

Don't get 'Petfished' this Christmas: Chief Veterinary Officer warns the public about deceitful pet sellers

- Public warned against being 'Petfished' and to always research the person behind the pet
- Over a quarter (27%) of UK cat or dog owners say they noticed a suspicious seller or advert while purchasing their last cat or dog
- Defra's Petfished campaign film urges the public to think twice before buying a pet this Christmas

Defra launches its Christmas Petfished campaign today, warning the public against unknowingly buying puppies, kittens, cats and dogs from unscrupulous sellers ahead of Christmas.

A recent survey of UK cat and dog owners found over a quarter (27%) came across a seller or advert that made them feel suspicious of the welfare of the pet, while purchasing their last cat or dog*. The research further reveals the public are at risk of purchasing puppies and kittens from deceitful sellers, otherwise known as being 'Petfished', finding:

- Less than half (43%) of UK dog or cat owners visited the seller in-person in the animal's home when researching their recent pet purchase.
- More than 1 in 10 (12%) pet buyers didn't do any research at all before visiting their puppy or kitten for the first time.
- Under a third (31%) of dog and cat owners feel very confident they could spot the signs of a low welfare puppy or kitten seller.

In addition, a survey of British Veterinary Association (BVA) and British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) members found nearly two thirds (68%) of pet owners were unaware that the clinical and behavioural signs of their pet may be linked to low welfare breeding practices**.

Veterinary professionals and Defra's Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) are urging the public to think twice before they buy, and look out for deceitful sellers who take advantage of increased demand for pets ahead of Christmas.

Chief Veterinary Officer Christine Middlemiss said:

Christmas can be a difficult time to settle a pet into a new home and it's vitally important that people not only research the breed of animal they want, but also the person selling it to them.

Puppies and kittens bred in low-welfare conditions can often be separated from their mother too soon which can lead to severe health and behavioural problems, heartache and high vet bills for their new family. We urge people to remain vigilant and to always thoroughly research pet sellers before getting in touch.

Bill Lambert, Health and Welfare expert at The Kennel Club said:

Buying a puppy is a huge decision and all prospective owners should do the proper research and have all the facts available so that they can make an informed decision.

We know there has been a surge in demand for puppies during the pandemic. The current mismatch between supply and demand can lead to more people being duped by rogue breeders and scammers, and inadvertently fuelling low-welfare breeders.

To avoid being Petfished, the public are being urged to spot vital red flags when researching sellers, with the help of the acronym S.P.O.T.:

- **Seller – Put the seller’s name and details including phone number into a search engine – avoid those with multiple adverts.**
- **Parent – Make sure you see puppies and kittens in their home with their mother.**
- **Old enough – Check puppies and kittens are at least 8 weeks old before you take them home.**
- **Treatment – Ask to see the animal’s health records and avoid sellers who can’t provide them.**

Defra’s Petfished campaign today launches a film warning the public of the dangers of purchasing puppies or kittens from low welfare breeding practices during the Christmas period. The film features familiar furry friends and urges the public to research the person behind the pet.

[Buying a pet this Christmas?.. Don’t get petfished!](#)

More information on what to do before contacting a seller and what to ask when you do get in touch can be found at getyourpetsafely.gov.uk or by searching ‘Get your pet safely’.

Notes to editors:

- Petfished is a public information campaign run by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in England. It is supported by a range of animal welfare charities, veterinary organisations and commercial partners.
- *Survey from Opinion Matters of 1,009 UK respondents who have ever bought a cat or dog (15.10.2021 – 19.10.2021)

- **Survey of 175 BVA/BVNA members (16.09.2021 – 19.10.2021)
- Commercial third-party sales of puppies and kittens were banned in England from 6 April 2020. Known as Lucy's Law, the law means anyone looking to buy or adopt a puppy or kitten must deal directly with the breeder or with one of the nation's reputable rehoming centres.

Additional case studies and quotes from veterinary professionals

Alex Taylor, President of BVNA: case study

Alex has seen an increase in popular breeds visiting her practice clinic. Recently a cross-breed puppy was brought into her clinic for its second vaccination at around 13-14 weeks. Alex realised the dog was suffering with severe breathing issues, and discovered the owner was unaware these breathing difficulties were abnormal puppy behaviours. The owner had bought the puppy from an online seller and paid between £3,000-£4,000. She had not done any research beforehand on types of dog breeds and potential health issues. Around six weeks later, the puppy's breathing difficulties were so severe it was struggling to breathe at all and sadly had to be euthanised.

The demand for particular breeds is so high that sellers churn these puppies out for profit and do not pay any attention to the animal's welfare. It's all too easy as a pet buyer to fall into the trap of buying a kitten or puppy you feel sorry for. Buyers find a seller online and when they meet up with them expecting to see the puppy or kitten with its mother, the seller is alone with just one puppy or kitten which looks poorly. By that point people have fallen in love with the animal and feel the need to 'rescue' it. They hand over the money and are left with an animal with severe health issues, leading to high vet bills.

This happens all year round sadly but there is a stark increase in low welfare bred animals visiting our practice around the Christmas period. It's important for prospective pet owners to research the breed of dog they are after and think about the costs and needs of an individual breed. A dog is for life, not for Christmas. It's an age old saying but it's true. Dogs can live for around 14 years. It's vital to purchase a pet from a reputable breeder.

Dr Julian Hoad, Clinical Director at Crossways Veterinary Group: Case Study

Julian remembers four times in the past year that a puppy or kitten brought into his vet practice was linked to low welfare breeding practices and had not survived. On two recent occasions, puppies had brought in to see him with the deadly parvovirus. The dishonest seller had lied about the puppies' vaccination statuses, and they had to be euthanised.

Particularly around Christmas, people are desperate to go on the

Kennel Club website to purchase a puppy. As the demand for puppies has outstripped the supply however, they can find themselves searching small online adverts that sell pets instead, often bred in low welfare conditions. The buyer purchases the puppy without doing much research, then brings it to our practice because it is unwell, and often that puppy or kitten has to be put down. It's tragic.

People don't realise when purchasing or researching pets that vets are often available to provide practical advice ahead of buying an animal, and also advise whether they will be able to take the animal on to look after its long-term welfare. So the public can check in with a vet and also educate themselves ahead of purchasing an animal using the online resources available.