ILLEGAL IMPORTATION OF PUPPIES INTO THE UK

Background

- The Pet Travel Scheme (PETS) was significantly changed in 2012, with the aim of further harmonising travel across Europe.
- PETS allows pet dogs, cats and ferrets to enter the UK without the need for quarantine, providing they comply with the rules of travel and have a valid pet passport.
- A pet passport is a document that records information related to a pet, including the treatments the pet has had in order to meet the rules of pet travel.
- Since these changes Dogs Trust has been concerned about the increased potential for infectious diseases entering the UK. This includes not only rabies, but also non-endemic diseases, which are not directly covered by PETS.

The Problem

Anecdotal evidence suggested a huge increase in the numbers of puppies being brought into the UK for sale, particularly from Eastern Europe.

Dogs Trust conducted a six month investigation into the trafficking of puppies which revealed that commercial dealers from Hungary and Lithuania use PETS as a cover to illegally import puppies into the UK for sale. The investigation found:

- Unscrupulous vets falsifying data on pet passports
- Breeders and dealers supplying young puppies under the legal age of 15 weeks
- Puppies kept and transported in poor conditions, severely impacting their health
- Ineffective border controls and enforcement of PETS at UK Ports
- Negligible sharing of intelligence amongst key agencies
- Lack of sufficient penalties to deter the illegal trade

What Should Happen

The commercial movement of pets is welcomed under the Balai Directive 92/65/EEC. This scheme is underpinned by the same animal health preparations as PETS, but it also imposes additional safeguards in respect of welfare and traceability. Requirements include dogs coming from a registered holding, a vet led clinical examination of the pet and health certificates, notice of shipment to APHA and a declared destination allowing for follow up checks.

When unscrupulous dealers can so easily smuggle pets for sale illegally under PETS, where the ‘document and identity check’ does not even require a visual sighting of the animal, it is not difficult to see why they choose to flout the rules and bring puppies into the country illegally.

Solutions

On 29th December 2014 further changes to PETS were introduced. The changes included:

- A new minimum age of 12 weeks before a pet can be vaccinated against rabies
- A new laminated pet passport, including details of the vet who issued the passport
- The introduction of non-discriminatory checks by member states across the EU
A tighter definition of non-commercial movement which means that owners unable to accompany their pet on its journey must travel within five days of the pet’s movement.

Defra cited these changes as a panacea for all the scheme’s problems, declaring that they would “further strengthen the system across the EU by increasing traceability and making pet passports harder to forge or tamper with”.

Second Investigation

We continued to receive reports of illegal imports, so we undertook a second investigation, between March and June 2015, in Lithuania and Romania. We found:

- Ineffective border controls and enforcement of PETS at British ports, with no requirement on enforcers to carry out even a basic sight check on the animal being imported
- Breeders and dealers supplying puppies under 15 weeks of age – the legal age at which puppies can be moved between member states – with dates of birth simply faked on pet passports
- Vets in both countries falsifying data on pet passports for PETS
- Puppies bred in horrendous conditions
- Puppies advertised for sale online with no reference to their country of origin

To demonstrate the ongoing ease with which dogs can enter the country unchecked, we successfully brought a microchipped stuffed toy with fake paperwork into the UK from mainland Europe on three occasions.

Current Developments

In December 2015 Chief Veterinary Officer Nigel Gibbens acknowledged the problem in an article for Veterinary Record.

Dogs Trust is conducting a pilot scheme with Kent Trading Standards, to pay for the quarantine costs of any puppies they seized at the borders, to negate the need to turn pups away and prolong their journey, and in the hope of disrupting the trade.

- Since December we have taken in over 100 puppies. Sadly some of these puppies have been so ill they have not survived, but others we have been able to nurse back to health and socialise, before finding them loving homes.
- As of February 2016 we have taken on so many puppies, we have had to source a second quarantine facility.
- The pilot will continue until May. In discussions with Defra, there is no definitive plan of what will happen after this date, despite the pilot demonstrating the problem is prevalent.

Key Facts

There are around 9 million dogs in the UK. Based on the average lifespan of 10 years, approximately 900,000 puppies are required each year to maintain this figure.

The Kennel Club registers around 250,000 puppies each year and rescue organisations rehome approximately 250,000. However, these numbers fall far short of the number required to meet
demand. Whilst some may come from legitimate breeders that are not Kennel Club registered, it is unlikely that the 400,000 shortfall in puppies is covered by these breeders.

In the first year after the introduction of PETS there was a 61% increase in the number of dogs entering GB.

Between 2011 and 2013, the number of dogs arriving from Lithuania and Hungary rose 780% and 663% respectively, and these figures only account for dogs that are declared.

In 2015, 2,271 dogs entered GB via PETS from Lithuania, in comparison to only 2 dogs that entered under the Balai Directive. Additionally, 2,694 dogs came from Romania and 3,435 dogs came from Hungary under the PETS scheme.

**Our Concerns**

The puppies being smuggled have not only been bred in horrendous conditions and potentially taken from their mother when they are too young, but have then endured long journeys with few of their welfare requirements being met. Many arrive in varying degrees of ill health, with some not surviving.

Prospective owners are often unaware of where their puppy has come from, with some dealers passing off an unrelated bitch as the mother of the puppies for sale, duping even the most well informed novice buyers. Many only find out when they take their puppy to a vet, at which point they will be paying the cost both emotionally and financially as a result of quarantine, and may have unwittingly put themselves and other pets at risk of infectious diseases.

APHA and Trading Standards are the two authorities involved in enforcing breaches of the regulations. There appears to be limited cover at entry points over the weekend and out of standard business hours. APHA are making inroads to improve the level of cover at the Port of Dover and Eurotunnel but they are a long way from round the clock cover and improvements have not been implemented at other ports.

Dogs are considered as property, so if traffickers are caught and don't want to pay quarantine costs they can abandon the puppies at the border, renouncing all responsibility. There are very few ramifications for traffickers, with sanctions unenforceable due to many residing abroad.

**Action Still Needed**

- Dogs Trust is adamant that if there is to be real progress in tackling the ever growing problem of illegally imported puppies, the UK’s key agencies need to share intelligence.
- Visual checks of all dogs entering Britain will help to ensure they are healthy, not underage and matching the information given in their passport.
- Extension of the necessary waiting period for travel after a rabies vaccination from three weeks to three months. This would bring the wait in line with the incubation period of rabies and make it much easier for authorities at ports to definitively age puppies coming in.
- Immediate sanctions, such as fixed penalty notices, would create more deterrence, particularly if the fines were large enough to disrupt the trade.

The Puppy Smuggling Scandal [https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/media-centre/puppy%20smuggling%20report%202014.pdf](https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/media-centre/puppy%20smuggling%20report%202014.pdf)
Puppy Smuggling: The Scandal Continues
https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/puppysmuggling/final%20use%20this%20one%20puppy%20smuggling_2.8.pdf