

# New powers to tackle cruel puppy smuggling move step closer

New plans to crack down on puppy smuggling and ban the import of dogs with cropped ears or docked tails have been set out by the UK Government today.

The new powers, which also include raising the minimum age for importing a puppy from 15 weeks to six months and banning the import of heavily pregnant dogs to help protect puppy and mother welfare, are aimed at safeguarding the welfare of the thousands of puppies and dogs that come into Great Britain from overseas each year.

More than 66,000 dogs were commercially imported into the UK last year according to Animal and Plant Health Agency figures. However, evidence shows a recent rise in low-welfare imports and smuggling activity, with border authorities seeing around a 260% increase in the number of young puppies being intercepted for not meeting the UK's pet import rules – from 324 in 2019 to 843 in 2020.

The proposals are part of a raft of measures included in [an eight-week GB-wide consultation](#) which seeks views from the public and stakeholders on government proposals to tackle puppy smuggling and low-welfare imports by unscrupulous breeders and traders.

In addition, the consultation asks the public and stakeholders for views on new penalties for breaching these rules, changes to the detention and rehoming process and whether the proposals should be extended to cover cats and ferrets.

Launching the consultation, Animal Welfare Minister Lord Zac Goldsmith said:

Puppy smuggling is a grim trade, and we are determined to clamp down on it.

Raising the minimum import age for puppies will help protect thousands of animals that are brought into the country each year and stop criminals looking to profit from the rise in demand for pets.

We already have one of the toughest pet travel border checking regimes in the world and as an independent nation outside the EU we are going even further by preventing anyone from bringing in dogs which have undergone inhumane procedures such as ear cropping or tail docking.

These new measures build on our plans to raise animal welfare standards across the board as part of our Action Plan for Animal

Welfare.

RSPCA chief executive Chris Sherwood said:

In recent years we've seen a huge increase in the number of dogs being commercially imported into the UK as well as the number of dogs being reported for having undergone mutilated procedures such as cropped ears.

These are major dog welfare issues that need addressing as a matter of urgency in order to protect dogs from unnecessary suffering and to protect the public from falling victim to criminals who are trying to cash in on these dogs' value.

We're really pleased that the Government – which pledged to tackle these issues among many others in its Action Plan for Animal Welfare – is launching this consultation and we hope that these new measures will be implemented efficiently so that we can crackdown on the illegal dog trade once and for all.

Owen Sharp, Chief Executive of Dogs Trust said:

We are delighted that today's consultation could bring us one step closer to ending the abhorrent puppy smuggling trade. Over the last six years, Dogs Trust has spearheaded the campaign to crack down on puppy smuggling, after our first undercover investigation in 2014 exposed widespread abuse of the Pet Travel Scheme by unscrupulous dealers, bringing in puppies for sale.

Since setting up our Puppy Pilot in 2015 we have cared for more than 2000 puppies which were seized at UK borders, often in horrendous conditions. We have seen puppies as young as 4 weeks old being smuggled into the country and dogs with open wounds from ear cropping as well as heavily pregnant dogs close to giving birth.

We are pleased that the consultation has set out proposals to tackle these issues and hope it results in tougher penalties for these crimes, as currently only a handful of cases have ever been prosecuted and the existing penalties are sadly no deterrent. We will continue to work closely with the Government to be the voice for dogs and put forward our recommendations to ensure the proposed legislation effects real change.

Media vet, animal welfare campaigner, and founder of the Lucy's Law and #BanPuppyImports campaigns, Dr Marc Abraham OBE says:

This important Government consultation is hugely welcome and will hopefully bring us another step closer to ending widespread cruelty to puppies and their parents. For decades, both the legal and illegal importation of young puppies has enabled and encouraged low-welfare breeding practices and dog exploitation across Europe, with puppies often separated from their mothers too early, then sent long distances often riddled with all kinds of disease, straight to their unsuspecting new owners in the UK.

By introducing these positive dog welfare proposals we can make significant progress in the fight against these cruel practices. I would like to thank the UK Government for listening to the evidence presented by campaigners and hope we can secure these positive changes needed to protect the puppies, their parents, and the British dog-owning public.

Puppies that are imported too young face a significantly higher risk of developing illnesses or even death.

Raising the minimum age for bringing puppies in to the UK will therefore ensure that they are not separated from their mothers too early and will allow them to develop further ahead of being taken on potentially long and stressful journeys which can have a lasting impact on their temperament and behaviour.

The RSPCA has also [recently reported](#) a 620% rise in reports of dogs found to have had their ears cropped, covering from 2015 to 2020. Ear cropping is a painful process where a dog's outer ears are surgically altered or removed altogether to make them look more aggressive. The surgical procedure, which has been illegal in this country since 2006, can hinder their ability to communicate with other dogs and their owners.

The majority of these dogs are suspected to have undergone the procedure overseas and under the new rules set out in the consultation launched today they would be banned from entering the country.

Last year the Dogs Trust [warned the public](#) about the risk of buying dogs online after rescuing dozens of puppies that were illegally imported into the country. Victims of this cruel trade included a group of six underage puppies seized at Dover port after being found covered in sticky oil and suffering from diarrhoea. The puppies had been illegally imported from Romania and were travelling in the back of a van for more than 24 hours. They had to be shaved to remove the oil from their fur.

In September 2020, four beagle puppies were also found in the back of an abandoned vehicle in Greater London. At eight weeks old, they weighed just two kilograms each and were very hungry and dehydrated. They are believed to have been illegally imported from the Republic of Ireland, to be sold onto prospective buyers in the UK. After spending three weeks in the care of the Dogs Trust, they went on to loving new homes.

The proposals launched today build on the UK Government's commitment to end the cruel practice of puppy smuggling and low welfare imports, as set out in the Government's [Action Plan for Animal Welfare](#) and [Animal Welfare \(Kept Animals\) Bill](#). The responses to the consultation will inform future government policy in this area, helping to [deliver a manifesto commitment](#) made in 2019.

The consultation can be found [here](#).