

Written evidence submitted by Blue Cross (PS0003)

Blue Cross would like to focus our response on the two areas we have been researching in detail over the last 6 months. We have also reiterated and expanded our response to the initial 2019 puppy smuggling inquiries' questions around a potential ban on third party sales in this submission.

The impact of Covid-19 on supply and demand

The fundamental problem we have faced in the UK over recent years is that demand for puppies far outweighs supply. This has led to a huge increase in irresponsible breeders and illegal dealers operating across the UK to try and meet this demand. The Covid-19 crisis and both national and local lockdowns have resulted in a surge in demand and a reduction in the number of available responsibly bred puppies. This has left a vacuum which has been exploited by irresponsible breeders, dealers and traders who are selling poorly bred puppies at massively inflated prices. The average price of a French Bulldog, for example, has increased over 40% between 2018 and the summer of 2019. We know that responsible breeders haven't been able to step up operations to meet this demand and in fact some have decided to scale back their breeding in order to comply with social distancing restrictions and because of the uncertainty around the affect further lockdowns will have on their business. Demand, however, is showing no signs of abating: with more and more people working from home on a permanent or semi-permanent basis many people are deciding now is the right time to get a new puppy.

Responsible breeders are making significant efforts to comply with the new social distancing measures - introducing virtual visits, arranging contact free deliveries, etc. The issue we have seen, however, is that social distancing measures have made it more difficult for prospective owners to distinguish between good quality breeders and irresponsible and unethical sellers. We have seen examples not only of sellers being duped into purchasing poorly bred puppies but also increasing numbers of completely fraudulent sales where no puppy exists in the first place. Purchasers are asked to pay deposits and then the seller either stops contact completely or provides fake collection information. During lockdown there have been a number of examples where these fraudulent sellers have given out the address of our rehoming centres as the collection point for the non-existent puppy.

Covid-19 - the impact on companion animal welfare sector

Covid-19 has had a massive impact on the animal welfare sector; many charities are seeing a significant drop in income whilst at the same time seeing increased demand for their services whether that be clinical or rehoming. At Blue Cross we are predicting a loss of £4 million in income - this will directly impact the work we are able to do in 2021 and beyond. Across the large charities operating in the sector we expect to see losses of over a £100 million . We also have significant concerns around the potential impact this crisis is having on smaller independent rescues operating across the UK. An Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH) survey showed that 32% of member organisations had less then 3 months of income and reserves remaining. There is the very real chance that many of these rescues may be forced to close their doors as they cannot afford to continue to operate. If this happens it is likely many of the larger rescues who are also facing financial challenges will be forced to step in to try and care for their animals. It is not an understatement to suggest that if this was the case the sector would be at crisis point.

Our day to day operations have had to significantly change as a result of Covid-19. Social distancing renders much normal veterinary work impossible, so Blue Cross hospitals had to prioritise emergency cases. New procedures had to be devised to enable Blue Cross's clinical team to help pet

owners. Virtual appointments, where a vet carries out a video or telephone consult with an owner, are up 485%. However, due to the cancellation of all non-urgent veterinary procedures, as of July 2020, Blue Cross now has a backlog of over 500 operations. The welfare of the animals waiting for treatment is increasingly compromised. Blue Cross has 14 rehoming centres and rehoming and advice units and these were also badly affected by the lockdown: centres were forced to close their doors, and, with less staff on site, we were unable to admit as many pets as normal. A new way of working was developed, with virtual 'meets', many more pets cared for in foster homes and delivery of pets directly to their new owner. This enabled teams to maintain social distancing, admit pets most in need and start to rehome pets again. Blue Cross has rehomed 50% less pets than the same period in 2019. Another significant impact for us has been the inability to have our volunteers on our sites: over 75% of our over 5000 volunteers were unable to do the roles they love so much. This obviously impacts on the work we can do as an organisation but it also impacts on the volunteers wellbeing and mental health.

It is important to point out that Blue Cross's experience is not unique, the impact Covid-19 has had on us as an organisation is affecting the whole sector. With the ongoing economic impact of Covid-19 starting to bite we know that demand for our services is set to rise. We are working together as a sector to try and ensure we are well placed to support pets and pet owners across the country but we require more support from Government. The zoo sector received over £100 million in a rescue package from the Government but no similar scheme has been announced for the companion animal welfare charity sector. We believe this support is essential to enable us to deal with the long-term impact of Covid-19.

The impact of measures including Lucy's Law and the 'Petfished' campaign and what other measures should be taken.

It is too early to tell the impact that either Lucy's Law or the DEFRA funded 'Petfished' campaign has had on the puppy trade in England.

As Blue Cross has stated both to Government and to the EFRA Committee, we do not believe a ban on the third party sale of puppies will be an effective tool to deal with either puppy smuggling or low welfare breeding. Following the introduction of Lucy's Law we know many proponents suggested that it will essentially end licensed puppy farming - we do not believe this will be the case. We know some puppy farms do sell through third party sellers but we also know that puppies are also sold directly to the public. From what we have seen so far there has not been a drop in the numbers of puppy farms in operation. Blue Cross plans to do further research in 2021 to assess the success of Lucy's Law. We have urged DEFRA to do their own review to ensure that the necessary changes can be made to make the legislation fit for purpose.

Blue Cross was pleased to see the investment DEFRA made with the 'Petfishing' campaign. It has definitely helped to raise awareness of the issue with illegal and unethical breeders and dealers. We are, however, concerned that the campaign is very broadly targeted and, therefore, in the long term is unlikely to change behaviour of buyers significantly. We need a long term well resourced human behaviour change campaign; this is an area where the sector could work together with DEFRA.

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