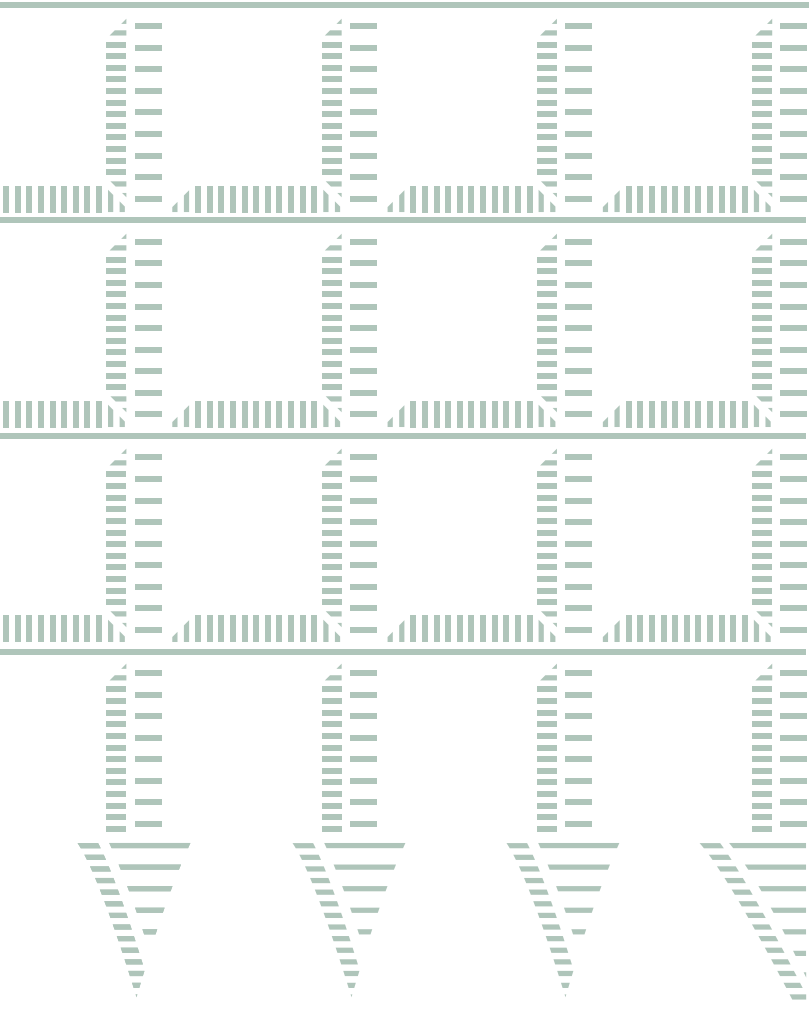


Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

Pet welfare and abuse: Government response

First Special Report of Session 2024–25

HC 581



Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and its associated public bodies.

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The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No. 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

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First Special Report

Our predecessor Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published its Second Report of Session 2023–24, [Pet welfare and abuse](#) (HC 161), on 5 April 2024. The Government response was received on 11 December 2024 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Foreword

The previous EFRA Committee launched an inquiry into pet welfare and abuse in February 2023 and published its report in April 2024. The inquiry examined unscrupulous breeding and importation, abuse and mutilation, ownership and welfare, and current preventative measures.

The Committee considered written evidence from a range of stakeholders and oral evidence from national animal welfare organisations, APHA, ferry operators, Eurotunnel, legal academics, the previous Minister responsible for animal welfare, and others.

The Government thanks the previous Committee for its report on “Pet Welfare and Abuse”. As the previous Committee recognised, protecting the health and welfare of our pets is of great importance given over half of UK adults own a pet. We welcome the report’s recommendations and are carefully considering them.

The Committee noted in their report the previous Government had withdrawn The Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill, on the grounds the Bill was in danger of being amended far beyond the original intentions of the Bill. The Committee also concluded that demand for dogs had driven unscrupulous practices. The Committee further noted concerns raised by stakeholders on the trend for so-called ‘puppy yoga’ and ‘kitty yoga’,

concerns which the Committee shared. This Government is committed to improving animal welfare. As outlined in the manifesto, we will ban trail hunting and the import of hunting trophies. And we go further to end puppy smuggling and farming, and the use of snare traps. We are considering the most effective ways to deliver these commitments and will be setting out next steps in due course.

The Committee noted evidence from the previous Minister, Lord Benyon, in November 2023 that Defra is finalising its review of the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (LAIA) Regulations 2018, which it then expected to be published in early 2024. A subsequent letter from the Department to the Committee, dated February 2024, confirmed that publication is expected as soon as possible. Following the interruption of the General Election we are finalising Defra's Post-Implementation Review of the Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) (England) Regulations 2018 (the LAIA Regulations) which will be published shortly. In 2018, the LAIA Regulations introduced a revised licensing scheme for eight key animal activities, many of which are related to the breeding and sale of pets or the caring of them on behalf of their owners. Defra has also commissioned opinions on the welfare implications associated with dog and cat breeding from the Animal Welfare Committee (AWC) which will be published shortly.

Defra's response to the recommendations is set out below. This government was elected on a mandate to introduce the most ambitious plans to improve animal welfare in a generation, and that is exactly what we will do. The Department has already initiated a series of meetings with key animal welfare stakeholders as part of the development of an overarching approach to animal welfare. We will be outlining more detail in due course.

Recommendation 1: In order to implement much-needed robust animal welfare safeguards, the Department must ensure that every provision from the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill is brought into force during the current Parliament. (paragraph 8)

The Government remains committed to animal welfare and will introduce the most ambitious programme for animal welfare in a generation.

With the proroguing and dissolution of Parliament ahead of the July general election, all business in the House of Commons came to an end and bills which had not received Royal Assent fell. This was the case with Private Members' Bills which included measures originally included in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill.

The following Acts received Royal Assent during the last Parliamentary session and have either come into force or will soon.

The Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act came into force on 22 July 2024. The Act prohibits the export of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, and horses for slaughter and fattening from Great Britain, stopping stress, exhaustion and injury caused by this unnecessary trade.

The Animal Welfare (Primate Licences) (England) Regulations 2024 were signed into law on 5 March 2024 and will come into effect on 6 April 2026. The Regulations introduce a licensing scheme, setting strict rules to ensure that only private keepers who can provide zoo-level welfare standards, will be able to keep primates.

The Pet Abduction Act came into force on 24 August 2024 and makes it an offence to abduct a cat or dog in England and Northern Ireland.

Defra maintains a close working relationship with the zoo sector, and we will continue to build upon this to identify possible further improvements. We aim to publish updated zoo standards shortly, which we have developed in collaboration with the sector and the Zoos Expert Committee, which will raise standards and support enforcement.

The Government also recognises the distress livestock worrying can cause animals and their keepers. We have committed to support a Private Members' Bill sponsored by Aphra Brandreth MP, which introduces new measures to tackle the serious issue of livestock worrying. The Bill will modernise the definitions and scope, strengthen police powers to improve enforcement and increase the maximum penalty to an unlimited fine to act as a deterrent.

As outlined in our manifesto, we are committed to ending puppy smuggling. The Government recently announced its support for the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill, a Private Members' Bill sponsored by Dr Danny Chambers MP. The Bill will close loopholes in the non-commercial pet travel rules that are abused by unscrupulous traders and give the government powers to prevent the supply of low-welfare pets to the United Kingdom. We are fully supportive of this Bill and would like to see it pass through both Houses as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

As also outlined in our manifesto, we will end the use of snare traps. We are considering the most effective way to deliver this commitment and will be setting out next steps in due course.

Recommendation 2: The litter licensing threshold for dog breeding should be reduced from three to two per 12-month period. A list of all licensed sellers should be publicly available, which would allow for verification and provide assurance to buyers. Care should be taken to ensure that future legislative changes to the breeding framework do not

discourage groups such as families from breeding from a much-loved pet, or hinder farmers and gamekeepers from being able to produce the next generations of working dogs. (paragraph 29)

Recommendation 9: *Stud dogs should be brought within Licensing of Activities Involving Animals regulations. The inclusion of stud dogs would help give traceability and ensure welfare measures apply to male dogs kept for breeding, who otherwise fall outside the scope of the regulations.* (Paragraph 47)

The Government partially accepts the Committee's recommendation. Whilst the Government acknowledges the Committee's concern and their recommendation to reduce the litter threshold, doing so may result in unintended consequences. In particular, we would want to carefully consider whether the type of small-scale home-based breeders that the Committee would like to protect would leave the sector rather than join the licensing regime. A further reduction in the number of litters may also disadvantage breeders of toy or giant breeds for whom a litter is often a single puppy.

We are considering the impacts and benefits of the dog breeding licensing scheme's threshold and scope in our post-implementation review (PIR) of the LAIA Regulations, and have commissioned an AWC opinion on the welfare implications of specialised canine reproductive practices, which will be published shortly.

The Government will consider the recommendations and available regulatory options to eradicate opportunities for puppy farming and other forms of low-welfare breeding, improve the health and welfare of all breeding dogs, and protect consumers, in line with the intended outcome of the Committee's recommendation.

As part of this work, the Government will take account of the needs of those who may wish to breed a single litter from a much-loved pet, and those who may breed regularly but do not sell the resultant puppies, such as breeders of working dogs, for example.

Recommendation 3: *The Government should produce clearer guidance for local authority enforcers regarding Section six of LAIA regulations, which prohibit the breeding of dogs where there are reasonable expectations that their genetics or health would lead to welfare problems. This guidance should include a list of breeds for which it is unlikely that a licence would be issued, and exceptional cases in which they might.* (paragraph 30)

The Government notes the Committee's concern about the breeding of dogs whose health may be compromised and partially accepts the Committee's recommendation. Condition 6(5) of Schedule 6 of the LAIA Regulations

is a crucial provision. Its application is intended to prevent licensed dog breeders from breeding from dogs where that can reasonably be expected to result in poor health or welfare outcomes for the breeding dog or their puppies, such as extreme conformation or inherited disease.

The listing of specific breeds for whom a licence would not be issued has the potential to lead to unintended consequences. For example, such an approach could restrict responsible licensed breeders and shift the breeding of breeds for which a licence is unachievable to unlicensed breeders. This would result in less local authority oversight with the potential for worse welfare outcomes for the breeding dogs and their offspring and may incentivise large-scale illegal breeding activity to meet continued demand.

As many dog breeds are prone to some form of hereditary ailment and as these ailments do not impact all dogs of a particular breed, or impact all affected dogs to the same extent, it may be worth considering whether to work to move breeding practices towards high-welfare high-health outcomes instead of introducing additional guidance.

Recommendation 4: *There are currently few legal safeguards to protect cats and their kittens, as cat breeding is not a licensable activity. Cat breeding should be awarded the same legislative safeguards and regulations as dog breeding under LAIA regulations.* (paragraph 31)

The Government acknowledges the Committee's concern for the welfare of breeding cats and partially accepts the Committee's recommendation. The health and welfare of kittens and cats commercially bred for sale as pets is already protected under the LAIA Regulations. Licence holders must meet and maintain the general and specific conditions for selling animals as pets. Local authorities are assisted through statutory guidance to enforce these licensing conditions.

In response to concerns about cat breeding conditions, we have commissioned the AWC to conduct a comprehensive and independent review into the welfare implications of feline breeding practices. This report, which is due to be published shortly will provide scientific advice on the welfare impact for the breeding cats and their offspring, including any long-term health and welfare issues associated with their breed characteristics or with poor breeding practices.

Further, as part of the PIR of the LAIA Regulations, we requested views from a cohort of sector bodies to seek views on the need to regulate the breeding of cats. Following the PIR report and AWC opinion, the Government will be able to consider whether further steps are needed to protect breeding cats in line with the Committee's recommendation.

Recommendation 5: *There are significant welfare concerns over the ‘puppy yoga’ trend, which involves the use of underage and potentially unvaccinated puppies in a setting that may be highly detrimental to their health and wellbeing. The Department should work with sector organisations to review how these welfare concerns could be most effectively addressed—for example through introducing stronger regulations, or introducing an outright ban of this practice.* (paragraph 32)

The Government acknowledges there could be potential risks to the health and wellbeing of puppies participating in such activities, as outlined in the inquiry findings. However, existing legislation can be applied by enforcement agencies to protect affected animals.

Dog owners, handlers and breeders, whether licensed or not, are required under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to protect their animals from harm, and to provide for their welfare needs in line with best practice. Anyone convicted of failing to protect their animals from harm, including causing them unnecessary suffering, may be imprisoned for five years, receive an unlimited fine, or both. Anyone convicted of failing to ensure that their animal’s welfare needs are met may be imprisoned for six months, receive an unlimited fine, or both.

Additionally, assimilated Council Regulation EC No 1/2005 applies throughout GB to transport in connection with an economic activity and requires that no person should transport any animal in a way likely to cause injury or undue suffering to them. It also prohibits the movement of dogs that are less than 8 weeks of age unless accompanied by their mother.

Defra keeps abreast of animal activities that are not licensed, including puppy yoga, and works closely with the Canine and Feline Sector Group and enforcement agencies to ensure appropriate messaging is circulated to discourage inappropriate activities.

We also support efforts by the RSPCA and animal welfare groups to raise public awareness of the welfare risks posed by these activities. We would encourage members of the public to carefully consider welfare conditions in these environments.

Should members of the public come across puppies or kittens being used in inappropriate settings, they should report this to their local authority, who have the necessary powers to investigate.

Recommendation 8: *The Government should work with the sector to formulate and introduce a public information campaign to raise awareness around welfare issues and harms of so-called ‘designer’ pets, particularly brachycephalic breeds, with the aim of discouraging acquisition of these breeds.* (Paragraph 46)

The Government shares the Committee’s concern about the health and welfare of designer pets, including brachycephalic breeds, and partially accepts the Committee’s recommendation. The Government has strong links with the canine and feline and pet selling sectors and maintains online advice and guidance for dog owners and a public messaging campaign (Petfished) to help potential pet purchasers make informed decisions.

Defra supports the work of the UK Brachycephalic Working Group (BWG) and the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG). The BWG, which includes in its membership veterinary academics and associations, the Kennel Club and UK breed clubs, and key animal welfare charities, aims to reduce the number of dogs affected by Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Syndrome and other brachycephaly-related health problems.

PAAG, established in 2001, comprises animal welfare organisations, trade associations, and veterinary associations. PAAG regularly engages with online marketplaces in the UK to assist them in distinguishing between appropriate adverts and those that should be removed. Defra also endorses PAAG’s Advertising Standards which preclude advertisements being accepted by several of the UK’s largest classified websites where there is a reasonable concern for the health and welfare of the animal involved.

To support consumers and reduce the opportunities available to unscrupulous breeders and sellers, Defra’s Petfished national communications campaign raises awareness of issues associated with low-welfare and illegal supply of pets. This includes providing advice on the impact of purchasing decisions based on the dog’s physical appearance.

The Government will maintain these relationships, as well as others, to protect animal welfare and consumers.

Recommendation 6: *The Government should introduce a new Veterinary Surgeons Act to update that of 1966. This should include the regulation of Canine Fertility Clinics. The Department should work with local authorities and relevant sector bodies to draft and publish guidance covering the training and knowledge that would be required for local authority enforcers to effectively regulate Canine Fertility Clinics.* (Paragraph 44)

The Government recognises the Committee's concern and partially accepts its recommendation. The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 came into power nearly sixty years ago, and the veterinary sector has changed substantially in this time. Defra continues to explore opportunities for legislative and non-legislative change that can help ensure that acts of veterinary surgery remain appropriately regulated and that our high standards of animal welfare continue to be upheld.

A new Veterinary Surgeons Act is a significant undertaking. Parliamentary time has not yet been set aside for a new Act.

Recommendation 7: *The current £100 fine on summary conviction for performing acts of veterinary surgery illegally is a derisory deterrent and is well below the cost of most, if not all, veterinary procedures. The Government should bring the fine for individuals illegally performing acts of veterinary surgery in line with the financial penalties under The Animals (Penalty Notices) Act 2022. Alongside this, the Government should issue guidance setting out which enforcement body members of the public and veterinary professionals should report concerns to about suspected illegal veterinary surgery. (Paragraph 45)*

The Government understands the need for a suitable deterrent but rejects the Committee's recommendation as existing penalties are higher than suggested in evidence provided to the Committee. The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 makes it illegal to practice veterinary surgery without accreditation from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, any updates made to legislation would maintain this. This is an either-way offence, so it is triable either summarily or on indictment.

The fines on summary conviction for such offences in England and Wales were updated by the Magistrates' Courts Act 1980 and the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, so they now stand as unlimited. The maximum fine on summary conviction in Scotland has been increased to £10,000 by the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1975 and the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995. In Northern Ireland, the maximum fine on summary conviction has been increased to £5,000 by the Fines and Penalties (Northern Ireland) Order 1984, as amended by the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 1994.

An offence can also be tried on indictment instead, which carries an unlimited fine.

Recommendation 10: *Ear cropping, cosmetic tail docking and cat declawing are ethically abhorrent procedures which are likely to have lasting welfare implications for the animals involved. The Government must give priority to closing the loophole that enables the importation*

of mutilated animals. This legislation should be introduced as a matter of urgency, and certainly before the end of the current Parliament. (Paragraph 60)

Recommendation 14: *As soon as possible, and certainly by the end of the current Parliament, the Government must ensure the following measures are implemented: A limit on the number of dogs, cats and ferrets that can be imported by an individual into the UK from five per person to five per vehicle, and three per foot or air passenger - A ban on the importation of puppies and kittens under six months - A ban on the importation of pregnant dogs and cats in the last 30% of gestation.* (Paragraph 85)

The Government shares the Committee's concern and partially accepts this recommendation. As outlined in our manifesto we will end puppy smuggling, and we are committed to clamping down on unscrupulous traders who prioritise profit over welfare.

Ear cropping, cosmetic tail docking and cat declawing have rightly been banned in the UK for over 15 years. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, it is an offence in England and Wales to carry out a non-exempted mutilation e.g., where a surgical procedure is not carried out for medical purposes, such as the cropping of a dog's ears. While these practices are illegal in the UK, we recognise that the current legislative framework can be abused by traders who import these animals from abroad.

The Government recently announced its support for the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill, a Private Members' Bill sponsored by Dr Danny Chambers MP. The Bill will close loopholes in the non-commercial pet travel rules by reducing the number of animals that can travel in a single movement from five per person to five per vehicle, or three per foot or air passenger. The Bill will also ensure that the movement of a pet is explicitly linked to that of its owner.

The Bill will also give the Government powers to introduce regulations to restrict low welfare commercial and non-commercial movements of pets into the United Kingdom. We will first use these powers to prohibit the bringing into Great Britain of puppies and kittens under six months old, heavily pregnant dogs and cats and dogs and cats with non-exempted mutilations such as ear cropping, cosmetic tail docking and declawing.

We are fully supportive of this Bill and would like to see it pass through both Houses as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

Recommendation 11: *It is all too easy to purchase DIY ear cropping kits online. This allows unscrupulous individuals to carry out this act of mutilation. Alongside closing the importation loophole, the Government should legislate to restrict the possession, hosting, sale and supply of DIY ear cropping kits.* (Paragraph 61)

The Government shares the Committee's concern about non-exempt mutilations. However, under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, it is already an offence in England and Wales to carry out a non-exempted mutilation, including the cropping of a dog's ears. The Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021 created tougher penalties for anyone convicted of such an offence who now faces either being sent to prison for up to five years, receiving an unlimited fine, or both.

Further, Defra supports the work of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) which includes in its membership some of the country's key animal welfare organisations. To ensure that advertisements for pets are legal and ethical, PAAG has developed a set of advertising standards which several of the UK's largest classified websites have agreed to meet. The standards prohibit engaged websites from hosting adverts for dogs whose ears have been cropped.

Recommendation 12: *A more consistent approach to training and accreditation for animal welfare officers is needed. Existing variations in training and enforcement puts animal welfare at risk. A central unit of suitably trained inspectors should be established which can be utilised by local authorities to improve collaboration and disseminate best practice. Wales has implemented a 5-year animal welfare plan which includes a focus on sharing and developing local authority knowledge and training. The Department should work with counterparts in Welsh Government, and the sector, to assess how similar measures could successfully be embedded in England.* (Paragraph 72)

The Government acknowledges the need for consistency in the training of animal welfare officers and the application of animal welfare legislation and partially accepts the Committee's recommendation. The LAIA Regulations require that suitably qualified inspectors are appointed by local authorities to inspect any premises on which a licensable activity is taking place.

Inspectors are considered suitably qualified if they hold a level 3 certificate granted by a body recognised by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulations. Their certificate must apply to that particular type of activity to count as qualified. The training must cover the application of the licensing conditions for all licensable activities and must contain a practical element.

Alternatively, inspectors are considered suitably qualified if they hold a formal veterinary qualification recognised by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, together with a relevant continuing personal development record.

Early evidence, such as that gathered for the PIR, indicates that this investment in the capability of inspectors has improved their confidence in understanding and applying the regulations to the diverse range of businesses and activities licensed under the LAIA Regulations.

Defra will continue to collaborate with local authorities and representative groups to share guidance on best practice for inspection teams, and continue to improve the availability of resources for the welfare needs of specific species. A number of local authorities have reported benefits in developing dedicated animal welfare teams shared between neighbouring councils. We support local authorities in pursuing this approach in a way that best suits their specific local needs.

Defra has also worked to assist local authorities in developing and applying best practice in use of new powers. When introducing penalty notices for animal health and welfare offences, Defra worked with local authorities and other stakeholders to develop statutory guidance on how penalty notices should be used in a consistent way. Defra has provided training sessions for local authority inspectors, delivered by the Institute of Trading Standards on the consistent and effective use of penalty notices. The training was well supported and received positive feedback.

Recommendation 13: *The Department should work with local authorities to assess the adequacy of existing kennel space capacity for seized dogs and implement measures to increase capacity if needed.* (Paragraph 73)

The Government partially accepts the Committee's recommendation. We continue to maintain close relationships with the kennelling sector through our relationships with sector groups such as the Canine and Feline Sector Group which includes representatives from the Association of Dogs and Cats Homes and Local Government Animal Welfare Group, and individual trade associations such as the UK Alliance of Catteries and Kennels. We also maintain close relationships with key representatives from English Police forces who also have powers of seizure. We use these relationships to inform our policy, including potential changes to the LAIA Regulations which regulate commercial kennels.

Recommendation 15: *The Government should mandate pre-import screening measures to control and restrict the movement of dogs from countries which have endemic diseases, such as Brucella canis and*

leishmaniasis, that are not present in the UK. Accordingly, all imported dogs from these countries should be tested for relevant non-endemic diseases. (Paragraph 94)

The Government takes biosecurity seriously but would not seek to make this change at this time. Disease risk is monitored carefully and is kept under constant review. Where necessary we have the powers in legislation to introduce preventive health measures to protect animal or public health by controlling diseases or infections that are likely to be spread due to the movement of pet animals into Great Britain. We remain aware of the concerns around non-endemic diseases and will consider any further actions as appropriate. Our future policy will be guided by risk assessment. We recommend prospective owners make sure any dog imported from regions where non-endemic diseases are present are tested before arrival.

Recommendation 16: *The Government should introduce a requirement for a rabies blood (titre) test by a veterinary professional before a dog enters the UK. The post-rabies vaccination waiting period should be increased from three to 12 weeks. This would help mitigate the risk of rabies entering the country via imported dogs, as well as ensuring that puppies and kittens cannot be imported under the age of six months. This would have the added advantage of tackling puppy smuggling.* (Paragraph 95)

The Government takes biosecurity seriously. We have no plans to introduce these requirements at this time. The British Isles (GB and Ireland) have been rabies free since the disease was eradicated in terrestrial animals in 1922. The last human case acquired in the UK was in 1902. The risk of a human case of rabies in this country is assessed currently as ‘very low’.

We already have strict import requirements in relation to rabies for dogs, cats and ferrets. The current commercial and non-commercial requirements for the movement of a pet animal into Great Britain (from the EU or a listed country) creates an unofficial minimum age requirement because it is not possible for a pet animal under the age of 15 weeks to be compliant with the legal requirements for rabies (vaccination at twelve weeks plus a twenty-one day wait period). For unlisted countries, a positive serology test for rabies antibodies and 3-month wait after primary vaccination is also required for any dog, cat or ferret. Disease risk is monitored carefully and is kept under constant review. Our future policy will be guided by risk assessment.

As referenced above, we have committed to end puppy smuggling in our manifesto and we are considering the most effective ways to deliver our commitments and will be setting out our next steps in due course.

Recommendation 17: The Government should shorten the tapeworm treatment window from 24–120 hours to 24–48 hours; introduce mandatory tapeworm treatment for imported cats as well as dogs; and reintroduce compulsory tick treatments for all non-commercial movements of cats and dogs. (Paragraph 96)

We have no plans to make these changes at this time. The Government takes biosecurity seriously; currently we mandate tapeworm treatment for dogs coming from *Echinococcus multilocularis*-endemic countries to be administered 24–120 hours prior to landing here. We will continue to review the effectiveness of our policy including the possibility of shortening the tapeworm treatment window to 24–48 hours and introducing tapeworm treatment for cats. We are aware veterinary and animal welfare stakeholders are highly supportive of this move.

Tick surveillance has shown that tick distribution and abundance is changing throughout the United Kingdom for a range of reasons, including habitat and climate change. Our future policy on import controls for disease will be guided by risk assessment.

Recommendation 18: Responsibility for border pet checks should be moved from carriers to qualified Government agency professionals. This should include a requirement for permanent 24/7 staffing cover at ports of entry. (Paragraph 112)

The Government acknowledges the Committee’s concern; however, we have no current plans to change enforcement arrangements at the border at this time. We operate one of the most rigorous and robust pet travel checking regimes in Europe. All non-commercial dogs, cats and ferrets entering Great Britain on approved routes (every route other than Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, Isle of Man and Channel Islands) under the Pet Travel rules undergo 100% documentary and identity checks by authorised pet checkers.

Authorised pet checkers working with the carriers are trained prior to being granted approval and receive annual audits by the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) of their checking and processing to ensure they uphold our requirements. They also receive refresher training and are encouraged to liaise with their APHA contacts to identify non-compliance trends and additional training requirements. The carriers also work closely with operational colleagues at APHA and Border Force.

Engagement with the carriers has indicated that they are committed to preventing illegal imports of pet animals. Observations made by APHA (during required quality assurance checks) on pet travel movements, including levels of compliance and carrier knowledge and behaviours, show good awareness of the pet travel rules.

APHA works collaboratively with Border Force and other operational partners at ports, airports and inland, sharing intelligence to enforce the pet travel rules, disrupt illegal imports, and seize non-compliant animals. APHA teams at the border work core hours Monday to Friday on a rotating shift (Day Shift and Late shift) but also provide out of hours cover where they respond to referrals. UK Border Force (UKBF) operate 24/7 and APHA receive and triage calls from UKBF colleagues undertaking routine vehicle checks in these ports and will attend those assessed as posing a potential welfare risk to the animal(s) and/or health in Great Britain.

Recommendation 19: *Alongside the ongoing Animal Welfare (Live Exports) Bill, stronger control measures are needed to prevent the trafficking of horses for slaughter. By the end of the current Parliament, the Government should ensure it has implemented measures to enhance and support digital equine identification. This will help improve traceability.* (Paragraph 114)

The Government acknowledges the Committee's concerns and partially accepts its recommendation. Defra officials have been working to deliver an improved identification and traceability system for equines to support biosecurity, public health, equine welfare, and trade.

The implementation of digital identification and improved traceability of equines requires both legislative change and digital enhancements to the current Central Equine Database.

Following the Chancellor's Autumn Statement and first part of the Spending Review, there are considerable pressures on public finances to meet the government's priorities for Defra. As a result, we are unable to progress with the delivery of a digitised equine identification system for the time being.

The government recognises the importance of the equine sector to the UK economy and of improving equine identification and traceability. As an interim measure, until digitisation work can progress, Defra is considering other options to improve the current regime.

The Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act, which bans the export of livestock and horses for slaughter and fattening from Great Britain, came into force on 22nd July 2024. We are putting in place regulations to ensure the ban is implemented effectively and enforced robustly. The Animal Welfare (Livestock Export) Enforcement Regulations 2024 were laid in Parliament on 12th September 2024. The Regulations will work alongside the existing legislative regime for animal welfare in transport, to provide a range of regulatory and enforcement powers to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) and Local Authority Inspectors.

We are taking a co-design group approach, working closely with industry, to identify solutions to prevent horses being exported for slaughter. The group membership includes industry representatives across the welfare, leisure, performance and racehorse sectors, as well as transporters and agents who facilitate the export of horses. The group has been asked to put forward an evidence based and workable option early in 2025.

Conclusion

The Government is committed to improving animal welfare. As outlined in our manifesto, we will ban trail hunting and the import of hunting trophies. And we will go further to end puppy smuggling and farming, and the use of snare traps. We are considering the most effective ways to deliver these commitments and will be setting out next steps in due course. The Government appreciates the work undertaken by the previous Committee during its inquiry into pet welfare and abuse and will continue to take their recommendations into account as we deliver our future work programme.