Editorial

Should we legitimise puppy farming?

LEARN some of the pertinent figures and it becomes obvious why dogs are being brought into the UK in large numbers.

In essence, set-up costs for breeders, particularly those operating in poorer countries, are low, and profits earned through UK sales are huge. According to a Dogs Trust estimate, a French bulldog breeder in Poland with 20 breeding bitches, each producing one litter a year, could bring around 80 puppies into the UK annually. If each pup sold for £1500, the breeder would be turning over £120,000. And that is a conservative estimate.

Compounding this is the low rate of detection of illegal imports and the fact that the penalties imposed on the few smugglers who are caught are not especially severe.

Essentially, however, there remains a fundamental problem concerning supply and demand for dogs in the UK. The following figures were relayed by Dogs Trust veterinary director Paula Boyden at last week's London Vet Show:
– The UK dog population stands at around nine million, a figure that has been fairly static for the past few years.
– If the average life expectancy of a dog is assumed to be 12 years, at least 750,000 puppies are needed each year to maintain the current population size.
– The Kennel Club registers around 243,000 dogs per year.

So, where are the remaining half a million dogs coming from?

Some come from UK rescue organisations, which rehome around 64,500 dogs each year – although only a small proportion of these are puppies.

Others come from licensed or unlicensed 'low volume' breeders who choose not to register new litters with the Kennel Club.

Still, the shortfall is likely to run into the hundreds of thousands, and it appears that it is presently being met through unregulated puppy farms – either located overseas or operating illegally within the UK itself. Defra has tightened up England's dog breeding regulations, but unintentionally, the UK seems to have partially outsourced the supply of its dogs to organised criminals. This is worrying from both a welfare and a disease risk perspective. Dogs Trust and the BVA have been pushing for a post-Brexit strengthening of rules surrounding the movement of dogs. However, it is also worth asking whether dogs need to be imported at all.

Could the UK demand for puppies feasibly be met domestically via regulated large-scale breeding operations? Veterinary peer Lord Trees has argued that there is a case to be made for responsible UK puppy farming (see p 610) – but politicians and the public would have to accept that, as with farming in general, intensive and large scale does not automatically equal bad.

> **There remains a fundamental problem concerning supply and demand for dogs in the UK**

The importation of large numbers of puppies is a relatively new phenomenon. It stems from 2012, when the UK harmonised its pet travel rules with the rest of the EU, making it easier for people to enter the UK with puppies. Between 2011 and 2013 the number of dogs arriving from Lithuania and Hungary alone rose by 780 per cent and 663 per cent, respectively. And these figures account only for dogs declared at the border.

To add another layer of complexity, there appears to be a growing fashion for adopting rescue dogs from Romania – a trend that Carri Westgarth, a researcher at the University of Liverpool, has been examining (see p 615).

To get a grip on the flow of dogs into the UK, Defra could start by investigating how demand was met in the past. It could also look to Norway, which is not an EU member and which has recently banned the commercial importation of dogs, including strays destined for rehoming.

As Lord Trees put it, importing dogs in general is irresponsible and selfish – and when it comes to rescuing dogs, perhaps there is something to be said for the old adage that charity begins at home.

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