

Dear DEFRA,

We are writing to you today to raise the alarm on one of the biggest welfare crises faced by Britain's beloved pets today - the intentional breeding for harmful, exaggerated physical features. Whilst these traits are often sought after for their aesthetic appeal, they cause serious, preventable health problems and compromise animals' ability to perform important natural behaviours.

This problem is entirely human-driven, and it is, therefore, within our power to rectify.

The UK Government can take action now to help protect our pets from this avoidable suffering, through addressing the current problem and preventing it in the future. One way to do this is progressing the commitment made towards a public consultation, as seen in DEFRA's 'animal welfare strategy for England'. The vision stated in this strategy is that "Every animal will experience positive welfare throughout their life." It is sad but true that as long as pets continue to be bred with extreme traits, this vision will never be fully realised.

The UK is a nation of proud, dedicated animal lovers; but, sadly, the trends in breeding for aesthetics over welfare put our pets in harm's way, overlooking or even celebrating the risks they face. Dogs and cats are the species most commonly affected at present, but exaggerated physical features are also intentionally bred into rabbits, fish, horses, reptiles, rodents and birds, making this a multi-species problem affecting many millions of animals.

It is time to end the trend.

Sadly, these harmful traits (such as flattened faces, missing tails, narrow nostrils, shortened limbs, hair- or scalelessness, deformed eyes or ears, harmful colour morphs and excess skin, amongst many more) have become so normalised that many people do not realise the harrowing consequences that may be faced by their pets. Alongside the costly and heartbreaking health problems, pets may struggle to perform natural, everyday behaviours that are important for their species, such as play, grooming, communication, exercise, sleep and temperature regulation. At best they're uncomfortable, at worst they're suffering in ways no animal should - and certainly should not be bred for.

It is undeniable that social media has played a monumental part in shaping desire for these animals, positioning them as "cute" rather than unhealthy. Concerning behaviours that actually indicate discomfort or suffering are often mischaracterised as 'normal for the breed', comical or adorable, rather than worrying health indicators.

In terms of scale, it is estimated that over 20% of the UK dog population are breeds with at least one extreme conformation. In the last ten years alone, the RSPCA reported a staggering 3,800% increase in French bulldog types entering its care, alongside a 192% increase in pug types. Both of these dog breeds typically have multiple extreme conformations, including absent or cork-screw tails, excessive skin folds, flat faces and protruding eyes. During the same 10-year period, there were 200% and 180% increases in British shorthair cat types and Persian cat types, respectively, coming into RSPCA care. Both of these are often brachycephalic (flat-faced) with large, protruding eyes; and Persians are also bred with an unnaturally long hair coat. The charity has also seen notable intakes of hairless cats, reptiles with harmful colour morphs, dwarf and lop-eared rabbits, and other examples of harmful traits.

The RSPCA's new report, **The shape of suffering**, highlights the need for urgent intervention and sets out a collaborative roadmap to address this crisis, defining the vital roles that owners, breeders, service providers, advisors, policy-makers and the public can play in driving change. We believe it is by working together to raise public awareness, shift consumer demand, champion responsible breeding and strengthen legal protections, that we can create a future where animals are no longer bred to suffer for the sake of appearance.

Whilst more work must be done to educate potential owners, provide better care and awareness for these animals, we must also encourage adoption rather than powering the breeding market and fuelling over-supply. We must shift demand and consumer trends, whilst collaborating with key stakeholders to create a movement for better health.

Whilst all these factors are critical, there is also an urgent need for the UK Government to step in and provide adequate guardrails and regulations to better protect the pets being bred, by strengthening legislation. The current legislative framework in the UK does not sufficiently protect pets from harmful breeding trends for profit.

It is all too true that this is creating widespread suffering for animals; devastating emotional and financial costs for owners and families; and charities often picking up the pieces when such animals are neglected or abandoned.

With the strategy committing to evaluating key animal welfare issues in England, we understand that DEFRA intends to undertake a public consultation on improvements to the health and welfare standards that all licensed breeders of dogs must meet. This is a welcome step forward and an opportunity to promote health over profit in the dog breeding industry. Additionally, the Innate Health Assessment developed by experts at the All Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW) provides further support in addressing some health risks in these animals. This tool could play a role in improving dog welfare, but would need to become a statutory requirement in order to fully protect future generations of pets.

We fully support the promised consultation on dog breeding - but we also ask you to go beyond that. In order to fully commit to tackling the problem of breeding for extreme traits, we must prevent the harm being caused to all affected companion animal species. Therefore, we also encourage an entire review of existing animal welfare legislation with the aim of closing the current loopholes that allow the breeding, sale and suffering of these pets to perpetuate.

We would encourage DEFRA to launch the promised consultation at the earliest opportunity to prevent the needless suffering faced by animals with extreme features.

Good health and wellbeing should always be at the heart of any pet breeding, and breeding for extreme traits can cause years of suffering that no animal - or their owner - deserves to endure.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Samantha Gaines, Head of Companion Animals at the RSPCA