

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: Pet welfare and abuse, HC 1123

Tuesday 5 September 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 5 September 2023.

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Members present: Sir Robert Goodwill (Chair); Steven Bonnar; Ian Byrne; Rosie Duffield; Barry Gardiner; Dr Neil Hudson; Robbie Moore; Mrs Sheryll Murray; Cat Smith; Julian Sturdy; Derek Thomas.

Questions 88 - 201

Witnesses

[I](#): Dr Samantha Gaines, Head of Companion Animals, RSPCA; Pip Griffin, Senior Dog Warden, Worcestershire Regulatory Services; Marisa Heath, Adviser, Local Government Animal Welfare Group.

[II](#): Bill Lambert, Health, Welfare and Breeder Services Executive, The Kennel Club; Dr Gudrun Ravetz, Chief Veterinary Officer, Pets at Home/Vets4Pets; Alexandra Baker, Chief Operating Officer, Pet Industry Federation.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [RSPCA](#)

– [The Kennel Club](#)

[Pets at Home](#)

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Dr Samantha Gaines, Pip Griffin and Marisa Heath.

Q88 Chair: Welcome to this session of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee. We are having our second evidence session in our report on pet welfare and abuse. I am very pleased to welcome our first panel, who would perhaps like to introduce themselves to the Committee, starting with Dr Gaines.

Dr Gaines: I am Dr Samantha Gaines. I am head of the companion animals science and policy department at the RSPCA and a dog welfare specialist.

Pip Griffin: I am Pip Griffin. I am the senior dog warden and animal welfare officer for 12 councils.

Marisa Heath: I am Marisa Heath. I am here on behalf of the Local Government Animal Welfare Group, but I also run the canine and feline sector group in the all-party parliamentary group for animal welfare.

Q89 Chair: You are all very welcome indeed. We have heard evidence in our inquiry showing that around half the puppies entering the market are from licensed breeders and the remainder come from unlicensed breeders or overseas. What animal welfare and other risks are associated with imported or unlicensed dogs? Can you differentiate between the family whose pet has puppies and other unlicensed breeders? Just because you are unlicensed, it does not mean you are doing anything illegal. You can have a small number of dogs and have some puppies.

Dr Gaines: With imports, which, as you have mentioned, make up a significant proportion of the puppies, we are particularly concerned about the biosecurity risk, initially. For example, we know there are diseases that can be brought into the UK that pose a risk not just to our dog population but also to public health. *Brucella canis* has been mentioned on several occasions by some of the other panellists.

We are also really concerned about the implications for the puppies themselves. When we look at the standards outside of the UK for bitches that are being bred from and puppies, they typically tend to be very poor welfare conditions. We typically see high-volume, low-welfare standards. These puppies are being bred and reared in poor conditions, but they are then also subjected to a whole range of stresses as they are transported across different countries to come into the UK.

The inappropriate breeding, the rearing and the lack of socialisation also pose a severe risk of behavioural problems for those puppies once they come into the country. As we have said, there is a significant risk to the health and welfare of imported puppies, but we have to acknowledge that that does not mean there is no risk for puppies bred in this country as well.



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You mentioned that a significant proportion of puppies are bred by licensed breeders, but a significant proportion of puppies are bred by people who are acting illegally and irresponsibly within this country. That in itself poses serious welfare risks, particularly to the puppies. If we are rearing puppies in very poor conditions, ultimately we are setting them up to fail as adults and predisposing them to significant behavioural problems.

Q90 Chair: When we were at the Dogs Trust, in one of their centres, they were effectively showing us figures saying that we do not breed enough dogs in this country and, therefore, we are creating demand for illegal imports. We saw some dreadful pictures of very heavily pregnant bitches that had been brought into the country. Are we neutering too many dogs in this country? Is that what is giving rise to some of this issue?

Dr Gaines: It is really difficult to comment on that. If we go back to the figures in 2015, around that time we had about 900 licensed breeders. They were producing around 70,000 puppies. If we then think about the number of puppies we need to maintain the normal adult population, we are talking about 600,000 a year. There is a great demand on unlicensed breeders and the people who are importing. That poses a really serious risk.

It is hard to say whether or not we are neutering too many puppies. Ultimately, we need to focus not just on the quantity but also on the quality that is being bred. That is a huge issue. We have a lot of puppies that are being bred and reared very quickly, so are not being set up for a good start to life. That is posing problems. The issue is very much around quality as well as quantity.

Q91 Chair: It is interesting that you have talked about quality. Many people see quality as being a pedigree dog bred from a fantastic bloodline, but some of the pedigrees that are being bred have traits that are not very desirable at all. Do we need to think more about mongrels and the breeding that used to go on before there was more control in the system?

Dr Gaines: Data came out from the Royal Veterinary College last Friday showing that the most popular puppies that have been acquired recently are French bulldogs and cockapoos. We are seeing a huge demand for dogs that have exaggerated features. That is quite interesting because it suggests a divergence: some people want a pure breed with very specific and exaggerated features, which are themselves a welfare concern, and other people are moving away from that traditional view of having a purebred and going for something that is a crossbreed instead, such as a cockapoo, which is a cocker spaniel crossed with a poodle.

Q92 Chair: Pip, you are at the sharp end of this particular problem, being a dog warden and managing dog wardens. Have you seen problems associated with imported dogs?



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Pip Griffin: We are at 2,000 dogs at the moment, as of yesterday. We have picked up 2,000 strays that have not been claimed. That is not including the ones that have been claimed.

Chair: That is just in Worcestershire.

Pip Griffin: That is just in Worcestershire.

Chair: Wow.

Pip Griffin: Most of those are French bulldogs, dachsies and cockapoos. Most of them have behavioural problems.

The other issue is that there is a domino effect because the councils do not have enough money. They are only able to keep those dogs for seven days in pounds. If they are lucky, they then go to rescues. The rescues are full of dogs that are really difficult to rehome and that need an awful lot of time and patience, and so on.

It is not just about this situation. For anyone who says we are not breeding enough in this country, just come and spend a week with me. I would be more than happy to show you how many dogs we have. So many councils are having to put dogs to sleep, more than they have ever had to do.

I have been in this job 30 years, and I am proud to say that we have never put a healthy, fit dog down. We are now at a precipice where we have no kennels. Our kennels are all full. We have 32 strays this week in our kennels. We normally average eight to 10. The figures are there. I do not know really what else to say. The figures are there.

Q93 **Chair:** There is no reason why anyone should rescue a dog from Serbia or Romania because there are plenty of dogs here that need rehoming, looking after and for their behavioural issues to be addressed by a good owner.

Pip Griffin: I am probably going to get shot for this, but yes. At the moment, we have so many dogs in pounds that desperately need to get sorted. So many councils are having to put dogs to sleep. They would not normally have to be PTS'd for this reason.

It is not the fault of the charities either. The charities are absolutely rammed. They have no space at all. Yes, we have to stop at the moment and just try to work on what we have in this country.

Q94 **Chair:** Marisa, that is the situation in Worcestershire. Is that typical around the country? Do we have a massive problem in local authorities up and down the country?

Marisa Heath: Yes. I spoke to someone today in a local authority where they have 71 dogs. A large amount of them were foreign dogs. They are now having to look after all of those dogs. In two weeks, looking after 16 of those dogs has cost them £16,500. This is an issue that is coming



through. I get regular phone calls from local authorities. We have about 500 officers who are members of our group. They are regularly facing these sorts of issues.

The thing to recognise is that generally this is a financial business. There are hobby breeders, and a lot of hobby breeders or licensed breeders go through a lot of loopholes in order to be licensed. They have to follow quite strict guidelines. With those guidelines, we can control how they breed those dogs. You then have this massive cohort who are either importing or not being licensed and therefore undercutting those standards and making more profit.

Local authorities do not know how to catch these people. They do not have the resources because there is no traceability. The traceability of all of this is quite an issue. We have all spoken collectively and in our submissions about a registration system for all dogs. It is not licensing; it is different to licensing. That would help us identify those dogs and get a clue.

A lot of the figures we use are slight guesswork, it is fair to say. We are saying, "We think this many puppies are bred in the UK. How therefore are we going to fill the demand here?" and then judging what is coming in and things. People do want their dogs. There is a growing demand for foreign imported dogs because people feel like they are rescuing them. We have definitely seen growth in that area.

Q95 Chair: We are going to come on to biosecurity issues in more detail but, Dr Gaines, the RSPCA has been very clear that people should not be duped by these criminal gangs who describe animals as rescue dogs when they have been scooped off the streets in places like Serbia and Romania. Is your advice very clear that you should not fall into the trap of thinking you are doing the right thing by rescuing one of these dogs because you are just going to make the problem worse and feed into an organised criminal operation?

Dr Gaines: It is difficult. As Marisa has said, members of the public believe they are rescuing those dogs. They get very strongly attached to the dogs and want to bring them over. As you said, there are risks associated with bringing those individuals. It is not just the biosecurity risks but also the risks for the dogs themselves. We have to remember that what those dogs are adapted to is very different to the life they are expected to live in this country. Some dogs come over and struggle significantly to cope and adapt to our modern way of living. We have to be very aware of that.

The RSPCA is very clear: ultimately, we want people to adopt from our centres, first and foremost. We recognise that people do want to buy puppies. If they are going to do that, they have to do so responsibly. If people want to adopt a dog from overseas, we would always direct them to go through the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes. They have very stringent rules around the people who can import dogs from abroad. They



make it very clear that the dogs have to go through a whole suite of medical tests and have a behavioural assessment, and they give support once a dog comes into the country. There are people who are circumventing the legislation and the various rules to bring dogs in illegally and irresponsibly, which poses huge risks.

Q96 Chair: If a feral dog has been running around the streets of Belgrade with a load of other dogs, it is very difficult to change that animal's lifestyle to become a family pet. That is basically what you are saying.

Dr Gaines: Yes. People are motivated to do what they think is the right thing. They want to bring that dog over to the UK. We have much better veterinary care available here and we have behavioural services.

From the dog's point of view, what they have experienced and what they are used to is very different. Through the way in which they have been bred, reared and socialised, they do not have the ability to cope with family living. The vast majority of them really do struggle to cope. We certainly see that with some dogs on social media. They absolutely are struggling to cope with the life we are bringing them over to live. It then becomes very difficult. The owner feels they are doing the right thing, but from that dog's perspective their quality of life is probably very poor.

Q97 Chair: In terms of legislation, are the current Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations fit for purpose, or could they be improved?

Dr Gaines: The RSPCA was very welcoming when the regulations came in in 2018, but we do think a number of changes could be made to those regulations. That includes increasing the scope of the regulation.

We very much welcome the fact that, at the moment, they already capture a number of activities that involve animals, but we would like that to be extended. For example, we would like to regulate dog walkers, groomers, those who operate in the behaviour and training space, and those who are responsible for cats and rabbit breeding. We have not really touched on cats and rabbits.

Chair: We are coming on to that later. Do not worry.

Dr Gaines: I will not say anything further. Yes, we want the regulations to be increased to capture additional business activities, but we would also like—Marisa has already alluded to it—to have the ability to tackle some of the poor breeding practices we see.

We have a provision within the breeding schedule that allows an enforcer to make a decision about whether or not to license a breeder, depending on the state of their dog's health and its phenotype and genotype. If they suspect that is going to compromise the welfare of the individual parents or puppies, they do not have to give that licence. It is very difficult for local authority enforcers to understand that guidance. We know they are struggling to do that, particularly when it comes to certain types of dogs.



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We would like DEFRA to produce much clearer guidance so the enforcers understand what the guidance actually means. We can look at Scotland as a good example. They list the breeds of dogs for which it is unlikely that a licence will be given for the breeding of individuals. There are a number of things that we would like to see, but both updating the regulations around that particular provision and extending the scope would be very much welcomed by the RSPCA.

Q98 Chair: That sounds like the sort of thing that will end up in one of our reports as a recommendation. Thank you very much indeed. Marisa, would you agree with that?

Marisa Heath: I have very strong views on this. I was part of the DEFRA expert panel, with the Canine and Feline Sector Group, that worked on the regulations in 2018. I know them inside out and back to front, unfortunately. They are very lengthy.

The problem with them has been application. You have inconsistency across the board. Some local authorities do it well; some do it very poorly; others just do not do it at all. Businesses have been really impacted by this because they do not know whether they are coming or going half the time. The officers who are appointed to enforce this legislation often change. They are moving on and then licensing taxis and things like that. It has been quite complex to see—

Q99 Chair: You do not want to name names in terms of which are the worst local authorities in the country, do you?

Marisa Heath: I would not dare say such a thing, but we see a lot of it. The licensing regulations were a really positive thing. They were really helpful. Where it has worked, businesses have really welcomed them.

I totally agree with Sam that we have left a gap by saying that some businesses should be regulated but others should not worry about it, such as dog walkers, dog groomers or sanctuaries and rescues, for example. We are quite keen to see a system around those as well. We have been working in the background on what that could look like.

We published a report last year where we basically said that we think the consistency and training of local authorities needs to be better. We all know the strain local authorities are under resource-wise. We think there should be dedicated animal welfare officers that work across local authorities. One local authority could have shared services or a contract with another local authority to get that consistency and expertise. This is not only bad for animal welfare; it is bad for business as well, the way it is currently going.

In a nutshell, the regulations are good. We can improve them. We have a moment—the five-year review is upon us now—to review them. We want to see some extra activities in them, but it is really about application to get it working.



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Q100 **Mrs Murray:** Very briefly, should DEFRA have some sort of check in place on local authorities?

Marisa Heath: My view on it is that there should be a national panel. Basically, you have regions and then you come up to a national panel, where you can get that consistency. On the national panel, you have DEFRA, the Animal and Plant Health Agency, RSPCA, the national inspectorate and the key local authorities so that people can be testing and having conversations about how things are working. That would be a better way of not using too much resource but getting people to come together.

I can see that local authorities really want to do this well. This is a public interest matter. The public care about animal welfare, and how it is dealt with is not very transparent. The local authorities want to do it well and they want to share their knowledge and expertise, but they do not have the right setup to enable them to do that.

Q101 **Mrs Murray:** Just very briefly, Pip, you might have a view on this.

Pip Griffin: I do, I am afraid.

Mrs Murray: It would be nice to hear from you as well about it because you are at the sharp end.

Pip Griffin: I am an animal activities licensing officer for 10 councils, and I have been for 22 years. I do not have a problem with licensing or not licensing. I am very strict. I am well known in my area for being too strict.

The problem we have for the 10 councils that we work with is that it is all very well when you go out and there is a problem but, first of all, you have to execute the warrant. There is finance involved in that, and then you have to find kennels.

I will give you one example. A raid was done—I will not mention anything—two weeks ago. There were 86 dogs. The bill just for kennelling for one month is £68,000 for that local authority. That is not including going to court, applying for a section 20, all the people on the ground on that day, the vets and following on with the veterinary fees for those animals, the grooming and everything else that has been involved in that particular case. It is £68,000 just for one month.

It is all very well to have people coming together, which is great, and coming up with all these ideas. If the councils do not have the money or the staff to implement all of this, how is it going to get any better? It is great to have all these ideas, but they do not have the money and they do not have the kennels either. That is another issue altogether. It is separate to this, but local councils cannot find kennels anywhere to accommodate this many dogs. That is the first thing.



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You can execute the warrant—we went to one the other week. We were with the police and we said, “What do we do with 48 dogs? Where do we put them?” It is all very well executing the warrant, but where are we going to put the dogs? How are we going to afford it?

A lot of the councils, as I am sure you know, are either bankrupt or on their knees. I am not an advocate of the council; I am just being factual on our area and what is going on. The Government have to understand that before they implement anything. It is great implementing all these ideas, but if the money is not thrown at it and the kennels are not available, none of this will get done.

Q102 **Chair:** I should know this, really. If I am going to get my gas boiler serviced, I go on the Gas Safe Register and people are listed there. If I want to buy a puppy from a registered breeder, is it that simple? Is there a national register? How do I do that?

Pip Griffin: Yes.

Marisa Heath: There is, but licensed breeders are not the only breeders here. You have hobby breeders as well. You cannot just—

Chair: Our little terrier had some puppies, and we sold them to our friends.

Marisa Heath: There you go. If you are going to say to the public, “Only buy from a licensed breeder,” you are missing out on some really high-welfare puppies being bred by hobby breeders and people who are not licensed. At the moment there is no real clear way of saying to people that this is the answer. Some of these breeders are incredibly cunning in the way that they show these dogs and trick people to thinking they are home bred and things.

Just following up on that point, to demonstrate it is not only an issue here, as I said, 71 dogs were seized two weeks ago in Monmouthshire. They have got dogs in kennels in Essex, Hull, Scotland and Derbyshire because they could not find the kennelling for all of those dogs. It is costing them thousands. That local authority internally is starting to say, “Don’t you dare to go and get any more animals. We can’t afford them.” They are not going to be doing any enforcing because they cannot do anything about it.

Chair: Thank you. Let us turn to Dr Hudson—who is a vet, by the way, so he knows what he is talking about most of the time.

Q103 **Dr Hudson:** I was going to declare that. I am a veterinary surgeon so I have a very strong professional and personal interest in this area. Thank you to our witnesses for being before us today.

I wanted to come to the subject of canine fertility clinics. We have started looking at this in this inquiry. We are very interested as a committee. The media have been very interested. “Panorama” ran a piece that touched



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on it a few months ago. There has been a real upsurge in the number of these canine fertility clinics, many of them unregulated. Potentially, acts of veterinary surgery are being done by non-veterinarians, such as blood sampling dogs and artificial insemination. It is raising a lot of health and welfare issues.

My first question is to you all. Is this coming across your frame of reference in terms of these clinics? What issues are you seeing in terms of these clinics in particular? There are some nods of heads; I do not know who wants to kick off.

Dr Gaines: Yes, canine fertility clinics are a huge concern for the RSPCA. We have had some complaints regarding the welfare of dogs that were involved in these clinics. What is particularly difficult is that the public generally do not necessarily recognise what a canine fertility clinic is. They tend to operate under different names. For example, we might have a clinic that says it is offering “pet services”, and then it is quite difficult for people to realise what is actually happening.

As you say, the huge concern is the range of fertility procedures that are being carried out by people who are not veterinary professionals, but are just lay people. Our big concern is that it is very much being driven by the desire for certain exaggerated conformations and certain aesthetic trends.

At the moment, for example, there are a lot of dogs out there being advertised with big nose ropes—really big thick bits of skin across their noses. These clinics are helping to facilitate the acquisition of these dogs that would not ordinarily be able to mate naturally. They are intervening to create something that unfortunately some proportion of the public want. We are worried about that.

What we would like to see to be able to tackle this is a modernisation of the Veterinary Surgeons Act. We would like that to regulate practices as well as individuals because we think that might help get round the issue. We would also like to see the inclusion of canine fertility clinics within the LAIA regs. The reason for that is that if you put in very tough conditions to regulate them, that should in effect dismantle the business model as it is. We would then hope you would only have vets carrying out the procedures that are veterinary procedures. That is what we are looking for and certainly what we would be recommending to Government to do to tackle those particular clinics.

Q104 **Dr Hudson:** Are there currently any regulatory or enforcement areas that could be adapted now?

Pip Griffin: No, not that I am aware of. The problem we have in our area is that the breeders are running that facility on site. They are not only breeding themselves; they are also doing this. We went to one the other week and it was in a shed. We took photographs. There was no legislation I could work with. It was clean; it was tidy. The lady was doing what she wanted to do, at the end of the day.



Q105 **Dr Hudson:** When you become aware of it, it is quite hard to go in and do something. You need an excuse to go in and have a look. When you get in there, as you say, it looks clean and tidy, but you are not really aware of some of the procedures that are going on.

Pip Griffin: Yes. There is no paperwork. I find that very difficult. We go in and say, "Do you have paperwork on how many you are doing?" It is quite a lot of money. They are making a lot of money. They are not only breeding.

We went to a couple of sites the other week and they had all done this course. They all had their scanners and goodness knows what else. I cannot see how that can be run properly. There is cleanliness, but also, financially, how much money are they making? There is no accountability. There could be laundering of money.

It is all very odd. I agree 100% that it should be regulated far better. It has become really fast growing very quickly. It has taken off. You can go on Google, and where we live there are 40 or 50 people in our area who are doing it.

Q106 **Dr Hudson:** In terms of recommendations for our Committee, there perhaps needs to be more public information about this. In the way the unregulated clinics are badging themselves, members of the general public are being lulled into thinking that they are legitimate and that they are perhaps led by vets when they are not. There needs to be a public information system to help delineate what is right and what is wrong.

Marisa Heath: It will be hard to signpost the public. Again, that goes back to the licensing point. That is about only going to a licensed CRC clinic that is being checked up on. You could use the Veterinary Medicines Act because sometimes they might be misusing medicine, but that takes detective work to find out. It is very tricky.

Q107 **Dr Hudson:** That is very helpful. Earlier in the session we touched on the demand for certain types or breeds of dogs, whether it is designer dogs or some of the bigger, more aggressive-looking dogs in terms of status. It has been suggested that there has been an uptick in ownership through the pandemic. People took that time to say, "Well, now is the time for us to get a pet."

Sam, in some of your answers you touched on the behavioural issues that perhaps have been stored up through that. Given where people are sourcing the dogs from, they are not socialised and they are coming into homes that are potentially not suitable for them. What factors are linked with the changes in dog behaviour that we are seeing in the last two or three years? What factors are involved in that? What can we do to try to mitigate that?

Pip Griffin: People are owning the wrong breed of dog, and they are not educated. The Government need to do much more enforcement with regards to public knowledge of what those breeds are. If you go and get



a Caucasian shepherd, what are you getting? You need to know that before you go and buy it. It is really cute when it is a puppy. It is like a little teddy bear, but it grows to this size. It is a completely different breed of dog to, say, a dachsie or a pug.

It is the same for the XXL bullies. They have gone through the roof. I have never picked up so many XXL bullies as we have this year. They are all young. People are spending a fortune buying them, and then they cannot look after them; they cannot cope with them; they are not able to handle the breed; they do not understand what that dog is like, how powerful some of them can be, their behaviour and their characteristics. It is definitely about educating the public with regards to breeds.

Q108 Dr Hudson: We are getting a dichotomy. We are getting some of the smaller breeds, like the dachshunds and French bulldogs. As you say, there is also a surge in the bigger dogs, the XXL bullies and things like that.

Pip Griffin: Yes, massive.

Dr Hudson: Is that leading to increased aggression in dog populations and an increased risk of attacks on other dogs and people?

Pip Griffin: We have definitely had more dog bites, and dog-on-dog attacks have gone through the roof in our area. I do not want to put one dog in a box, but they are all big dogs that are attacking.

Again, I do not blame the dog: I blame the owners. The owners are not educated enough and do not have the knowledge of that breed. They are not walking them enough; they are not socialising them enough; they are not taking them to dog training classes. They do not understand the breed they have or how to cope with that breed. When it has a problem, they are dumping it with the local council as a stray. It is not a stray—it is dumped—but you have to put it under the guise of a stray.

Q109 Dr Hudson: Marisa and Sam, would you agree with that? We are seeing changes in the behaviour of these dogs and potentially more dog-on-dog and dog-on-person attacks. Are you seeing that in your frames of reference as well?

Dr Gaines: From the RSPCA's perspective, we are absolutely seeing an increased number of dogs coming into our care that have more challenging behaviours. That is the case across the sector.

One of the big drivers around the issues we are seeing is the increased view of dogs as commodities. We can use that to explain the situation we have with XL bullies, for example. These are dogs that have increased in popularity over recent years. Where there is a recognised increase in popularity and demand, that often goes hand in hand with people exploiting them and using them as commodities.



We then end up with situations where people are breeding and rearing really poorly and predisposing dogs to behaviour problems. We can explain some of what we see with the more popular breeds like the French bulldog as well. Again, people are very much attracted to these dogs because of how they look. That in itself is a really difficult behaviour to disrupt.

When people recognise that a breed of dog is popular, they take advantage of that desire for them. You end up with people being very unscrupulous and not breeding them appropriately.

Q110 Dr Hudson: In terms of recommendations for us, what can we do? What recommendations can we make to help increase public awareness of some of the worries about these designer pets, whether it is big animals or whether it is the cute ones—the brachycephalics that cannot breathe properly because their face is so squashed in? What can we do? There is a role for popular culture and the media not to normalise lots of these things, but what recommendations can we make to raise public awareness?

Dr Gaines: We have to be a bit careful around public awareness. Over many years, we have fallen into the trap of doing the same messaging to the public and assuming that it works. With the advent of human behaviour change theory, we are now seeing that we need to understand the motivations of certain segments of the public and then develop interventions that will target those particular parts of the population.

We have good examples where we have seen that starting to work. We cannot be in a situation anymore where we are saying to people, “You need to go and buy a puppy responsibly. You need to do X, Y and Z,” and just expect everyone to respond accordingly to that message. We have to recognise that people have different motivating factors, and we have to find interventions that are going to be effective at changing their behaviour.

Marisa Heath: It works more with the breeder. We have to change breeding practice to get the right dogs out there. There is a piece of work, an offshoot of APGAW, going on at the moment looking at innate health with Dan O’Neill, who you have probably come across. We are doing some work there that could be factored into a code of practice on breeding. That would come under the Animal Welfare Act, if it could be framed to do so.

That goes back to my earlier point. You are only tackling those who are licensed; how do you get those other breeders? I bring us back round to the registration point and a code of practice that would allow measures around that. The public have not wholly listened to the messaging that has gone out, it is fair to say. They see the dog; they want the dog.

When it comes to safety and things, to give DEFRA credit, it has done a really nice piece of work with CFSG on child safety with dogs over the last



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year. We went off the beaten track, beyond just putting it out to the usual audiences, and went into the NHS, to social working teams and to health visitors. That is often where the problems are. We are not getting to those people. We need more of that. They need to carry on going with that because it takes a long time to change behaviour in that way.

Q111 Dr Hudson: Has DEFRA's "Petfished" campaign helped in terms of trying to source where you get your animal from? Has that been helpful?

Marisa Heath: In a minor way, yes, but, again, we tend to be speaking to the same people all the time. We have to get smarter about who we talk to. Local authorities are well placed, through social care and, as I said, family support programmes and things, to go into the places where problems can happen.

You can then go on to the bigger things. One of the complaints we get the most through the local government group is dog walkers. Earlier this year, very sadly, a lady was killed in Surrey, where I live, because she was walking eight dogs or something. Walking eight dogs is not a great way to set a standard. If I am a professional animal carer and that is my business, I am already setting the example that I am not understanding dog behaviour if I am taking eight strange dogs all in one place.

Last week I went out with the Crown Estate, which is looking at implementing its own licensing scheme around this. We saw so many dog walkers with eight or nine dogs. That brings a risk of dog-on-dog attacks and that kind of thing. I cannot control my three or four terriers, let alone eight big dogs. We need to set the principle straightaway and say, "That is not good animal behaviour; that is not understanding how animals work."

Chair: I cannot control one terrier, to be honest with you.

Marisa Heath: There you go.

Q112 Dr Hudson: That is really helpful. I also just wanted to touch on one other issue. At our first session before the summer recess, Dan Hewitt and Sam Leader from ITV ran a piece on puppy yoga, where people are going to yoga classes and there are these underage puppies there, potentially not vaccinated, that are spending hours not being fed, watered or toileted. Has the puppy yoga boom come across your radar? Again, what can we do about that? Have you come across it? Do you have any thoughts on it?

Pip Griffin: No.

Dr Gaines: We have. Within the RSPCA, we were interviewed as part of that piece for ITV. Coming out of that, what was promising was that we have now seen some local authorities investigating people who are using puppies. To some extent, that probably shows that some increased awareness can lead to a change. Certainly from what we saw in the social



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media reaction and some of the reaction within the traditional media as well, people were horrified as to how those dogs were being used.

Again, this is a really good example of puppies being used as commodities. The amount of detail given about the extent to which those puppies were deprived of natural behaviour was truly shocking to some people. From the RSPCA's perspective, that was a very welcome piece of media to go out. That has changed some behaviour.

Marisa Heath: We do have the exhibiting of animals regulations. They should be able to control that as part of the LAIA licensing. They should have been licensed to be doing that, and they would not pass the licensing. It can be stopped.

Dr Hudson: It all comes back to raising awareness and seeing whether we can inform change from there.

Q113 **Barry Gardiner:** Ms Griffin, I was struck by what you said about some of these fertility clinics operating in basically a shed and being completely without any documentation. Let me say two words to you: Al Capone. The way he was got was the Internal Revenue Service in the States going in and looking for papers. Is there any way in which you can start working with them to go and close down some of these operations?

Pip Griffin: I make numerous calls to them every week. They know me quite well now. It is about trying to catch them. A lot of it is cash, to be fair. It is like the breeders. A lot of it is cash. They advertise in one place, and then the next month they will use a different mobile number and they will advertise somewhere else.

It is not as easy as people think to catch them out. If you do not have figures, if you do have how much they are charging or how many people are going through, how can you verify all of that? It is very difficult to prove.

Q114 **Barry Gardiner:** These fertility clinics are not established companies as such, advertising in the normal way.

Pip Griffin: No.

Barry Gardiner: They are private individuals who are raking in a lot of money and none of it is coming through to the tax system.

Pip Griffin: That is right. Yes, I would say 90% of it is not.

Q115 **Barry Gardiner:** You are in touch with HMRC to shop them where you are.

Pip Griffin: Yes, constantly.

Chair: When you said "Al Capone", Barry, I thought you were advocating machine-gunning them on Valentine's Day, but that was my mistake.

Pip Griffin: If you give me one, I will use it.



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Barry Gardiner: Do not tempt me, Chair. I am sure Ms Griffin would like to.

Pip Griffin: I would, yes.

Q116 **Chair:** If DEFRA were here, I suspect it might suggest that if we overregulate and insist on vets being used in these canine fertility clinics, it could push them further underground and make the problem even worse. Would that be a valid point to make? There is a balance to be struck, I guess.

Pip Griffin: At the end of the day, if you are licensing, you have better laws to work with. As a licensing officer, if I find somebody who is not licensed and who is advertising with regards to that, I have a right to go there. My powers are able to be used: I can get a warrant; I can knock on the door; I can write letters to them. If they do not have a licence, I am not allowed to. I am not allowed to go there; I am not allowed to contact them; I am not allowed to do any investigative work. That is half the battle.

Q117 **Robbie Moore:** The next line of questioning is focusing on importing pets and the biosecurity side of things. To all three of you, how aware do you think the general public are of the potential disease and biosecurity risks of importing companion animals? How can we try to increase that awareness, if it is not there at the moment?

Marisa Heath: I can be really quite short with that one: they are not very aware at all. It is not a conversation that most people have. We do not really speak that publicly about rabies, which is quite a known disease. Then you have others—Neil will know how to pronounce them—such as *Brucella canis* and all these sorts of things. There are others that are even harder to pronounce. Most people will not have any awareness of those at all, including the fact that they are zoonotic.

Only a couple of months ago a lady contracted *Brucella* from a pregnant imported dog. There are real risks with this, and no one is thinking about that when they bring these dogs into their family home with their children and things. There is probably some public awareness work that could be done around that.

Q118 **Robbie Moore:** Just before we go to the others, what would be the best way of expanding that awareness? How can that be best done?

Marisa Heath: You do not want to start scaring people and having them worried about diseases their dogs are carrying, but it just goes back to that really clear message. If there are enough dogs in the UK, as is being said here, we should not be importing dogs. We have our own stray and abandoned dogs that need homes. There just has to be a really clear and punchy message to the public that avoids scaremongering and things but is clear.



The real way to deal with it is to license rescues and rehoming, including those ones bringing dogs over, and make testing for disease mandatory within that licensing.

Q119 Robbie Moore: Would either of you like to contribute more to that point or are you in agreement that there is a very strong lack of awareness at the moment?

Dr Gaines: Yes, I would agree with Marisa. There is a lack of awareness. We have the known disease risks, like the diseases that Marisa has mentioned, but the other issue we have is that at the moment we do not even know what the potential impact of certain diseases could be, if they came into this country.

This is about raising public awareness that this is not just about the risk to themselves but much wider public health concerns and issues for dog welfare as well. We are putting our own dogs at risk by bringing other dogs into the country.

Pip Griffin: We need to work on the vets. A lot of vets are not aware of what paperwork they need or where that dog has come from and what diseases are more known in that area. A lot of vets in our area phone up very unsure. "This dog does not seem to have a passport, but it has been bought in. Who do I phone?" Do you see what I mean? There is a lack of understanding with a lot of the vets. One way forward would be to educate the vets so that they understand who they call, what they do and how they do it. We had one vet who allowed a dog to go when they should have held the dog because it was not passported or anything. It had come from Czechia so it should have been quarantined. They let the dog go home and then phoned us the next day and said, "We just thought we would have a conversation." When we went to see the dog, it was not there.

It is about talking to the vets and trying to get them to understand which line they go down. Vets are also a good way of getting publicity. They are at the forefront of dealing with customers going in with their dogs.

Q120 Robbie Moore: Marisa, from a local authority perspective, is it easy enough for a local authority to be able to effectively identify imported companions?

Marisa Heath: No. They do not have the resources to be out actively looking anyway. No, it is not easy.

Pip Griffin: No, not at all.

Q121 Robbie Moore: To build on importing companions, what connection, if any, is there between the identity of imported companions and organised crime gangs or organisations?

Pip Griffin: It is massive. In our area we have a database, which we share with the RSPCA, the police and lots and lots of different agencies,



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on any criminal activity. We are now employing four people for that. Three years ago it was just one person. That shows the amount of criminal activity that is going on with regards to the breeding of dogs and bringing in animals from different countries. Yes, it is massive.

Marisa Heath: Even aside from that legal element, there is a really distasteful vibe around a lot of it as well. I have had officers who have had their lives threatened. They are public officers at the end of the day. You can access their email; you know where they work in the council offices.

I had one in tears this morning because all her staff have been sent serious threats from members of the public. "How can you get in the way of these foreign dogs being imported? We are saving them. You are the awful people who are getting in the way here." There are some really strong feelings around it, both criminal and just not nice, that officers are having to deal.

Chair: We have got to the point where we need short answers and concise questions.

Q122 **Barry Gardiner:** First of all, let me thank all of you for the work that you are doing here to protect animals. The passion you do it with has been displayed in your answers so far. Perhaps one of the most distressing aspects of your work is that you come across dogs that have been mutilated. Although many people may think, "How could anybody want a mutilated dog?", sadly that seems to be the case. What can we do to stop this practice of the cropping of ears, the cutting off of tails and in some cases the declawing of cats?

Dr Gaines: From the RSPCA's perspective, we would like to see the importation of animals that have been surgically mutilated being banned. The difficulty we have at the moment is that within the UK it is already illegal but, to some extent, mutilated animals being able to come into the country creates a smokescreen.

In the RSPCA's experience, we have people who will say that their dog was cropped legally outside the UK and then imported into the UK legally, although when we look at the evidence, it is not possible for that to have happened and it must have happened in the UK. We also have to help the public understand that this is not a normal look for dogs. It is not normal for their entire ear flap to be removed or surgically altered. It also does not confer any health benefit. There are a lot of myths, certainly if we are talking about ear cropping, that we really need to challenge.

Perhaps some of it is about being a lot more honest as to the impact. The RSPCA now has a lot of experience. We have seen a huge rise in the number of reports of dogs with cropped ears coming through to us. There was a 621% difference from 2015 to 2020. We see huge impacts on these dogs in terms of short-term pain responses, but in some cases it can be for extended periods. It also impacts their behaviour and their



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ability to communicate socially with other dogs. We absolutely do need to crack down on that.

Q123 Barry Gardiner: In your survey you calculated that 3% of dog owners got their pet from abroad specifically because they wanted a dog with cropped ears. That amounted to 29,000 dogs imported for that reason. If this Committee were to recommend a ban on mutilated animals, which could be animals that had originated in the UK, went to get cropped abroad and then were reimported back in, I take it that all three of you would support that recommendation.

Pip Griffin: Yes, 100%.

Marisa Heath: Don't forget about cats and declawing, though.

Q124 Barry Gardiner: Yes, I mentioned declawing—mutilated animals. Thank you for that. To what extent is ear cropping being carried out illegally in the UK as opposed to happening overseas and the dog being imported? How big an issue is this?

Dr Gaines: Again, the data around that is difficult, but some research came out earlier this year that looked at the number of reports of dogs with cropped ears from electronic health records that are collected by the veterinary profession. In 60% of the cases they looked at, there was evidence of importation.

A large number of dogs are being brought over with cropped ears. Certainly, the number of reports that are coming through to our cruelty line suggests that there is also a lot of activity in this country. It is going to be an underestimate of the actual scale because we are in a situation where among the public, as you have mentioned, a lot of people do not even know that it is an illegal procedure and it is not a normal look for some of the dogs we see.

Q125 Barry Gardiner: What about penalties?

Dr Gaines: In terms of the penalties, the RSPCA was very pleased to see the Sentencing Act come through a couple of years ago and the ability to give much tougher penalties. Certainly for us, we see a potential for it to be a deterrent to people and also to punish people.

We have to be quite careful, though, when we are talking about different penalties and the deterrent value. It is not only the length of term, if a custodial sentence is given; it is also around the certainty that the individual is going to be caught. That is what has the real deterrent effect.

We are really pleased to see that the courts now have the ability to give much tougher sentences, particularly in some of the cases that we have seen. If I might just mention a case that we had very recently that has resulted in a much tougher sentence, a kitten called Binx in Liverpool was subjected to eight months of absolutely horrendous cruelty at the hands



of an individual. I will not go into the detail of the cruelty, but it was heard in Liverpool Crown court in July. The perpetrator was given a 27-month custodial sentence. In that instance we were really pleased to see that individual given a much tougher sentence because of the cruelty he had caused to the cat, which unfortunately lost its life as a result of that.

Q126 Barry Gardiner: If we were to ban mutilated animals from coming into the country, there would come a point at which the possession of a mutilated animal would be a criminal offence. Is that the case?

Dr Gaines: We want to deter people from bringing them in. We will have a group of owners who have innocently, I guess, acquired dogs with cropped ears. We would need to be quite careful about any—

Q127 Barry Gardiner: That is why I say there would come a time when all the animals that could possibly legitimately—not that any of it is legitimate—or legally have been mutilated could no longer be alive, and therefore possession would then become a criminal offence.

Dr Gaines: Potentially, yes.

Q128 Barry Gardiner: On public awareness, what can we do to make it clearer to the public that this is abuse, is violent mutilation and is not a cosmetic exercise?

Pip Griffin: We can work with local government and local councils to try to get them to do a lot more social media. I am a firm believer—possibly this is the opposite to other people—in shock. We send pictures out. We do animal welfare pictures every month. The response we have got over the last two years, because of the volume of welfare we are dealing with now, is astronomical.

I think 90% of the public want to know. They are horrified and shocked. It is never going to hit everybody, and there is always going to be that one person who will carry on doing whatever they are doing, but it is definitely about educating the public. For the councils, social media is really important, with pictures of dogs, of the ear infections, of the tail docking and of the puppy that died because they severed the spinal cord when they took the tail a week ago. It is all of that.

It is not about shock: it is about the truth. It is about telling people, “That dog came in on that day, and these are the pictures.” Yes, they are graphic—give a warning—but it is important to tell people. In this country, we shy away from the graphic and from frightening the public. It is about being truthful and honest and showing them what is going on, so they make the right decisions.

Q129 Barry Gardiner: The other day I was in the park and I challenged a dog owner because the tail of their young dog had been docked. I was told it was an Australian sheepdog and it is natural for some of them to have bobbed tails. Do reassure me that that is true.



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Pip Griffin: It is not true. Again, it is social media. People think a lot of the gun dogs and the active dogs have to have their tails docked because it is for—

Barry Gardiner: They did not say it had been docked. They said a fifth of the dogs in the litter could be born with what is called a bobtail.

Pip Griffin: That would be not from this country, surely.

Barry Gardiner: It is an Australian sheepdog.

Marisa Heath: There are some.

Dr Gaines: Yes, you can naturally have dogs with much shorter tails.

Barry Gardiner: I should have just kept my mouth shut. In fact that is what the Chair says all the time.

Chair: They have similar cats on the Isle of Man, do they not?

Mrs Murray: Absolutely, yes.

Q130 **Ian Byrne:** We have covered a lot of these points, but it would be good to get this on record. I will go to Marisa first. How well are animal welfare regulations being enforced at present?

Marisa Heath: There is no enforcement agency under the Act. As I said, it is inconsistent and it is done with different levels of expertise. Shake your head if you think I am wrong here. There are some examples of people who are doing really amazing jobs, and then there are massive holes all over the place as well. A lot of people who want to do a better job do not know how because they are not given the authority to do it, their local authority does not want to give them the resource or they do not have the training. There are all sorts of gaps.

We did a very comprehensive report. We FOI'd all the local authorities, the police and everything. Our endpoint was that you need dedicated animal welfare officers who understand what they are doing, people like this, who go out. The people who are doing taxis and things like that should stay doing taxis because it is very different from doing animals. That is one of the problems.

Animal health is a statutory requirement that falls on the upper-tier and unitary authorities, the county councils, and licensing and stray dogs falls with the lower-tier authorities. There is a mismatch in resources there as well. There is a level of expertise at the county and in trading standards, which also prosecutes. It deals with farm animals and things like that. The lower-tier authorities are really scant on resource. Not many of them do it very well, which is why I say they probably should not be doing it and you should be looking at other ways of doing it.



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Either all animal health and welfare should sit with the upper tier or the lower tier should have shared services and things. There are better ways of doing it with the resources we have.

Pip Griffin: I would say it is 100% down to resources and manpower.

Q131 **Ian Byrne:** Are adequate resources being allocated at the moment?

Pip Griffin: No, not at all.

Q132 **Ian Byrne:** Is that true across the 10 authorities you represent?

Pip Griffin: Absolutely, yes. I saw on social media this morning that Birmingham Council is bankrupt. That is one of our councils. That tells you everything. If it is bankrupt, it has no money. It cannot enforce because it cannot afford to enforce. Therefore, it cannot do animal welfare. It cannot take people to court because it has no money to take people to court. Because it is all over social media that the council has gone bankrupt, people are therefore going to do more bad things in that area because they know they can get away with it.

Q133 **Ian Byrne:** I was going to talk to you about that. What are the consequences?

Pip Griffin: They are huge—they are massive. We have found it several times over the years: as councils have gone bankrupt or been in a deficit problem, the staffing levels drop. There are not enough staff to combat all of those things. The prosecutions drop, and so on. Sadly, it really comes down to finance at the end of the day.

Q134 **Ian Byrne:** How long have you been doing this for? Did you touch on that before? Was it a couple of decades?

Pip Griffin: Yes, 30 years. I have been an animal welfare officer for 22 years and a dog warden for 31 years. I have been an animal licensing officer for 21 years.

Q135 **Ian Byrne:** What was the picture like 22 years ago?

Pip Griffin: The welfare was not brilliant, but I have never, ever been in the situation I have been put in this year. It is a pandemic. You just cannot explain to people other than by showing them horrible pictures to frighten them, but it is the truth. Every single day our job is harder. It is not nice. You are right about the violence and the volatility of people.

Q136 **Ian Byrne:** You did not have that 22 years ago, did you? You did not have the scale of criminality that we see now.

Pip Griffin: No, we always had the odd person who would threaten to do naughty things to me, but now it is through the roof. It is really bad.

Marisa Heath: There is also the cost element of holding animals, which we touched on. In England, you can end up holding animals for months and months. We have one authority that has 140 farm animals. I know



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we are not talking about farm animals today, but that just illustrates the point. She has seized and is looking after them. The bill to look after those animals is going to go up over the winter. Meanwhile, the farmer has gone and got another 120 animals because the court case is taking so long. It is the same with the 71 dogs I mentioned: she does not know how many months she will have them.

The Scottish model is 21 days of seizure and then you can move the animal on. If you want to make animal welfare better, you have to find a way of moving the animal into a home or euthanising it, basically.

Q137 Ian Byrne: What are the key recommendations you would want in a report on this?

Marisa Heath: We need to look at the seizure of animals because local authorities will be put off taking any animals out of bad situations. They will turn a blind eye because they cannot afford to take them. You have to get that window closed. We cannot wait six, eight or 10 months.

You get some situations where you take 60 horses in or something. Horses are expensive animals to keep. You have to have a window so you can rehome those animals or euthanise them, if that is the case. Scotland has that model and has set 21 days to do it. I hear it is effective.

Pip Griffin: It is very effective.

Marisa Heath: Looking at that model would be really key to helping local authorities control this. At the moment, the role of a local authority animal welfare officer is not seen as it should be. It is a really important role. These people should be respected and admired for their knowledge. Some of them have 30 years' experience. They need a profile. They need a role that is respected. They need clear powers under the Act.

Dr Gaines: Something that would be a solution is increasing funding into local authorities. That is absolutely key. From the RSPCA's perspective, we could look at ways of ringfencing funds. We are big advocates of reintroducing dog licensing as well, not the scheme we had back in the 1980s but a scheme where money that is generated by the licensing fund goes back into the local authority. It can then be used for very specific services that benefit not just dog owners but communities at large.

Q138 Ian Byrne: Could you send us information on how you envisage that?

Dr Gaines: Yes, absolutely.

Ian Byrne: It would be good to see that.

Q139 Mrs Murray: Just for clarification, Marisa, you spoke about the different authorities and their responsibilities. You said that unitary and upper-tier authorities, such as county councils, are responsible for one thing and lower-tier authorities are responsible for something else. Unitary authorities actually cover both lots of responsibilities.



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Marisa Heath: Yes, of course.

Mrs Murray: I just wanted to clarify that, really. Unitary authorities do both; counties have one responsibility and then lower-tier district councils have another. Is that right?

Marisa Heath: That is absolutely right. When we did our FOIs, we found out that unitary authorities were doing a good job because they had everything in the same place.

Q140 **Mrs Murray:** As another clarification, I have heard the word “bankrupt” used quite a lot. Do you mean councils that have issued a section 114 notice?

Pip Griffin: That I do not know.

Chair: This is places like Birmingham.

Pip Griffin: Yes, Birmingham clearly put a thing out this morning and said it was bankrupt.

Mrs Murray: Yes, that is what happens. They do not go bankrupt; they issue a section 114 notice, just for clarification.

Q141 **Derek Thomas:** We have touched a bit on this, but are any of the three of you working with DEFRA and local authorities to develop and enforce animal welfare legislation at the moment?

Marisa Heath: Yes, we are doing it voluntarily. I set up the Local Government Animal Welfare Group as a voluntary entity to try to help local authorities figure out how to apply the legislation, how to get access to training and things. The RSPCA works closely with many local authorities. They have good connections through the inspectors and things to support them.

This is the beauty of animal welfare. There is a lot of voluntary work with people putting their time in. There are a lot of charities putting resources in as well to try to help enforce the legislation. A lot of that goes on. As I said, it could probably be more organised and more consistent.

Q142 **Derek Thomas:** There is not a formal review of the legislation, though.

Marisa Heath: No.

Q143 **Derek Thomas:** Sam, can I pick up on a point that I want to raise with you specifically? You can then come back to that one. I understand that the RSPCA has been in discussion with central Government on transferring the prosecution role to the CPS; why are you seeking to do this and what progress are you making?

Dr Gaines: Yes, that was something we started looking at last year. You are absolutely right: we do want to move our prosecutions function from the RSPCA and into the CPS. We have been in discussion with the Ministry of Justice and the Attorney General’s office. The Ministry of



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Justice has intimated that it is keen to do that and that we would be able to move our prosecution function.

From the RSPCA's perspective, we want assurance that, if that function were to be moved across, there would be a dedicated animal welfare team within the CPS that has the same knowledge so we still see those cases being taken forward. The main reason the RSPCA wants this is that we are now seeing a big change in the cases that we are involved with and that we are investigating. As has already been mentioned this afternoon, there are now a lot of criminal elements to the cases we are involved with. It becomes quite difficult for a charity to be able to manage that.

We have also seen the uplift in the sentencing from six months to five years. We do not necessarily think that the RSPCA is well placed to be a part of that either. We are very keen for it to cross over, but we want the assurance that animal welfare cases will still be prosecuted where the evidence passes the relevant and applicable DPP tests.

Q144 Derek Thomas: Are you also engaged with DEFRA on other areas of legislation and welfare?

Dr Gaines: Yes. One example that I can talk about would be me. I am on the responsible dog ownership steering group that DEFRA is currently running. The report is in draft stage at the moment. That is looking very specifically at how we tackle dog bites, which Neil has mentioned, and how we promote responsible dog ownership. Yes, the RSPCA works with DEFRA on a whole range of welfare issues.

Q145 Derek Thomas: Do the longer sentences act as a deterrent for abuse?

Dr Gaines: I guess we have yet to see the true outcome because the sentencing guidelines have only come in recently. I gave the example earlier of a case where we have already seen a tougher sentence being given as a result of prosecution. We have other cases going through the courts as well. To some extent time will tell, but I would go back to the point I made earlier. Through some of the criminology research, we know that deterring the individual is not just about the duration of the sentence: it is also about the certainty of that person being caught. If you have the certainty and that extended or longer sentence, that should act as a good deterrent.

Q146 Derek Thomas: Are people well aware of this increase in sentencing and what may occur if they continue to abuse?

Pip Griffin: No.

Dr Gaines: No, in a nutshell.

Q147 Derek Thomas: Is that something you can do something about? Or does that sit with DEFRA or someone else to promote that?

Pip Griffin: It is local government.



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Marisa Heath: It is about putting case studies out in the local press and things.

Pip Griffin: Yes, definitely.

Q148 **Derek Thomas:** Pip, you mentioned local government, and you have also talked about resources. You work for a number of them; can you do a joint public awareness exercise across the area you cover? Is that something on your radar?

Pip Griffin: We could do. We did a press release every single week. I did that because I am the press officer for the dog warden team. Every week, all the way through October, November and December, we showed a stray dog that was picked up in the most appalling condition. We got a massive amount of help and support from the public and all over social media. We did not get anything negative, believe it or not, as we thought we would.

It does work, but it is a matter of time. I work—I am not trying to blow my own trumpet—Monday to Friday, nights and weekends. I do not get paid nights or weekends. I get flexi or lieu. I have accrued so much flexi and lieu that I cannot take it. It is really difficult to think, “I will do a press release” when we are just on the ground at the moment with so many stray dogs.

Dr Gaines: Can I just add a point to that? Going back to what we mentioned previously and the deterrence value of the sentencing, we are certainly finding out the importance of human behaviour change theory. We have to recognise that the behaviour of people who are involved in cases of abuse and cruelty is driven by a range of motivating factors. We have to understand why individuals are carrying out that behaviour in order to come up with effective interventions. This is certainly a new area of work for the RSPCA. We are moving into a prevention model of trying to identify what is driving the human behaviour, which allows us to identify the best intervention to reduce it and hopefully prevent it completely.

Q149 **Derek Thomas:** This is not anywhere near what I should be talking about, but in my constituency primary schools have dogs in the schools themselves. That would be one example of supporting good animal welfare and good care.

Dr Gaines: Potentially.

Derek Thomas: They are very lovely dogs and they do a good job.

Dr Gaines: We have to look at it from the perspective of the dog as to whether it is lovely. There are some very good examples where individual dogs are probably not well suited to that environment, but the benefit it brings to children often outweighs the potential harm.

Q150 **Derek Thomas:** I will not mention any particular schools. Presumably,



though, if we want to develop a generation of people who know how to care properly for animals, they need to be introduced and exposed to animals and taught how to do that.

Dr Gaines: Yes, but it is again very much about how we do it. We have to be very mindful that in wanting to engender and foster a more compassionate society, which the RSPCA is right behind, we do not end up putting animals in situations where their welfare could be compromised. That is often quite tricky because we want to give individuals the opportunity to interact with animals, but it has to be in their best interests.

Derek Thomas: I have drifted into a danger area, Chair. I will leave it there.

Q151 **Julian Sturdy:** I have a very quick question; I am sorry if it was covered right at the beginning when I was not there. Have you seen any data on the rise in pet ownership during covid and the lockdowns now starting to come to fruition? What are you seeing on the ground?

Pip Griffin: Yes.

Dr Gaines: I can cover that. Operationally, we are seeing an increase in more challenging dogs coming into our care, which we think is an impact of covid. We have covered this through various questions. Covid had a really significant impact on our pet population, particularly for dogs, because we saw that huge uplift in dogs being imported from outside the UK and not given the appropriate breeding, rearing and socialisation that is necessary for a well-adjusted adult dog. We are absolutely seeing an impact from that.

It is worth saying at this point that, based on the research, we probably should not think we have seen the worst of it. What we do know from the research about the presentation of behaviour problems is that they tend to manifest between 2.5 and 3.7 years of age. Bearing in mind that the pandemic only happened in 2020, there are probably some dogs that are still developing and are yet to present those behavioural problems. We do need to be aware of that. Owners are potentially going to be at risk around those dogs. They are going to struggle. We also have the cost of living crisis. That impacts upon people's ability to access behavioural support, veterinary support and so on.

Chair: May I thank the panel and in particular the RSPCA—I have been a member for 20 years—for the great work you do? Thank you for the work you do in local authorities.

Pip, you said you were not going to blow your own trumpet; we should do that for you. Local government officers often get a load of grief, and you go above and beyond the call of duty. I suspect there are many people up and down the country doing exactly the same as you, putting the welfare of the animals first and foremost. I hope that anyone watching this session who is doing what you are doing, wherever they are in the

country, will receive the gratitude of the Committee for all you do in your own particular way. Thank you very much indeed.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Bill Lambert, Dr Gudrun Ravetz and Alexandra Baker.

Q152 **Chair:** Welcome to the second panel in this evidence session on welfare. Some of the evidence we have heard already about the way animals are treated has been quite harrowing. Could I ask our witnesses to introduce themselves, starting with Bill?

Bill Lambert: I am Bill Lambert. I am the executive for health, welfare and breeder services at the Kennel Club.

Dr Ravetz: I am Gudrun Ravetz, chief veterinary officer at Pets at Home, which includes our 444 veterinary practices, Vets4Pets and Companion Care.

Alexandra Baker: I am Alexandra Baker. I am the chief operating officer at the Pet Industry Federation, which is a trade association for pet businesses.

Q153 **Chair:** My first question is probably one that Bill and Alexandra would be keen to answer. What are the benefits of sourcing a puppy from a licensed breeder rather than from an unlicensed breeder overseas? That is a fairly simple question, but maybe you could outline some of the worst-case scenarios you have seen.

Bill Lambert: As was mentioned earlier, there are a lot of people who breed dogs who are not licensed. Of course, buying from a licensed breeder means that they are under the jurisdiction of the local authority, they are inspected and they have to conform to certain welfare practices.

It is worth noting that about 90% of people who register with the Kennel Club breed one, or less than one or two litters a year. There is a huge cottage industry in breeding dogs, and sometimes the best source to buy a dog from is someone who has a litter from their own pet dog at home, where they are reared as part of the family. A lot of those people who are breeding dogs are doing it perfectly well, and perfectly legitimately, but are not licensed. Licensing largely applies to people who are making a living out of breeding dogs.

Alexandra Baker: We would echo what Bill said. If you are buying from a licensed breeder, you are buying from a breeder who has gone through the regulatory system and is on the radar with their local authority, and the licensing regulations are ultimately there with welfare at the heart of what they are all about.

That said, my understanding is that a large proportion of puppies that are bred in the UK do not fall within the licensing regime, which means that



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the vast majority of people taking on new puppies are taking them on where they have not come from a licensed background. What we would like to see within the licensing regulation, certainly under breeding, is more traceability.

At the moment, it is set at three litters and above. We would like to see some form of registration scheme that goes right down to hobby breeders or breeding a family pet, where even just being registered with their local authority would perhaps give a little more traceability to where that puppy has come from. It would also give the potential puppy buyer the knowledge that they are getting their puppy from someone who is at least on the radar with their local authority and has perhaps signed up to something such as the BVA puppy contract, for example, which is a great tool for ensuring that puppies are bred and passed on to new owners responsibly.

Q154 **Chair:** Could that be a disincentive for a family to breed from their family pet? They could say, "I don't really want to be licensed or inspected," and that would just push more people into the illegal supply.

Alexandra Baker: Just to clarify, we would not necessarily want to move into the realm of licensing, because that would be far too onerous, but a simple registration scheme is something that could potentially be introduced. It does not necessarily have to be a disincentive. It could actually be a very good way of giving reassurance to new puppy owners that the person they are buying their new puppy from has really got the welfare of that puppy very much at the heart of what they are doing. I hope it would not be a disincentive. People who genuinely want to pass on their puppies in a responsible way would hopefully welcome that move, but so many puppies are being bred that are not falling within the licensing regime.

Bill, correct me if I am wrong, but only about a quarter of the puppies that are acquired in the UK per year are actually coming from the Kennel Club. There is a huge raft of other sources where puppies are coming from, and many of those are not falling under a licensing regime. We just think that perhaps there should be greater traceability, and a registration scheme perhaps is one way that we could look at to improve that situation.

Q155 **Chair:** Certainly our Patterdale terrier, when she was alive, had a litter. It was planned and was not a street accident, but many bitches get into pup without their people knowing. At what point would you want them to register that situation—when the puppies are born? We already microchip puppies. Would that not be the sensible point at which that could be registered?

Alexandra Baker: Possibly, but there are issues with the microchipping side of things as well, because there are so many databases. There are many, many more dogs on the microchipping database than actually are still alive. I am not even sure most people know which database their dog



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is microchipped on. I am not sure that microchipping regulations have done what they maybe should have done.

As I said, I would not want it to be particularly onerous. It is just a form of traceability, maybe not for every puppy, but about being more on the radar or using tools like the puppy contract to give more of a welfare framework for these puppies that are being passed on to new owners. It needs more conversation or more dialogue around it.

Q156 Chair: Gudrun, is part of the problem that there is tremendous demand for a puppy, whereas we have lots of rescue dogs up and down the country that need homes? It is a bit like buying a second-hand car: you are not sure what the previous owner has done with it. Is that the problem? Or is it that children like puppies? Can we do more to try to skew that demand?

Dr Ravetz: We heard some good discussion from the previous speakers around the desire for puppies and how many animals we actually have that need rehoming. Part of this is what we are seeing that happened in the pandemic with a culture shift through social media, a desire for a particular look, a particular design, and that ability to access very, very quickly. What we used to have was a pause, where people would discuss and think about it.

While we do not sell puppies or kittens at Pets at Home, with every animal that we do sell, we aim to sell the right pet to the right owner. That starts at pre-acquisition with a pre-purchase discussion around the five welfare needs to make sure that they can meet those. It is within the gift of our colleagues to not sell that animal if they do not feel it is right and to continue that education conversation. I take that back to puppies and kittens too.

We need to have that conversation. What we would like is for that conversation to happen within our veterinary practices, to encourage a genuine conversation about the ability to meet the needs of those puppies, which puppy is the correct puppy to have, and to avoid this impulse purchase of puppies. We have a social storm of a desire now without a thought around it.

The other piece I would go back to is this. At Pets at Home we run pet pals sessions, where we engage with young people and their parents around the five welfare needs, to engage them around responsible pet ownership and understanding what that is. By 2028, we have an ambition to educate 300,000 schoolchildren because, as the other panellists said before and as Sam said, it is imperative that we educate young people.

We also know there is a link with domestic violence and animal abuse. The sooner that we can start positive welfare messages and positive engagement around responsible pet ownership, so that joy of pet ownership starts early, the better.



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Just going back to the regulations, one thing that we must not forget is that stud dogs do not fall under these regulations. These stud dogs can be used multiple times, potentially with extreme conformations that are causing welfare problems.

Q157 Chair: That is understood. You say we should have more regulation. Are there things that the Government could do to try to clamp down? What practical differences could there be?

Dr Ravetz: Stud dogs should come under the regulations. We need to bring that in. You mentioned the puppy contract. I was lucky enough—I think that is the right word—to work on the puppy contract when I was with the British Veterinary Association. Again, that gave a framework for education so people could understand both how this puppy had been bred and what health and medical interventions it had had. That is the start of a conversation, because all too often there is not a conversation between puppy purchaser and puppy breeder. Sometimes that is lack of knowledge and education by the people wishing to purchase that. We need to really go back to that education side.

We need to be careful about putting legislation in that is too onerous, particularly with perhaps the single breeding dog in one year from a family, but how do we support them to do the right thing and provide the right information for that potential puppy purchaser? The BVA-RSPCA puppy contract is one way to go.

Q158 Chair: Where new pet owners or prospective pet owners come to see you and discuss, is it generally after they have got the dog or do some come before?

Dr Ravetz: We would encourage all pet homes to engage with their veterinary professionals before they buy a pet, because hopefully it will all go swimmingly well, but if that dog is unwell on the way home you need to have that provision in place. You need to have it registered with your veterinary professional and have that relationship in place. We would encourage people, because a veterinary relationship with a pet owner is very, very strong. If we can start that right at the beginning, we can get things right. That is something the profession has been trying to do to educate pet owners to engage very, very early. We can encourage that.

Q159 Chair: For example, do you discuss the lifetime cost of having a dog? It is often an impulse buy, but it can cost several thousands if you are looking at kennels for holidays and the cost of veterinary care, which seems to be getting much more expensive, I have to say, particularly as local veterinary practices are all being bought up by conglomerates. Is that just my imagination, or is that happening?

Dr Ravetz: There is a change in business ownership of veterinary practices, but what is important to note is the ability of veterinary professionals to do more things and achieve better outcomes. We have better diagnostics. We have better surgical and medical interventions



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now, and we can provide better outcomes than we could before. The investment within veterinary practices has allowed us to do that, and some of that has happened because of different ownership models.

The important piece is that we engage people early on and we are able to support them through that lifetime. The engagement early on is about having that conversation around lifetime costs. I know the profession, through the British Veterinary Association, the RSPCA and the PDSA PAW report that you have heard from, have done some very good work on lifetime costs of all types of animals—rabbits, cats and dogs.

That is important to note, but so is the conversation about particular breeds. We need people to understand—and we have talked about behaviour change—that, if people are looking at these breeds with extreme conformation problems, they are likely to suffer health and welfare problems throughout their life. That is going to be costly and, sadly, some of these people will not be able to get pet insurance because of the expected problems they will perceive. As much as we are aware of unscrupulous breeding and unscrupulous owning, some people are sadly going into it naïvely. We need to help them to make the right decisions around these pets so that they have that information.

Q160 Chair: The most difficult decision a pet owner will have to make is, “Do I have my animal put down or do I spend £2,500 having this procedure on a dog that is 10 years old already?” We are farmers. We used to have sheep. A sheep is worth £120, so you really did not get the vet out unless you had to, but if you have a family pet it is like part of the family. Are we finding people spending money they cannot afford to spend on trying to save the life of a dog that has probably had the best part of its life already?

Dr Ravetz: I am sure lots of people in the room are pet owners. I certainly am. We can all recognise the unique bond we as families, and particularly children, have with pets. We are privileged to have access to 7.6 million VIP customers, so we know how people feel about their pets. We have seen throughout the cost of living crisis that people will continue to spend on their pets above other things. They will spend on their pets because they are such an important part of their families.

What we are seeing anecdotally through our veterinary practices is that people are continuing to do this, but where veterinary professionals are very capable is that they are always there to have that contextualised care conversation so that they can provide the right education and ability, so that the right outcome can come for that pet within the budget of that person, while making sure that that emotional bond is understood at all points.

Q161 Barry Gardiner: Dr Ravetz, could I just clarify? Earlier I thought you said that there were occasions on which you would advise people, “No, you can’t buy a dog,” but Pets at Home does not sell dogs, does it?



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Dr Ravetz: We do not sell cats and dogs, but when we are selling the small mammals we will have a pre-purchase conversation. If it becomes apparent that it is not the right moment or the education needs to continue, our colleagues have the ability to not sell that pet at the time but continue that education conversation.

Q162 **Barry Gardiner:** Do you have figures about how many small mammals you have sold and how many you have denied?

Dr Ravetz: I do not. Our sales of small pets is actually declining. I can get you the figures for those. They are somewhere in here but I cannot see them right at the moment. They are declining.

Barry Gardiner: I was just wondering about the proportion where you have said, "Look, you are in no position to buy a rabbit," or whatever.

Dr Ravetz: To be honest, I suspect we do not record the no-sales. I lead a team who oversee and support the practice owners, but also oversee the retail side in terms of health, welfare, and efficacy and safety of products. Within my team, we have dedicated people who help to train our colleagues and who will engage, and they are often in conversation with colleagues who have said they will decline a sale, but we probably do not record that, to be honest.

Bill Lambert: If it helps, I speak to breeders on a regular basis. Breeders tell me that they regularly will turn down puppy buyers because they are not suitable for their dog. We often have the conversation and we tell them to go and buy a goldfish, because it might be more suitable than a puppy. We do have those conversations, but of course, when you have highly commercial breeders who are making a living out of their dogs, it is highly unlikely those conversations take place, quite frankly.

Can I just make one more point and put your mind at rest? There are bob-tailed Australian shepherd dogs. They do exist and it is around about one in five.

Q163 **Barry Gardiner:** Thank you very much for that. I wanted to focus on the canine fertility clinics. We heard evidence in an earlier session that suggested having a condition that if a dog cannot mate naturally, there should be no artificial insemination. It should not be allowed, if they cannot mate naturally, to perform artificial insemination. Is that something that you would support?

Bill Lambert: If I just give you a little bit of background to this, there have been fertility clinics for many years in the UK. They have been used legitimately by breeders for a number of years but—this point was made earlier—they have suddenly exploded. They have exploded because there was a demand for high-value puppies and, where there is money, this industry has developed.

It is associated with some breeds that have extreme conformations or that have had difficulty mating and producing puppies, in order to



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produce more puppies. Some of the practices are already illegal, but unfortunately enforcement is a problem. I certainly support the view that most of the procedures should only be done under veterinary guidance and we should have a vet on site to carry those practices out.

Q164 Barry Gardiner: Why should there be artificial insemination of any dog?

Bill Lambert: I will give you a number of reasons. The first is genetic diversity. Breeders who are interested in breeds will want to increase genetic diversity and want to bring frozen semen in from overseas. This has been carrying on for a long time.

There can be welfare benefits to the animal. For example, would I want to drive 200 miles to take a bitch on a hot day to the other side of the country to have her mated when there was a different option available to me? There are legitimate reasons for using artificial insemination, but of course I would not support breeding animals that cannot breed naturally.

Q165 Barry Gardiner: I take your point about the genetic diversification, which is a fair point, but when it comes to artificial insemination and what you said about taking an animal across the country, does that not smack of the commodification that we talked about in the earlier session?

Bill Lambert: There can be an element of that, of course, but there can be circumstances where there are welfare benefits for both the dog and the bitch in artificial insemination. I have illustrated one point, but animals can certainly get stressed under those circumstances. There are individual cases, obviously, and that is when responsible breeders will make those decisions.

When you are talking about producing animals on a large scale, using methods to increase the number of puppies in a litter and increase fertility, and bringing bitches into season in between their natural cycles, these practices are abhorrent and would never be supported.

Dr Ravetz: There are different types of artificial insemination. As Bill has said, there can be reasons for intravaginal artificial insemination. Perhaps you may not wish to travel with the dog for two hours. I would struggle to see that there is a benefit for intracervical and surgical artificial insemination. There is a point at which we have to see the intrinsic value of the animals for themselves, and we must not commodify animals at all. We do need to have a long hard look at where this is.

We always have to be careful of unintended consequences if we try to ban something. Bill makes a very good point around genetic diversity. There may be cases where it is appropriate, but where it is appropriate it must be done under strict veterinary supervision for very tight and specific reasons. The problem we have now is that it is done for commercial gain or for human gain, and that is a real concern.

Within our veterinary practices, we do see animals come in that we are concerned have had procedures done. We have no medical records for



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them. The owners are not telling us where or what has happened. This can then be a risk of going on if we are trying to treat these animals going forward.

To be honest, it is very demoralising for our teams, who are under pressure anyway, knowing that they want to do the right thing for the welfare of the animal and cannot, either because of procedures that have gone on that should not have—because they were acts of veterinary surgery—or because they are unable to obtain medical records. While we have to be careful of blanket ruling out anything, we do need to have very strict guidance on when and where this is appropriate. It must be done for the benefit of the animals or for the wider set of animals.

Q166 **Barry Gardiner:** This Committee has to produce its report; it has to make recommendations. Those recommendations have to provide solutions to these problems. Give me some solutions. What do you think could be done to tackle the issues and the abuses that we have talked about?

Dr Ravetz: We certainly need to regulate canine fertility clinics for a start. We need a new Veterinary Surgeons Act so that we can bring in vet-led teams that are regulated. That comes hand in hand.

Q167 **Barry Gardiner:** That should enforce greater penalties. What is the maximum penalty at the moment?

Dr Ravetz: I am not the Royal College, but my understanding is that the maximum penalty for undertaking an act of veterinary surgery is very minimal.

Barry Gardiner: It is £100, I think.

Dr Ravetz: Yes, that is my understanding. It is very, very minimal. There is no deterrent there and the risk of being caught is probably still quite small. As we heard before, that is not a deterrent in itself. We do need a new Veterinary Surgeons Act so that it is modern and up to date for the concerns and problems we are seeing, but also so that it allows for the veterinary profession to be able to do more. We can protect the title of our registered veterinary nurses and allow them to engage in more professional activities.

We need to take a long look at canine fertility clinics, the reasons they have popped up and how they are operating. That needs to be a multi-agency approach, both from the speakers we heard earlier, who have a lot of knowledge of this area, along with Bill, who obviously has a lot of knowledge on the breeding side, and, importantly, from the veterinary profession. We must tighten up on how and why this is done, and at that point we can have guidance. The difficulty is that there is always wiggle room in guidance, and that is what we need to be very, very careful of.

Q168 **Barry Gardiner:** Bill, what issues have you identified with co-owned bitches by breeders?



Bill Lambert: Co-ownership has happened for a long time in our world—the show world—because you have more than one person owning a dog and they have an interest in them. It is often for breeding. They may want to jointly own or jointly breed the puppies. What you are alluding to is that co-ownership has been used—I am aware of the “Panorama” programme that highlighted this—to find loopholes around being detected, effectively. There are issues there, but I am not quite sure how that could possibly be enforced, because I cannot see how we could possibly bring in legislation to actually stop someone wanting to own a dog.

Q169 **Barry Gardiner:** Even though there might be co-ownership, could it be necessary to have a person who was responsible for the animal’s welfare? Would that be one way of tackling it?

Bill Lambert: Yes, there should be, but even that might be difficult to enforce, because you would have two people saying, “I’m not responsible.” We have already seen that attached to the Dangerous Dogs Act, where people have had responsibility for a dog that has been in someone else’s care. I am not sure how much of an issue it is, quite frankly. As I say, in our world, co-ownership has existed for a long time without any issues at all.

Chair: It can be an issue in the divorce courts when they are fighting over the dog.

Dr Ravetz: That is what I was about to say. Because they are possessions, in some of our practices we have struggled where there has been potentially co-ownership but one person is registered with the veterinary professional, one person is registered on the microchip, and there is a divorce proceeding going on. We are unable to give advice to one without the other, so we have found ourselves in a tangle around ownership of pets.

Q170 **Barry Gardiner:** How do you untangle it?

Dr Ravetz: That is a very good question, which our legal team is trying to work through. I will let you know how we are getting on with those cases.

Q171 **Dr Hudson:** I have a question on the fertility clinics. From our previous session we have heard that it is very difficult to ascertain exactly what is going on in some of these unregulated clinics. Gudrun, if I could just push you further, I appreciate this is a difficult question, but you touched on how it is difficult for vets in the frontline, and certainly within your practice network, who are then presented with animals that potentially have had procedures done—acts of veterinary surgery outside of veterinary supervision. Talk in general terms if that is easier, but what sort of procedures are you picking up that have been done? Is it blood samples, is it artificial insemination, or, heaven forbid, are you picking up that things like caesarean sections are being performed not by veterinary



surgeons?

Dr Ravetz: There are definitely blood samples. There is definitely artificial insemination. There have been cases where caesareans have happened. The problem is that we do not know if they are done by veterinary surgeons or not, because there is a wall of silence and we have no medical notes. I would not like to say whether it is one or the other, but the wall of silence is part of the problem.

As we know, as veterinary professionals, you have to keep medical records, you have to share those medical records, and you have to keep them for a period of time. That is an important part of an animal's history and an important part of treating them for their health and welfare. If we are in the dark on that, it is a problem going forward, but we have definitely seen all of those.

Q172 **Dr Hudson:** You are picking up that some of these procedures have been done. How common is it? Is it many? Is it few? What are we talking about?

Dr Ravetz: I do not think it is common. We are not absolutely tracking them, but what I would say is that, as the group veterinary officer, I am hearing this from our practices where we have not heard it before. It is a concern, mainly the concern of the distress it is causing. They are themselves showing an emotional response to something they do not wish to see and feel powerless to do anything about.

Q173 **Robbie Moore:** Gudrun and Alexandra, what trends are you seeing in the demand for designer pets, and what do you feel is the influence behind this? Is it celebrities or influencers?

Dr Ravetz: The demand for designer breeds and for looks over welfare started before the pandemic, obviously, and then was exacerbated by the pandemic and that desire for puppies, which led to unscrupulous breeding of particular types that were highly desired. We have seen the trend not declining, which is the sad point, particularly around brachycephalic dogs, these XL bullies, and now those with mutilations, particularly the cropped-ear types.

Originally, a lot of this stemmed from influencing, usually through social media. That has led to normalising poor conformation and extremes of conformation, and that has led to a desire of copycat, really. "I want to be like that influencer. I want to have that." Again, it comes to the commodification, because these animals are then used on social media, everybody likes them, and the gain is for the human, not for the pet. That is the real problem.

The sad thing for the veterinary profession and our veterinary practices is that we are not seeing the decline reducing; we are just seeing different animals added in. We are now seeing mutilated animals adding in to extreme conformations and poor welfare, or we are seeing different types



of breeds such as XL bullies come through. There is a lack of education around good welfare and responsible ownership.

Alexandra Baker: We do not necessarily collect data particularly on what our member businesses are actually seeing in terms of breeds. From my own perspective, celebrity influencers have a huge impact. I am aware from what I follow on social media that some people, if they own cropped breeds, particularly cropped-ear breeds, and they have come across them in a legitimate way—perhaps they have picked them up from a rescue—will very deliberately not post pictures of those animals on social media so that they do not normalise the look of that dog, with the floppy ear removed.

When I was younger, dogs like Dobermans and rottweilers always had docked tails. I remember, when that ban was introduced and we suddenly saw rottweilers and Dobermans with tails, how it actually looked unusual to see dogs in their proper conformation, wandering the streets with full tails on. We have to be really careful with the cropped-ear look that it does not become normalised, because otherwise people then forget what those dogs actually looked like to begin with.

Social media has a really important part to play. If owners are aware of the horrors that pet has actually gone through to have that mutilated ear, and they take something on themselves to not advertise that further and normalise it, then that would be very helpful.

Q174 **Robbie Moore:** Gudrun, picking up from what you were saying, effectively we are coming to a position where the trend is increasing, whether it is influencing or celebrity social media, but we are also starting—correct me if I am wrong—to see not just cropped ears but other types of normalising of very extreme breeding taking place. Do you see the upward trend starting to level off, or are we on an upward trend at the moment?

Dr Ravetz: That is difficult, because I do not have specific numbers, but as a veterinary profession and certainly with our practices we are not seeing it declining; we just see it changing. That is of concern, because it is the normalisation. Pets at Home is very clear that we will not show pictures of extreme conformations, cropped ears and mutilations in our marketing materials, because we do not want to normalise that, but through our practices we are not seeing a decrease.

Bill Lambert: It might help if we first establish what we mean by designer pets. If I talk about the popularity of different breeds, the pugs, which became a popular breed, have declined by 57% between 2022 and 2013. They are certainly on the decline. The other brachycephalic breeds that we register a lot of—pugs and French bulldogs, for a start—are starting to decline as well.

You asked earlier what solutions and recommendations we could offer. One thing that we would like to see is compulsory testing. We have



developed with the University of Cambridge a respiratory test, which is widely available now, that can look at the flat-faced breeds and measure how much they are able to breathe, because you cannot easily tell by looking at the dog how well that dog can breathe. There is a simple test that can be done before breeding to measure the breathing capability of those animals, and we then give recommendations on which ones should be bred from. If everybody followed that protocol, we would very quickly change those breeds and they would be able to breathe better. That is one recommendation that we would like to see—that people take advantage of those health tests that are available.

- Q175 **Robbie Moore:** That is great, but the challenge is that you are in a steep battle, so to speak, against the influencing of social media and so on, and therefore there will be a lot of people who say, "Right, I have seen this particular breed"—despite the change to that animal, whatever that change may be—"and I want one now." How do you think Government, as part of a solution or recommendation, can try to counteract that, over and above what you are suggesting?

Bill Lambert: It is interesting, because influencing has been around for a long time. The corgi that was associated with the late Queen was very popular in the 1950s and 1960s when she was pictured a lot in the newspapers with her children and the corgis, and they reached a peak at that time. People are clearly influenced by the way that dogs look. It is a really unfortunate thing. The research we have done shows that people pick dogs on their appearance, and their appearance can often be deceiving. A nice, fluffy, cute dog may not necessarily make a suitable family pet.

There are 222 registered Kennel Club breeds, but there are a load more dogs out there that we do not recognise. The choice is enormous, but unfortunately it comes down to education. We do our level best to try to educate people about where they should go and what dogs they should be buying, but it is a message that sometimes does not get out there.

You are absolutely right about social media. Whereas at one time the *Daily Express* might have had a picture of the Queen, nowadays I can publish pictures of myself, or celebrities can, and suddenly reach millions of people very simply. It is a really unfortunate thing that people are influenced in that way.

- Q176 **Robbie Moore:** We have obviously talked about what the pet looks like, but of course there are other characteristics that purchasers may be interested in, in terms of the aggressive characteristics of the pet. Alexandra, are you seeing any changes in trends to breeds that are showing more of an aggressive characteristic?

Alexandra Baker: What our members are particularly reporting as a result of the pandemic is a change in behavioural traits, not necessarily breeds, from what they are seeing coming into their grooming salons, into their kennels or in daycare. About 90% of our members are seeing



more negative behavioural traits being manifested—for example, separation anxiety or nervousness. About 40% of them are displaying aggressive tendencies. That has had an impact on our businesses, because they are either having to use two groomers, for example, to groom a dog, or having to muzzle a dog. That is impacting on them financially as businesses.

There are some signs that that is starting to settle down a little bit. It was particularly bad straight after the pandemic, although I was interested to hear from the RSPCA in the previous session that dogs that can manifest these behavioural traits slightly later, so we may not have hit it. We will continue to survey our members to find out what behavioural treats they are continuing to see, but it is certainly having a huge impact. It is not so much necessarily the breed, but it has certainly been in the lockdowns when people bought lots of puppies, perhaps as first-time owners, and did not or were not able to socialise them properly. Those traits are carrying through into what our members are seeing in their businesses today.

Bill Lambert: The XL bully is a breed of dog that has been mentioned a number of times today, so perhaps I can enlarge a little bit on that. The issue of status dogs has clearly not gone away. The Dangerous Dogs Act, which sought to make pitbulls illegal, may have worked in some ways, but it is a bad piece of legislation and we would like to see a root-and-branch review of it. Clearly it just shows you that people can move from one type of dog to another type of dog that may have the same sort of problems associated with it.

You have not asked about the Dangerous Dogs Act, but I would just say at this point that obviously it is fundamentally flawed because it is based on the way a dog looks, and you can quite easily move from one breed to another breed that has the same characteristics.

Mrs Murray: I am going to move on from dogs and puppies to the breeding and trading of cats and rabbits. Chair, I have to declare an interest as the chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Cats, and I also own two cats.

Chair: We have one of those groups for everything.

Q177 **Mrs Murray:** We do indeed. Gudrun and Alexandra, in your view how has the cat trade market changed recently—for example, in terms of marketing, advertising and pricing?

Dr Ravetz: Sadly the cat population is not immune to the problems that we have had with extreme conformations in dog breeding, such as the Scottish fold cats, the brachycephalic cats and the extreme conformation of cats. We have seen it initially in smaller numbers, but sadly we are seeing that increasing again for exactly the same reason. It is mirroring what we have seen in the dog population, and our practices are seeing that.



The solutions are very, very similar, in that we need better education. People need to understand the health and welfare concerns with these animals, and we also need to understand how we can educate people around what good looks like. The solutions are very, very similar to what we have seen, and the causes are sadly very, very similar. We have normalised poor welfare in cats, and sadly we have been a little bit slower to call that out in cats than we have in dogs. It is right that we have now woken up. I would like to see it have exactly the same attention that we have given to dogs before we have an explosion in really poor cat welfare.

Alexandra Baker: At the moment there is no legislation around cat breeding. I know Cats Protection is very strongly advocating that, and we would echo that. We have been a bit slow on the cat front. They are often seen as the Cinderella of things. Since the third-party ban on puppies and kittens being sold in pet shops, the fact that rescue centres are not licensed and the fact that there is no cat breeding means that there is really nothing regulating the breeding and sale of young cats. That means that cat owners and potential cat owners are very much in the dark about where to get healthy, welfare-friendly pets that have been bred in the right way. I know Cats Protection will have talked in previous sessions on this, so I know that the work has been done. It would be really good to see that coming forward into some form of regulation.

Q178 **Mrs Murray:** Gudrun, do you have a view on whether cat breeding could and should be better regulated? If so, how would you suggest we introduce that?

Dr Ravetz: Yes, I absolutely would. It deserves to be regulated. We need to be careful that we do not fall into doing a disservice to cats. We should look at the wins that we have had in dog regulation, and also perhaps the things that we could have done better or that we have found have not worked as we expected. An audit and a review would be good, and to learn from that, so that we have the proper protections in place for cats.

There are some superb cat charities that do excellent pieces on education. Cats are extremely important in our households but perhaps again have slightly lagged behind dogs in our education of cat needs, the different styles of cats and what cats want, because not every cat is the same or wants the same environment.

It is important that we do start to educate people more on cat behaviours. A lot of cats do not wish to be in multi-cat households. There are a lot of myths that we need to unpick. The veterinary profession plays a part in that. It is that relationship prior to purchase, around how we can do things that are for the benefits of the cat. If we do them for the benefit of the animal, we will have very positive relationships with our pets.

Bill Lambert: You might be surprised that I can comment on this, because although I am with the Kennel Club I used to breed cats and I do



own cats as well. As Gudrun said, we need to learn from some of the mistakes we have made or seen with licensing. We have certainly seen a number of people—the small-volume breeders—who have been turned away from breeding because of the fear of legislation.

If someone sets out to breed a litter of dogs today, it is very difficult to know whether they need a licence or not, because at the moment there is this element called the business test within the licensing system, which is one of the qualifiers for whether you need a licence. Until you have the puppies and they are available for sale, you have no idea whether you are going to fall into the licensing threshold or not.

If we introduce licensing for cat breeders as well, we need to look at the whole scope and say, “Do we need to learn lessons from dog breeding and some of the mistakes we have made there?”

Q179 Mrs Murray: I am going to move on from cats to rabbits now, just to make your day a little bit more varied. What issues are you seeing around rabbit breeding and their sale as pets?

Alexandra Baker: What we are seeing is a huge growth. We have had conversations with the Rabbit Welfare Association on this. There has been a huge growth in online sales of rabbits, which is a totally unregulated area. Generally we would want people to be purchasing a rabbit in a pet shop, because that is regulated and it is licensed with the local authority. There are welfare standards around it.

Unfortunately, what is happening is these online sales where people decide they want a rabbit. It is the third most popular pet, but people see it as a starter pet and do not actually appreciate that there are quite complex needs and they live for quite a long time. People do not really realise that. They get one rabbit; they leave it in a hutch. It is often bought for a child and the child then loses interest in it, so this poor rabbit does not have much of a life.

The importance of taking on a rabbit through a pet shop is quite crucial, because obviously then that education can be passed on so the owner is absolutely aware of the commitment they are signing up to by getting a rabbit. That does not happen through online sales, and often the online sale has come about because there is a mismatch pairing, they have bred like rabbits and they are now trying to get rid of those rabbits.

We perhaps also would like to see something in the vending regulations. At the moment it is set at eight weeks that rabbits are sold. We would maybe like to see that raised to 12 weeks, because sexing of rabbits is notoriously difficult at the age of eight weeks. The genitalia has not developed well enough, unless you are very expert, to know the difference. These breeding pairs are often sold off, and then of course it just perpetuates the problem. That is what we would like to see.



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Looking at full rabbit breeding regulations, I am not sure whether that could be brought into the regulatory framework, given everything else that also needs to be done, but there is a good code of conduct that has been worked on by a number of different stakeholders, including Pets at Home, RSPCA and Rabbit Welfare Association, and I know APGAW have been dealing with that. It would be really good if that were made a statutory code or something that potential rabbit owners were much more aware of. We would love to see that really gaining some foothold with regard to rabbit purchasing.

Q180 **Mrs Murray:** Gudrun, do you have anything to add? Pets at Home sells rabbits, doesn't it?

Dr Ravetz: Yes, we do sell rabbits. We took the decision that we only sell rabbits in a store where there is a veterinary practice, because then within our ecosystem we can refer where needed. I agree with everything Alexandra has said. We also recognise that these are complex animals. They are not ideal starter pets, and they are certainly not children's pets. Within any marketing and visualisation we have, we encourage the fact that there is an adult also in the shot, so that we are not normalising that this is just an association with children. Again, it is that pre-purchase advice that is very, very important.

We started with dogs, then we talked about cats lagging behind, and the poor rabbit lags behind even further. We must remember that within all of these we have complex, sentient animals that deserve our respect and deserve our protection. We must start to think of them in the same way as we see other pets.

Q181 **Mrs Murray:** Could regulatory improvements be made to improve the welfare of pet rabbits? If you think they could, what changes would you like to see?

Dr Ravetz: The code of rabbit welfare, which we did also feed into, is very, very good. You have the starter there, to be honest. That is where I would start with the regulations, because some good work has already gone into that. Again, it is around education. We are very clear at Pets at Home that rabbits must go in pairs, and that we make sure the education is there. We have a duty as positive retailers to up the game, to be honest, and speak out more. In terms of regulations, you have a very good set of guidelines that are already there.

Q182 **Mrs Murray:** The Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund has called for breeders to temporarily suspend their activities, and for a nationwide amnesty on the sale of new rabbits, to help to reduce the number of unwanted rabbits. What assessment have you made of the potential merits of this approach?

Alexandra Baker: That is quite tricky. It is very hard to get people to go for a full amnesty. It would be a great thing if they were able to achieve that, but in reality that is probably quite difficult to make happen. When people are wanting to sell rabbits it has happened, it is accidental, and it



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is not something that they have necessarily planned. They suddenly have eight or 10 of them and they are wanting to move them on. That could be quite challenging to actually make happen, unfortunately.

I echo what Gudrun was saying about more of a public awareness campaign around the responsibilities of owning a rabbit, to try to gradually get the public psyche to understand that they are not easy pets and they are not starter pets, so they are perhaps seen as a little bit more valuable than they currently are.

Q183 Mrs Murray: Gudrun and Bill, do you have anything extra to add to that, particularly with regard to question three about a temporary moratorium on breeding of rabbits?

Chair: I do not think the Kennel Club does.

Bill Lambert: I was happy to comment on cats but this is outside of my scope.

Mrs Murray: I just wondered whether Bill had a view on it.

Dr Ravetz: I do not have a specific view on that, but we are seeing a quite significant decline in our sales of rabbits. As group veterinary officer, I chair the pet welfare committee within our business, and that committee is made up of all the senior people within our business to look specifically at the welfare of what we do. Certainly within our breeding structure we are reviewing all of this and that will be taken into account, because we recognise that things change and move on. We have adoption in some of our stores as well, and we work very closely with adoption centres and charities. As I say, we worked very closely on the APGAW code for welfare of rabbits.

Q184 Mrs Murray: Bill, I know you are Kennel Club, but do you have an opinion? I did not want to leave you out.

Bill Lambert: Yes, I do. If you had an amnesty, I am just trying to relate it to what would happen in the world of dogs. If you stopped a group of people breeding, another group would pop up that would satisfy that demand. As long as there is a demand there, someone will fill it.

Chair: I have to admit, I have hundreds of rabbits, and anything that could be done to discourage them from breeding would be more than welcome.

Mrs Murray: I see them around my house.

Chair: I do not think even Dr Coffey has that within her power.

Q185 Dr Hudson: I want to come back to mutilations and things like ear cropping. We have had a discussion about how that has been potentially normalised in society through social media, through celebrities and so on, but there is an important role that popular culture and films have. One of my favourite films that I watched with my family was the film "Up", and



some of the dog characters in that had their ears cropped. Just last year in the "DC League of Super-Pets" film one of the lead characters is a dog with cropped ears. If people are paying money to go to the cinema with their families to see dogs looking like that, then people think that is normal. We need to be very well aware of that and try to address that with public information, and also put pressure on some of the big studios and so on to change their practices.

Bill Lambert: It has been a surprise to us to see that ear cropping has become fashionable. The Kennel Club banned ear cropping from its register in the early part of the previous century, so for years it did not even surface. We will not register cropped dogs at all. We have been against cropping dogs for many years.

You mentioned that film. We are part of a coalition. We wrote to the film company and tried to get assurances that it would give messaging, but unfortunately it would not do that. We did try to raise the awareness that this was not a normal conformation and that these dogs would have been mutilated to achieve that look. There are things going on but I cannot possibly say how successful they have been.

Q186 **Dr Hudson:** Just to be very clear, it is a mutilation. There is no clinical indication to crop a dog's ears, and it is a horrific, cruel, barbaric practice. It is alarming as well that when you now look online, you can get ear-cropping kits from online retailers, which implies that, sadly and horrifically, that practice is potentially happening in this country.

In your networks, what is the trend you are seeing in the number of dogs that have potentially had these horrific mutilations? Yes, some people say it under the guise, "I have imported this dog," so hopefully we can try to address that through legislation. Are you picking up that these horrific procedures are being done in our country?

Dr Ravetz: We are definitely picking up through our practices more animals coming in with cropped ears. Nobody will admit they have been done in this country, and while there is the loophole that they can be imported, it is a smokescreen for them also potentially being done in this country, because nobody will admitted to illegally doing that.

That loophole does need to be closed but, again, I can give you an example where we need to be very tight on our loopholes. One of our practices informed us of an animal that had been cropped and brought in from abroad, with a certificate from a veterinary surgeon saying that this dog and its littermate had a fight, and because of injuries from the fight both of the ears miraculously needed to be cropped. Both were cropped in exactly the same way. I do not know if you remember the Dogs Trust investigation around rabies and fraud in veterinary certification, but it was reminiscent of that. We need to be very careful, if we allow certification coming in, that we are seeing that done. We presume that was done fraudulently, because we struggle to see how two littermates can have a fight and end up with cropped ears in exactly the same way.



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Yes, we are seeing an increase in it, and it comes back again to the same conversation we are having with canine fertility clinics. This is causing distress for our practitioners because they are there for the welfare of the animals, and they are seeing these mutilations that they feel powerless to act upon. It is depressing and it is distressing for those colleagues. We would absolutely like to see this loophole closed, because it is abhorrent.

Q187 Dr Hudson: To follow up on my friend Sheryll's questions on cats, are you picking up significant numbers of cats that have been declawed?

Dr Ravetz: We have not heard the same number of cats being declawed, to be honest. We hear the occasional piece but, as I say, it almost feels a matter of time. We must not forget that a mutilation is a mutilation, no matter what animal it is upon. Therefore, if we are to ban mutilations, it must be across the board for all animals; otherwise we will end up with another problem somewhere else because we are only dealing with this problem we have seen.

Bill Lambert: You are obviously keen to make recommendations. I understand that only in the last few days Ireland has banned the import of cropped dogs. That is an interesting country to do it, because there has always been a loophole that animals could be brought into Ireland and then through Northern Ireland into the UK. If Ireland has banned the import then it would be very easy for us to do so. That is something we would certainly support.

Q188 Dr Hudson: As a quickfire question to all three of you, I assume you would all support banning the import and further sale of animals that have been mutilated, such as declawed cats and dogs that have had their ears cropped?

Dr Ravetz: Yes, 100%, although if animals are seized then there needs to be an exemption for them to be rehomed in the right way with responsible owners.

Q189 Dr Hudson: We have touched in previous questions on the demand for pets to look a certain way, appear a certain way or behave in a certain way. What is the impact of that demand having on the people who are supplying these animals? You have genuine people who are breeding animals in good faith, and then you have the unscrupulous breeders who are trying to fuel a market. What impact is this demand having on where these animals are being bred?

Bill Lambert: The animals are being bred to look a certain way because there is demand for them, but then perhaps the surplus product are then being sold to people who are not as aware and perhaps do not know what they are buying. I see adverts online all the time for cross-breed dogs, in particular of two breeds that are completely unsuitable to be mated together. These puppies are readily available. Responsible breeders go to a lot of effort to try to breed dogs with traits that they understand and know. That is the impact: although these dogs may be bred for a specialist market, they actually do get out in the public domain, and then



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we get them on social media and then that creates further demand. We heard earlier on about human behaviour change, and that is what we need to look at.

One positive note is that we are talking here today about animal cruelty, and the vast majority of people understand that animal cruelty is bad. There is a lot being done behind the scenes to actually reinforce those messages, but clearly it is not universal. It does not go right across the board.

Q190 Dr Hudson: I am aware we are short of time, but as a final question, what would be your requests or recommendations in a co-ordinated way to raise public awareness of these harms around certain types of breeds or certain types of appearances? What can we do in a simple way to recommend something that raises public awareness so people feel, "Do you know what? I am not going to look out for something like that, because that is not right"? What can we do? What simple recommendations could we make?

Alexandra Baker: I echo what one of the previous panellists said about the shock tactics potentially used, the declawing and the ear cropping, and what those animals go through at the time that that is happening. We are too desensitised to that sort of thing, so that is something I would perhaps support.

Dr Ravetz: While I do agree with that, sometimes those people who wish for it will not see, listen to or hear that. It plays a part, but we need to be aware that a subsector will not engage with that. Some of it starts at a very young age. Education around animal welfare, responsible ownership, and the understanding of what that is, is very, very important. We try to do that through Pets at Home, but we can all do that in a wider field.

It is about making people understand what the long-term prospect is for these animals. A lot of these animals will not get pet insurance. They will have poor health and welfare. They will have large veterinary bills. We need to be very upfront with people about what is happening.

Bill Lambert: To echo that, it does start at a very young age. Getting animals into school and teaching children about animal welfare is important. I understand that it is optional for schools to include animal welfare on their curriculum; perhaps we should consider whether that should be mandatory.

Q191 Ian Byrne: Thanks very much for the session so far. It has been really, really good and really informative. I just want to touch on pet behavioural issues. We have heard over the evidence sessions that there has been a marked increase in the number of companion animals with behavioural issues. What in your views are the drivers of the increase? You have covid, the change in working practices and the cost of living crisis; what do you feel are the main issues?



Alexandra Baker: There was the pandemic and the reported growth, certainly in dogs, because the majority of our members are dealing with dog-related businesses. There were the lockdowns and the lack of education, where people thought, "Oh no, it's lockdown. We are all at home. This is the time to get a dog." They did not really do their homework to understand what was involved, and even if they did they could not do very much about it. As I said earlier, those animals are manifesting quite challenging behavioural traits. The pet industry is certainly having to adapt its practices in order to look after these animals.

What is happening in, for example, pet grooming situations, is that if dogs are displaying difficult and challenging behavioural tendencies, often the owner cannot get near them with a brush because they have not been to a groomer—they have not had that socialisation. If you try to get a brush or a comb through it, often there is a welfare issue there because their basic grooming needs are not being met. Again, they end up at a grooming salon, it needs two of them, it needs a muzzle and it becomes quite challenging for the groomer to have to put right.

Dr Ravetz: We all know that socialisation is a very important part of a puppy's life. That socialisation starts from the time of birth and that period with the mother, being socialised with other puppies, being socialised in environments and having a positive experience. It then carries on to that positive experience when they are with their new owners and that socialisation period. The other aspect is positive training—the use of positive training and not negative training. Then it is giving animals the respect to be animals as well, so allowing them to show normal behaviours, not behaviours that we wish them to show.

Sadly, through the pandemic, we have two issues really. Where there is poor breeding, which we know was exacerbated in the pandemic, early socialisation was done badly with no thought for the long-term welfare of the animal. We then put them into a situation where everybody was in lockdown, so they were within a small environment. They were not socialised to other animals, other experiences and going to veterinary surgeons. Then there is a working pattern change. That small environment that the animal is comfortable with is potentially changing, because that working pattern of those owners has now changed, so we start to see behavioural issues because of that. You can see the perfect storm that has happened.

For me, it is about positive breeding in a positive welfare environment, very good socialisation, good training and allowing animals to be normal animals and show normal behaviours. We can educate around that, using the knowledge of good behaviourists when there are problems, because sometimes there are problems and it is nobody's fault. Therefore, we have to direct to the right people.

Bill Lambert: I would just like to echo everything that Gudrun has said. We are seeing a number of problem dogs out there. People are now



turning to look at methods to correct that behaviour. All the good behaviourists and dog trainers will talk about positive reinforcement, as Gudrun has mentioned. Unfortunately, we still have electric shock collars available and people are turning to using electric shock collars, which are nasty devices that cause pain to animals. We really must see these banned, because they are simply being misused and they are adding to the problem. Research has shown that aggression can actually be increased by the use of electric shock collars. That is just one thing I would like to add to that.

Q192 Ian Byrne: That is a good recommendation we can obviously include in the report. It is just a perfect storm. Obviously, we now have a cost of living crisis as well. We have had this massive increase in dog ownership and now we have a cost of living crisis. What impacts of the cost of living crisis are we seeing on pet welfare?

Bill Lambert: It definitely has increased relinquishments. There are two elements there. There is the cost of living crisis but, just prior to that, we now have people who were perhaps away from work and are now having to return to work. Again, it has added to the problem of care. That has not manifested itself quite as much so far, because once people have had a dog they will find ways of getting that dog looked after. They will go to doggy daycare or get members of the family, because they get attached to the dog, but there has certainly been an increase in relinquishments. We run breed rescue, so we rescue quite a lot of dogs, as many as some of the bigger charities. We are very aware of the number of dogs.

Interestingly, the number of relinquishments of dogs has increased in the popular breeds, which I suppose is bound to happen. If you have more French bulldogs out there, you are going to get more French bulldogs relinquished. The cost of living crisis is the number one reason that people have given for relinquishing them.

Q193 Ian Byrne: The RSPCA has done a report: it is 95% due to veterinarian bills. Is that a huge issue that we have to deal with as well? You touched on it before about education.

Dr Ravetz: As I say, when we engage with our pet owners, we are aware that they will spend on their pets above all else. Certainly within our practices we are still seeing that desire and wish to do everything that they can for their pets, but our practitioners are probably having more contextualised care conversations to make sure that we can meet the needs within the budget that owner has. This comes down to a lot of things that we have talked about. If you have a breed that sadly has poor health and welfare, that is going to add more cost. It may be that you have not been able to get pet insurance with that.

Our practices offer preventive healthcare plans, because we know that prevention with a lot of things is the right thing to do. This allows people to budget for preventive care. A lot of it starts with education and understanding the lifetime cost, the lifetime experience that you can have



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and how to do that correctly, so that you can pre-empt concerns. You can get the right insurance; you can get the preventive healthcare plan; you can get the relationship with your veterinary surgeon; you can get the right products that you need within the budget that you have and have those positive conversations.

Alexandra Baker: The pet industry generally usually does quite well in times of the cost of living, because relinquishment of their pet is absolutely people's last resort. They would usually, as Gudrun said and I would echo, rather do without things themselves than not have their pet. Within the pet industry, in some respects we are quite lucky, because there are choices in the pet industry. You can treat your dog with premium treats or you can give it a small piece of cheese from the fridge or something. You do not have to go all the way down a very high-budget route. There are options.

At the moment, we are seeing a bit of a battleground for that middle area of pet food. We are seeing a dip in premium treats, but certainly our members are not reporting a decrease in the number. In fact, they are actually seeing an increase in need for their services currently. Although I am very aware that the welfare charities are seeing relinquishment and that is probably inevitable, veterinary bills and pet insurance are probably the sort of things that pet owners are starting to knock off their shopping list.

Q194 **Ian Byrne:** The previous panel of witnesses said they have not seen anything like it.

Alexandra Baker: Yes. From an industry perspective, though, there are still a large number of people who are owning pets and finding ways to keep hold of them. Certainly, kennels were full over the summer. I had to go over an hour away to get a kennel for my dog over the summer. We know that doggie daycares are bursting at the seams and pet groomers are being fairly buoyant as well. Where they can make choices, people are making choices to keep their pet and do whatever they can.

The hybrid working solution that has materialised out of the pandemic has helped as well, because it means that more people are at home, so they are not needing to have daycare all the time. We would also potentially, in the right way, advocate dogs coming into the workplace. Our education company runs a course to help employers and employees to do that in a responsible way.

Q195 **Ian Byrne:** I am after a couple of key recommendations with regards to how we support owners who have pets with behavioural problems. They have the dog or they need a dog, and they are worried now. What would you offer to help buyers? What do you think we should be offering to help buyers to ensure that they stay with the pet?

Bill Lambert: There are lots of resources out there. We are all doing little bits and pieces. Again, it comes down to the awareness and making



people aware. The advantage we do have now is social media. Social media can be a very positive thing. It has lots of negatives attached to it, but I know that we as an organisation use social media a lot to make people aware of what is available. Some of that is already being done, but it is difficult to sometimes reach some of these groups and people who have the significant problems.

Ian Byrne: We touched on that in the earlier session.

Dr Ravetz: Within our stores particularly, we have highly trained colleagues, and we would always encourage pet owners to come in and have that conversation to find either the right products or the right knowledge.

Ian Byrne: Do they even want to be pet owners?

Dr Ravetz: Absolutely, we would very much encourage them. Because of the ecosystem of having veterinary professionals in most of our sites, we are able then to refer to our veterinary professionals where that is appropriate as well. It is about making sure that we give the right recommendations. When we are looking at behaviour trainers, it is very important that we look for those who use positive reinforcement. The veterinary profession is very aware of it. Our store colleagues are. Obviously the Kennel Club is. It is about getting the right messages out to people so they know where to look. Perhaps we have been a bit fragmented in that. If we can all come together to give those positive messages in one, that may help.

Q196 **Cat Smith:** I will try to get the information out quite succinctly, because I am conscious of the time. On online sales and offline sales, we know now that around 65% of people who are buying a pet will go online to make that purchase. That might not be directly online—it might be that they use online to find a breeder or it might be that they use social media. I just wondered if I could ask you all what trends you are seeing, given your background, as you are all very experienced, in terms of people using online, but particularly social media sites and Facebook groups in particular.

Alexandra Baker: I do not have any data on it, but a lot of people are using online as a means of almost signposting that there are pets for sale. Pets cannot be sold online directly, but people are advertising those pets online. For most people, it is the obvious place for them to look. The first thing we do is pick up our phone and look at Google when we want to find something, or we find a Facebook site or a website.

That is useful in terms of finding something quickly, but then we are not necessarily getting the right information about whether that pet is right for us. There still needs to be that conversation, either with a pet retailer or with a vet, where you are actually taking information that you have and then going and talking to the pet professional about it to find out whether that is the right sort of animal for your lifestyle. Although the



internet opens up so many possibilities and ways of doing things, it does not always lead to the right outcome for everybody.

- Q197 **Cat Smith:** Gudrun, you are selling in store and you are able to have that conversation pre-purchase around responsibilities. Are you seeing a decline in numbers of sales of small mammals?

Dr Ravetz: We have seen a decline in the number of sales of small mammals. We are not sure if that is to do with the internet or whether that is just because there is a switch to puppy ownership. We cannot exactly say where that is. Through our practices, we definitely hear anecdotally that people are searching more online and going down that route. As a profession, we would agree with the PAAG standards that are there and that people should sign up to those, because they are robust.

- Q198 **Cat Smith:** Bill, if I could perhaps direct you towards social media companies, from a Kennel Club perspective, do you think they are doing enough to regulate and be responsible when it comes to people using their sites to sell?

Bill Lambert: The answer to that is clearly no. They are not doing enough. Social media has had a massive impact on the sale of pets, simply because for years we have been advocating that the best way to buy an animal is to go and meet the breeder, speak to them, learn all about them and see with your own eyes the conditions the dogs are reared in. The moment you go to social media, someone who is working out of a shed can appear as large as Pets at Home, for example. They could have a very good website. It can look very flashy and be very appealing. It is a veil of deception.

DEFRA's "Petfished" campaign was a very good campaign. I do not know how effective it was or how effectiveness was measured, but the principle of it was very good, because it did highlight what was actually happening. In answer to your question, no, the companies are not doing enough and I would love to see more regulation on lots of aspects of social media. Where it becomes extremely difficult, and probably most difficult, is on Facebook. These are private messages that are sent to people. How you tackle that is a whole other world.

- Q199 **Cat Smith:** It has come out through some of the other answers around the responsibility of the public. What public education would you like to see to help people make informed decisions about buying pets responsibly?

Dr Ravetz: We have talked a lot about children. We can all understand the pester power of children and how they latch on to things. If we can get the correct messages at the right time, at the right ages, they stand us in good stead. For adults, we have gone into a culture of "want it now". We have gone into a culture of influence. As we have seen with nudge theory and behaviour change, we need to put our thinking caps on as to what the correct educational messages are to challenge this.



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There has to be the carrot and stick approach. The carrot is the positive welfare, the positive engagement with your pets, the long-term life benefits for both pets and pet owner. There is within the LAIA under schedule 6 that we should not be breeding animals where there is a health harm to the animal to be bred or to the progeny. We need to start to use our regulation and enforce it. As we heard before, there cannot be a deterrent if you do not feel that you are going to get caught out by it or that there is a deterrent if you are there. That is almost the deterrent, the stick side. We need to come together and work out what is a proper education campaign. The easiest start, if we can do it compulsorily, is with the children.

Q200 Chair: Just before we finish, we have been talking about mutilation of animals and unnecessary medical procedures. Funnily enough, we had a situation not far from me. One of our friends bought a gun dog, a Labrador, from a breeder, and the breeder was insisting it was castrated, and he did not want his dog castrated. Certainly, we have never had any of our dogs spayed or castrated. In terms of the effect on the animal and its ability to carry out its natural, instinctive behaviours, some of the animal welfare charities say, "Yes, we always insist everything is spayed or neutered," but should we maybe not be seeing that as such a routine thing for the welfare of the animal?

Dr Ravetz: This is a live discussion within the profession at the moment, actually. It is an individual conversation with an owner at the time about that of an individual animal, rather than what we once thought of as perhaps a normal blanket approach at a stage in the pet's life.

You have to look back to why a lot of that was and that was overpopulation. Certainly with cats, I know that the cat charities are very concerned that we actually need to be a little bit more robust on neutering for cats. With dogs, like I say, there is that conversation happening within the profession. I would say that everybody must have that relationship with their veterinary surgeon, because there are pros and there are cons. It is difficult to go into it now, but there are pros and cons to it. There has to be an individual conversation about what is the right thing for that animal, that owner and the lifestyle in which they live.

Bill Lambert: I would just like to say that I am delighted to know that conversation is going on in the veterinary profession, because it has been one of the things where we have perhaps had a difference of opinion with the veterinary associations. We do not advocate blanket neutering because, as Gudrun suggested, it can promote other problems. Excessive coat growth, for example, is one thing that it can promote. Certainly we do not like to see blanket castration, but it should be on the individual dog. It can have behavioural benefits, having dogs castrated, but it depends on the individual case of that individual dog. That is a conversation that the owner needs to have with the vet.

Q201 Chair: Those conversations are certainly not with the rescue charities. They were very adamant, when we went, that they would always insist



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every animal is neutered in some way.

Alexandra Baker: I would just add something. The welfare charities are seeing the relinquishments, so I would imagine that their motivation is slightly different, to actually spay that animal before passing it on, because from their perspective they want to reduce the number of animals coming in. They perhaps see it as a crude but maybe very effective tool. In an environment where an animal is comfortable in its home environment with its owners, that conversation with a vet is probably right. It should not always necessarily be an automatic decision to spay or castrate an animal if it is perhaps not right.

Dr Ravetz: We have talked about the respect for the animal and always doing things for the animal's benefit, but sometimes we have to reflect that animals have an impact in society as well. We have to take the community and the society on board at the time. This is one of those conversations where that does play a part in it.

Chair: I just thought I would throw that in at the end. That is something I feel quite strongly about, in a way—the routine nature of it. Certainly, I have castrated dozens of cattle and thousands of sheep, but it is not necessarily the most pleasant procedure, certainly while it is happening. Anyway, thank you very much indeed for bringing your expertise and knowledge. It has been very helpful indeed.