



# The trade in puppies: problems and solutions

FROM THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS DEPARTMENT

- ★ The British market for the trade in puppies is unknown but the RSPCA believes it could be at least 700,000 and as much as 1.9 million animals annually.
- ★ Poor breeding, dealing and trading practices can have a significant impact on animal welfare not just for the young being sold but also their parents.
- ★ The British puppy market is met from a variety of sources; some breeders only breed one litter a year ranging up to those commercially breeding many thousands a year.
- ★ Welfare problems can occur at every stage of the trade, resulting in animals having chronic health and behaviour problems and dissatisfied consumers seeing their newly bought puppy suffer from illness and in some cases even dying soon after purchase.
- ★ In the past three years the British puppy market has changed with the number of imported puppies increasing: over 60,000 puppies a year come from places such as Ireland, Lithuania and Hungary leading to increased disease risks.
- ★ Criminal gangs can earn more than £2 million annually from the puppy trade, costing the Treasury millions in unpaid tax.
- ★ The RSPCA welcomes Defra's review of animal licensing as it believes that the present legal framework is outdated with some laws 65 years old, well before the internet age.
- ★ The RSPCA supports compulsory licensing for anyone selling a puppy with welfare conditions attached to that license and relevant training for the vendor, clearer sales information on any puppy advert including the internet and compulsory licensing for any commercial puppy breeders who breed two or more litters a year

## Introduction

It is estimated that the national demand for puppies is anything from 700,000 to 1.9 million animals each year. It is driven by a range of factors including fashion, family and friends creating a market for puppies that can be focused on a number of popular breeds such as Shih Tzu, Pomeranian and French Bulldogs. Puppies come from a variety of sources within and outside the UK. The welfare of these puppies varies enormously during the breeding, rearing, transport and sale of these animals.

## What does the market in puppies look like?

It is estimated that around 70,000 puppies, some 10% of the market, are born to licensed British breeders<sup>1</sup>. The remainder are imported, rescued or come from unlicensed breeders. Whilst some of the unlicensed British breeders will be selling only one litter a year (eg many of the 235,000 puppies annually registered by the Kennel Club) others will be from large scale commercial breeders. But we simply do not know the extent of this market. When Wales introduced a new dog breeding law in 2014, making it compulsory to have a license if you bred more than two litters a year, it is thought that 500 breeders escaped it.

Rescue organisations and pet shops account for a fraction of the market<sup>2</sup>. The remainder probably

<sup>1</sup> *Licensed Dog Breeding in Great Britain*, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, 2015  
<http://www.battersea.org.uk/servlet/servlet.FileDownload?file=00Pb000000JnCIGEAN> (accessed 17.01.16)

<sup>2</sup> *A Healthier Future for Pedigree Dogs*, APGAW, 2009  
<http://www.apgaw.org/data/sites/1/PDFs/a-healthier-future-for-pedigree-dogs.pdf> (accessed 17.01.16)

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comes from imported puppies, the trade in which has changed markedly in the past five years. Ireland was the main exporting country prior to 2012 delivering some 50,000 puppies annually to Britain. The 2012 change in the UK law, allowing free movement of pets into the UK from the continent, provided the perfect opportunity for puppy dealers to exploit. Non commercial dog imports rose by 3% but those from the puppy breeding countries of central Europe increased enormously - from Romania by 28 times, Lithuania by five times and Hungary by four times. Some of these are being imported without the proper vaccination and identification controls. It is thought that at least 20,000 puppies are imported legally from the continent and a further 50,000 from Ireland. Many will have been bred and reared in poor environments and separated from their mothers too early and so at risk of significant, long-term behavioural and medical problems.

The selling of puppies has changed enormously in the past 65 years. For example, pet shops, which do have to be licensed, now account for less than 5% of puppies sold<sup>3</sup>, compared to dominating the trade in the 1950s. Most people now obtain their puppies from commercial breeders (around 50%), backstreet breeders and neighbours (around 25-30%) and imported puppies (around 10%)<sup>4</sup> and around 30% use the internet to look for puppies<sup>5</sup>. Many of these sellers will not have a pet shop license.

Responsible breeders may sell from their homes to a buyer who they trust will take good care of the puppy. Irresponsible breeders can rely on puppy dealers to get their puppies to the buyers. Trade routes from the breeder to the marketplace are uncertain but west Wales and East Anglia are two main puppy breeding areas. In addition puppies imported from the continent and Ireland will come through the main ferry ports of Dover, Holyhead and Pembroke. Transported by vans to holding centres, the puppies will then be advertised on the internet before being individually sold to make it appear that these are small scale operations.

### **What are the welfare problems?**

The RSPCA received over 3,500 calls on puppy farms in 2015, a 122% increase on five years ago. Many of these include people complaining that their puppies had become ill after they had been bought. Of the calls where the point of sale was noted (609), 87% of puppies were sold through an internet advert. The second highest method of acquisition was newspaper adverts at 5% highlighting the impact of the internet.

Lack of hygiene and barrier controls throughout all stages of the trade can increase the transmission of disease such as parvovirus. Puppies maybe sick at the point of sale leading to high veterinary bills for the owner and poor welfare for the puppy and in some cases may lead to euthanasia. One investigation found around 20% of puppies bought on the internet will die in six months<sup>6</sup> and in another case of 39 puppies seized by the RSPCA from one commercial puppy dealer, six were so sick they had to be euthanised immediately and 65% had congenital defects.

The way in which a puppy is bred and reared also plays a significant role in its future physical and psychological health. It is especially important that puppies are introduced to a wide range of people, other dogs and animals between three and 12-14 weeks of age as it is at this stage where they learn the most readily about the characteristics of those they meet. In the same way, puppies also need to be

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> PDSA Animal Wellbeing Report, PDSA, 2015

<https://www.pdsa.org.uk/get-involved/our-current-campaigns/pdsa-animal-wellbeing-report> (accessed 17.01.16)

<sup>6</sup> *The Dog Factory*, BBC Scotland, 2015

habituated to the sights, sounds and smells associated with different environments. If opportunities for socialisation or habituation are lacking the puppies can be at greater risk of developing behaviour problems such as avoidance behaviour and aggression when older. The incentive in the commercial puppy trade is to get the animals to market as young as possible, as this is when they are deemed to be the most cute, usually between 6-16 weeks old.

Puppies trafficked from other countries are at particular risk of developing behaviour problems if they have been bred and reared in poor environments but the way in which they are transported and kept prior to sale can also be detrimental. For example, long distance transport can result in the uncontrolled exposure to other dogs and people which can be significant sources of anxiety, fear and stress. Whilst health problems can be relatively short lived and managed with medication, fear and anxiety related behaviour can be chronic requiring significant commitment from the owner and severely impact a dog's quality of life.

### **What are the economic incentives?**

A recent European study found that the trade in cats and dogs was worth €1.3 billion annually in the EU 10% of the trade comes from breeders breeding over 200 dogs each annually<sup>7</sup>. Financial incentives can be great for these commercial breeders and the commercial dealers. Investigations by the RSPCA on a ring of puppy dealers in Manchester found they were earning £35,000 a week, £2 million annually of undeclared income. These puppies were being sold for £550-£1000 depending on the breed even though they had been bought for around £200 from the puppy farmer in Ireland. This shows the potential for mark up in the trade. In 2015 another investigation estimated that one dealer was earning £200,000 a year from importing puppies from Ireland into Scotland<sup>8</sup>.

### **Problems with current legislation**

Breeding and selling of puppies is controlled by a licensing system that is 16 years old<sup>9</sup> and makes it compulsory for anyone breeding dogs for "commercial purposes" defined as more than four litters annually, to be licensed. So those people who are not in the business of breeding dogs for sale, so called hobby, back-street or opportunistic breeders, and produce less than five litters in any 12 month period do not need to obtain a license. There seems to be confusion amongst enforcers about what constitutes a licensable breeding establishment. The RSPCA would support a reduction in the threshold to two litters a year to close this loophole and ensure it applies to all commercial breeders. We would also support a central database of breeders so that anyone wanting to sell a puppy has to show where it has come from.

The main piece of legislation concerning the sale of animals is the [Pet Animals Act 1951](#) (PAA). This sets out a licensing regime for pet shops and prevents pets from being sold in the street. Fewer than 4% of pet shops licensed by councils sell dogs<sup>10</sup>. However as it is illegal to sell a dog without a pet shop license there are pet shop license holders selling dogs without a pet shop. This makes it difficult for enforcement agencies to refuse a license as there are no premises to check. The RSPCA supports a change so that anyone selling a dog is licensed, has the appropriate training and gives out good care information to any buyer. Many of the puppy dealers the RSPCA investigate sell from car parks or false homes with no information on the puppy, such as its medical and breeding history, so the consumer has no one to complain to when the puppy becomes sick.

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<sup>7</sup> *Study on EU Trade in Cats and Dogs*, European Commission, 2015

<sup>8</sup> *The Dog Factory*, BBC Scotland, 2015

<sup>9</sup> Breeding and Sale of Dogs (Welfare) Act 1999 (England and Scotland)

<sup>10</sup> *Freedom of Information Request on Pet Shop Licenses*, OATA. 2014

[http://www.ornamentalfish.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/FOI-Request-on-Pet-Shop-Licensing\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ornamentalfish.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/FOI-Request-on-Pet-Shop-Licensing_FINAL.pdf) (accessed 17.01.16)

## Way forward

The RSPCA welcomes the Government's [consultation](#) into the way puppies are bred, traded and sold.

In particular we:

- support a new law as a Regulation under the Animal Welfare Act;
- support the proposed need for anyone selling a puppy to be licensed;
- welcome the need to have model license conditions for puppy breeding and selling to provide greater harmonisation between local authorities;
- support the proposal to increase of the age of selling a puppy to anyone to eight weeks old;
- support the Government's proposal to get more powers to look into puppy dealers' accounts and data;
- Support the intention to reduce the threshold for a breeding license on the number of litters being bred from four, but want to see it set at two rather than three;
- want to see greater surveillance at ports to catch and prosecute puppy dealers who are evading import controls;
- want to see more transparency for consumers when they are looking to buy a puppy on the internet by giving clear information on the puppy breeder or dealer;
- want to see local authorities given training for the new law on microchipping and on licensing puppy breeding and selling and ensure they have the budgets required to meet these demands.

While the RSPCA recognises there is no easy solution to these complex welfare problems in the puppy trade and that consumers will continue to be motivated by a strong desire to buy a puppy in whatever situation, we welcome that Westminster is considering these issues by reviewing the legislation and to bring in an updated licensing regime with animal welfare at its heart enforced by local authority licensing officers.