

Joint BVA, BVNA, BSAVA and SPVS response to the Defra consultation on Cat and Dog Microchipping and Scanning in England

17 February 2021

Who we are

1. The British Veterinary Association (BVA) is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom. With over 18,000 members, our primary aim is to represent, support and champion the interests of the United Kingdom's veterinary profession. We therefore take a keen interest in all issues affecting the profession, including animal health and welfare, public health, regulatory issues and employment matters.
2. The British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) is the largest membership body of veterinary nurses in the UK with over 6,000 members. It is also the official representative body for veterinary nursing in the UK. In addition to support for its Membership, key activities of the BVNA include an Annual Congress in October and a wide range of accredited CPD courses, including online seminars. The BVNA also publishes the VNJ (Veterinary Nursing Journal).
3. The British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) exists to promote excellence in small animal practice through education and science and is the largest specialist division of BVA representing nearly 10,000 members.
4. The Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) is the division of the BVA with a primary focus on matters concerning vets in practice and the practices where they work. SPVS is a not-for-profit organisation for professionals within the veterinary industry. SPVS promotes responsible leadership by providing tools and resources that enable members to develop and expand their business and leadership skills.
5. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation on compulsory cat microchipping and potential scanning reform.

Summary of our positions

6. Compulsory cat microchipping
We recognise that the microchipping of cats has the potential to improve animal welfare and promote responsible ownership.¹ We therefore support the microchipping of cats as a safe, effective, and permanent way to identify individual animals, as well as a way to facilitate the quick identification of lost pets if requiring veterinary treatment, and reunite lost pets with their owners.
7. However, we currently have concerns about making cat microchipping compulsory. Any proposed legislation to introduce compulsory microchipping for cats must be clear in its aims, what public or animal welfare issue it is trying to address and how it will be enforced. To ensure successful implementation, adequate resources must be in place to support enforcement.
8. Crucially, before considering the introduction of compulsory microchipping for cats, the UK governments must address, and learn from, the issues that are currently preventing the effective implementation of the Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015. These include:
 - Ensuring the responsibilities of keepers, new keepers, vets and local authorities are clearly and consistently communicated to all stakeholders, including encouraging owners to make sure that their contact details are up to date.

¹ To ensure that microchipping is successful in its aims, it is important that all microchips are ISO compliant.

- Establishing a central microchipping database, or a single point of entry to query the existing multiple real-time databases that currently exist.
9. As part of this, Defra should first consider and address any issues identified by the Post Implementation Review of the 2015 compulsory dog microchipping regulations, before progressing compulsory cat microchipping proposals based on this model. [Read the BVA, BVNA, BSAVA position on the microchipping of cats in full.](#)
10. Potential scanning reform
We strongly oppose proposals to introduce blanket or indiscriminate compulsory scanning, on animal welfare and public safety grounds. We recognise there has been some criticism of the profession from campaigners calling for compulsory scanning. Unfortunately, such campaigns misunderstand the powers of vets and the potential welfare harms of compulsory scanning to both animals and humans (eg those fleeing with their pets from domestic abuse).
11. Veterinary surgeons are obliged to scan a dog for a microchip before rabies vaccination and the completion of an Animal Health Certificate, or before completing other official documentation that requires identification of the animal (eg official health screening tests).
12. In addition, we already recommend that veterinary practices should scan for a microchip under the following circumstances:
- **Prior to microchip implantation** – this helps to ensure that there is no other microchip present.
 - **On presentation of a lost, stray or apparently unowned animal** – this facilitates reunification with the owner when checked against the national databases, providing the owner has kept their details up-to-date.
 - **On first presentation at the practice** – this ensures that the animal is correctly identified when checked against the national databases and serves as a useful reminder to the new client to ensure that they keep their details up-to-date. The microchip details should be recorded on the practice database – often lost pets are local to the practice and a check against the practice's own database can provide a quick solution.
 - **Before travelling abroad** – this is to ensure that the microchip is still working and has not migrated significantly and would not normally include a check against the national database(s).
 - **Before rabies vaccination or official certification** – vets are obliged to scan for a microchip before administering a rabies vaccination and completing an Animal Health Certificate, or before completing other official documentation that requires identification of the animal (eg official health screening tests)
 - **Annually as routine** (eg at the time of the annual check-up and/or booster vaccination) – this is also to ensure that the microchip is still working and has not migrated significantly. Although it would not normally include a check against the national databases it should include a check against practice records and provides an opportunity to remind the owner to keep their details up-to-date.
 - **On admission for treatment or hospitalisation where appropriate** – this is part of good clinical practice to ensure that the patient is matched to clinical records. This would not normally include a check against the national database(s).
 - **Prior to euthanasia if considered appropriate** – this is part of good clinical practice to ensure that, where there is any element of doubt, the patient is matched to clinical records. This would not normally include a check against the national database(s) and in many cases may not be appropriate.
 - **On presentation of wildlife** – this is to identify any wild animals part of a local or national, wildlife rehabilitation or research programme.

13. However, as each case will be different, it is essential that vets can exercise their own professional judgement in these situations in order to safeguard animal welfare and public safety.

Question 1: Would you like to see compulsory cat microchipping introduced in England?

14. We recognise that the microchipping of cats has the potential to improve animal welfare and promote responsible ownership.² The ability to individually identify owned cats and trace the keeper has the potential to improve animal welfare and promote responsible ownership by enabling:
- Lost, stray and stolen cats to be returned to their owners more rapidly³;
 - Quicker identification of injured cats meaning that owners are contacted more quickly for veterinary treatment to be agreed and undertaken promptly;
 - Quicker and more accurate identification of dead cats and notification to owners;
 - Health test results to be correctly attributed to an individual animal;
 - Population data regarding cats to be collected allowing more accurate prevalence data to be calculated;
 - Tracing and identification of animals in the event of a disease outbreak, such as Rabies;
 - Reinforcement of responsibilities of the owner under the Animal Welfare Act;
 - Microchip activated technology, such as pet feeders or cat flaps, to support weight management and prevent unwanted animals the home;
 - Easier detection of cat theft;
 - Easier identification and subsequent arrest of owners culpable of animal cruelty; and
 - Reduction of potential for fraud at cat shows.
15. However, we currently have concerns about making cat microchipping compulsory. Any proposed legislation to introduce compulsory microchipping for cats must be clear in its aims, what public or animal welfare issue it is trying to address and how it will be enforced. To ensure successful implementation, adequate resources must be in place to support enforcement. It is also important to recognise that microchipping is not definitive proof of ownership.
16. We note that the rationale for introducing the compulsory microchipping of dogs - to ensure public safety, to prevent nuisance and to control stray dogs - does not apply to the same extent, or in the same way, to cats as free roaming animals, or their owners.⁴ We would also question the success of introducing microchipping of dogs for public health reasons given recent research indicates an increase in dog bites.⁵
17. As outlined in [Cats and the Law: A plain English guide](#), the law accepts that cats will follow their free roaming instincts, therefore owners are unlikely to be held responsible for any damage that their cat causes where it can be argued that it results from a cat's natural behaviour. It is therefore unlikely that compulsory microchipping would reduce potential nuisances caused by roaming cats.
18. Assessing the effectiveness of existing compulsory microchipping regulations
According to the consultation document, the primary policy objective for compulsory cat microchipping is to enable the quick reunification of lost cats with their owners. However, we are concerned that if compulsory cat microchipping legislation replicates the current model of compulsory dog microchipping, it will not be effective in delivering this objective.

² To ensure that microchipping is successful in its aims, it is important that all microchips are ISO compliant.

³ In the Voice of the Veterinary Profession Autumn 2019 survey 84% of vets surveyed (535 base) said that the most common reason for being unable to reunite stray cats with their owners was the absence of identifier information.

⁴ [Cats and the Law: A plain English guide](#),

⁵ <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/research/news/articles/adult-hospital-admissions-for-dog-bites-triple-in-20-years/>

19. There is currently a total of 15 national databases with which pet owners can choose to register their animals. These databases do not currently share their data with each other, nor is there a central database. This is a growing issue, which threatens one of the key aims of compulsory microchipping of dogs, and the central policy objective of compulsory cat microchipping proposals – to help reunite lost animals with their owners.
20. Our Voice of the Veterinary Profession 2019 showed that the most common reason for being unable to reunite stray dogs with their owner was that the identifier information on the microchip database was out of date or incorrect (68% of vets, base 535).
21. Although Check-a-Chip helps to identify which database holds the registration for a particular microchip number, it is not a central database.
22. For veterinary practice, cross-checking with such a large number of databases is an administrative burden which challenges already stretched vets and vet nurses, whose limited contact time with their clients and patients is better spent providing preventative healthcare advice. In addition, practices may not be aware of new databases that are established or ones that cease trading. We therefore question the potential effectiveness of introducing a similar model for compulsory cat microchipping.
23. For compulsory microchipping legislation to be effective, it is essential that there is one central UK microchip database that is maintained and up-to-date. However, we recognise that this may be a challenge given the proliferation of commercial databases in recent years, and so the implementation of one central UK microchip database is unlikely. Instead, we are calling for:
 - All existing and future commercial microchip databases to register with EuroPetNet (or relevant equivalent). Petlog is currently the only UK database to be registered⁶
 - Improved enforcement in relation to those databases which do not meet government standards.
 - Exploration of the potential for setting up a single point of entry to query existing multiple real-time databases. The facility to enter a microchip number into a single web-based portal that could check all microchip databases would minimise the need for a manual search, increasing efficiency and protecting commercial interests.
24. Crucially, before considering the introduction of compulsory microchipping for cats, the UK Governments must address, and learn from, the issues that are currently preventing the effective implementation of compulsory dog microchipping regulations across the UK^{7,8,9,10}. In particular, the number of separate national databases currently in existence.
25. As part of this, Defra should first consider and address any issues identified by the Post Implementation Review of the 2015 compulsory dog microchipping regulations, before progressing compulsory cat microchipping proposals based on this model.

Question 2: Do you agree that a requirement for compulsory cat microchipping should be limited to owned cats?

26. We recognise that it would be difficult to implement compulsory microchipping for wild-living, domestic cats who have no identifiable owner (eg. feral or stray cats). It is therefore appropriate to exclude feral or stray cats from proposed compulsory cat microchipping legislation.

⁶ <https://www.europetnet.com/member-organisations.html>

⁷ The Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015

⁸ Microchipping of Dogs (Scotland) Regulations 2016

⁹ The Microchipping of Dogs (Wales) Regulations 2015

¹⁰ The Dogs (Licensing and Identification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

27. While we understand the rationale for limiting legislation to owned cats with identifiable keepers, we remain concerned that this is not workable in practice as establishing ownership and identifying keepers with which cats normally reside is often not clear cut.

Question 3: Do you support the proposal that cats should be microchipped by 16 weeks of age unless there is an animal health reason certified by a vet?

28. If compulsory microchipping of cats is to be introduced, legislation should specify an age range within which a cat should be microchipped that allows for these circumstances, as opposed to an age limit. We would therefore support a range of 8 weeks onwards and no later than 20 weeks unless there is an animal health reason certified for a vet. This would allow for age of implantation to be determined by a veterinary surgeon's professional judgement, based on the individual kitten's size, temperament, response to handling, and opportunities to implant alongside other healthcare interventions eg neutering, and any other factors deemed relevant (notably, many of these interventions are likely to occur following the first transfer of ownership of a kitten).
29. Evidence from our members suggests that kittens are being microchipped at the point of first vaccination which is usually at the age of 8 weeks. However, microchipping can also be done at the point of second vaccination (12 weeks, when kittens are larger and easier to handle), or at the time of neutering at, for example some practices neuter at 14-18 weeks and insert the microchip while the kitten is under general anaesthetic (which reduces potential stress from handling). NB. It is important to note that 14-18 weeks is an example, some practices may neuter outside of this age range depending on their clinical judgement and the individual case.
30. Veterinary surgeons use their professional judgement to determine the appropriate age of implantation of microchips in kittens. Factors that can inform this decision include:
- The kitten's size,
 - The kitten's temperament and response to handling;
 - Biosecurity considerations eg. avoiding having unvaccinated litters of kittens in the waiting room;
 - Whether microchip implantation can be performed alongside another healthcare intervention eg. a vet may implant a microchip when the kitten receives its vaccinations or is under general anaesthetic for neutering. This can minimise the need for repeat visits to the practice, as well as additional stress and handling.
 - Re-homing policies by re-homing charities or similar organisations
31. We are also aware that for younger, smaller, kittens, the size of the needle required for the implantation of mini chips can still injure smaller kittens. We therefore question whether it would be appropriate to specify a specific age of implantation in legislation.

Question 4: If compulsory cat microchipping was introduced, how long a lead-in period do you suggest for the public, database operators, local authorities, veterinary practices and animal welfare charities to comply?

32. If compulsory cat microchipping is to be introduced, we would support a lead-in period of one year. However, in the event that Covid-19 restrictions are still in place, it is paramount there is the flexibility to extend this lead period to ensure that vets, who may be having to prioritise essential cases or catch-up on a back log of routine work, have sufficient time to prepare.
33. We note that five years after their implementation, there is still a lack of clarity amongst the wider public and stakeholders as to the roles and responsibilities set out under the Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015. In order for the compulsory microchipping of cats to be effective in its aims, new legal roles and responsibilities would therefore need to be clearly and consistently

communicated to all stakeholders (including new keepers, vets and local authorities) in the proposed lead-in period, and regularly thereafter.

34. This lead-in period would also present a timely opportunity to reiterate the responsibilities of keepers, new keepers, vets and local authorities under the Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015 to all stakeholders. Emphasis should be given to reiterating the need for keepers make sure the details on their animal's microchip are up to date. We would welcome opportunities to work with the government, competent authorities, and other stakeholders to achieve this through a government-led communications campaign.

Question 5: Which form of enforcement powers do you support for cat microchipping, and for what reason(s)?

35. If compulsory cat microchipping is to be introduced, adequate resources must be in place to support the effective enforcement of new legislation. When considering which form of enforcement powers would be most appropriate and effective, Defra should first consider any enforcement issues identified by the Post Implementation Review of the 2015 compulsory dog microchipping regulations.
36. It is important to reiterate that vets should not be required to enforce compulsory cat microchipping or verify ownership. As we set out below, we strongly oppose compulsory scanning by vets on animal welfare and public safety grounds. [Read our position on microchip scanning \(dogs\) and databases in full.](#)

Potential scanning reform

37. We strongly oppose proposals to introduce compulsory scanning, on animal welfare and public safety grounds. We recognise there has been some criticism of the profession from campaigners calling for compulsory scanning. Unfortunately, such campaigns misunderstand the powers of vets and the potential welfare harms of compulsory scanning to both animals and humans (eg those fleeing with their pets from domestic abuse).
38. Primary consideration - animal health and welfare
On admission to membership of the RCVS, and in exchange for the right to practise veterinary surgery in the UK, every veterinary surgeon makes a declaration:

*" I PROMISE AND SOLEMNLY DECLARE that I will pursue the work of my profession with integrity and accept my responsibilities to the public, my clients, the profession and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and that, ABOVE ALL, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care."*¹¹

39. With the declaration in mind, vets play a key role in helping to reunite lost, and sometimes stolen, animals with their owner. However, if the veterinary profession were required to play a role in enforcing owners' compliance with microchipping legislation this may cause negative unintended consequences for animal welfare by compromising the vet-owner relationship. This crucial relationship is based on trust and confidentiality and if compromised could act as a disincentive to accessing veterinary advice and care, ultimately impeding the profession's primary responsibility to protect animal health and welfare
40. It is also important to recognise that the circumstances surrounding the individual cases which present themselves in veterinary practices are sometimes not clear cut and there will be a need for the vet to exercise their professional judgement, based on the information available to them. Vets must also operate within their powers, so cannot seize or hold a dog or cat suspected as stolen, nor can they share confidential ownership information as this would breach data protection laws and, in some circumstances, could put the animal, its owner, or its finder, at risk. Where there is an

¹¹ <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/>

ownership dispute or an animal is suspected stolen vets are advised to follow the [RCVS 'Client confidentiality and microchipped animals flowchart'](#)

41. We already recommend that veterinary practices should scan for a microchip under the following circumstances:

- **Prior to microchip implantation** – this helps to ensure that there is no other microchip present.
- **On presentation of a lost, stray or apparently unowned animal** – this facilitates reunification with the owner when checked against the national databases, providing the owner has kept their details up-to-date.
- **On first presentation at the practice** – this ensures that the animal is correctly identified when checked against the national databases and serves as a useful reminder to the new client to ensure that they keep their details up-to-date. The microchip details should be recorded on the practice database – often lost pets are local to the practice and a check against the practice's own database can provide a quick solution.
- **Before travelling abroad** – this is to ensure that the microchip is still working and has not migrated significantly and would not normally include a check against the national database(s).
- **Before rabies vaccination or official certification** – vets are obliged to scan for a microchip before administering a rabies vaccination and completing an Animal Health Certificate, or before completing other official documentation that requires identification of the animal (eg official health screening tests)
- **Annually as routine** (eg at the time of the annual check-up and/or booster vaccination) – this is also to ensure that the microchip is still working and has not migrated significantly. Although it would not normally include a check against the national databases it should include a check against practice records and provides an opportunity to remind the owner to keep their details up-to-date.
- **On admission for treatment or hospitalisation where appropriate** – this is part of good clinical practice to ensure that the patient is matched to clinical records. This would not normally include a check against the national database(s).
- **Prior to euthanasia if considered appropriate** – this is part of good clinical practice to ensure that, where there is any element of doubt, the patient is matched to clinical records. This would not normally include a check against the national database(s) and in many cases may not be appropriate.
- **On presentation of wildlife** – this is to identify any wild animals part of a local or national, wildlife rehabilitation or research programme.

42. Where there is an ownership dispute or an animal is suspected stolen, vets should follow the RCVS [Client confidentiality and microchipped animals](#) flowchart.

43. Database barriers

Further, there is currently a total of 15 national databases with which pet owners can choose to register their animals. These databases do not currently share their data with each other, nor is there a central database. This is a growing issue, which threatens one of the key aims of compulsory microchipping – to help reunite lost dogs with their owners. Although [Check-a-Chip](#) helps to identify which database holds the registration for a particular microchip number, it is not a central database.

44. For veterinary practice, cross-checking with such a large number of databases is an administrative burden which challenges already stretched vets and vet nurses, whose limited contact time with their clients and patients is better spent providing preventative healthcare advice.

45. For compulsory microchipping legislation to be effective, it is essential that there is one central UK microchip database that is maintained and up-to-date. However, we recognise that this may be a challenge given the proliferation of commercial databases in recent years, and so the implementation of one central UK microchip database is unlikely. Instead, we are calling for:
- All existing and future commercial microchip databases to register with [EuroPetNet](#). Petlog is currently the only UK database to be registered¹².
 - Improved enforcement in relation to those databases which do not meet government standards.
 - Exploration of the potential for setting up a single point of entry to query existing multiple real-time databases. The facility to enter a microchip number into a single web-based portal that could check all microchip databases would minimise the need for a manual search, increasing efficiency and protecting commercial interests.

Question 6: Do you think veterinarians and other bodies who legally euthanise should be required to scan cats and dogs prior to euthanasia?

46. We strongly oppose this proposal. As outlined above, we already recommend that veterinary practices should scan for a microchip prior to euthanasia, if considered appropriate, as part of good clinical practice and where there exists any doubt so as to make sure that the patient is matched to clinical record. However, as each case will be different, it is essential that vets are allowed to exercise their professional judgement in these situations in order to safeguard animal welfare and public safety.
47. It is important to emphasise that, as animal health and welfare professionals with years of training, veterinary professionals are best placed to advise on whether euthanasia would be in the best interests of an animal's welfare.
48. A veterinary surgeon's primary consideration should be to the health and welfare of the animal under their care. If vets were required to scan, verify and resolve owner disputes prior to euthanasia, this has the strong potential to delay the provision of euthanasia, which may ultimately negatively impact on an animal's welfare where euthanasia is considered necessary to prevent ongoing pain or suffering. In addition, vets need to be empathetic in scenarios where euthanasia is distressing and emotional for owners and unnecessary scanning of microchips may serve to exacerbate the situation. Not least, a vet may consider that it is in the wider public interest to euthanase a dangerous dog, to prevent further dog biting incidents or attacks. In this scenario, delaying euthanasia to resolve an ownership dispute may put public safety at risk. Further, it may also result in the client taking matters into their own hands and inhumanely euthanising the dog themselves.
49. How vets approach requests to euthanase healthy animals
This can often present a difficult ethical dilemma for many veterinary surgeons, who must consider both their duties to the animal and to their client. Vets may accede to the wish to proceed with euthanasia, but do not have to do so. Each case must be considered individually; there will be occasions where it is appropriate to advise or request another opinion and if euthanasia is refused, this should always be offered to the client. It is important to emphasise that euthanasia itself is not a welfare issue when performed correctly.
50. When presented with a healthy animal and a request for euthanasia, a veterinary surgeon will discuss all of the available interventions with the client so that they can make an informed choice as to the most appropriate course of action. Depending on the individual case and previous behaviour of the dog or cat, this may include other treatment options, referral to a dog behaviourist, referral back to the rescue centre if the dog was rehomed with known behavioural/health issues, or euthanasia. It is important to emphasise here that appropriate treatment options may have a significant cost and be time intensive, meaning that it may not be a suitable option for some clients.

¹² <https://www.europetnet.com/member-organisations.html>

51. If the client decides that euthanasia is their preferred treatment option, typically the vet would scan the dog or cat's microchip before euthanasia if appropriate and where there exists any doubt to ensure the patient matched its practice records as part of good clinical governance. In terms of verifying ownership, there is no legal duty on the vet to establish the legal ownership of animals that are presented by clients. In fact, there would be no practical way of doing so. Neither the registration of a pet's microchip number on a microchip register, nor the registration of a pet under a client's details on a practice's client database can definitively establish that the registrant has legal title to the animal (although these may be used as evidence of such in a legal dispute over ownership). Instead, the priority for the vet is establishing that the client who is presenting the animal for treatment has the authority to consent to treatment.
52. The Veterinary Defence Society (VDS) advises¹³ that ordinarily, vets are entitled to take it on trust that the person who presents the animal and who is asserting authority to consent to treatment of it has proper authority to do so on behalf of all of its owners. This remains the case up until there seems reason to suspect that such authority may not exist. There are many different scenarios when that could arise – perhaps the most common is when an animal is registered jointly to a married couple, and is then presented by one half of that couple in circumstances when the practice is aware that there has been a marital breakdown, or where there is dual ownership between a rescue organisation and the owner, that the practice is aware of, who rehomed the animals in question. The VDS advises its members to do what they can to distance themselves from any negotiations between 'co-owners'.
53. In such circumstances, the Veterinary Defence Society (VDS) advises vets to proceed with caution. Where, in their judgement it seems the animal's welfare is not likely to be adversely impacted by delaying treatment, the vet should delay the treatment, pending clear instructions from both parties. VDS advises that vets should take no irreversible action, such as neutering or euthanasia, in the absence of agreement by both parties. However, vets may proceed if they consider that there is sufficient grounds to do so in the interests of animal welfare or wider public interest. One example of this may be where a vet feels that the public safety risk is sufficient to justify proceeding to prevent any immediate risk of the dog attacking another human or animal. In such a case, the VDS would advise that the vet should document their decision making with thorough clinical notes documenting the animal's history and condition, and seek a corroborating second opinion from another veterinary surgeon.

Question 8: Do you think veterinarians should be required to scan cats and dogs upon first presentation?

54. We strongly oppose the proposal to make it compulsory for vets to scan cats and dogs upon first presentation. We already recommend that veterinary practices should scan for a microchip on first presentation at the practice to make sure that the animal is correctly identified when checked against the national databases. However, as each case will be different, it is essential that vets are allowed to exercise their own professional judgement in these situations in order to safeguard animal welfare and public safety.
55. As outlined above, if the veterinary profession were required to play a role in enforcing owners' compliance with microchipping legislation this may cause negative unintended consequences for animal welfare by compromising the vet-owner relationship. This crucial relationship is based on trust and confidentiality and if compromised could act as a disincentive to accessing veterinary advice and care, ultimately impeding the profession's primary responsibility to protect animal health and welfare.
56. The below case studies also illustrate the risks of compulsory scanning to human safety:

Case study 1 - The risks of requiring vets to police the system

¹³ Advice obtained through BVA correspondence with VDS

A new client who had recently rehomed a dog asked his vet how he should go about transferring the details on the dog's microchip into his name.

While ascertaining the rehomed dog's history, the vet learnt that the dog had originally belonged to a woman who had relinquish the dog to escape an abusive relationship. The new owner also mentioned that he still had some links to the woman who had relinquished the dog.

As it was the first time the vet had seen the dog, the vet scanned its microchip, however it wasn't clear whose name the chip has been registered in, that of the woman or her abusive partner. When a vet is presented with a dog registered in another person's name, they are encouraged to follow [the RCVS decision making flow chart on client confidentiality and microchipped animals](#) to decide if it is appropriate contact the registered keeper or release details of the new keeper.

Had the vet been required to scan the chip and then contact the microchip database or registered keeper to notify them that the new keeper was requesting a change in registration details, this could have resulted in several negative consequences:

- If the microchip company had contacted the abusive partner to request he download and pass on a transfer code, he would have been alerted to the new whereabouts of the dog, which could have put the new owner, former owner and the dog in potential danger;
- If the microchip company had contacted the abusive partner and he had not been aware that the dog had been rehomed, the vet could have become embroiled in a civil dispute over ownership, which, as a custodian of animal health and welfare, is not the vet's role nor an effective use of their time, skills or expertise.

Case study 2 - Microchips as a risk factor for domestic violence: Dogs Trust Freedom Project

When someone has fled domestic abuse a risk factor for their ongoing safety could be the microchip. An example would be if a survivor moves to a new, safe address in a completely different area and registers her dogs at her new local vet. If the owner is not savvy with microchips, she may not be aware that the chip is still registered in the ex-partners name, and that this could be a potential risk to her. If she attended the vets with the dogs, they could realise the chip is in another person's name and ring that person for clarification. Within seconds, the perpetrator would know the new area that the owner has fled to due to the vet's phone call.

As part of their Freedom Project to foster dogs where people are fleeing domestic abuse, Dogs Trust have experienced incidents where the perpetrator of domestic abuse would attempt to find out the owner's address by asking a vet/rescue professional to look up the details on the database for them. In one case, the perpetrator had family members who worked at a local animal charity, and in the other case a perpetrator threatened a veterinary practice staff member to look up the chip details on the database and disclose them to him. Although in this case he was quite obvious about what he wanted, there have been cases of perpetrators being more subtle about their reasons for asking, and the vet professional likely wouldn't know that they were divulging something sensitive.

Therefore, on the Freedom Project any dogs that are in their care have their chips locked by the database and are only accessible to the Freedom team as part of an agreement with the chip companies. Locking the chips reduces the risk of any of the above examples reoccurring and the data given out accidentally. However, this wouldn't protect survivors who still have their dogs in their care and don't have the ability to have their chips locked. It has always been a concern that once we have returned a dog to its family, the chip is then unlocked and re-registered at their new address - so in theory perpetrators of domestic abuse that are very persistent may then get the opportunity to continue with trying to access the chip details, should they still hold onto the microchip number for that dog.

Note: The above examples should not be used in print/press work to avoid the risk of emulation by perpetrators of domestic abuse.

Question 12: What costs would a requirement to scan for microchips in these circumstances generate to groups of organisations referenced above?

57. Policy makers should not oversimplify the impact of scanning microchips based purely on a raw estimate of 'time cost' for vets. It is important consider that these are all times on top of normal consult times (which may not go to plan themselves), which then has a knock-on effect on the time vets have to provide services that are essential for animal welfare.
58. Paired with that is time taken away from clinical consulting if a vet becomes embroiled an owner dispute or were to be required to scan and verify chips more frequently, as these are not easily quantifiable or finite tasks. Given the number of databases there are to check, administrative tangles to get to the bottom of, as well as the emotionally-charged and time consuming situations that can occur with ownership disputes and resulting communications, these can be very time intensive activities across a period of time, detracting away from vets' main duty to provide services for animal health and welfare.

Question 13: Are there any impacts of requiring compulsory scanning in circumstances mentioned above that could affect animal health and/or welfare?

59. See animal health and welfare impacts outlined above.
60. In addition, compulsory scanning and verifying registered keepers may result in dogs unnecessarily spending extended periods of time in kennels while ownership disputes are resolved. It is extremely difficult to meet the welfare needs of dogs in a kennelled environment. Studies have shown that dogs find this environment particularly challenging, and that specific aspects of this environment eg. noise levels, lack of environmental enrichment, small kennel sizes may negatively influence dogs' behaviour patterns and social interactions.^{14,15,16}
61. Further, if vets were obliged to scan before every euthanasia indiscriminately this could result in delays to urgently required treatment/euthanasia if the registered keeper is a different person to the client and is uncontactable.

¹⁴ Shepherd, K. (2010). Behavioural, legal and welfare implications of the DDA in the UK – a case history. *Journal of Veterinary Behaviour* 5, 39-40.

¹⁵ Hiby, E.F., Rooney, N.J. & Bradshaw, J.W.S. (2006). Behavioural and physiological responses of dogs entering rehoming kennels. *Physiology and Behavior*. 89, 385–391, and Rooney, N.J., Gaines, S.A. & Bradshaw, J.W.S. (2007). Behavioural and glucocorticoid responses of dogs (*Canis familiaris*) to kennelling: Investigating mitigation of stress by prior habituation. *Physiology and Behavior*. 92, 847–854.

¹⁶ Gaines, S.A. (2008). Kennelled dog welfare – effects of housing and husbandry. University of Bristol, PhD thesis. Taylor, K.D., Mill, D.S. (2007). The effect of the kennel environment on canine welfare; a critical review of experimental studies. *Animal Welfare*. 16, 435-448.