



The EU coordinated control plan for the official controls on online sales of dogs and cats: Analysis of the results

1. Background

Internet trade in dogs and cats has been increasing in recent years. Digital technologies pose challenges to competent authorities in terms of physical control and monitoring compliance with legislation.

In a previous study mandated by the Commission¹, the online sales of dogs and cats was already pointed out as a critical issue in term of animal health, animal welfare and consumer deception.

With the enter into force of the new regulation on official controls², the Commission has been given the opportunity to propose EU coordinated control plan to the Member States for a limited period of time.

In October 2018, the Commission adopted a recommendation³ for an EU coordinated control plan (CCP) on online sales of dogs and cats. The CCP objectives were to help EU countries gaining insight on current practices in the online sales of pets and to be more engaged in the control of the e-commerce pet market⁴.

On a voluntary basis, the competent authorities of the EU countries could perform checks between 15 October and 15 November 2018. Firstly, the authorities identified national websites offering dogs and cats for sale. Secondly, they planned or performed inspections when the advertisements were suspected of non-compliance with EU or national legislation. Thirdly, they had to notify the non-compliant offers to the Commission until

¹ Study report on the welfare of dogs and cats involved in commercial practices, https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/animals/docs/aw_eu-strategy_study_dogs-cats-commercialpractices_en.pdf

² Regulation (EU) 2017/625 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on official controls and other official activities performed to ensure the application of food and feed law, rules on animal health and welfare, plant health and plant protection products, amending Regulations (EC) No 999/2001, (EC) No 396/2005, (EC) No 1069/2009, (EC) No 1107/2009, (EU) No 1151/2012, (EU) No 652/2014, (EU) 2016/429 and (EU) 2016/2031 of the European Parliament and of the Council, Council Regulations (EC) No 1/2005 and (EC) No 1099/2009 and Council Directives 98/58/EC, 1999/74/EC, 2007/43/EC, 2008/119/EC and 2008/120/EC, and repealing Regulations (EC) No 854/2004 and (EC) No 882/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council, Council Directives 89/608/EEC, 89/662/EEC, 90/425/EEC, 91/496/EEC, 96/23/EC, 96/93/EC and 97/78/EC and Council Decision 92/438/EEC (Official Controls Regulation) OJ L 95, 7.4.2017, p. 1

³ Commission Recommendation on a coordinated control plan for the official controls on online sales of dogs and cats, (C2018) 5488 final.

15 February 2019. To keep the workload of the competent authorities at a reasonable level, a maximum number of websites to be notified was set to about 20 notifications⁵.

2. Results

The authorities of 17 Member States plus Switzerland participated in the CCP. The participating countries checked hundreds of websites and notified to the Commission 315 offers suspected to be non-compliant with EU legislation (see Annex and Table 1).

The control authorities focussed their controls on national traders (93% of the offers) to allow physical inspections when the advertisements were considered suspicious. Nevertheless, they also found offers in their respective official language(s) from traders located in other EU Member States (6%) or third countries (1%) such as Belarus, Serbia or Russia. In some cases, local traders were working with foreign owners of pets or selling pets from other countries.

Table 1. Summary of the results (in percentage)

Advertisements notified to the Commission	315	(In %)
Traders location:		
- National ⁶	283	93%
- Other Member State	19	6%
- Third country	3	1%
- Not available	10	3%
Advertisements on:		
- Dogs	221	70%
- Cats	42	13%
- Dogs and cats	52	17%
Number of ads with information on:		
- Age of the animal	174	55%
- Identification of the animal or of the mother	58	18%
- Vaccination records and anti-parasitic treatment	115	37%
- Country of origin ⁷	177	56%
- Status of the trader ⁸	157	50%
- Inconsistency between activities and trader's status ⁹	66	42%
Number of inspections planned or performed	169	54%

⁵ Annexes to the Commission Recommendation on a coordinated control plan for the official controls on online sales of dogs and cats, (C2018) 5488 final.

⁶ In some cases, local advertisers/traders were working with foreign owners of pets or selling pets from other countries.

⁷ i.e. where the animal was born

⁸ i.e. private breeder, registered professional breeder, pet shops, etc.

⁹ i.e. private owner selling more than ten dogs/cats per year.

Most of the advertisements were selling dogs (70%) and lacked information about the animals. Elements such as the age of the animal or its country of origin were given in more than half of the advertisements. However, other points such as the vaccination or ID of the animal were clearly lacking.

Although it was not mandatory in the protocol, authorities planned or performed 169 inspections. They led to inspection of the traders' premises, warnings and fines in some cases. The authorities observed the sale of animals too young or unhealthy, but also pets not vaccinated nor treated. The traders also used fake ID and transported animals illegally to neighbouring countries. Member States reported specific challenges related to the inspections. There were too many websites to check. The authorities also encountered legal difficulties for inspectors to access private houses. They also could not always perform physical inspections due to missing details in the ads or lack of information on where the animals were kept.

In addition, the participating countries proposed potential solutions for a safer market such as:

- the creation of educational materials for citizens
- guidelines with mandatory requirements for websites
- an EU/national quality chart on pet ads
- partnerships between authorities and websites
- a harmonised European identification system for pet animals

3. Conclusions

The CCP helped the national authorities to gain insight on the online market of dogs and cats. It allowed them to be more prepared to respond to the challenges of the online world in an appropriate manner, knowing that training of additional staff in Internet investigations or increase in control capacities are often required.

The high percentage of non-compliant offers is a clear sign that the e-commerce control today needs to be strengthened. In addition, EU consumers should be more informed of the potential risks linked to purchasing dogs and cats online.

As national legislation can really vary from a country to another one, it is sometimes hard to draw general conclusions. Member States are then encouraged to exchange best practices in this field. Further efforts are necessary, in particular to remind the main players of e-commerce, such as platforms and traders, of their responsibilities.