

Many rescue dog owners think they are imported (wrongly) into UK via Pet Travel Scheme

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Many owners of rescue dogs imported into the UK believe they arrive through the European Union (EU) Pet Travel Scheme, which has less stringent requirements than the EU Balai Directive, which should be applied for these animals, find the results of a large survey, published in *Vet Record*.

The EU Pet Travel Scheme is intended only for pets, although it is thought that many of the 300,000 dogs imported under it, don't fall into this category.

The scheme is relatively simple and cheap, but only requires the dog to be microchipped, vaccinated for rabies, and treated by a vet for a tapeworm *Echinococcus multilocularis*, which can be fatal if passed on to people.

The Balai Directive is for commercially traded dogs, which includes those where ownership changes, as in [rescue](#) dogs brought over by charities.

This requires the animal to come from registered or approved premises, be microchipped, vaccinated against rabies, given a health check by a qualified vet 48 hours before despatch and certified with an Intra Trade Animal Health Certificate (ITAHC).

In recent years, the number of dogs imported legally and illegally into the UK has risen, and often involves dogs rescued from southern or eastern Europe.

To try and find out why people in the UK import rescue dogs, and how, the researchers uploaded a survey for 3 weeks in 2017, targeting Facebook groups for dog rescuers bringing animals in from abroad.

Some 3,080 responses were received, most of which were from women (93%). Around two thirds of respondents already had one other dog (67%).

Eighty one different breeds from 44 countries were imported, with a third (34%) imported from Romania alone, followed by Cyprus (22%) and Spain (19%).

Most owners thought their dogs had been put up for adoption after being found on the street (61%). The rest had been rescued from animal cruelty, given to a shelter by their previous owners, or born in a dog shelter. A few (1%) had been rescued from the dog meat trade.

Owners said that most of the dogs (89%; 2,726) had been imported through the EU Pet Travel Scheme; only 1% (37) indicated the Balai Directive, despite one in five respondents saying they had looked at UK government website information on the correct procedures. A further 8% of respondents didn't know which method had been used.

Most (92%) respondents said they had adopted a rescue dog through an organisation, 40% of which were based abroad.

The most common method of finding a rescue dog was through social media, with the most common reason given for adoption, coming across a particular dog they wanted (59%).

But concerns about greater likelihood of suffering for a dog based abroad (39%) and the risk of the dog being put down (38%) were also cited.

Strict requirements to adopt from UK rescue organisations were also highlighted as barriers to adopting from the UK, which suggests that a review of organisational adoption processes may be required, say the researchers.

Some 15% (79 out of 533) of the dogs tested for Leishmania parasitic infection, which can cause leishmaniasis in people, tested positive. But infections such as tapeworm and other worms, were also picked up.

The researchers emphasise that their research relied on information supplied by the owners, and wasn't objectively confirmed, so may not have been entirely accurate.

Nevertheless, they point out: "These results indicate a lack of understanding (or application) of the laws relating to the importation of rescue dogs from abroad."

Clear guidelines on animal travel laws and stricter checks on imported rescue dogs are needed, "to ensure protection against the importation of exotic diseases that pose a risk to animal and [human health](#) in the UK," they conclude.

BVA President Daniella Dos Santos said: "This important study demonstrates the pressing need for stricter pet travel laws and more stringent enforcement to safeguard the health and welfare of both animals and the wider public in the UK.

"Vets are concerned about cases of new or rare diseases they are seeing in practice, such as leishmaniasis, ehrlichiosis, and heartworm. These are

associated with rescuing so-called 'Trojan [dogs](#)' with unknown health histories from abroad.

"Our advice to anyone thinking of rescuing a dog is to consider adopting a dog from a UK rehoming charity or welfare organisation instead or financially supporting organisations abroad to rescue and rehabilitate stray [animals](#) locally."

More information: Importing rescue dogs into the UK: reasons, methods and welfare considerations, *Vet Record*, [DOI: 10.1136/vetrec-2019-105380](#)

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