Online pet sales in the EU
What’s the cost?
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COMMENT</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAIN FINDINGS</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSIONS</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT WE DID</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF RELEVANT LEGISLATION</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Since the explosion in internet commerce at the turn of the century, the online pet trade has grown exponentially, with animals traded online in huge numbers throughout the European Union (EU). However, the casual nature and ease of online trading has led to animal welfare standards suffering as a result of sellers not listing key information regarding their welfare, and buyers purchasing animals without understanding their specific welfare needs and requirements. As this study highlights, the vast majority of online pet adverts across the EU lack basic information on the animal’s health and needs. In addition to this, many adverts are for animals that are too young to be separated from their parents, in poor health or for banned breed types.

A growing body of evidence supports the notion that the online sale of pets is conducive to poor standards of care for animals and poorly evaluated purchase decisions by prospective owners. The recent study by the European Commission on the welfare of dogs and cats involved in commercial practices notes that there is a general lack of knowledge and information for keeping pets, and suggests that best practice should be shared. It also notes that internet sales are a major factor to the undocumented trade and that there is a poor understanding of EU regulations in this area.

The EC’s study shows that there is a risk to new owners; less than 20 per cent of purchasers of pets reported being well informed about animal welfare and health at the moment of purchase. The report suggests that appropriate information on the health and welfare of animals and on consumer rights could be helpful at the time of purchase.

European citizens are asking for more information on responsible pet ownership; a recent Eurobarometer on the attitudes of Europeans towards animal welfare shows that 74 per cent believe that companion animals should be better protected and 87 per cent consider that information campaigns are a good way to influence attitudes in that way.

Whereas the Animal Health Law 2016 makes it mandatory for operators selling pet animals to provide basic information to the future pet keeper, it is unclear whether this applies to the online sale of pets, which today represents the main marketplace for the purchase of companion animals.

In addition to poor standards, e-commerce is increasingly being used to illegally sell protected wildlife such as CITES species or species listed on Annex A of European Council Regulation 338/97. The European Parliament study on the EU trade policy and the wildlife trade highlights the fact that the illegal wildlife trade is increasingly conducted via new technologies, including the internet and social media, yet the legislative framework at EU level is not capable of addressing it.

The Pet Advertising Advisory Group was initially set up to address the lack of regulation in newspaper adverts, a source historically used by the majority of people seeking to buy a pet. However today, buyer behaviour has broadened and currently in the EU, 400,579 dogs and 104,318 cats are advertised online for sale on any given day. The online sale of pets in the EU is completely unregulated in more than three-quarters of member states. That’s why the EU Dog & Cat Alliance felt it was important to work with Blue Cross to produce this report to highlight the need for better standards of online advertising throughout the EU.

We consulted our vast network of member organisations across Europe when preparing the report and have gathered vital information to assist policymakers and websites to instil better practices for the online advertisements of animals.

Steve Goody, Chief Operating Officer and Deputy Chief Executive, Blue Cross

Suzie Carley, Chair of the EU Dog & Cat Alliance

The growth of internet use across the European Union over the last ten years has been huge. Eighty-five per cent of European citizens now have access to the internet and many use it as a place to buy and sell animals. This rapid growth of the online market place has sadly led to an increasing number of welfare concerns across many European countries.

This report shines a light on the issues that exist in this online market place and suggests workable solutions that will better protect the welfare of pets bred and sold across the European Union.

5 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora

STUD/2016/578025/EXPO_STU(2016)578025_EN.pdf
The study identified the following key findings:

**A growing trend in Europe**

The research has highlighted that the most common method used to purchase a pet is through online classified adverts, followed closely by social media. These methods largely outweighed purchases from pet shops or breeders.

A snapshot count of online adverts for dogs and cats on the main classified websites in the 21 European countries for which respondents had answered the survey, revealed that 400,579 dogs and 104,318 cats were advertised for sale on a given day; thousands of exotic animals were also offered for sale.

These findings underline the fact that most pet purchasing has moved online and suggest that any initiative to protect animals and educate prospective owners must take this reality into consideration.

**Unregulated online market**

The study reveals that in over three-quarters of the countries listed the online sale of animals as pets is unregulated – a worrying situation considering that it has become the main marketplace to purchase a pet. Only one country and one region have rules governing the sale of pets online specifically. Malta’s law states that you must be registered as a pet shop to trade in animals; the Wallonia region of Belgium introduced a new regulation in June 2017 which bans the advertising of animals on generalist classified websites.

The answers show that there are a number of regulations applicable to the trade in pet animals in the countries surveyed, including governing the age of animals that can be sold, and banning certain breeds. Some countries, like France, require commercial breeders to be registered, although this does not affect peer-to-peer sellers.

However, only in the UK and Ireland are there voluntary standards that online advertisers adhere to, which can result in advertisers being banned in the event that they breach the voluntary regulations. Still, very few websites are signed up to these regulations – just six out of the 75 listed by respondents across the EU.

Pets are increasingly being sold on a multitude of closed groups on social media. These present additional challenges as the groups are moderated by individuals with seemingly no training in animal welfare and their ad-hoc nature make them more difficult to regulate, even through voluntary standards.
Poor practice
A study of adverts on classified websites across 21 EU countries has highlighted many instances of poor practice. These included lack of information about the animal, animals that were not weaned, websites offering finance deals to purchase an animal and animals in poor health. This highlights the fact that most websites do not require standard information on the animals advertised nor do they provide guidance to sellers.

CONCLUSIONS
The available data provided by organisations across Europe provide a clear picture of the state of the regulation of the online trade in pets in each country listed.

From the survey responses it can be concluded that there is much to be done to improve the standards of pet advertising across the EU. There are considerable gaps in the legislation governing online advertising and in most cases even a lack of voluntary minimum standards to ensure animal welfare does not suffer.

A call for action
95% of the respondents consider there to be a problem with the online advertising of pets in their country, thus demonstrating that this is a Europe-wide problem.

This is corroborated by the main welfare concerns of respondents who listed a number of common themes, including the sale of animals that are too young or in ill health, as well as a lack of animal welfare information with the sale.
It is difficult to know who sells pets online, whether they are pet owners with a new litter which they cannot keep or a breeder, either professional or hobby. In both cases it would be beneficial to regulate the advertising of pets online and offer information and guidance to sellers and buyers.

In order to create a better environment for the online trade of pets we recommend the introduction of self-regulation for classified websites. This would take the form of:

- a complete set of guidelines for the online advertising of pets, to be promoted to classified websites across Europe
- examples of best and worst practice to be shared with interested parties
- co-operation with NGOs across the continent to ensure that standards are monitored and maintained
- co-operation and information exchange on illegal trade between EU and national authorities.

We recommend initiating cross-border co-operation to encourage best practice based on the experience of the UK Pet Advertising Advisory Group (IPAAAG) and the Irish Pet Advertising Advisory Group (IPAAAG), to ensure that standards of animal welfare are raised during the online sale of animals as pets across the continent.

These objectives are the essence of the EUPAAG project. Its aim is to promote self-regulation among classified websites in Europe to improve animal welfare. EUPAAG provides stakeholders with a toolkit to help them set up and operate a collaborative pet advertising advisory group in their respective countries.

CASE STUDY
The Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG)
PAAG was created in the United Kingdom in 2001 to combat growing concerns regarding the irresponsible advertising of pets for sale, rehoming, and exchange. The group comprises animal welfare organisations, trade associations and veterinary bodies.

PAAG aims to ensure that pet animals advertised for sale are done so legally and ethically. PAAG has been engaging with online marketplaces in the UK to help them distinguish appropriate adverts from those that should be removed and has developed a set of Government-backed minimum standards which several of the UK’s largest classified websites have agreed to meet. During a six month moderation period, 130,000 illegal or unethical ads were removed. This continuing work with websites is vital, especially given the current lack of regulation with regards to the online sales of pets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

WHAT WE DID

The survey was conducted using an online tool and was sent out to members of animal welfare organisations in EU member states. The questions were drafted by Blue Cross and were designed to provide both quantifiable and supplementary data. The questions covered issues relating to the pet trade in the country in question, including the methods of sale, the regulations governing the sale of pet animals, and the standards that online sellers must adhere to, and if they are respected. In addition, participants were invited to include further information, where possible, to illustrate the situation in their country as they have experienced it.

Data analysis

Geographic representation – 48 respondents filled in the survey, representing 21 countries across the EU.

48 respondents filled in the survey, representing 21 countries across the EU.

- Belgium
- Bulgaria
- Czech Republic
- Estonia
- Finland
- France
- Germany
- Greece
- Hungary
- Ireland
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Malta
- Netherlands
- Poland
- Portugal
- Romania
- Slovenia
- Spain
- Sweden
- UK

*This includes separate responses for Jersey and Guernsey.*
The study highlighted that Malta has specific regulation for the online advertising of pets. Its law states that one must be registered as a pet shop to trade in animals. The Wallonia region of Belgium voted in a law in April 2017 (entry into force 1 June) which specifically forbids advertising pets for sale on generalist classified websites. In Portugal, a law proposal was adopted on 19 July 2017 which makes advertisements for the sale of pet animals subject to certain validity requirements, such as having to indicate the age of the animals. In the UK, France, Greece, Slovenia, Sweden, Finland and the Netherlands the online sale of pets is covered in wider animal legislation. All other countries do not have regulations or legislation covering the online sale of pets. This means that in over half of the countries listed the online sale of animals as pets is unregulated – a deeply worrying situation.
Most common method to purchase a pet

Respondents were asked which methods are most commonly used to purchase pets in their country. Online classified websites and social media are where 57 per cent of buyers purchase pets, followed by 19 per cent in pet shops and only 6 per cent from markets. This data shows how online platforms have become the major marketplace for the purchase of animals.

The answers given as ‘Other’ are as follows: breeders, shelters, animal charities, adverts at veterinary clinics, dog beauty salons, supermarkets; adverts found on street signs, rescue centres, kennel clubs; adopted/bought from other countries and through charities from other EU countries.

Problems associated with the online advertising of pets

The study shows that 95% of respondents perceive that there is a problem with the online advertising of pets in their country. Respondents were asked to clarify their answers and describe the main welfare concerns around the online sale of pets they experienced in their country. The main themes listed were as follows:

- Too many “breed, but no pedigree” pets available online
- False advertising
- Sellers using fraudulent identification numbers
- Animals illegally imported from other countries
- Animals are too young
- Animals are in poor health
- Indiscriminate breeding with no thought for health testing
- Keepers at the animal wholesales are unqualified
- Living conditions at wholesalers are terrible
- Unlicensed breeders
- Selling endangered or forbidden (wild or exotic) animals
- Impulse buying
- Buyers have very little idea about animal welfare and have not considered all aspects of pet ownership
- Animals are too young
- Too many “breed, but no pedigree” pets available online
- False advertising
Voluntary standards for the online advertising of pets

Are there voluntary standards for the online advertising of pets in your country?

- Yes – UK and Ireland
- No – all others

Ireland – IPAAG
Sites are monitored and breaches raised directly with the websites. Advertisers can be banned from advertising in future.

UK – PAAG
A number of leading UK sites have signed up to minimum standards drawn up by PAAG members. The sites are monitored and breaches are reported directly to the websites.

Examples of good practice from individual websites

Czech Republic – May 2016, large advertising agency ANNONCE, as the first commercial entity in the Czech Republic, began blocking objectionable advertisements posted by illegal dog breeders and dealers and initiated a large enlightenment campaign. www.annonce.cz/chcemepsa/

France – Leboncoin.fr and Paruvendu.fr and Vivastreet.fr provide additional information about animals such as date of birth, vaccinations, whether it is sold by an individual or professional etc. However, it seems that adverts can still be published without this information.

Finland – Although Tori.fi does not have voluntary standards, it does warn the buyers about puppy mill puppies and recommends customers to avoid suspicious adverts/sellers. www.tori.fi/turvallisuus/elaimet.htm?ca=18

Ireland – DoneDeal immediately removes adverts if concerns are raised about illegal behaviour or failure to comply with minimum standards. Also cooperates with ISPSCA – authorised officers regarding illegal behaviour.

Romania – www.adoptiicaini.ro/
This is not a website for selling pets, but to promote responsible adoptions and with links to animal protection associations.

UK – Six websites operating in the UK have engaged with PAAG. Many have developed new ways of tracking questionable advertisers and are responsive to deal with any queries regarding an advert. Gumtree have planted fake adverts on their site to raise awareness of what to look out for.
Restrictions on sale/ownership of certain animals

In order to conduct research on the legality of the sale of certain species on online classified websites across Europe, respondents were asked for information on legislative restrictions in place. The answers show that there are a number of regulations governing pet animals in the countries surveyed, including governing the age of animals that can be sold, and banning certain breeds or types. Additionally, in the UK and Ireland there are voluntary standards that online advertisers adhere to, which can result in advertisers being banned in the event that they breach the voluntary regulations.

Example of national legislation

Finland:
The Animal Welfare Act 1996 (rev 2006), states that capturing wild mammals and birds to be cared for is prohibited unless the animal is captured to be kept in a zoo or farmed for the production of meat or eggs or breeding animals for this purpose or for game management purposes, or for temporary medical care or other acceptable temporary cause or for scientific research work.

Netherlands:
The Netherlands operates a positive list for exotic pets.

Minimum age restriction for the sale of certain/all animals (not imported)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Sale restrictions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>puppies and kittens over 7 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>50 days but only for breeders/pet shops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>puppies and cats over eight and 12 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>for both kittens and puppies, the minimum age is eight weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>puppies over eight weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guernsey</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>eight weeks (dogs, cats, ferrets)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jersey</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>puppies, eight weeks; kittens, 10 weeks; ferrets, eight weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>puppies over eight weeks; kittens over 12 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>eight weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>puppies over eight weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>over eight weeks – cats and dogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>puppies over eight weeks; kittens over 12 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>puppies, eight weeks; kittens, 12 weeks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>puppies over eight weeks (eight weeks for kittens awaiting legislation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Main advertisements websites on which pets are sold

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total numbers</th>
<th>Main classified websites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>Dogs: 4,530  Cats: 1,379 Exotics: 610</td>
<td>2dehands.be  Zememain.be  viavastreet.be  kapaza.be  locanto.be  jannonce.be  les-annonces.be  chiens-chats.be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>Dogs: 42,610  Cats: 922 Exotics: 477</td>
<td>otk.bg  boxor.bg  kucheta.puppy-market.eu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>Dogs: 1,077  Cats: 215 Exotics: 78</td>
<td>facebook.com  kudobarners.ee  soov.ee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>Dogs: 1,156  Cats: 8,461 Exotics:</td>
<td>huuto.net  lemmikkipalstat.net  tori.fi  nattfmarkkina.com  koiratori.com  apulo.fi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>Dogs: 5  Cats: 7</td>
<td>gspca.org.gg*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>Dogs: 11,732  Cats: 952</td>
<td>abadal.hu  tiskutyha.hu  facebook.com/groups/elodo.kutyak Macsa.kisasszult.kiszallat?h голзвt  sofregas.hu/gyanyarazsg/haziasszlt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>Dogs: 2,202  Cats: 142</td>
<td>DoneDeal.ie*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jersey</td>
<td>Dogs: 142</td>
<td>jerseyinsight.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>Dogs: 3,662  Cats: 2,152</td>
<td>vivastreet lt  rinka lt  rinka lt  rinkatu lt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>Dogs: 963  Cats: 431</td>
<td>ss.lv  reklama.lv  zip.lv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>Dogs: 9,034  Cats: 2,719</td>
<td>olx.pl  allegro.pl  grathia.pl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>Dogs: 18,274  Cats: 1,616</td>
<td>facebook.com/groups/elado.kutya.macska.kisasszult?h голзвt  sofregas.hu/gyanyarazsg/haziasszlt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>Dogs: 2,780  Cats: 177</td>
<td>olx.pt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>Dogs: 1,769  Cats: 428</td>
<td>milanuncios.com  vbb.com  wallapop.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>Dogs: 64,377  Cats: 8,332</td>
<td>milanuncios.com  vbb.com  ez.wallapop.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Dogs: 942  Cats: 54</td>
<td>blocket.se  ukk.se/sv/kopashund/hundraras-valkvillar  vovve.net/Hundanannonser  katasportforslag/annonser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>Dogs: 27,569  Cats: 3,737</td>
<td>gumtree.com  preloved.co.uk*  pets4homes.co.uk*  friday-ad.co.uk*  vivastreet.co.uk*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total:** 104,318 400,579

* websites signed up to voluntary standards for the advertising of pets
EU Dog & Cat Alliance

Since 2014 the EU Dog & Cat Alliance has been a leading European expert on companion animal welfare, encompassing over 75 organisations from 24 Member States. The Alliance has been working within the EU on issues relating to animal welfare, having published a groundbreaking report on national legislation to protect dogs and cats across all 28 EU Member States. The Alliance looks forward to constructively working with the European Commission, Parliament and Member States to improve not just the welfare of dogs and cats in the EU, but also human health through helping to prevent the spread of zoonosis, ensure consumer protection, and deal a blow to one of the profitable trafficking sectors in the Union – the illegal importation of dogs and cats.

Blue Cross

Sick, injured and homeless pets have relied on us since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured, pets turn to us for help every year. Each year thousands of cats, dogs, small pets and horses turn to our animal hospitals, clinics and rehoming services for treatment and to find them the happy homes they deserve. Blue Cross has chaired EUPAAG since 2016.

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