Illegally imported pets? Guidance and compliance flowchart for vets in England

When, who, and how to report to the competent authorities if you suspect the illegal importation of pets in England

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Working collaboratively
Veterinary surgeons can often be the first to suspect that an animal may have been illegally imported when a client brings their pet for its first check-up. It is therefore paramount that, where appropriate, vets, Local Authority Animal Health Function (LAAHF) and APHA work collaboratively to report and act upon the suspected illegal importation of animals in a timely and effective manner.

The LAAHF is a term used to identify the personnel within a local authority that are responsible for the provision of animal health and welfare enforcement. The LAAHF is normally located within trading standards or environmental health services.

To achieve this, the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and the National Animal Health and Welfare Panel (NAHWP) have developed the following guidance note and compliance flow chart to support vets in their considerations of when and how to report the suspected illegal importation of pets. As such, this document provides summary guidance on navigating client confidentiality, how to report concerns of illegal imports and an overview of how local authorities are likely to respond.

Primary consideration: Ensuring animal health and welfare
In terms of monitoring and reporting the illegal importation of pets, veterinary surgeons in the UK are required by the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to their care:

‘Veterinary surgeons must make animal health and welfare their first consideration when attending to animals.’

Decisions to report suspected illegal importations must therefore balance whether to report suspicions of illegal importation and the public or animal health risks that this may pose, with a veterinary surgeon’s primary consideration to ensure the health and welfare of the animal that is under their care.

Confidentiality concerns
We recognise that vets may be concerned about potentially breaching client confidentiality or the Data Protection Act 2018, when reporting concerns regarding illegal imports to local authorities.

RCVS Professional Code of Conduct
We would emphasise that in terms of monitoring and reporting the illegal importation of pets, veterinary surgeons in the UK are required by the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to their care.
In addition, under the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct the veterinary profession can disclose information to the authorities where it is deemed necessary:

“In circumstances where the client has not given permission for disclosure and the veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse considers that animal welfare or the public interest is compromised, client confidentiality may be breached, and appropriate information reported to the relevant authorities. Some examples may include situations where an animal shows signs of abuse; where a dangerous dog poses a risk to safety; where child or domestic abuse is suspected; where there is some other significant threat to public health or safety or to the health or safety of an individual; or where the information is likely to help in the prevention, detection or prosecution of a crime.

If a client refuses to consent, or seeking consent would be likely to undermine the purpose of the disclosure, the veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse will have to decide whether the disclosure can be justified. Generally, the decision should be based on personal knowledge rather than third-party (hearsay) information, where there may be simply a suspicion that somebody has acted unlawfully. The more animal welfare or the public interest is compromised, the more prepared a veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse should be to release information to the relevant authority.”

Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR
Legislation relating to client confidentiality and data protection also supports veterinary surgeons in their decision to provide information to the authorities, namely Section 170 of the Data Protection Act 2018, which provides an overlapping exemption to offences relating to personal data where any disclosure is necessary for ‘the purposes of preventing or detecting crime.’

If a veterinary surgeon or nurse suspects that an animal has been brought into the country illegally, they can report the details to the relevant authority (See BVA and NAHWP Illegally imported pets? Compliance flowchart for vets in England). ¹ All enforcement bodies have data protection policies

¹ Legal requirements:
- There is a duty under the Animal Health Act and Rabies Control Order 1974, for anyone (therefore including a veterinary practice) to report a suspected case of rabies and to keep the animal in question away from other animals.
- The Non-Commercial Movement of Pet Animals Order 2011 16 (2)(b) also contains a requirement to provide assistance or information that a person enforcing the legislation may reasonably require. While it is an offence under these regulations to falsify movement documents such as passports or certificates, so any suspicions should be reported. This legislation also requires all dogs, cats and ferrets to be microchipped.
- In addition, it should be noted that there is a duty under the relevant pieces of disease legislation to report suspected cases of other notifiable diseases to APHA
and will treat any data in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018, as well as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

**Legal regulations: Importation of cats, dogs and ferrets into the UK**

Pets must comply with EU Pet Travel Scheme requirements (EU Regulation 576/2013) or the Balai Directive and Trade in Animals and Animal Related Products Regulations 2011, which apply for the commercial import and export of animals being moved in and out of EU member states. If they do not comply with these requirements, cats and dogs entering the UK are normally required to spend 4 months in quarantine.

The EU Pet Travel Scheme permits the movement of pet animals (dogs, cats and ferrets) to the UK without the need for quarantine, providing they meet certain conditions, such as having the correct documentation, identification, vaccinations and treatments.

EU pet travel regulations for the non-commercial movement of dogs, cats and ferrets travelling within EU and listed non-EU countries set out that pets must:

- be microchipped before rabies vaccination;
- be vaccinated against rabies at least 21 days before travel, pets must be at least 12 weeks old before receiving the rabies vaccination on the scheme;
- have a valid EU pet passport;
- travel with an approved transport company on an authorised route;
- Dogs entering the UK, Ireland, Finland, Norway or Malta must be treated for tapeworms by a vet with a product containing praziquantel (or equivalent) no less than 24 hours and no more than 120 hours (between 1 and 5 days) before its arrival in the UK.

For those pets travelling from unlisted non-EU countries, they must meet the above requirements and additionally take a blood serology test after rabies vaccination, followed by a three-month wait before entry into the UK.

Read the UK Government guidance document on the EU Pet Travel scheme and how to complete Pet Passports in full.

You can also check the country and ISO code of microchip manufacturers to ascertain the country of origin of the microchip, or consult Europetnet by entering the chip ID.

**Supporting vets in their considerations of when and how to report the suspected illegal importation of pets: Compliance flowchart for vets in England**

Recent cases continue to highlight the fact that veterinary surgeons can often be the first to suspect that an animal may have been illegally imported when an owner takes their pet for its first check-up following its importation.

With this in mind, we have created the below compliance flowchart to aid decision-making for vets in what are often complex situations. The flow-chart outlines what to consider when a client presents an animal with a pet passport, how to report suspected illegal imports if you have concerns and if appropriate, and an overview of how local authorities are likely to respond.

Download the BVA and NAHWP Illegally imported pets? Compliance flowchart for vets in England