

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, Amgylchedd a
Materion Gwledig
Ymgynghoriad ar effaith argyfwng
Covid-19
CCERA(5) CP25
Ymateb gan Yr Ymddiriedolaeth Cŵn

Welsh Parliament
Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs
Committee
Consultation on the impact of the Covid-19
pandemic
CCERA (5) CP 25
Evidence from Dogs Trust

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

1. About Dogs Trust

Dogs Trust, the UK's largest dog welfare charity, has been caring for dogs in need for more than 125 years. Founded in 1891 (formerly the National Canine Defence League) we have always campaigned on dog welfare related issues; our mission to bring about the day when all dogs can enjoy a happy life, free from the threat of unnecessary destruction – is always at the heart of what we do.

We invest substantial resources in education programmes, community outreach, Dog School training classes and in our local microchipping and neutering schemes in order to promote responsible dog ownership. Dogs Trust also has an in-house research team to ensure that all our policy and positions are evidence-based, and we are doing the best we can for all the dogs in our care.

We care for over 14,000 dogs every year at our 20 rehoming centres. We have had a rehoming centre in Bridgend since 1966, one of our very first and the centre now rehomes over 600 dogs each year.

In addition to our centre at Bridgend, the building work on our new Cardiff rehoming centre began in 2018, which will be located within a few minutes' walk of the Senedd, helping us to care for and rehome many more dogs in need throughout Wales.

2. Executive Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has had an immense impact on the operational capacity and finances of Dogs Trust and other animal welfare organisations across Wales.

Dogs Trust estimates that over the next five years our income will be reduced by £60 million, this year alone we are likely to see a reduction in expected income of around £15 million, which will have a profound impact on our services right across the UK.

The impact on dogs and dog owners across Wales is significant:

- Dog acquisition, particularly of puppies, has risen during lockdown at a time when responsible sources of new pets have been unable to meet demand. This has

allowed puppy farmers and illegal importers to flourish and make huge profits, especially as prices have increased by nearly 90% for some breeds¹.

- Behavioural issues such as separation anxiety are likely to increase as people return to work and dogs are left alone. Other behaviour problems are already rising as shown in our research².
- Illegal imports have continued as usual, to meet high demand throughout the pandemic as profiteers take advantage of the high prices people are willing to pay for a puppy.
- Delays to non-urgent and preventative veterinary care including vaccinations and neutering, with the former increasing the potential for an outbreak of preventable disease such as parvovirus within the pet population at a time when veterinary resources are stretched to capacity.
- Reduced rehoming capacity due to social distancing and altered operational models, with our Bridgend Centre having to close to the public at the height of the pandemic.
- We will likely see an increase in relinquishments as those who can no longer look after an impulse purchased dog after a return to work. After the 2008 financial crash, people struggled with costs for their dog. If this happens again owners may look to Dogs Trust and other charities for help or to relinquish ownership.

3. The scale and impact of the pandemic on your work and/or sector

3.1. Reduction in rehoming capacity

During the first lockdown and subsequent firebreak period Dogs Trust continued to take in dogs but at a significantly reduced capacity.

Our Bridgend rehoming centre had to initially close to the public, however staff continued to work to ensure the safety and welfare of all the dogs in our care. When practical, we began to trial virtual and socially distanced rehoming which allowed some dogs to find homes. Our Centre has partially reopened for appointment only visits with Covid-19 safety measures and protocols in place; this is subject to change as local restrictions evolve. Our Bridgend Rehoming Centre was 64% down on our usual rehoming rates between 23rd March and 3rd August when compared to figures for the equivalent period in 2019. Rehoming has been impacted more than our other rehoming centres in the UK as Wales maintained the 5-mile local travel restrictions.

¹ <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/news-events/news/2020/huge-price-hikes-for-popular-breeds-duringlockdown-revealed>

² https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/research/research-papers/201020_covid%20report_v8.pdf

Given the resources required to rehome in a COVID-safe manner and the need for social distancing, we expect our rehoming numbers to continue to be significantly impacted, especially with extension of ongoing lockdowns / firebreaks.

3.2. Increased demand for dogs

We have witnessed a marked increase in demand for dogs during the lockdown period, with Google searches for 'buy a puppy' increasing by 166% after lockdown was announced³. People are acquiring a dog whilst they have more time at home, but we are concerned that once they return to work, or return to a more normal routine and/or are impacted by the possible recession and potentially cannot afford to care for their dog, many of these dogs may be relinquished into the care of charities like Dogs Trust.

For the period of 24th March to 30th July 2020, we recorded 2,186 rehoming calls for our Bridgend Centre compared to 1,721 for the same period last year, which is a 27% increase. At the height of the original lockdown Bridgend received nearly 200 emails a day from people enquiring about rehoming a dog. To put this into context, the centre currently has 12 dogs on our website which are available for rehoming.

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. Pet ownership, particularly of puppies, 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 and illegal importers.

3.3. Illegal importation of dogs

Illegal imports have continued to be a significant concern⁴ due to the high demand for pets. 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 a major issue.

In December 2015, Dogs Trust made a landmark decision to provide care and support for illegally imported puppies during their time in quarantine, predominantly those entering via Dover and Folkestone. One of the issues that continues to arise in our investigations is the lack of resources available to the agencies on the ground at the ports. We feared, and still fear, that many puppies are entering the country purely because there is not sufficient resource available to cover adequate staffing at the ports or the costs of quarantine. By funding the care of the puppies, it empowers the relevant agencies to seize illegally imported puppies, knowing their fate is secure with Dog Trust able to care for them and find them suitable homes. Between the start of the first lockdown (23rd March) and the end of September, Dogs Trust rescued 140 puppies that were illegally imported into the country from Central and Eastern Europe. During the same period last year 89 dogs were seized and brought onto the Pilot.

³ Figures sourced from Propellernet, based on Google searches for "buy a puppy" from week commencing 22nd March 2020 and week commencing 12th July 2020.

⁴ Dogs Trust Puppy Pilot Figures 2020

Since early 2019, 37 heavily pregnant bitches have been seized and been cared for. They went on to give birth to 212 puppies. Of the 37 pregnant bitches admitted to Dogs Trust care since early 2019, 14 of these came into our care between the start of the coronavirus lockdown and September 2020. Eight mums tested positive for Leishmania, an infectious and zoonotic disease which is not naturally occurring in the UK.

The approximate total market value of the puppies born to pregnant bitches admitted to Dogs Trust through the Puppy Pilot since early 2019, would have been over £400,000 if they had been sold by dealers. This shows just how lucrative this illegal market is especially during Covid-19 when such high prices can be charged and the welfare of the puppies is not a concern for the illegal importers.

3.4. Increased demand for our services

Following the financial crash of 2008 there was a cumulative 30% increase in stray dogs in the subsequent three years⁵. We are aware that relinquishment and abandonment could similarly occur

as families struggle to care for their pets in these challenging times. Dogs Trust is anticipating up to

40,000 dogs could be at risk of abandonment in the coming years due to the coronavirus pandemic⁶. In addition, if some charities in the sector are unable to continue operating, a real issue with the current financial challenges, there will be an increased demand on those still operating. As mentioned, we have already seen an increase in the number of people getting a dog (see section 3.2.) and are concerned that many of these dogs may be relinquished once people return to work, as the financial impact of the recession is felt or when the furlough scheme comes to an end.

3.5. Vet Care

To meet social distancing guidelines vets were (rightly) prioritising emergency treatment throughout the first lockdown period. This resulted in limited access to routine veterinary treatments such as vaccination and neutering. Although this has been changing as the lockdown restrictions are lifted, there will be an inevitable backlog of neutering to be carried out, as well as vaccination courses needing to be restarted. Whilst necessary, the firebreak will only exacerbate delays and increase the backlog. Owners are also likely to not be accessing veterinary care due to socio-economic pressures or having to delay treatment during lockdown. We are concerned about the ongoing impact of these factors on dog health. In addition, there is an increased pressure on our vets and vet nurses to adapt to video consultations rather than being able to clinically assess dogs in person.

⁵ <https://faanalytics.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/straydogssurveysummaryreport2011.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.dogstrust.org.uk/news-events/news/2020/dogs-trust-warns-up-to-40-000-dogs-could-be-at-risk-of-abandonment-in-the-fallout-of-the-coronavirus-crisis>

3.6. Education & Local Campaign work

Dogs Trust invests substantial resources in free education and community outreach programmes to promote responsible dog ownership, as well as offering free Vet Nurse Check-ups and microchipping services. Since the first lockdown was announced in March, all visits to schools have been suspended, however the team has worked hard to adapt practices to be able to deliver virtual talks to children with downloadable materials. The pandemic has negatively impacted the number of children we have been able to engage with.

All of our local campaign team visits providing free advice, check-ups and microchipping have been put on hold indefinitely and as yet there is no clear date for when this service may resume. This service predominantly works in areas of higher social deprivation, which may be more severely impacted by a recession, and offers support to owners who often cannot access regular veterinary care.

3.7. Reduced workforce

In addition to furloughing staff, we have been working with a reduced work force due to the rules around self-isolation. We have had a reasonable number of staff self-isolating due to them or a member of their household having symptoms of Covid-19. For safety reasons we also had to take the decision to ask our volunteers not to give their time, instead advising that they stay at home and

keep safe. A reduced workforce presents various challenges, not least in being able to ensure the welfare of the dogs in our care.

3.9 Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

Dogs Trust is committed to protecting our staff and their jobs and we have welcomed that charities are eligible for the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Currently, 7% of our staff in the UK are on full time furlough and 49% remain on flexible furlough. In Wales 33% of staff members were furloughed, with 23% of those remaining either full or part time furloughed when the scheme was extended. We very much welcome the changes introduced so that 80% of wages are now being covered by the Government again from 1st November, it would have been preferable if the UK Government's scheme offered the same level of support for the firebreak in Wales as when the 2nd lockdown was announced in England.

3.10 Financial impact

Like all charities, Dogs Trust is being hit hard by this crisis, with income expected to drop at the same time as demand for our resources rises.⁷ Dogs Trust receives no Government funding to deliver our work and whilst the UK Government has been supporting a significant number of charities during the Covid-19 crisis, Dog Trust has not been eligible for this support.

Across Wales this has meant:

- The closure of our two charity shops – Abergavenny and Cowbridge - during the lockdown and firebreak.
- A drop in the donation of goods from members of the public due to the closure of rehoming centres
- Our fundraising programmes in partnership with commercial organisations have been either cancelled or postponed
- Our national fundraising programmes including face to face collections have been significantly reduced or cancelled
- Legacies provide an important source of income for charities and this is anticipated to significantly decline. Legacy Foresight, the legacy modelling body, has modelled a decrease in legacies of between 9-27% due to the drop in share prices, static or decreasing house prices, sales not going ahead as a result of the lockdown and reduced GDP
- Dogs Trust's standard and capital build reserves have both suffered significant losses of income as a result of the overall decline in the investment markets

We are forecasting that our income generation will be impacted significantly with a reduction in expected income of around £15 million this year. This figure does not include any loss as a result of the potential recession following lockdown. We are predicting a £60m decline in income over the next five years.

4. How Welsh Government action to date has helped to combat the impact of the pandemic

As part of the sector group Companion Animal Welfare Group for Wales (CAWGW) we have held 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.

⁷ <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/news/charities-facing-%C2%A3101-billion-funding-gap-over-next-sixmonths>

5. What further steps the Welsh Government should take

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

- There is a need for 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 56% suffering a drop of over half their income – this was higher for Welsh organisations at 80%. This is particularly challenging for smaller animal welfare 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 cannot be underestimated, as well as the negative impact on animal welfare.
- Promotion of materials to encourage responsible buying and selling of puppies and kittens. We would like to see the Welsh Government promote the puppy contract. The checklists were created by a collection of professional organisations dedicated to companion animal welfare to help ensure prospective buyers purchase a healthy, well-bred puppy. It remains imperative that responsible buying practices are encouraged to tackle issues around unscrupulous selling – something charities have warned has increased as a result of the pandemic and the rise in demand for a new pet.
- 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 direct any actions that need to be taken.

We are encouraged that where possible the Welsh Government has continued its legislative programme on animal welfare alongside the Covid-19 response.

We would also ask that where possible Welsh Government support our asks on areas that are reserved to central Government that we believe would make a significant difference to animal charities:

- We would like further financial support to be available for animal welfare charities
- Lift the £800k limit under the Covid-19 EU Temporary Framework for State Aid so that charities can claim the business support permitted under the Retail, Hospitality and Leisure Grant Fund for all of their charity shops - at present the £800k limit means that charities such as Dogs Trust with more than around 30 shops will reach the financial ceiling and so be financially penalised as this funding will be unavailable.
- Targeted investment for small, medium and large charities to ensure critical capacity is sustained in the sector so that animals can be supported both during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Make it clear within the Government Covid-19 safety employer guidelines which guidelines apply equally to volunteers; as a charity we rely upon our fantastic volunteers at our shops and centres and clear guidance will alleviate complex interpretations.

- We would welcome the introduction of business rate relief for veterinary practices. We believe that preferential VAT rates on services and access to cheaper veterinary medicines would assist the veterinary provision which we rely on as the UK's largest dog welfare charity. To put this into context, we believe this could, for example, be the equivalent of running three rehoming centres for a year.