

**Senedd Cymru**  
**Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, Amgylchedd**  
**a Materion Gwledig**  
**Ymgynghoriad ar effaith argyfwng**  
**Covid-19**  
**CCERA(5) CP 23**  
**Ymateb gan Grŵp Lles Anifeiliaid**  
**Anwes Cymru**

**Welsh Parliament**  
**Climate Change, Environment and Rural**  
**Affairs Committee**  
**Consultation on the impact of the Covid-19**  
**pandemic**  
**CCERA(5) CP 23**  
**Evidence from Companion**  
**Animal Welfare Group Wales**  
**(CAWGW)**

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## **Impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on the agriculture and fisheries sectors, food supply, animal welfare, climate change and the environment**

Companion Animal Welfare Group Wales (CAWGW) is a sector group bringing together specific expertise and focus, with the aim of improving the welfare of companion animals in Wales.

Members of the Companion Animal Welfare Group Wales (CAWGW) who have contributed to this inquiry are:

- Battersea Dogs & Cats Home
- Blue Cross
- Cats Protection
- Dogs Trust
- Kennel Club
- PDSA

### **Associate Members:**

- Dog Breeding Reform Group
- Friends of Animals Wales

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an enormous impact on the operational capacity and finances of animal welfare organisations across Wales. It also is having a clear impact on pets and pet owners up and down the country in a number of ways:

- Increased demand for charitable veterinary care as more pet owners become eligible through rising unemployment and increased benefit uptake (people will become eligible who aren't necessarily unemployed)
- The future impact of the public making impulse pet purchases, which they may then later regret. Pet acquisition, particularly of puppies and kittens, appears to have surged during the Spring lockdown, at a time when responsible sources of new pets have been unable to meet demand, resulting in a growth in revenue for puppy farmers, backstreet breeders and illegal importers.
- Legal and illegal imports surging due to the high demand for pets, leading to increased welfare, disease and safety risks.
- Delays to non-urgent and preventative veterinary care including vaccinations and neutering, with the former increasing the potential for an outbreak of preventable disease within the pet population at a time when veterinary resources are stretched to capacity.
- Reduced microchipping rates particularly in young pets due to the lack of capacity to provide this. This could lead to significant numbers of future stray animals whose owners cannot be traced.

- Reduced charitable veterinary and rehoming capacity due to social distancing and altered operational models.

It is essential that the Welsh Government work closely with the sector to support us through these difficult times. We know the demand for services is likely to increase tenfold and we need to be able to support as many vulnerable owners and animals as possible.

## **The scale and impact of the pandemic on your work and/or sector**

### **Impact on services**

- Rehoming / Fostering

During the lockdown period, members continued to take in animals, but at a significantly reduced capacity. As our rehoming centres and advice units were initially closed to the public, we relied heavily on our network of fosterers to help us ensure we could continue to help emergency intakes. As and when practicable, members started to trial virtual rehoming which allowed some animals to find homes. Centres are reopening as and when local restrictions allow, with Covid-19 safety measures and protocols in place. Whilst members have still been able to continue to operate in some capacity, our impact has been seriously affected by the pandemic. For example, Dogs Trust's Bridgend Rehoming Centre is 64% down and Cats Protection's Bridgend Adoption Centre is 63% down on the number of animals rehomed between 23<sup>rd</sup> March and 3<sup>rd</sup> August when compared to figures for 2019. Rehoming has been impacted more than the average across other areas of the UK – this is due to Wales easing lockdown at a slower pace and having 5-mile local travel restrictions.

Members have seen an increase in demand for pets during the lockdown period, with Google searches for 'buy a puppy' increasing by 175% since lockdown was announced<sup>1</sup>. With reputable animal charities currently unable to operate at usual capacity, there is a real concern that unscrupulous sellers are using this time to exploit those looking for a new pet. The demand for pets, particularly of puppies and kittens, has surged during lockdown at a time when responsible sources of new pets, for example reputable rehoming centres and breeders, have been unable to meet demand, resulting in a growth in revenue for puppy farmers, backstreet breeders and illegal importers.

Members have seen a surge in the number of legal and illegal imports due to the high demand for pets, leading to increased welfare, disease and safety risks. Pets are being imported in huge numbers to the UK at present, with an increase of almost 400% in the number of intra-trade animal health certificates issues from April to May. The illegal importation of dogs via the Pet Travel Scheme has also continued to be an issue.

Members are expecting to see an increase in the number of pets being abandoned or relinquished in the coming months as the full economic impact of the pandemic is realised. The end of UK Government support schemes, like the furlough scheme, may see more individuals facing increased hardship. The additional strain this may have on rehoming organisations cannot be overlooked.

- Pet Hospital services

Pet Hospital services, both within private and charity run practices, have been seriously affected. Charity pet hospitals and clinics in Wales, who provide free and low-cost care to the pets of people in need, introduced an emergency-only service in accordance with Government, RCVS and BVA lockdown guidance. This ensured they were able to provide help to the most vulnerable pet owners at this time while keeping their teams and clients safe. Non-urgent cases were seen via 'remote consultation', over phone and video calls. Since March this year,

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<sup>1</sup> Figures sourced from Propellernet, based on Google searches for "buy a puppy" from week commencing 22nd March 2020 and week commencing 12th July 2020.

PDSA's Welsh hospitals and clinics carried out 28,000 consultations, of which 22,000 were remote and 6,000 were face-to-face. Delays to non-urgent and preventative veterinary care including vaccinations and neutering will have adverse implications on the health of the pet population in the future. Delays to these sorts of procedures also increase the potential for an outbreak of preventable disease at a time when veterinary resources are stretched to capacity and could result in an increase in accidental litters leading to a subsequent rise in pet abandonments. This coupled with the fact that microchipping during the lockdown period was not considered an essential service during lockdown, has potential to lead to an increase in strays, which cannot be reunited with their owner. Much preventative care remains on hold as sites continue to work in a Covid-safe way, reducing capacity and creating a substantial backlog.

The demand for free or low-cost vet care is higher than ever. Figures from Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 2019 briefing on poverty suggest that 24% of adults are living in poverty in Wales, which is likely to significantly increase as a result of the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> With the PDSA Animal Wellbeing (PAW) Report indicating that half of all households own a pet, there is clear need for charitable veterinary care within Wales. For every 1 million new benefit claimants who will become eligible for PDSA services, the charity predicts that this translates to around 50,000 new pets needing their help. The number of people enquiring to see if they are eligible to access PDSA's services peaked in July 2020, with 59% more enquiries than normal. With all CAWGW members incurring significant financial losses this year (expanded further down), the vital services provided are facing significant challenges.

- Education

All members provide free education and community outreach programmes that work to promote good animal welfare and look to foster more positive relationships with animals. Since lockdown was announced in March, all visits to schools have been suspended and it remains unclear when these will be able to return. Members have worked hard to adapt practices to enable education teams to continue to deliver virtual talks with downloadable materials. However, the pandemic has negatively impacted the number of children charities have been able to engage with. Blue Cross has seen 80% less school age children in Wales this year compared to 2019 as a result of the lockdown. Not being able to reach members' regular audiences to talk about important topics like dog safety and wellbeing could have future implications, particularly in a period where more people are getting pets and have been spending more time in the home with them.

- Advice and support for owners and the Sector

All CAWGW members are working with organisations from across the sector including, the Canine and Feline Sector Group (CFSG), Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH), British Veterinary Association (BVA), British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA), RSPCA and Pet Industry Federation (PIF) to provide advice, support and guidance to the public, rescue centres and pet related businesses. Resources produced have included advice infographics to help pet owners and guidance documents for pet businesses and charities. English and Welsh versions of the infographics are available on the CAWGW website <https://cawgw.co.uk/news/advice-to-help-owners-worried-about-their-pet>

Members have a range of advice available to support pet owners at this time including:

- Advice and guidance for pet owners on how to care for their pet during the pandemic
- Battersea and Blue Cross have set up a dedicated behavioural advice lines to deal with specific issues pet owners may have
- Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support line continued to operate and take calls from across Wales

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/uk-poverty-2019-20>

- The Kennel Club provided updated health and welfare advice for breeders who had puppies or were soon to have puppies
- PDSA provides an online symptom checker and Pet Health Hub for owners worried about their pet

CAWGW members will continue to ensure up-to-date information and advice is available to the public and Welsh Government.

- Financial impact

Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the financial resources of all CAWGW members, with charities expecting to feel the effects for years to come. The charitable sector as a whole has been negatively affected: Pro Bono Economics estimate that charities are facing a £10.1 billion funding gap over the next six months as a result of Covid-19, with incomes expected to drop at the same time as demand for their service rises.<sup>3</sup>

Our members have seen:

- The closure of charity shops during the lockdown period
- A drop in the donation of goods from members of the public due to the closure of rehoming centres
- Inability to hold planned fundraising events and engage in face-to-face fundraising
- The loss of some grants due to the cancellation or postponement of charitable activities by some grant schemes

Overall, members are forecasting a significant reduction in income in 2020, with some of our Associate members at risk of running out of income to fund operational costs in the coming months.

### **How Welsh Government action to date has helped to combat the impact of the pandemic**

- All CAWGW members have made use of the UK Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme during the lockdown period.
- Some Associate members have been eligible for Welsh Government grants: Friends of the Animals Wales received funding through the Government Retail Grant Scheme and were able to use that to clear some of their outstanding veterinary bills, totalling approximately £13,000.
- As a group, CAWGW has had regular meetings with the Welsh Government to discuss the ongoing impact and to share information throughout the lockdown period. This has also included the Welsh Government sharing support and guidance for pet owners on their website, for example, the infographics supporting worried pet owners

### **What further steps the Welsh Government should take**

CAWGW members would like to see the following steps taken by the Welsh Government to support animal charities during the pandemic:

- Promotion of materials to encourage responsible buying and selling of puppies and kittens. CAWGW members would like to see the Welsh Government promote the puppy and kitten checklists.<sup>4,5</sup> These checklists were created to help ensure prospective

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/news/charities-facing-%C2%A3101-billion-funding-gap-over-next-sixmonths>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.thecatgroup.org.uk/pdfs/The-Kitten-Checklist.pdf> <sup>5</sup> <https://puppycontract.org.uk/>

buyers purchase a healthy, well-bred puppy or kitten by a collaboration of professional organisations dedicated to companion animal welfare including CAWGW members. It remains imperative that responsible buying practices are encouraged to tackle issues around irresponsible selling – something charities have warned has increased as a result of the pandemic and the rise in demand for a new pet.

- There is a need for enhanced and continued financial support from the Welsh Government - almost all organisations responding to an Association of Dogs and Cats Homes (ADCH) survey in May reported a negative impact on fundraising and income resulting from the outbreak, with an average drop in income of 53% – this was higher for Welsh organisations at an average of 80%. This is particularly challenging for smaller animal organisations, some of which are warning that there may not be enough funding to cover operational costs for the rest of the year. The knock-on impact any closures would have on the wider animal sector and Local Authorities who are responsible for stray dogs (a function that animal welfare organisations often provide) cannot be underestimated, as well as the negative impact on animal welfare.
- Further research to be carried out by the Welsh Government, in partnership with the animal welfare sector, to look at the long-term impact the pandemic could have on animal welfare in Wales and to consider what services are needed to support pet owners. This research would help to dictate any actions that need to be taken, and CAWGW would be keen to assist.

### **Any other areas within our remit you wish to draw to our attention**

#### **Sector Research**

Since April, the ADCH, of which all CAWGW full members who undertake rehoming activity are members, has conducted surveys on the effect of COVID-19 on hundreds of rescue organisations across the UK. Individual members have also analysed their own data on issues such as abandonments, cruelty complaints, charitable veterinary care, and stray dogs.

Of the respondents to the ADCH survey, there were 7 organisations who solely operate in Wales and a further 26 who operate in Wales as well as other countries. Whilst the results were not statistically significant, these 7 organisations provided evidence of the negative impact COVID-19 has had on the sector in Wales. The largest impact was financially, as stated previously, with only two organisations confident that they will be able to continue operating into 2021. Although the organisations have had reduced capacity, with staff furloughed and a reduced availability of volunteers, this has not stopped them safeguarding animal welfare during the pandemic with emergency intake and caring for animals whose owners are hospitalised or died.