



Pets change lives
We change theirs



Covid-19
Pets and pet owners
Blue Cross briefing



Foreword

Pets and pet owners up and down the country are having to get used to a 'new normal' and it is likely that there will be a long term impact on the welfare of the nation's pets as a result of Covid-19. This briefing aims to give a brief overview of the impact this deadly virus is having in these areas. This has been an incredibly challenging time for us all and we recognise that the only way we are going to get through this period and support pets and pet owners across the country is by working together as a sector with the Government.

As the new CEO of Blue Cross, I look forward to working with you in the future to support the recovery of the animal welfare sector. The last three months have been unlike anything we have ever experienced before as a charity. The impact of Covid-19 has been felt by every part of our organisation from our frontline services in rehoming, clinical and education to our income generation teams like retail and fundraising. The impact for us as a charity is likely to be felt for many years. Not only has Blue Cross been affected, we also know that the animal welfare sector more widely has been heavily impacted by the crisis.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Chris Burghes". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Chris Burghes
CEO

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on many people's lives in the UK: loved family members lost in horrible circumstances; families sundered by lockdown restrictions; normal working routines upended; jobs lost, livelihoods threatened, children's education disrupted.

The social and economic impact is becoming increasingly apparent:

- **GDP fell by 20.4% in April, the largest fall since monthly records began in 1997¹**
- **As of 14 June 2020, 9.1 million employees had been furloughed through the Government's Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS)²**
- **In May 2020, 2.8 million people claimed unemployment related benefits. Between March and May, there has been an increase of 1.6 million claimants³**
- **The economic fallout of the pandemic could leave 1.1 million more people below the pre-Covid poverty line at year end, including a further 200,000 children⁴**
- **The Centre for Mental Health estimates that, if the economic impact is similar to that of the post 2008 recession, then we could expect 500,000 additional people experiencing mental health problems⁵**
- **The British Red Cross reports that 41% of UK adults feel lonelier since the lockdown began⁶**

Financial loss to charities

The charitable sector as a whole has been negatively impacted: Pro Bono Economics estimates that charities are facing a £10.1 billion funding gap over the next six months as a result of Covid-19, with incomes expected to drop by £6.7 billion at the same time as demand for their support rises by the equivalent of £3.4 billion.⁷

Blue Cross and Covid-19

Like all animal welfare charities, Blue Cross has been affected by the pandemic and the lockdown. All our shops were closed, some staff were furloughed and revenue was lost: Blue Cross reported a loss of £1m in income from stores closing in March to the end of May. Our Community and Events Team is expecting a gross loss of £600,000, with a further £600,000 loss from face to face fundraising activities. Overall, Blue Cross is forecasting a loss of £4m income in this financial year.

Blue Cross volunteers play such a major role in our work; however, 75% were unable to perform the activities they enjoy so much.⁸

Our frontline services were similarly affected:

Recommendation:

- **Clarity within Government Covid-19 safety employer guidelines about which guidelines apply equally to volunteers.**
- **Blue Cross has benefited greatly from the support the government have provided to the retail sector during the crisis and is keen to continue this positive dialogue to ensure our charity shops are able to remain profitable.**
- **Blue Cross would like the Government to consider temporarily increasing gift aid rates for the charitable sector from 25% to 33% for the next two years, allowing the charity to continue to deliver vital services in these challenging times.**

Clinical

Social distancing renders much normal veterinary work impossible, so Blue Cross hospitals had to prioritise emergency cases. New procedures had to be devised to enable Blue Cross's clinical team to help pet owners.

Virtual appointments, where a vet carries out a video or telephone consult with an owner, are up 485%. However, due to the cancellation of all non-urgent veterinary procedures, as of July 2020, Blue Cross now has a backlog of over 500 operations. The welfare of the animals waiting for treatment is increasingly compromised.

'The Blue Cross clinical teams have adapted to this new way of working extremely quickly and have been able to ensure our clients and their pets still get the best care and advice' Alison Thomas, Head of Veterinary Services.

Rehoming

Blue Cross has 14 rehoming centres and rehoming and advice units and these were also badly affected by the lockdown: centres were forced to close their doors, and, with less staff on site, we were unable to admit as many pets as normal. A new way of working was developed, with virtual 'meets', many more pets cared for in foster homes and delivery of pets directly to their new owner. This enabled teams to maintain social distancing, admit pets most in need and start to rehome pets again. Blue Cross has rehomed 50% less pets than the same period in 2019⁹.

1 www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/articles/coronavirusandtheimpactonoutputintheukconomy/april2020#main-points

2 Coronavirus: Impact on the Labour Market – House of Commons Library Briefing Paper 8898: researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8898/CBP-8898.pdf

3 *ibid*

4 Institute of Public Policy Research: <https://www.ippr.org/news-and-media/press-releases/1-1-million-more-people-face-poverty-at-end-of-2020-as-a-result-of-coronavirus-pandemic-finds-ippr>

5 Covid-19 and the Nation's Mental Health: Forecasting needs and risks in the UK: May 2020: www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-05/CentreforMentalHealth_COVID_MH_Forecasting_May20.pdf

6 'Life after lockdown: Tackling loneliness among those left behind': <https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/we-speak-up-for-change/life-after-lockdown-tackling-loneliness>

7 www.probonoeconomics.com/news/charities-facing-%C2%A3101-billion-funding-gap-over-next-six-months

8 Figures for active volunteers Feb 2020 compared with May 2020

9 March to May 2020 compared to March to May 2019

Pets and Covid-19

With so many people unable to work, and locked down in their homes, owning or caring for a pet has been seen by many as an option for helping to cope with the pandemic. Between Monday 16 March and Sunday 22 March we saw a 45% increase in the number of short-term fosters compared to the same period in 2019.

'This surge in fostering requests shows not only people looking for the companionship of a pet but also people's desire to support charities during this difficult time. Their support has enabled us to keep helping pets during the lockdown' Kelly Grellier, Director of Rehoming.

The joy and companionship pet ownership can bring will provide much-needed solace to individuals, helping them with feelings of loneliness and anxiety. Our survey showed that 89% of survey respondents who self-identified as suffering from anxiety said their pets had benefitted their wellbeing during lockdown. This compares to 84% of the population generally.¹⁰

Blue Cross is concerned, however, that this may have some deleterious consequences:

Breeding and selling of pets

The fundamental problem we face in the UK is that supply of puppies and kittens does not meet the demand – and there is evidence that the demand for puppies has increased during the pandemic:

- **Dogs Trust report that online searches about getting a puppy surged by 120% in the month after lockdown was announced; searches online for "adopt a puppy" saw an even bigger rise of 133%¹¹**
- **The Kennel Club said searches via its "find a puppy" tool had risen by 53% between February and March. Searches between 16 and 23 March were up 37% compared with the previous week and up 84% on the same week last year¹²**

Online sales


At a time when less rehoming can take place, and while demand is so high, many animals are therefore being bought online without owners necessarily considering long term costs or commitments. Despite lockdown, there remains a high number of puppies available to buy online with over 400 adverts placed daily. The market for puppies remains strong: the prices of popular breeds like French bulldogs have risen over 40% from an average of £1,750 in 2018 compared to staggering prices today of an average of £2,500.

Concerns regarding buying a puppy safely

Responsible breeders are not breeding more to fill this demand, and at best only cater for a small proportion of the market. Lockdown restrictions have also made it more difficult for prospective buyers to identify unscrupulous sellers.

Rise in imports of puppies

Increased illegal imports to meet demand for pets leads to increased welfare, disease and safety risks. Pets continue to be imported in significant numbers to the UK during the crisis, whether from overseas breeding operations or rescues.

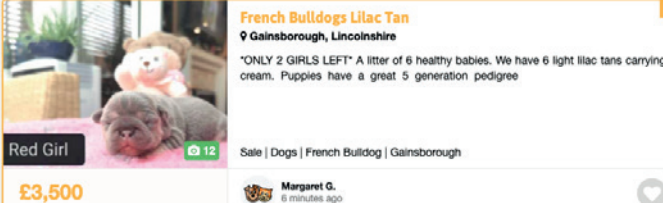


4 Female English Bulldog Pups Available.
♀ Cardiff, Cardiff
Here I have 4 beautiful female English bulldog puppy's for sale all pups will be dwkc registered 1st jabs with micro chip Vet checked Wormed and flead

Sale | Dogs | English Bulldog | Cardiff

£6,000

Owen G.
23 hours ago

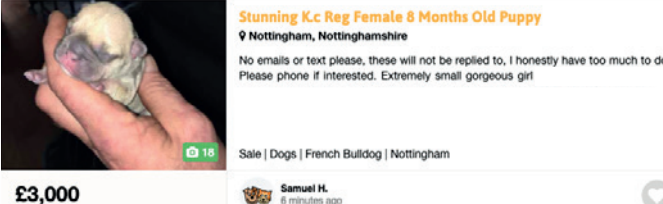


French Bulldogs Lilac Tan
♀ Gainsborough, Lincolnshire
"ONLY 2 GIRLS LEFT" A litter of 6 healthy babies. We have 6 light lilac tans carrying cream. Puppies have a great 5 generation pedigree

Sale | Dogs | French Bulldog | Gainsborough

£3,500

Margaret G.
6 minutes ago



Stunning Kc Reg Female 6 Months Old Puppy
♀ Nottingham, Nottinghamshire
No emails or text please, these will not be replied to, I honestly have too much to do. Please phone if interested. Extremely small gorgeous girl

Sale | Dogs | French Bulldog | Nottingham

£3,000

Samuel H.
6 minutes ago

Recommendation:

- **The Government should determine the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on issues such as puppy farming, puppy smuggling and unscrupulous selling of puppies and kittens by third parties.**

¹⁰ All figures for the YouGov survey, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,946 dog, cat and small pet owners. Fieldwork was undertaken between 28th May - 1st June 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of the dog, cat and small pet owner population by gender, age, social grade and region.

¹¹ www.dogstrust.org.uk/news-events/news/2020/dogs-trust-advises-public-against-being-dogfished

¹² www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/apr/06/coronavirus-lockdown-lucys-law-puppy-new-pet-decision?utm_term=RWRpdG9yaWFsX0d1YXJkaWVufV9kYXV1S19XZWRZGF5cy0yMDA0MDY%3D&utm_source=esp&utm_medium=Email&CMP=GTUK_email&utm_campaign=GuardianTodayUK

Horses and Covid-19

Even before the pandemic struck, equine welfare charities were very concerned about horse welfare. Back in 2012, these charities declared a 'horse crisis' and, although the situation has improved since then, there are still major issues of equine welfare in the UK: the number of horses deemed at risk, for instance, is estimated by the equine welfare sector at around 7,000, outpacing the 3,000–4,000 spaces available at rescue and rehoming charities.

Covid-19 has the potential to worsen this situation, although it will be winter before the full effects become apparent; this is when caring for equines becomes more labour and resource intensive, with increased costs. The National Equine Welfare Council (NEWC) and the Association of Dog and Cat Homes (ADCH), both of which Blue Cross is a member, have conducted a survey on the 'Impact of Covid 19 on Equine Rescue Organisations'. It found that the initial ban and subsequent restrictions on rehoming will only have added pressure and additional costs to an already overloaded sector:

- **66% of those who responded had stopped or reduced rehoming, while only 38% of all rescues had stopped taking in animals**
- **51% report they had reduced access to non-essential veterinary interventions and, more worryingly, 32% said they had reduced access to essential veterinary care**

Recommendation:

- **Funding for local authorities and enforcement agencies, with clear direction that equine welfare should be considered a priority, to ensure they can help respond to a potential increase in welfare concerns as a result of Covid-19.**

Pet bereavement

The lockdown and social distancing necessitated veterinary services introducing measures that inevitably impacted pet owners at the most sensitive and emotional times: emergency surgery and the end of the pet's life. In normal times, this is the most difficult and traumatic aspect of owning a beloved family pet; when that pet is euthanised without the presence of the owner, the distress can be considerably worsened. Blue Cross found that:

- **40% of pet owners who had to have their pet put to sleep (PTS) during lockdown were unable to be with them**
- **40% of pet owners who had to have their pet PTS during lockdown believed that the restrictions (e.g. having to social distance at the vet) made this more difficult to deal with**
- **52% of pet owners who had to have their pet PTS during lockdown stated that their veterinary practice did not recommend any support to help them cope with the loss of the pet.¹³**

Blue Cross's Pet Bereavement Support Service (PBSS) has provided an invaluable service, by phone and email, to grieving owners during the crisis: between March and May, the service supported 2,797 people.



¹³ All figures for the YouGov survey, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,946 dog, cat and small pet owners. Fieldwork was undertaken between 28th May - 1st June 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of the dog, cat and small pet owner population by gender, age, social grade and region.

Pet Behaviour

The pandemic brings its own challenges for pets.

'It is clear that lockdown has had a massive impact on both the behaviour of our pets and the needs of owners in terms of trying to deal with them. In response to this, Blue Cross has developed our behaviour line in order to help as many owners and pets as possible during this difficult and unsettling time. It would seem that the huge change in our lifestyles has placed a strain on the relationships we have with some of our pets, and the increased exposure to physical contact, overhandling and a lack of respite from busy home life has resulted in these types of behavioural problems developing.'

Ryan Neile, Head of Behaviour Service Operations
Socialisation

Socialisation is a crucial part of a puppy's development. Usually, this would include meeting lots of different people, other dogs, going to regular puppy classes and exposure to a wide range of situations and environments. Covid-19 restrictions, though, mean that puppies are unable to be socialised in all the ways we ordinarily would and, as a result, animals, particularly younger pets, are developing behavioural problems during lockdown - and will do so further when owners return to work. These problems could in turn lead to more puppies being abandoned due to owners being unable to cope.

The Blue Cross behaviour call line has received 200 calls during the lockdown period. Of these calls, 51% were around aggression to people.

Separation anxiety

The question also arises: what will happen to pets when the normal routine and social lives of their owners resume? Pets will have become used to having their owners around virtually all day and enjoying the extra attention this will have brought.

"When this is all over, and everybody goes back to work and school, I'm going to have a dog that is suddenly wondering where everybody has gone."¹⁴

This could lead pets to develop what is known as 'separation anxiety' which can manifest itself in certain behaviours: hyperactivity, whining, increased heart rate. A survey by Dogs for Good found that over half of dog owners (54%) are worried about 'separation anxiety' when they return to work¹⁵. This is supported by a Blue Cross survey which found:

- **The most reported behavioural issue during lockdown for dog owners was separation anxiety when you leave the home (e.g. barking/howling, toileting, destroying things)**
- **Of those that reported their dog exhibiting separation anxiety, 56% stated that this behaviour had increased during lockdown¹⁶**

'Our behaviour line has helped many people to better understand their pets needs and how to make the necessary adjustments in order for everyone (our pets included) to cope with this new way of life. We could see behaviour problems with our pets exacerbated as the lockdown is gradually lifted, so we are also helping owners to prepare their pets for the new normal'

Ryan Neile, Head of Behaviour Service Operations

Animal cruelty

Blue Cross is also concerned that, sadly, there could be a very disturbing aspect to the lockdown: a rise in the incidence of animal cruelty and neglect. This could be down to:

- **New, inexperienced owners being unable to cope with their recently purchased pet**
- **Breeders and suppliers being unable to sell animals, whether puppies, kittens, small furies and exotics, because of the lockdown and being unable or unwilling to care for the increasing numbers in their premises**
- **Animal rescue centres/sanctuaries becoming overwhelmed due to staff shortages and financial hardship**

The RSPCA reported in May that, since the lockdown began, rescuers had dealt with 27,507 incidents of animal cruelty, neglect and suffering in animals which need help¹⁷. A sector wide survey led by the ADCH and NEWC has found that 14% of equine rescue organisations are already reporting more calls about cruelty to animals while only 5% are receiving fewer calls. The Links Group – a coalition of organisations focussed on the link between domestic and animal abuse - has written to the Vet Record and the Vet Times expressing its concern that there may be an increase in such cases, often allied to domestic abuse within the home:

"the family pet is often part of the domestic abuse cycle with perpetrators using the pet to exert power and control over their victim."¹⁸

Recommendation:

- **The Animals and Wildlife (Penalties, Protections and Powers) (Scotland) Bill has just passed through the Scottish Parliament. Blue Cross urges the Government to follow this example and take forward the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill and increase sentences for animal cruelty in England and Wales.**

14 www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/03/pets-helping-coronavirus-crisis-animals

15 www.dogsforgood.org/2020/05/owners-fear-for-their-dogs-wellbeing-as-lockdown-eases/

16 All figures for the YouGov survey, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,946 dog, cat and small pet owners. Fieldwork was undertaken between 28th May - 1st June 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of the dog, cat and small pet owner population by gender, age, social grade and region.

17 www.rspca.org.uk/whatwedo/latest/news/details/-/articleName/rspca-receives-40-abandonment-reports-a-day-during-coronavirus-lockdown?utm_source=Twitter&utm_medium=Social&utm_content=CoronavirusAbandonmentReports&utm_campaign=Rescues

18 <https://thelinksgroup.org.uk/news/f/unintended-consequences-of-Covid-19-lockdown>

Veterinary Care

Microchipping

Microchipping is a legal requirement for dogs but it was not deemed an essential activity by the veterinary profession so the number receiving a chip will have reduced meaning that some new puppy owners aren't currently able to get their dog chipped. This could make it far more difficult to reunite pets with their rightful owners if they are lost or stolen. It is not compulsory for cats to be microchipped, although the Government has recently consulted on the issue and Blue Cross strongly supports making it compulsory.

Blue Cross cat microchipping figures are down 73% so far this year.

Recommendation:

- **Microchip databases to work in partnership with the sector to ensure all new puppy owners are able to get their animals microchipped as soon as is practicable.**
- **The Government should act on its manifesto commitment to "bring forward cat microchipping."¹⁹**

Neutering

For cats, the lack of neutering could lead to higher numbers of unwanted litters, particularly as we enter kitten season. It is difficult to predict how many more kittens may be born due to the lockdown restrictions; however, last year six of the leading cat welfare charities neutered a total of 216,261 cats. Cats Protection had 1,210 downloads of its advice pages on pregnant cats, birth and caring for kittens between April and June this year compared to 114 for the same period in 2019. The charity estimates that up to an additional 84,000 kittens could be born, based on the number of cats the charity neutered last year and other factors.²⁰

Blue Cross neutering figures for cats are down 67% so far this year, so we are concerned that the lack of neutering could lead to an influx of unwanted cats to animal welfare charities once the crisis has eased.



Vaccination

Routine vaccinations – parvovirus for dogs, for example - have also been suspended. The Animal Welfare Commission (AWC) has highlighted that:

"Concern is growing as to the length of the delay before they can start again and the risk of disease spread once social distancing rules are relaxed."²¹

The AWC advises that "vaccination programmes need to recommence before increased social mixing of animals occurs."

Blue Cross vaccinations are down 74% so far this year.²²

'At the start of lockdown we know large numbers of puppies were unable to get their first vaccinations, it is possible that we will start to see local outbreaks of diseases such as parvo as unvaccinated start to be out in the community more.'

Alison Thomas, Head of Veterinary Services.

Recommendation:

- **The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee to hold an inquiry into the impact of the pandemic on companion animal welfare, and the organisations that exist to uphold this crucial social function.**
- **Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to work in partnership with the devolved administrations to undertake a thorough and wide-ranging assessment of the impact of the outbreak on animal welfare across the United Kingdom.**

19 Get Brexit Done: Unleash Britain's Potential https://assets-global.website-files.com/5da42e2cae7ebd3f8bde353c/5dda924905da587992a064ba_Conservative%202019%20Manifesto.pdf

20 Animal Welfare during Covid-19 – EDM 544 <https://edm.parliament.uk/early-day-motion/57018/animal-welfare-during-covid19>

21 AWC Opinion on the Animal Welfare Issues related to Covid-19 – Animal Welfare Committee https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/889858/AWC_Opinion_on_the_Animal_Welfare_Issues_related_to_Covid-19.pdf

22 Figures March to May 2020 to March to May 2019

Impact on wider animal welfare sector

Initially, there was a degree of uncertainty about the impact lockdown would have on pet owners, and the relationship between them and their pets.

There was also some confusion about the potential of transmission from pets to humans. This uncertainty was addressed by the animal welfare sector under the aegis of the Canine and Feline Sector Group (CFSG), of which Blue Cross is a member. The CFSG came together to provide infographics and advice for pet owners, and other welfare charities, on issues such as pets and self-isolation and dog walking and Covid-19.²³

However, the Covid-19 crisis has the potential for significant animal welfare risks:



Potential closure of animal rescue centres and sanctuaries

Blue Cross is concerned that a number of animal rescues could be forced to close and this will place further pressure on the remaining rescues to step in and care for those animals, each of whom will be trying to manage in a tighter financial position than before. The ADCH carried out a survey of rescue and rehoming organisations²⁴ in the early stages of the pandemic and found:

- 100% said their income had reduced
- 61% said they have reduced staff numbers (the majority through furloughing)
- 55% said that fundraising income had already reduced by over 50%
- Just 52% of members said they had three months of income and reserves remaining, whilst 32% had less than three months, and some significantly less than this

Claire Horton, ADCH Chairman, said:

“There are over 1,200 animal rescue and rehoming centres throughout the UK, doing their very best to care for hundreds of thousands of unwanted and abandoned animals each year. Their closure or reduction in capacity would be catastrophic for animals in need.”

The ADCH established an Emergency Fund, paid for initially by major animal welfare charities Battersea and Dogs Trust, and partners Mars and PetPlan.²⁵ This is targeted specifically at smaller organisations, with a view to making grants available for those turning over less than £500,000 per annum to help them get through the Covid-19 outbreak. ADCH is looking to find other sources to increase the Fund and ensure that as many rescues as need it can be supported through the economic shocks of the coming weeks and months.

In the longer term, the viability and sustainability of many charities will be threatened, given that many fixed costs cannot be reduced, while future impacts of the crisis will be more difficult to manage. A loss of income is likely to continue long after Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, particularly if unemployment rises with the knock-on effects on loss of donation income for charities.

Recommendation:

- The Government should bring forward long-promised legislation to regulate animal rescue centres and sanctuaries.
- Targeted investment for small, medium and large charities to ensure critical capacity is sustained in the sector so that animals and their owners can be supported both during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Greater demand for clinical services

In 2020 and 2021, the sector is expecting significantly increased demand for our services, including more animals needing homing or veterinary treatment, whilst also facing severely reduced income. Among pet owners receiving universal credit, 13% said they, or someone in their household, started to claim this since the COVID-19 crisis began.²⁶

²³ www.cfsg.org.uk/coronavirus/_layouts/15/start.aspx#

²⁴ www.adch.org.uk/coronavirus/publications_and_pr/adch-launches-coronavirus-emergency-fund-for-rescues-in-need/

²⁵ www.adch.org.uk/adch-coronavirus-emergency-fund

²⁶ All figures for the YouGov survey, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,946 dog, cat and small pet owners. Fieldwork was undertaken between 28th May - 1st June 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of the dog, cat and small pet owner population by gender, age, social grade and region.

Potential long-term problems

So far, there has been a reduction in strays or abandonment to rescues. This is, however an illusory picture emanating from both the perception some members of the public will have held that intake was suspended by charities at the same time they were not rehoming; and because owners were at home for an unusual amount of time. It will not last, and all charities are expecting a possible surge of relinquishment in the later months of 2020.

Demand for the sector's services is expected to rise both during and after Covid-19 subsides given the economic pressures facing the country, The demand will be directly related to the worsening economic situation with higher levels of abandonment of animals, need for low-cost veterinary services and increasing unwanted litters as veterinary practices have had to prioritise emergency care.

There are historical precedents for this: following the 2008 banking crisis Blue Cross saw a 27% rise in abandoned or stray cats.

Recommendation:

- **The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to work with the animal welfare sector to help prevent a significant increase in demand for rescue services in the latter part of 2020, or whenever Covid-19 restrictions ease.**

**For further information please email:
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bluecross.org.uk/petsandcovid

