



Blue Cross manifesto

New parliament,
new start for animals



A vertical close-up photograph of a dog's face, showing its eye, nose, and mouth. The dog has brown and white fur. The image is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping a light blue vertical bar.

Introduction

Blue Cross is a charity that has been helping sick, injured, abandoned and homeless pets since 1897.

We are passionate about our vision that every pet should live a healthy life in a happy home. We help thousands of pets in need – dogs, cats, horses and small animals – every month, providing veterinary care and expert behaviour help. We also find them loving, happy homes, provide advice and education for current or future pet owners and a Pet Bereavement Support Service. We collaborate with other animal welfare charities and organisations through membership of bodies such as the Association of Dog and Cat Homes (ADCH) and the Cat and Feline Sector Group (CFSG).

In 2020, we will conduct and collate research into, and build awareness of, the beneficial nature of human-pet relationships. This includes the positive impact pet ownership can have on physical and mental health, and on alleviating loneliness and isolation. This research could, in turn, help reduce strain on the NHS, the benefits system and other charitable organisations.

The new parliament provides an opportunity to provide a new start for pets and their welfare. We are heartened by the fact that animal welfare issues have risen up the agenda of all political parties in recent years, reflecting the passion and commitment many members of the public feel about these issues.

While progress has undoubtedly been made, there remain a number of areas where we believe further change is needed – from increased sentences for the worst cases of animal cruelty to repealing the iniquitous and ineffective section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

We also know that legislating is only the first step: enforcement of existing animal welfare laws is frequently poor and inconsistent. Any legislation is only effective if there is robust and comprehensive enforcement of its provisions.

We hope you find this manifesto thought-provoking and stimulating. Blue Cross looks forward to working with you throughout this parliament on improving and maintaining the highest standards of pet welfare. They deserve no less.

In 2018:

- 31,321 pets were helped by Blue Cross Veterinary Services at our hospitals and clinics
- 9,253 pets were helped by Blue Cross Rehoming Services
- 12,966 grieving people were helped by the Blue Cross Pet Bereavement Support Service

Dogs

Breed specific legislation - Section 1 Dangerous Dogs Act 1991

It is now nearly 30 years since the infamous Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 was passed, a piece of legislation renowned for being ill-considered and hastily and badly drafted. In particular, section 1, which prohibits the ownership of four types of dog - the pitbull terrier, Japanese tosa, dogo Argentino and fila Brasileiro – has caused intense controversy and arouses strong passions in animal welfare charities and among the general public: in February 2019, Blue Cross handed in a public petition to 10 Downing Street calling for repeal of section 1 which had attracted over 83,000 signatures.

It is clear that the legislation in its current form is not working – it is both detrimental to animal welfare and fails to protect the public. Blue Cross believes now is the time for a complete repeal of breed specific legislation. If not repealed, perfectly well-behaved dogs will continue to be pointlessly euthanised because of this needless legislation. We will continue to vigorously campaign for them to be allowed to live the happy and healthy lives they deserve.

The legal framework for dealing with dangerous dogs is extremely complex with a myriad of different pieces of legislation covering the issue. This can make it complicated for enforcers to know which piece of legislation to use in which case. Combining all dog control measures in one comprehensive, overarching piece of legislation, based on the latest scientific evidence, would provide clarity and certainty for enforcers.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- a complete repeal of section 1 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991
- as an interim measure, rehoming organisations to be allowed to rehome section 1 dogs
- the introduction of a preventative, evidence based consolidated legislation to deal with all dog control issues



A vertical close-up photograph of a dog's face, showing its eye, nose, and mouth. The dog has brown and white fur. The image is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping a light blue vertical bar.

Breeding and selling of dogs and cats

Fundamentally, the problem is that the public demand for puppies and kittens outstrips the supply available from licensed breeders, leading people to look elsewhere for their pet. The scale of unlicensed sellers – particularly dog breeders – is of huge concern. Estimates suggest that as many as 88 per cent of puppies born in Great Britain are bred by unlicensed breeders. Furthermore, thousands, if not tens of thousands, are believed to be imported annually from European countries to meet public demand, with many of those sellers also likely to be unlicensed. The increasing popularity of flat-faced – brachycephalic – breeds such as French bulldogs and pugs has also fuelled the trade. The breeding of these dogs can lead to a variety of health conditions including breathing issues, sight problems and birthing complications. We believe using these breeds in advertising and marketing materials directly contributes to, and perpetuates, the problem.

More and more people are also choosing to find a pet on the internet. Some popular classified websites can have as many as 50,000 adverts online in the pet section at any one time. Blue Cross is a member of the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) and is currently working with a number of large classified advertising websites, including Gumtree and Preloved. PAAG has drafted a set of minimum standards which the government has endorsed as a voluntary code of practice. These have already led to a reduction in the number of inappropriate, misleading and illegal adverts that are being placed online.

We believe the most effective way to deal with problems caused by the breeding and selling of dogs would be through the introduction of a comprehensive system of registration and licensing for anyone breeding and selling any animal. This would bring much needed visibility and traceability to the trade, increasing consumer protection and better protecting the welfare of dogs and cats bred and sold across the UK.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- a system of registration and licensing for all those who breed and sell all pet animals
- the creation of a centralised database of all registered and licensed breeders and sellers for enforcers. This would include those sellers who place advertisements on the internet, whether on classified websites or social media.

Shock collars

Blue Cross has long campaigned for a ban on aversive training methods, such as electric shock collars, as their use is a serious animal welfare issue. They are outdated, impact negatively on animal welfare and have no place in 21st century dog training. Blue Cross strongly believes that the only effective way to train a dog is through reward based training.

There is no evidence that shock devices deliver better and more effective results than using positive methods for training. Further, we know causing pain to a dog has a detrimental effect on the relationship between owner and pet and can cause problems such as anxiety-related issues. Wales led the way by banning electric shock collars in 2010. We believe all adverse training methods compromise welfare and are therefore in contravention of the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- the government to bring forward legislation to ban aversive training methods

Greyhounds

Blue Cross is an animal welfare member of the Greyhound Forum, which brings together animal welfare charities and organisations in conjunction with greyhound industry officials to improve the lives of greyhounds. The Welfare of Racing Greyhound Regulations 2010 sets out a regulatory framework for the sector. However, at present the regulations do not ensure the welfare of greyhounds outside of the tracks despite greyhounds spending the majority of their time in trainers' kennels. There are continuing welfare concerns about greyhound trainers' kennels and, in order to bring kennelling facilities up to standard, more money needs to be invested and clear guidelines need to be laid down in the form of regulation.

Bookmakers currently contribute a voluntary levy for greyhound racing, which stands at 0.6% of turnover. Nothing, though, has been established to ensure this funding is ringfenced for greyhound welfare. Blue Cross has concerns about the sustainability of this funding without a statutory requirement, as there is on the proceeds of horse race betting.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- the government to extend the Welfare of Greyhounds Regulations 2010 to cover trainers' kennels
- the government to amend the 2010 regulations to require the publication of essential welfare data relating to rehoming numbers as well as injury and euthanasia
- the government to introduce a statutory greyhound race betting levy to improve the welfare of racing greyhounds. This should be set at a level to provide a sufficient and sustainable source of funding for greyhound welfare.

A vertical close-up photograph of a cat's face, showing its eye, whiskers, and fur. The cat has light-colored fur and a dark eye.

Cats

Microchipping

Compulsory microchipping for dogs was introduced in 2016 and is now seen as one of the essential components of responsible dog ownership. In 2017, 24% of cats admitted to Blue Cross were considered to be stray. However, it is not uncommon for owned animals to be presented as 'strays' because they are not microchipped or do not have up-to-date details on the chip. Out of a total 5,057 cats admitted for rehoming to Blue Cross in 2017, a staggering 80% were not microchipped.

Without a microchip we cannot reunite 'stray' pets with their owners. It is also vital to make sure contact information is kept up-to-date if owners move or change their number.

If microchipping of owned cats became mandatory, it would be the responsibility of the cat owner to get their cat microchipped and, as with dogs, vets would not be enforcers of the requirement to microchip. However, vets can encourage owners to microchip their cats, thus helping to reinforce the responsibilities of cat owners to their pet under the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

Blue Cross welcomed the last government's consultation on compulsory microchipping for cats in England.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- microchipping to be made compulsory for cats as it is with dogs
- well-administered and efficient communication between database companies to make sure microchip details and information on lost and stolen pets is properly shared and centrally available

Cats and road traffic accidents (RTAs)

Under section 170 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, motorists are required to stop and report an accident involving animals including horses, cattle, mules, sheep, pigs, goats or dogs. Cats, though, are not included.

If a cat has been involved in an RTA, it will be up to the enforcement agency – police or local authority – to decide whether an individual should be prosecuted. But it is really important that the public know they must report when they hit a cat because of the devastating emotional impact it can have on the owner. Losing a pet and not knowing what happened to them is a very traumatic and distressing experience for any owner. Although the news that their pet has been killed in an RTA will obviously be very upsetting, it will at least provide some certainty and, hopefully, closure.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- a change in legislation to make it a legal requirement to report a road accident involving a cat to the police
- any new legislation mandating that if a driver accidentally injures a cat, they must seek emergency veterinary treatment for that cat where s/he can also be scanned for a microchip and the owners located
- more accurate recording of cat deaths on the roads by local authorities to ensure that owners can be made aware if their pet has been involved in an accident



A vertical close-up photograph of a cat's face, showing its eye, nose, and whiskers. The cat has light brown and white fur. The image is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping a blue vertical bar.

Benefits of pets

In November 2019, Blue Cross published a major and comprehensive report entitled A Link in the Chain: tackling mental health, poverty and loneliness through pet ownership. The report examined, using case studies, public polling, and Freedom of Information requests, the benefits of, and barriers to, pet ownership and animal interaction in the three specified areas. The report showed the powerful bond that vulnerable people experiencing challenging times have with their pets and displayed the beneficial effect pet ownership can have on society as whole.

The report covered a wide variety of issues, including:

- the prevalence of Animal-assisted Therapy (AAT) in NHS Mental Health Trusts across the UK
- the provision of low-cost veterinary care across the UK
- pet ownership in sheltered housing

Blue Cross is calling for:

- the Department of Health and NHS England to undertake a comprehensive review into the provision of AAT for mental health patients
- better signposting of AAT to mental health patients and their families so people can choose it as a therapeutic course of treatment
- mental health professionals to receive training in the five freedoms enshrined in the Animal Welfare Act 2006 to enable them to support their service users
- the government to include the benefits of pet ownership in alleviating loneliness to be included in the Loneliness Strategy
- the government to consider developing a strategy for an integrated and accessible rural transport system which better supports pet owners in isolated communities

Animal cruelty

One of the criteria for judging whether the UK is a civilised society is the way it treats its animals. We have traditionally regarded ourselves as a nation of pet lovers and, in the majority of cases, our pets are well looked after and enjoy happy and fulfilling lives. They also help their owners to live similar lives.

Sadly though, this is not always the case. As a pet welfare organisation, we see a number of appalling cruelty cases in both our centres and hospitals each year. Animal cruelty is an abhorrent and despicable crime, perpetrated on defenceless and vulnerable animals. A message must be sent out that crimes of this nature will not be tolerated, and those responsible can expect to suffer the consequences if they are found guilty.

Blue Cross was extremely disappointed that the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill failed to pass before the dissolution of the last parliament, particularly as it had all-party support – a welcome rarity in these contentious times. The current maximum sentence of six months for the most heinous cases of cruelty is far too lenient and acts as no deterrence whatsoever. More abused and maltreated animals will not receive the justice they deserve until this situation changes.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- the government to reintroduce the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill at the earliest opportunity and for all parties to work together to ensure it passes through parliament swiftly

Pet theft

The theft of a beloved family pet is one of the most distressing and traumatic events in any pet owner's life. The corrosive uncertainty as to their whereabouts and health can cause lasting and deep-seated emotional suffering. Although some are thankfully reunited with their pet, many owners will never see them again.

Pet theft is covered by the Theft Act 1968 and is not a specific crime in its own right. The maximum sentence for theft is seven years imprisonment. Sentencing Council guidelines place theft into four different categories, with category 4 being the lowest impact crime for "low value goods stolen (up to £500) and little or no significant additional harm to the victim or others". Most pets will not meet this level of monetary value so the perpetrator will receive the lowest sentence.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- the government to amend the Theft Act 1968 to make the theft of a pet a specific crime
- the sentencing guidelines to be amended to introduce tougher penalties, such as increased custodial sentences, for those convicted of these crimes to act as a deterrent and to ensure consistency across all cases

A vertical close-up photograph of a dog's face, showing its eye, nose, and whiskers. The dog has brown and white fur. The image is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping a light blue vertical bar.

Exotic pets

Blue Cross does not believe exotic species should be kept as pets in the UK. Exotic animals have complex social, physical and behavioural needs. Each species has adapted to a specific habitat, which can be costly and difficult to replicate. If their captive environment is unsuitable it can lead to a host of serious health problems and psychological stress. The fundamental understanding of how to meet the needs of exotic animals is frequently lacking.

Primates, in particular, are wholly unsuitable domestic pets. Blue Cross was therefore encouraged when the previous government published its consultation on the welfare of primates as pets in England.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- the government to introduce a ban on keeping primates as pets
- the government to undertake a full review of the exotic pet trade

Regulation of animal sanctuaries and rehoming organisations

Many rescue and rehoming organisations already achieve extremely high standards of welfare. However, we know that there are organisations and individuals operating as rescues who can sometimes become overwhelmed and struggle to meet the welfare needs of the animals in their care.

Blue Cross has long been calling for licensing of rescue and rehoming centres. We believe this will be a significant step forward in terms of ensuring high welfare standards and promoting best practice in the sector. We also know that there is a growing trend for the establishment of 'rescue' centres importing dogs from abroad to sell on to members of the public. While some of these are likely to be genuine, we know that a number of these types of establishments operate as a cover for illegal puppy smuggling.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- the government to bring forward a consultation regulating animal sanctuaries and rehoming organisations
- the introduction of an accompanying system of inspection which will ensure welfare standards are met and maintained

Enforcement

For any piece of legislation to be regarded as meeting its purpose it must be rigorously and consistently enforced. Failure to do so, in any sphere, can result in the law losing public support and confidence and can lead to widespread flouting of its provisions.

Blue Cross is very concerned that animal welfare is one area where enforcement of relevant legislation is failing and leading to adverse consequences for animal welfare. Principally, this is due to a lack of resources for the enforcement authorities – local authorities, police – which prevents them fulfilling their statutory duties. Local authorities have seen considerable cuts to their budgets in recent years which is likely to have had significant implications on an authority's ability to effectively enforce and investigate.

One area where enforcement is needed is horses. The Control of Horses Act 2015 enables local authorities in England and Wales and private owners to deal with horses that have been fly grazed on their land. Blue Cross would argue that increasing local authority resources and knowledge to enforce this Act would have a positive impact on the welfare of horses.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- increased local authority resources and knowledge to apply the Animal Welfare Act 2006

Fireworks

Fireworks have long brought entertainment to many people. Sadly as most owners will attest, the same cannot be said of pets, many of whom can be extremely frightened and traumatised by the sound of fireworks exploding nearby.

Dogs feel safe and secure when they can predict and control their environment, so when unexplained noises happen unexpectedly, such as those caused by fireworks, this can be extremely stressful. In these cases, owners may see behaviours such as avoidance (eg hiding away, not eating and agitation) and overt behaviours (eg barking, spinning, tail-chewing) that occur as dogs try to drive away the perceived threat. These behaviours can be extremely challenging for owners to address because fireworks remain out of their control. They are therefore unable to remove the triggers for their dog's fearful behaviour.

As a prey species, horses are naturally fearful of loud noises. The unexplained loud bangs and flashes of fireworks as well as the smell can be very stressful. Injuries can be caused from the resulting panic behaviours. Stress related conditions, such as colic, may also be caused in some individuals. Easy access to fireworks and poor enforcement of existing legislation is therefore having a detrimental and lasting impact on animal welfare.

Blue Cross is calling for:

- further restrictions around the sale of fireworks, limiting them to licensed, public occasions and organised events
- local authorities to take the location of public displays into consideration when granting them a licence and require that they are well publicised in the surrounding area
- lower decibel fireworks to be used to reduce the number of animals affected



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