such as urinating around the house is not great, but it is a normal reaction if the cat is stressed. Often they can just make alterations to their home so that the environment is more conducive for the cat, or look at if there is another cat that is upsetting them. I would say that has always been the problem. It has not massively increased.

Where we do find a problem is the number of cats that we are asked to take into care is rapidly rising. We cannot take them in. We are trying, where we can, to use our feline behaviourist to give people advice to try to keep them in their homes, with a degree of success. Sometimes there are situations particularly multi-cat households, because cats are not a social species by nature, they are much more solitary and, really, the best solution would be that the cat was rehomed. It has certainly become more challenging in terms of resources.

Certainly, in terms of the pandemic, once owners go back to work quite frankly cats are not so bothered by the fact that the owners are not there anymore. They are not so dependent emotionally on their owners. For some cats they are quite glad that their owners have gone back to work. It is not such a problem.

Q54 **Chair:** Thank you. That is very helpful. We are going to talk later on about some of the challenges of people keeping their animals beyond that, and we will come on to some of the equine issues.

Do you have any feel, Jessica? Was there a change in the ownership level through the pandemic? We will talk about the problems now with people with the cost of living and being able to keep their horses, but were there any changes in the number of people keeping horses? Did they feel with lockdown that this would be a nice time to go for the little girl's pony, for instance?

Jessica Stark: Absolutely. During the pandemic the cost of equines increased dramatically. There was a huge demand. Many people now working from home do not have to go into the office and did decide to buy horses, which was a wonderful thing. A lot of equine welfare



HOUSE OF COMMONS

establishments, World Horse Welfare included, had many people who wanted to rehome horses. That was a real positive.

The market for horses is not as buoyant as it was. Prices are decreasing, so we do not see the same impact as we have seen with other companion animals, but we are certainly on the watch for prices to go down.

Q55 Chair: That is helpful. That leads me into my next question to you all, in terms of the changes through the pandemic and coming through beyond the pandemic and then into the cost-of-living crisis, putting pressure on to people as in they now have a companion animal, but can they keep going? They have potentially gone back to work and there are financial issues. Evidence suggests that there is an increasing number of pets and companion animals needing to be rehomed, or potentially being abandoned, or even worse, just let out and neglected. Is that something that you are picking up in your institutions, and if that is the case, what can we do to mitigate and tackle this?

Dr Boyden: We hit 50,000 calls in 2022 for people looking to relinquish their dogs, just 6,000 in January this year, so double what we had last year. We are seeing more and more people looking to relinquish. Clearly, we do not have kennel space for that number of dogs, so we are exploring other ways to support pet owners, whether that is expanding our foster network so we can help more dogs, but also how can we keep dogs in homes? With some work that we did, 77% of dog owners said that their pet food bills had gone up. One thing that we have lobbied the Government to do was to consider a temporary removal of VAT on petfood, veterinary services, veterinary medicines, to try to keep dogs in home.

The thing that we must bear in mind is that we do not have an NHS for dogs, so it is the charities picking up the pieces here. We have certainly been running food banks out of our own centres, and working with fellow charities, some of the petfood manufacturers, to supply food banks for petfood.

We are also looking at various financial schemes to help pet owners. If, for example, we know that somebody can generally keep their pets but suddenly have an unexpected bill, can we help them with that? It is obviously better for the dog and for the owner and better for us than having to take that dog in. Clearly, our doors are open, but we would rather keep dogs in homes if we absolutely can but people are struggling.

Q56 Chair: People are struggling. Also, in terms of capacity, in terms of the animal charities in the UK, you have a lot of animals on your books. Is there a public awareness? We touch again on the concept that people are importing animals and thinking that they are doing a good thing, maybe rescuing a dog from Romania, for instance, when potentially you are not helping that dog. Would a better message be to the UK public that there are plenty of dogs, cats and other animals needing homes in this country, and that you will help their animal welfare by supporting the institutions



here rather than trying to fuel a trade of animals coming in from overseas? Would that be a fair comment?

Dr Boyden: That is an absolutely fair comment. It is a very different demographic to during the pandemic when we mentioned more people were looking to get pets. As charities, what we must take on the chin is we have received comments such as, "Well, I had to get a dog from overseas because you would not let me have one". Therefore, we must look at how we are rehoming. For example, what is the point of us going to inspect somebody's home when they could move house tomorrow? We need to consider that side of things.

We also must bear in mind, as we have already said, that some of the pets coming into our care have complex needs now. Therefore, it is taking us longer to rehome some of the dogs in our care because we must work with them, and also work with the new owner to ensure that we get that dog settled into hopefully its forever home.

Q57 **Chair:** Thank you on behalf of the Committee. We visited Dogs Trust; we visited Battersea and I thank all your charities and institutions for the work that you do. The investment of time and effort to help these dogs, cats and other animals get ready to go out to loving homes is not to be underestimated. Thank you for all you are doing in terms of helping these animals and ultimately helping humans as well to keep those animals. Does anyone else from the panel want to come in on my initial questions?

Dr Roberts: We are seeing many more people wanting to relinquish their cats due to financial reasons. It is much more marked with the cost of living than with the pandemic. For financial reasons it is 48% higher than last year in terms of people wanting us to look after them. Similar to Dogs Trust, we are doing what we can to help. We have always helped to support people on low incomes with neutering costs.

We are now doing microchipping for all those people, but also providing cat food as well. We also have our own food banks jointly with FareShare, and trying to give people as much advice as we can on how to do things more cheaply, make their own cat toys and all that sort of thing.

Unfortunately, it is a perfect storm at the moment. Fewer people are adopting cats, more people are buying them, so we cannot get the cats out to then take more cats in. A lot of the cats we are taking in have more complex needs because people have not sought veterinary care. It is a worrying trend that more people are buying cats and more people are buying pedigree cats than they did previously. That is quite a trend that we are seeing. It is quite marked. Many years ago, it used to be only 8% to 10% of cats were pedigree. Now in the last year of those purchased it was about 38%, so it has risen massively.

Jessica Stark: As I mentioned, for horses we are not yet seeing any kind of a horse welfare crisis, but I would comment that during the financial crisis of 2008 we did not see the effects of that until about 2012. I think



there is a lag with horses for a number of reasons, but we have conducted some surveys that point to troubled waters ahead. The National Equine Welfare Council conducted a survey of horse owners as well as equine welfare establishments in early 2023. What we found is that, while most horse owners are prepared to make sacrifices themselves to care for their horses, despite the cost of living, there were a particular proportion of them who were not meeting the basic needs of their horses. That would cover about 140 equines.

The headline there is that the price of feed, forage and vet care is going up significantly, as well as fuel. People are managing at the moment, but they may not in future. Similarly, equine welfare establishments—while there is no warning right now—are very impacted by the increased cost for horses. About 50% of the rescuers said that they would minimise the numbers that they would take in, in future. Our concern is that come winter, when costs of fuel and the rising costs are there, if all of a sudden more people cannot take care of their horses, more rescues cannot take in more, you could start to see a welfare crisis. It is something that we need to be vigilant at monitoring.

Becky Thwaites: I agree with all my colleagues. At Blue Cross something we are keen to do is to keep pets and people together. Ultimately, we do not want to rehome people's pets. What can we do as organisations to ensure that people can afford to meet the welfare needs of their pets? We provide free and reduced cost veterinary care for people on low incomes. It becomes more challenging for us to provide that during a cost-of-living crisis when more people are eligible for our services.

The previous panel touched on the issues around provision of vets. That is an issue that we are seeing in our animal hospitals. In the last two years our animal hospitals in central London have never been fully staffed. That makes it incredibly challenging when we have more people registering as clients. Something that we are keen to do is look at before we get to rehoming how to ensure affordability of small things that can make a real difference, whether it is pet food banks, behaviour advice or support with veterinary care. We can then prevent having to take the pets in and dealing with that overpopulation of pets in rehoming centres.

Dr Boyden: The other element we do have to think about here is housing in terms of affordability of houses and properties or landlords that will accept pets. We are having challenges with that. For example, I was at one of our centres a couple of weeks ago and two beautiful, large labradoodles were there. The owner was downsizing because of the cost of living and the premises that she found would only take one dog, so she made the heartbreaking decision that she would rather keep her two dogs together than separate them, because they were 10 years of age. Certainly, having a lack of suitable accommodation for people to stay with their pets is a growing issue.



Q58 Chair: Would you welcome the Government bringing forward that legislation on rental reform to allow tenants to have pets?

Dr Boyden: We do welcome it. However, it does not apply to people in social housing. The other concern is there is now a facility to allow landlords to request that owners take out insurance. The research that we found is that pets may do some damage, but not to the extent where you need a huge insurance policy, which is another burden for pet owners.

Q59 Rosie Duffield: Moving on to breeding, and Paula in particular, I know that the Dogs Trust is worried about the increase in canine fertility clinics. That was mentioned in the last panel. How well is current regulation protecting the health and wellbeing of bred dogs and if not, what needs to change?

Dr Boyden: A very good question. The current legislation is not. It is great that we have the new LAIA regulations, however there are lots of concerns with that. First and foremost, we have no traceability of who is breeding dogs, where they are being bred. We know that you must be licensed if you breed three or more litters per year. Certainly, our work indicates that probably 90% of dogs in the UK are from unlicensed breeders. Some of those will clearly be legally unlicensed because they are producing less than the three-litter threshold, but until we start to get a handle on that traceability it is a problem.

We quite often hear the words puppy farm and what we ought to do is change that narrative to low welfare breeding establishments, because it is not necessarily small is good and big is bad. We need that traceability. We need enforcement and this means appropriate training of local authority inspectors.

If I can use Wales as an example, there was some investigative work done in Wales a few years ago indicating that the legislation was not being enforced, and the Welsh Government have supported training of a specific group of animal welfare inspectors. The challenge that we have in England is that inspectors could literally be licensing a taxi in the morning and a breeding establishment in the afternoon. You cannot assess a breeding establishment with a tick box. We need to have good quality, trained inspectors to facilitate that.

The obvious one, which I know you would expect me to mention, is the issue of importation. What we would like to see is a process of both licensing and registration. That would then lead us on to having a requirement that, if you are advertising a puppy for sale, you either have to include your licence number or your registration number, so it starts to give you that feedback.

There is a great example of that with the online sale of veterinary medicines. For the online retailers, if they are approved by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, they have a little logo on their website that then



takes them back to the VMD website to say they are bona fide. They are the sorts of things we need. There is not enough regulation to give us a clear idea of what is happening.

Q60 Rosie Duffield: The next part of the question is about cats and rabbits, so mainly for Maggie and Becky. Cats and rabbits are not subject to breeding regulations. What are each of you seeing in terms of breeding practices and the wellbeing of cats and rabbits? We have been reading about genetically altered rabbits, for example, and the brachycephalic trend. That is quite shocking.

Dr Roberts: Cat breeding is not licensed in England, as you say. I think a lot of people think it is, particularly pedigree breeding, but it isn't. It has only recently been licensed in Scotland. We very much welcome and, as an organisation, we call for licensing. There is no regulation at all, so as the increasing demand is happening for people to buy cats, and particularly pedigrees, then people are often breeding in very poor conditions. There is an increasing trend for not just pedigrees but also extreme breeds.

We heard earlier a lot about dogs. Up until very recently cats have not suffered too much from that. A cat was a cat. Even those that perhaps were pedigrees were still a reasonably normal cat-shaped animal. We are seeing trends—often starting in America and certainly fuelled by social media—for things such as the Scottish Fold cat. That is a cat that is thought to be appealing because it has a very round face and little floppy ears that people think is cute, but that occurs because they have a deformity of the cartilage. It is not just the ears; it is all their joints that are affected as well, so they have chronic pain and chronic arthritis. People often say, "Oh, they are really nice because they don't move around a lot and you can just cuddle them" because it is painful to move, and the numbers of these cats are increasing.

Also, things such as the Munchkin, which is a short-legged cat, bred through the dwarfism gene. It is like a Dachshund cat. Cats should be agile, and these cats get spinal problems and so on. There are many others that we are seeing. We would like to see legislation where it controls the number of litters that individual cats and individual breeders can breed. We would like it to be that if it is two or more, be it through one cat or two cats, and that cats over the age of six are not bred, no more than six litters in a lifetime and three cats in two years.

The other thing we need to start controlling is the hybridisation of cats with wild cats. This is a concerning trend. You may have heard of Bengal cats that are very popular and are used in advertising all the time. They are very beautiful cats and have been bred to look like wild cats, but they are a true hybrid with the Asian leopard cat. Now there has been a lot of crossbreeding and the generations have come down, so they only have about 17% on average of those wild cat genes. However, they still show behavioural traits such as being aggressive, attacking other cats and so



on. Often, people get them because they are beautiful, but they are not very good pets. They do not get on with other cats very well.

More concerning than that, there are now other hybrids, including cats such as Savannah cats that are a domestic cat crossed with a serval cat. I don't know if you know what a serval cat is like, but it is much bigger than a domestic cat. In the first cross, when they often use a serval male crossbreeding with a domestic female, often the females are killed because when cats are mated the male gets the queen round the neck, so there are high levels of death. Because they are different species often there is a lot of foetal death with the kittens dying.

Then you produce a cat that is big and aggressive, often 10 kilograms, double the size of a normal cat, and they are potentially quite dangerous. They can jump eight foot in the air. There is another one called the Chausie, which is crossed with Caracals, which traditionally used to be used for hunting birds in India, because they could leap in the air. It is because they look beautiful, but they are so not suited as pets and we should outlaw the breeding of these. We are starting to see people now relinquish them because they cannot cope with them, but what are we to do with these cats? Can we responsibly rehome them?

Q61 **Rosie Duffield:** That sounds like animal experimentation.

Dr Roberts: It is quite interesting that, if you have a serval in a zoo and you have a zoo licence, it is illegal for you to do this cross-species breeding but as there is no control at all over domestic cat breeding this is occurring. A lot of the initial ones came over from the States, but now they are being bred in the UK and going for £6,000, £8,000, £10,000 for the kittens. It is very concerning, and we do need to license breeding and have controls over some of these extremes and not allow them to be bred. They are contravening the Animal Welfare Act, in my opinion.

Becky Thwaites: I completely agree on the issues around cats and dogs. It is important not to forget rabbits. We are definitely seeing a rabbit welfare crisis. There is a massive increase in the number of people who are getting pets. As Dr Sean Wensley mentioned in the previous panel, they are seen as an easy starter pet but they are incredibly complex animals that have complicated needs that can be difficult to meet, whether that is a large enclosure size or access to space.

As you mentioned there as well there is a particular issue around brachycephalic rabbits. We are seeing more of these flat-faced rabbits coming into our care. In fact, 50% of the rabbit population is what we are estimating as potentially a brachycephalic breed. They can then have complex health issues. We are seeing increasing numbers of rabbits with dental problems that cause significant pain to the rabbit. It also means that it is taking us longer to rehome them.

We think there are some simple things that can be done from a Government point of view. One is a system of registration and licensing



HOUSE OF COMMONS

for the breeding and selling of all pets. When it comes to rabbits particularly, rabbits are quite difficult to sex. We find that pet shops are selling rabbits that end up being a breeding pair without the new owners realising and suddenly the problem gets worse, and they have six rabbits and what do they do? We want to see that pet shops have that put on to them, that they must sex the pets correctly.

We also saw a problem during the pandemic that people were not accessing that preventative neutering, particularly with rabbits, and that has led to the huge growth in the rabbit population. Along with other organisations, such as the Rabbit Welfare Association, we are calling for a pause on the breeding of rabbits so that we can deal with the huge numbers that are coming into our centres. That is something that we would like to see that would help us deal with the rabbit welfare crisis.

Another thing is there is no statutory code of practice for the keeping of pet rabbits. We would like to see that. We think that would help in terms of educating the public about the needs of rabbits and educating that they are not that easy starter pet, so that parity with cats and dogs is something that is so important from a rabbit welfare point of view.

Q62 Rosie Duffield: Thank you. That was helpful. Jessica, do you have particular concerns about equine breeding practices that require measures to improve welfare standards as well?

Jessica Stark: Yes absolutely. Breeding is not regulated for equines either. There is absolutely no regulation of it whatsoever. What we encounter, World Horse Welfare and the other equine charities, is it is not so much the sport market, because that tends to regulate itself, although we could talk about some of the trends there, but it is the horses that are bred more for the leisure or showing market. The two problems there are either indiscriminate breeding, where not enough thought or consideration is put into the future of that foal—and that can be from a breeder, but for many of them it is just people who want to breed from their mare—or their mare is injured and they want to have her do something while she is unable to compete, so they will put her in foal. This is one of the reasons World Horse Welfare put together an initiative called Need to Breed, which helps horse owners think of all the considerations of whether they should breed themselves or buy.

The other problem with indiscriminate breeding is that there can be lots of factors behind it. Sometimes it even happens at breeding establishments where they once bred horses and took it quite seriously, but either through old age or mental health problems or physical health problems they lose control of the situation, or they could be sound but maybe not take the bloodlines as seriously. They are not as selective as they should be to produce foals that are going to be desirable in the market.

What we do find particularly when we go into breeders where there are welfare concerns is that there is often poor foot care, lack of food and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

water, the stables are not mucked out, and their welfare is compromised and they are, therefore, either low value because of that, or they were always going to be lower value because there was no demand for the numbers that they were producing.

Dr Boyden: A couple of additional comments on the side of canine fertility clinics in addition to the previous comments. One of the reasons they need regulating is that there is no accountability on the part of the fertility clinic from the perspective of breeding. We know that the breeding regulations have that clause that basically says you should not be breeding if it is going to affect the welfare of the dam or the offspring. Nobody is counselling the owners of these dogs. Are they suitable for breeding? Have they had any C-sections previously? It is very much, "Well, I do the insemination and that's it." There must be a level of accountability from the perspective of the clinic if they are offering these sorts of services.

The other comment that was made previously about stud dogs, again it is something that does need regulating. If you have a stud dog that is carrying an inherited disease there is no limit to the number of litters that stud can sire. Therefore, if you have a disease it can very easily spread very quickly. As you know, the Kennel Club is a closed book. You could very easily have inherent problems within a particular breed if we continue to allow a stud dog to sire as many litters as chosen to.

Q63 **Chair:** Further to that, do you have any thoughts about how these fertility clinics could be regulated? In the previous panel, Melissa Donald suggested a reformed Veterinary Surgeons Act could help with that, but if vets are not involved with these premises, how can we regulate it? What mechanism could we recommend to Government to get a handle on it? I think we all agree something needs to be done to stop these practices, but what can we do?

Dr Boyden: A couple of thoughts we have had around that. One is that, as has already been alluded to, it is multiagency. At the moment there is a Veterinary Surgeons Act, there is a Veterinary Medicines Directorate, there is local authorities and probably the RSPCA involved because of the concerns about these clinics. One thing we could do is regulate them under the LAIA regulations.

As you know, they are going through the post-implementation review and, as part of that, we suggest that a fertility clinic must have a named veterinary surgeon to oversee all the activities that have been discussed that we know are happening, so that there is a level of responsibility on the vet, but also with what I have mentioned about the counselling of the people involved who undertake these services.

Q64 **Chair:** Equally so, some of the things that are going on in these clinics, I imagine most of the veterinary surgeons would not want to go anywhere near having their name associated with them because they are doing things that vets are not happy with.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr Boyden: There are some good fertility clinics out there, probably the more longer standing ones that are associated with veterinary surgeons. It can be done well, and one would hope that if there were regulation it would eliminate the ones that are clearly there to make a profit.

Chair: That is very helpful.

Q65 **Ian Byrne:** What Maggie touched on with the cats was fascinating, but what trends have you seen in the legal or illegal import of animals in your respective areas?

Dr Boyden: In terms of illegal imports, a couple of things to bear in mind is that the importers are very good at changing their tactics very quickly. For example, during the pandemic, we saw an almost overnight shift from puppies coming in through the Pet Travel Scheme to coming through the Balai Directive, coming through commercial activity.

One of the key things that we have seen in the last couple of years is a significant increase in heavily pregnant mums being imported to basically whelp in the UK and then those puppies be sold off as UK-bred. There are serious concerns about that, not least the welfare of the mums. You touched on zoonotic disease. Once those dogs are in the country those puppies are sold as UK-bred, so the provenance that they may have come from mainland Europe with the diseases that are there are completely lost. To put it into context, between 2020 and the beginning of this year, we had 141 mums come into our care. The street value of those puppies would be almost £1 million. There is no deterrent for this activity, and this is one of the significant concerns that we have.

Touching back on breeding, what we have seen with breeding establishments is in terms of they are licensed for a specific number of breeding bitches, but they are not identified so we are seeing this recycling of bitches where they are brought in, they go into a breeding establishment, they whelp and then they go back to Europe to be mated again. That is where we need to start looking at some of this recycling. The pregnant mums, dogs with mutilations, again we have had about 80 Cane Corsos come through the Puppy Pilot all with cropped ears, so that is another significant worry that we are dealing with.

The other thing that we have seen historically when we started the Puppy Pilot back in 2015, the prevalent breeds were French Bulldogs, Bulldogs, Pugs, Dachshunds. Dachshunds have always been prevalent there, but certainly during the pandemic what we saw were a variety of breeds coming through, but Dachsies are still there. A lot of this leads back to the total lack of penalties that are a deterrent. Again, we hear anecdotally that it is associated with organised crime because again it is low risk and high reward.

The other thing that we saw during the pandemic is that when the puppies are seized basically we underwrite them to allow them to be seized. When they are invariably abandoned we will quarantine them and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

then we will responsibly rehome them. Because of the sort of money that was being charged for puppies during the pandemic—commonly £3,000, £4,000, £5,000 per puppy—what we saw was an increase in them being reclaimed. We would import them. They would be seized and then the importers would pay the quarantine and claim them back, because there was still money to be made.

Q66 **Ian Byrne:** It must be heartbreaking for staff.

Dr Boyden: It is appalling and the same with the pregnant mums. We have had to give them back as well.

Q67 **Ian Byrne:** Give them back, knowing where they are going.

Dr Boyden: Yes, so they are making so much money out of this and it is nothing about welfare.

Q68 **Ian Byrne:** From a recommendation point of view, what would you like to see?

Dr Boyden: Certainly a ban on the commercial importation of pregnant mums, so we see no benefit in that at all. As you know from the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, a reduction of the point of pregnancy when a pregnant mum can come in. At the moment it sits at 90% of gestation, so they are very pregnant. We showed you some images when you came to Canterbury. As has been mentioned, we would like to see an increase in the minimum age of entry into the UK. We would concur with six months, because we know that most puppies go to their new homes at eight or 10 weeks.

We would also like to see a ban on the importation and sale of dogs with mutilations. The reason we need the “sale” is that otherwise they will be passed on. However, there are two things with that. We need an exemption to allow reputable rehoming organisations to rehome, otherwise we will be in a similar situation as we are with section 1 dogs. If we have a section 1 dog in our care there is nothing we can do about it. We need to ensure that that is the situation as well, and that there is no exemption for dogs with mutilations or under six months being brought in for rescue and rehoming.

The other thing that we need—which sadly was not in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill but perhaps there is an opportunity with the individual Bill coming through—is we need visual checks. At the moment we are told that there are 100% checks at the border, and these are what are described as document and identity checks. What that means is that, if you are bringing your dog into the country, you would be handed a microchip scanner. You would scan your own pet, and you would hand the scanner back with your passport for the operative to check it and check all the details. There is no requirement for the operative to visualise your pet. If you are not looking at them, how can you see if they are pregnant, if they are underage, if they are mutilated?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Certainly, we have demonstrated this with our own investigations in two separate years where we have imported a toy dog into the country, and nobody suspected it. That is important. The penalties are important as well. If you are caught smuggling cigarettes, you could get up to seven years' imprisonment and you would not get your cigarettes back. The maximum imprisonment for illegal importation is 12 months.

Q69 Ian Byrne: At the moment the controls are not fit-for-purpose for what we are facing.

Dr Boyden: They are not.

Q70 Ian Byrne: With the potential for criminality, as you said the money that can be earned. Becky, do you want to touch on that question? What recent trends have you seen in legal or illegal imports of animals in your respective area?

Becky Thwaites: We completely agree with Paula around the importation of dogs illegally and legally into the UK. To highlight, the disease risk is something that we are extremely concerned about at Blue Cross. We see increasing numbers of dogs coming into our hospitals with parvovirus, which can be fatal, and that often comes from the way the puppies are transported into the country. We had a dog a couple of weeks ago that came into our animal hospital in Victoria, seven weeks old, so had been sold underage. We believe he had been illegally imported. He had died by the end of the weekend and that is incredibly traumatic for our staff to deal with, so it is definitely an issue when it comes to dogs.

In terms of cats, I know that Cats Protection has done research that suggests there is an increase in the number of cats coming into the country this way as well. For us, it is so important that the measures that were proposed in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill are brought forward separately as soon as possible. We have that cross-party support. We have the support across the sector, to try to tackle some of these issues and deal with the lack of enforcement when it comes to the importation. I am sure Maggie can share additional statistics around cats being imported.

Dr Roberts: Last year about 5% of the new cats acquired had come in from abroad. What is slightly scary is the official figure was about 40,000 cats came into the UK but with our survey, which is our Cats and Their Stats survey, we reckon it is about 80,000 so there are quite a lot that are being smuggled. Cats are easier to smuggle in, particularly in the boot of a car and we know this happens because we have been contacted when some have been found and asked if we wanted to take 12 Scottish Fold cats that had come from Eastern Europe, which is a horrendous journey, particularly if you are locked in the boot of a car.

With the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill they were not going to include cats in the ban, but we would call for the same things as Paula



has mentioned for dogs as for cats, that we ban the importation of cats under six months, so there are not the kittens coming in, that we do not allow pregnant cats, particularly in the last 50% of gestation, and we do call as well for cats with mutilations to also not be allowed to come into the country. The main one with cats is declawing and although the numbers are not massive at the moment, we all know that what has happened with the dogs with ear cropping is that even five years ago you barely saw it. It has increased so dramatically. We want to stop them coming in.

Figures from PDSA, which we are all sharing today, is that about 5% of cat owners that acquired their cats abroad acquired them abroad because they wanted a declawed cat. I don't know how much you know about declawing, but it is not trimming their nails. It is amputating the end of the digit; it is the equivalent of taking your fingers off like that. It leaves the cats with chronic pain, but also with severe behavioural issues. They need their claws. It means they cannot express that natural behaviour, but also you can never let the cats outside because they cannot climb a tree or anything like that.

Q71 Ian Byrne: Is it a fashion thing?

Dr Roberts: It is to stop people's sofas from getting scratched, whereas you could provide an adequate scratching post and make the environment such that the cat can scratch on something appropriate. It is really appalling. A lot of scientific studies have already demonstrated chronic pain. Often there are chips of bone left in and so on. It is illegal to do that in the UK, as has been said previously. We do not want people to bring these cats in.

The media can fuel this. All the "Puss in Boots" films featured a declawed cat. People think, "Oh, that will save my sofa". We want those protections to cover cats as well. We also want to bring back the tapeworm treatment for the cats that are coming in, particularly *echinococcus multilocularis*, a tapeworm that can affect people as well. In places such as Switzerland, for example, there is quite a lot of *echinococcus multilocularis* in cats and we want to stop that sort of thing from coming in.

Q72 Ian Byrne: Jessica, do you want to add anything from an equine perspective?

Jessica Stark: First, on the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, we were very disappointed. Two provisions in the Bill were very important to horses. One was a ban on live exports to slaughter, which I will talk about in a second because it relates to imports and exports. Secondly, livestock worrying because it would have created greater penalties for dog attacks on horses.

Focusing first on the exports to slaughter, it is true that for decades no horse has been officially exported for slaughter but we do know that British horses end up in European slaughterhouses. The reason is that there is an under-the-radar trade. This is a trade that pretends to be one



HOUSE OF COMMONS

thing but is really something else. This is where we thought that the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, by making that export illegal, could allow for greater measures to be put in place to better enforce against what is happening at our ports and across the chain, even at the destination.

For instance, we see that nobody knows how many horses are being moved into and out of the country. There is no way to accurately measure that. While people can apply for documentation from the Animal and Plant Health Agency and declare journeys, there are no checks that those journeys happen or that the journeys that are happening relate to what is being declared. There is also no way to check whether or not the destination address is a real address and there is no one at the ports to link this information.

We have worked with the agency on these issues but the reality is that just from the port observations that we have been doing, just on the rest of the country, we reckon that as many as 44,000 horses per year could be moved, just through the west side ports. We think that just as many could be moved through the southern and eastern ports. There is huge traffic between the UK and Ireland that is not reflected in any statistics. We also know that the UK is a land bridge and that these things can move circularly through Europe.

In our view, this trade is very low risk and high reward because, if you can traffic these horses into a market or to particular dealers, they can be sold for any purpose. They can be sold for meat or riding. They can even be sold to another dealer and do the circuit again.

We have concerns not only about the welfare of the animals but also the biosecurity. A shipment came into this country this year of surrogate mares who both arrived with strangles. While that is not a notifiable disease, it should have been picked up before the horses were transported.

Often in this trade, it is claimed that vehicles are empty but are coming into the country full of horses, or it will be claimed that there are five horses on board when there are 20.

While we support the use of physical checks, we believe that the checks should be intelligence-led. We do not believe that every load should be checked at the BCP, for instance, or at a port but that there should be more destination checks.

Fundamental to all of this, one of our hugest wishes is for a robust equine identification system, because you need full traceability before the agencies can track whether the horse that they say is travelling is the one travelling, that it has been here or come back here. This would require investment for us to be able to take control of our borders and to make sure that we know what is coming in and coming out. We need the enforcement agencies to have an appetite for taking this seriously. We



HOUSE OF COMMONS

think we can get there but robust identification and traceability is the first step.

Q73 **Ian Byrne:** Dropping mitigations for the risks of animal and zoonotic disease from the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill is a disaster, isn't it?

Jessica Stark: Loads more needs to be done. I will defer to others on what was in there, but certainly we have concerns for equines in the target operating model with the EU, for example with the trusted trader model. We think there are biosecurity risks even as we plot going forward.

Q74 **Ian Byrne:** Would you concur, Paula?

Dr Boyden: Yes. The disease risk is still there. *Brucella canis* was mentioned earlier and it is a significant concern. We mentioned heavily pregnant mothers coming into the country. The highest risk for *brucella canis* is associated with the fluids around reproduction and giving birth. If individuals do not know they are *brucella* positive, there is a public health concern about *B. canis*.

Ideally, we would test pre-import for these diseases. However, that needs a bit of thought and having appropriate reference laboratories because we already see passports from vets in the original countries saying "*Brucella canis*: negative" but I am not going to stake my MRCVS on that. We need something robust that can tell us that the tests are bona fide.

There are a couple of elements on the broader disease-risk side of things. One is that a pet has to be microchipped to come into the country but it does not have to be registered on a database. It is very easy to get microchip scanners that have a data logger on them. There are no GDPR issues with that because it is just a number, but dropping those data on a database with a date stamp would mean that if, for example, we come across a stray dog with a foreign microchip or if there were an outbreak of disease, we could do a search on that dog to know when it came into the country and whether it came through a legal route.

It would not mean that if the animal came through a legal route it is compliant. We know that. However, take rabies as an example. Most cases will present between three and 12 weeks post infection, so a dog that came in six weeks ago would be a much greater risk than a dog that came in six months ago and that information starts to give us an indication if there is a problem.

Various diseases have been mentioned. Another one I will mention is leishmania, which is potentially zoonotic. The reason I say "potentially" is that at the moment we don't have its sandfly vector in the UK. However, there have been some documented cases of dog-to-dog transmission, thought possibly to be through a bite or fight wound, but we cannot definitively say that it has not adapted to another vector.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

When the pet travel scheme was set up in 2000, DEFRA set up the DACTARI scheme—Dog and Cat Travel Risk Information—requesting that vets logged it if they identified a so-called non-endemic disease in a dog that had travelled. The challenge was that it relied on vets reporting and that was the flaw. It should have relied on laboratories reporting. That system no longer exists but we do have things such as SAVSNET, the Small Animal Veterinary Surveillance Network, run from the University of Liverpool's vet school that has links with some of the laboratories.

I think it would be very easy to set up a system to give us a better idea of the prevalence of these diseases. Tick treatment has already been mentioned. Some diseases are starting to become endemic in the country. As a vet, my responsibility is to stop that and therefore to know what is happening would be very useful.

Q75 Chair: Can I ask a couple of quick clarifying questions, first to Jessica Stark? As a Committee, we are struggling to get the numbers of horses that are moving in and out of the country and, as you say, potentially thousands of horses are shipped illegally for slaughter to Europe every year, through the east or the west, under the guise of sport or with fake paperwork. You have been doing some surveillance and you quoted some numbers. We are trying to get a handle on when the numbers you mentioned are from and whether Brexit has changed anything. Are you still seeing the same levels post-Brexit and post-pandemic? We are trying to get a handle on how big this is. We think it is big. Can you give us a feel for the time course of your numbers?

Jessica Stark: These numbers are from this year, from 12 days of port observations at Cairnryan, Birkenhead, Holyhead and Pembroke, so just those western ports.

We have extrapolated from what we have seen on given days so there is a question in these numbers but we reckon, based on them, about 44,000 horses. These horses could be moving completely legitimately. We don't mean to say that all these movements are illegal by any means. We are just trying to get a sense of the scale of horse movements because nobody knows. Based on historical observations, we think that we would see similar numbers from the southern and eastern ports. There is a lot of trade in horses that has never been documented. That is largely because the trade between Ireland and the UK was not documented during the tripartite. We believe that there is still a lot going on.

Things have changed since Brexit and very much so. People are using Northern Ireland as a back door when they want to avoid taxes and paperwork. Journeys that would have gone across the UK and through Dover into Calais might now be going up through Northern Ireland so that it is not as much of an EU movement, so we are seeing much longer journeys. We are also seeing much longer ferry journeys and that is a concern from a welfare perspective.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q76 **Chair:** Which routes are the horses that you think are being shipped to be slaughtered in Europe going out through?

Jessica Stark: They could go out through any route, probably the ones with the least resistance. I have to emphasise that horses are moved mostly for riding or breeding—that is what is stated on the declaration—but trade in these horses is often a cover for organised crime, a trade in other things. However, I emphasise that the trade is largely in animals for riding, breeding or competition.

Q77 **Chair:** If the measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill on the movement of animals for slaughter can go through, and if we can get an improved equine identification system, we should be able to stop this horrific movement of animals, the long journeys—

Jessica Stark: From under the radar, I think so, but we will need some of those simple, intelligence-led checks at ports and at destinations. We need a system that is joined up.

Chair: That is helpful. However, I think you are saying that the scale of the problem is still as high, if not higher.

Jessica Stark: Yes. It is high reward, low risk.

Q78 **Chair:** To Paula, in terms of the movement of heavily pregnant dogs, we have discussed this before. The stage of gestation you are talking about, when you cannot ship them, is the final 10% of the pregnancy. The Bill is trying to say the final third, the last 30%, of the gestation period. Maggie Roberts mentioned 50%. What is your wish list? Did you want it to be 30% or 50%?

Dr Boyden: I would say 50% in an ideal world but we have to have a level of pragmatism. Part of our rationale in coming to that conclusion was that, as you know, the Animal Welfare Act in the UK does not protect unborn offspring. New Zealand's Animal Welfare Act protects unborn offspring in the last 50% of gestation. However, I appreciate that it takes more effort to identify. The cut-off here would be 42 days. We are seeing pregnant animals come in just under that cusp, so already the importers are wise to what is being set in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill and that is part of my concern.

Chair: You are saying that the last third would be a start but in an ideal world, you would want it further back?

Dr Boyden: Yes.

Q79 **Chair:** My final quick question: you talked about a ban on the commercial movement of heavily pregnant animals. What about the bad people who flip between? If we shut that down, will they move into the pet travel system? Do you think there should be a recommendation banning it unless people have a good reason, say they are moving back to the UK having lived in France? If you ban it in commercial trade, might people



not then flip it into the pet movement regime?

Dr Boyden: Yes, without a doubt. We know that people are very good at flipping between the two systems. That is a very good point. Yes, I am mindful of my colleagues at Kennel Club—there may be room for some dispensation—but the challenge is that dispensation soon becomes a loophole. You are right, however, that flipping between the systems is a significant risk, particularly with currently available checks.

Q80 **Chair:** In an ideal world, banning the movement of heavily pregnant dogs and cats, full stop, would be a good starting point.

Dr Boyden: Unless there was a very good reason.

Chair: That is a starting point. Okay. That is helpful.

Q81 **Rosie Duffield:** I am afraid I am going back to mutilation. From everything you have said, I take it that organisations are still seeing a trend towards ear and tail docking and horrible declawing practices. Paula mentioned the Cane Corsos. It is as though trends move to different breeds that become popular and expensive. Are you sure that that is still a trend or maybe even a growing trend despite our talking about it and your organisations doing your best?

Dr Boyden: It does still seem to be a trend. We are still seeing it come through with the puppies being seized through the puppy pilot. We also know that the practices are still prevalent on social media. People are seeing them on the street. This is why we feel strongly that we ought to ban the import and sale of these dogs. If we banned the import and sale, the numbers would diminish over time. They would not be in the mind's eye and would not be as desirable. That is part of our rationale. We have to ban the sale because we have already heard that there is evidence to suggest that these dogs are still being illegally mutilated within the UK and if we do not ban the sale, the source remains.

Q82 **Rosie Duffield:** The previous panel mentioned that you can buy kits—sometimes even online, quite easily—and that you can send your animals abroad to be mutilated. That seems to be a massive loophole in the legislation. Do we need to deal with that as soon as possible?

Dr Boyden: On kits, absolutely; we ought to ban the sale. As for sending pets abroad, we should be able to prosecute people under the Animal Welfare Act, because that would be the commission of an offence but we would need to have the evidence to do so. It would also mean having enough people on the ground.

Q83 **Rosie Duffield:** Visual inspection is another tool?

Dr Boyden: Yes.

Q84 **Rosie Duffield:** Does anyone else want to come in?

Dr Roberts: We don't have any evidence that declawing is happening in the UK. We are pretty certain that most of what we are aware of is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

probably coming from the USA. I don't think many people would try to declaw a cat with a home kit, but we do think declawing is a growing trend. We feel that we should not be importing or allowing the sale of any mutilation that is illegal in this country. We need to stop it before it becomes more of a trend.

Becky Thwaites: We are seeing more dogs coming in through our hospitals. A particularly shocking statistic: the RSPCA has reported a 600% increase in the number of calls about cropped ears to their cruelty line. It is a growing problem. We completely agree that it is important to ban importation. We also need to look at why people choose to get these pets. Perhaps we need a behavioural-change campaign looking at why people prioritise how their pet looks rather than their health and welfare. That is relevant to cropped dogs and declawed cats as well as to the growing problem of brachycephalic.

What can we do to educate the public about what makes a good pet and the health implications of some of the features that people perceive to be cute or a status symbol? I don't think the public understands the pain that having the ear cropping procedure would put a dog through. As charities, I think we can do more to educate the public alongside changes in legislation.

Q85 **Rosie Duffield:** As well as charities, does DEFRA have a role in public information campaigns? In the previous panel, Sean Wensley mentioned campaigns showing how a dog of a certain breed should look and the Chair mentioned the Disneyfied version of a Doberman. Do we need more campaigns like that and is it DEFRA's responsibility? I think it probably is.

Becky Thwaites: Yes, we do need more public education and I think DEFRA has taken that on with other issues. It is something that charities do every day. However, we are struggling with how to get across to certain audiences that are not listening to DEFRA and not looking at DEFRA's social media feeds or Dogs Trust and Blue Cross websites. It comes down to investment in proper human behaviour change, and working out the right communication channels to get to owners who are making decisions without consideration of their animals' health and welfare.

We would support public information campaigns, but they would have to be well researched. Just putting out social media posts encouraging people not to do things is not going to work; it will not get to the people who are cropping dogs or breeding extreme-flat-faced animals. Campaigns need to be much more in depth.

Dr Boyden: On cropped ears, we need social influencers who understand that cropping a dog's ears, apart from being very painful, impacts the rest of that dog's life because dogs communicate and express emotion through their ears. If dogs' ears are fixed, they cannot do those things, and that puts them at a disadvantage, when they meet other dogs that are used to looking for those sorts of signs, and humans too. If a dog is



HOUSE OF COMMONS

stressed, one of the things it will do is put its ears back, but it cannot do that if the ears have been mutilated.

- Q86 **Ian Byrne:** Has the British public seen a video of what happens to the dog and the cat? It must be horrific. The image would never leave you and you would never want a dog or cat with those sorts of mutilations. Seeing the pain the animals go through might transcend what people see through the Disneyfication effect. Maybe we need that sort of messaging: to be brutal about it and let people see the pain the animals go through and the impact the procedures have.

Dr Roberts: It could be quite powerful. There are always debates, though, about how much you should shock people to change their behaviour but a lot of people just do not understand. I have been thinking about cropped-eared dogs and can remember being shocked when I realised that Scooby Do was a Great Dane but his ears were cropped. As a child, I thought, "Oh, he's a Great Dane and I thought Great Danes had floppy ears". I was very upset.

Rosie Duffield: My dog communicates by moving his long, floppy ears up and down. It is crazy, isn't it?

- Q87 **Chair:** We are coming to the end of our time. You will have seen what I did with the previous panel, the quick-fire round. I want to get this on public record. We are hoping that our report making recommendations to the Government will also raise public awareness of some of the horrific issues that we have been discussing today: horses being illegally transported for slaughter, dogs being horrifically ear-cropped, and cats being declawed. We hope to raise public awareness and help people to make informed decisions about sourcing their pets.

So, your wish lists: give us three or four things that you would like the Government to do or like us to make recommendations about.

Dr Roberts: My first thing would be the licensing of cat breeding, and I talked before about the numbers of litters. Licensing should include stopping the breeding of hybrid cats and some of the more extreme breeds. We would like to ban the importation of cats under six months old and similarly for dogs, as well as of pregnant cats in the last 50% of gestation. We want to ban mutilations, specifically declawing, but we think that anything that is illegal in the UK should not be allowed to enter and that animals should not be allowed to be sent abroad to be cropped or declawed.

There is something else that we have not talked much about yet. In the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, there was a section on pet abduction that only referred to dogs. We would like that section to include cats. There is lots of evidence that the impact on a person of their cat being stolen is just as bad as if their dog were stolen, and we think that is going to happen more because of increased focus on pedigree.

Chair: Thinking not just about the impact on owners but on the animals



that are stolen.

Jessica Stark: I also have three things. First, a provision in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill banning export for slaughter to be introduced for equines as soon as possible. We would prefer the Bill to be a Government Bill, not a Private Member's Bill. We would like a move towards intelligence-led enforcement, a focus on making sure that what goes across our ports and borders and is reported is what it says it is, to stop the under-the-radar trade. We would like full traceability of equines, a robust equine ID system and the registration of premises, which we think is essential as a first step towards possibly looking at the licensing of dealers and breeders just as we are looking at licensing animal welfare establishments.

We did not get a chance to talk about this, but animal enforcement is very patchy. We and other organisations have been working with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare to propose a new model of animal welfare enforcement that focuses on dedicated animal welfare officers, perhaps using a regional model so that they can be commissioned. We are talking about a competence in the enforcement of animal welfare law as well as in licensing legislation being essential. We would very much like that proposal to be moved forward because we don't currently have a system that is fit for purpose.

Becky Thwaites: Again, three key things. First, a system of registration and licensing for the breeding and selling of all pets, including cats and rabbits.

Secondly, there were lots of positive measures in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, including for tackling problems of the illegal importation of puppies and kittens. We want to see it brought forward as soon as possible.

Lastly, something that we have touched on quite a bit today—the health and welfare issues for brachycephalic animals. Blue Cross is urging the Government to review the situation of brachycephalic animals and to consider what legislative options they could bring forward. We know there is legislation in some European countries. We would like DEFRA to review that legislation, to see what has worked and what we can bring to the UK to deal with the growing issue of pets that have been bred for the way they look rather than for their health and welfare.

Dr Boyden: First, importation and there are several aspects to it. Ban the importation and sale of dogs with mutilations, with an exemption to allow welfare organisations to rehome them. Increase to six months the minimum age for puppies to be allowed to enter but with a 12-week wait, because that is quite important for the incubation of rabies; reduce the point in gestation at which a pregnant animal can come in and, sitting alongside that, we need some decent penalties for people illegally importing. We also need visual checks to identify them in the first place. We need pre-import testing to prevent the importation of non-endemic



HOUSE OF COMMONS

diseases and, ideally, a good, robust process of understanding where such diseases are at.

I agree on local authority enforcement, having good training for inspectors so that they are set up to assess welfare and on having regional hubs rather than leaving it to local authorities. We must have animal welfare inspectors and you cannot have a tick-box exercise.

On the enforcement of animal welfare standards, we need to bear in mind that the RSPCA is the primary prosecutor of offences under the Animal Welfare Act. To put that into context, the Metropolitan Police has 30,000 officers. The RSPCA has 300 officers to cover England and Wales, and we need to be mindful of that. It is not a criticism of the RSPCA. They have a mammoth job, and we ought to be supporting it.

I agree with Becky about traceability. Until we get a system of registering and licensing people breeding puppies, we will not solve the problems because we don't know who they are or where they are.

If you will indulge me, I would like to say a couple of things about the link between the abuse of animals and the domestic abuse of people. It should come as no surprise that in cases of injuries to animals and people, the indicators—the circumstances, the violence, the actions involved and the excuses offered—are exactly the same because of the common denominator of the human perpetrators. We know so much about the human-animal bond.

Owning a pet can be another reason why she just does not leave because she will not leave her pet. Abuse is a gendered crime. The Dogs Trust runs a pet-fostering service, the Freedom Project, and the Cats Protection Trust runs Paws Protect, to provide temporary fostering for pets belonging to people fleeing domestic abuse. We know that, as part of their coercive control, perpetrators will often prevent their victim from feeding their pet, from taking them to the vet. A number of pets that come into our project need some veterinary intervention because of a level of neglect that is not the fault of the client.

It is great to see that pets are now mentioned in the domestic abuse legislation and guidance. We need to be mindful about that, which brings me on to housing. If we take dogs into our project, we want to reunite them with their owners but sometimes we cannot do that because the owners cannot get into housing that will accept their pet, which is devastating for them after everything they have been through. We need to be mindful of that side of things as well.

Chair: Thank you all very much for a very powerful session today. We have a lot of fantastic evidence and we will be able to make recommendations. The session has been very helpful. Thank you, panellists on panel 1 and panel 2, for all that you do to protect animals and promote their health and welfare and, indirectly for human welfare as well. Thank you.