

Blue Cross Response

Blue Cross is a pet welfare charity so we will confine our comments to the impact being unable to apply for the DCMS funding has had on the services we provide, both to pets and to vulnerable people.

How well has the funding been distributed?

Definition of 'vital service'

As a large charity (£40m turnover), Blue Cross didn't qualify for the small/medium size charity funding so our only possible source of financial assistance was the £360m set aside for Government Departments. The charities eligible for this funding allocated to Government departments were defined as those "providing vital services and helping vulnerable people through the current crisis".¹

Fundamentally, there was a contradiction between the criteria defining which organisations could apply for the fund and the Government's own criteria for Covid-19 related services. According to the DCMS guidance, Blue Cross, like other animal charities, were not eligible to apply as they were not defined as providing 'a vital service which helps vulnerable people'.

However, under the 'Key Worker' guidance our staff, including veterinarians, *were* classified as providing a vital service and, as Key Workers, our staff were able to send their children into school and access other support. The reason that the Government classified organisations such as Blue Cross as providing 'vital services' was because pets still have medical needs regardless of the pandemic.

Blue Cross submits that it would have been more consistent, and equitable, for DCMS to apply the same criteria as the rest of Government and open up the funding to a wider section of the charity sector. We might not have been successful in any application, but it appears counter-productive to restrict the funding opportunities for the charity sector.

On a more general level, it is also important to note that the animal welfare sector did not receive a targeted funding package such as the £100m Zoo Animals Fund disbursed by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), an extension to which was announced in the Budget.

Has the funding achieved its objectives?

Helping 'Vulnerable People'

¹ 'Chancellor sets out extra £750 million coronavirus funding for frontline charities', HM Treasury, 8 April 2020 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-sets-out-extra-750-million-coronavirus-funding-for-frontline-charities>

The objectives of the funding included:

“providing critical frontline services to vulnerable groups affected by COVID-19”.

“reducing the closure of charities providing essential services to vulnerable people by ensuring they have the financial resources to operate, thereby reducing the burden on public services”

“providing key services specific to supporting the COVID-19 response, to reduce the burden on the NHS or other public services”.

Blue Cross submits that we, and other animal welfare charities, also provide a vital service for vulnerable people. Blue Cross veterinary care is available to pets whose owners are on certain means-tested benefits and live in the catchment area of one of our animal hospitals or pet care clinics. Many of our clients could therefore certainly be classed as among the most ‘vulnerable people’ in society. We know from long experience that their pets are a vital – sometimes only – source of companionship and solace. Any adverse health issues for their pets can have a massive impact on the wellbeing of vulnerable people, potentially leading to increased demand on other public services.

It appears that the DCMS had a much stricter criteria of what is a ‘vital service’ and what is a ‘vulnerable individual’ than the rest of HM Government. While we recognise that decisions were being made quickly, and often without consultation, it’s unclear why DCMS installed this tighter criterion.

Impact on Blue Cross

Blue Cross had to cut £4m from our operating budget and restrict services throughout the pandemic, especially during the first period when demand for services increased and clients, often vulnerable, were confronting the severest challenges. **The lack of funds meant we had to restrict services throughout 2020 and now have to catch up on the backlog.**

The consequence was that the number of pets Blue Cross could help decreased: in the first two quarters of 2020 we saw:

- an 8% drop in pets helped in our clinical work; and
- a 67% drop in our re-homing work.

However, demand increased rather than reduced. Our emergency fund saw a 26% increase which meant a backlog of clinical cases being built up. **If we had received grant funding then we would have spent that on additional veterinary support to help more pets, and by its nature help more vulnerable people.**

The impact for the future is that costs will be incurred throughout 2021, which will be another difficult financial year. However, more importantly, **by restricting treatments we impacted on pets and caused increased worry and stress to vulnerable individuals.** This negative impact could have been reduced if we had had access to additional funding.

Blue Cross Recommendations:

- Targeted investment for small, medium and large charities to ensure critical capacity is sustained in the sector so that animals and their owners can be supported both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The Government to work with the animal welfare sector to help prevent a significant increase in demand for rescue services in 2021.

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