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30 July 2024

Dear Martin Coleman and inquiry group members,

Ref. Veterinary services for household pets in the UK - Issues Statement

Following the Competition and Market Authority's ("CMA") decision to initiate a full market investigation into the supply of veterinary services for household pets in the United Kingdom, I am writing to you on behalf of Naturewatch Foundation to highlight a matter that we think is worthy of consideration in the course of your investigation, namely the emergence of canine fertility clinics (aka dog breeding services).

Who we are

Naturewatch Foundation is a registered animal welfare charity (1039679) that speaks up for animals in the UK and internationally. It's our mission to advance animal welfare and we work across five core campaign areas: the trade in companion animals, wildlife crime, animal testing, the Link between animal abuse and the abuse of people, and animal welfare in Eastern Europe.

Through our companion animal work, we have worked extensively on the issue of canine fertility clinics in the UK and have provided evidence to the UK EFRA Select Committee, Animal Welfare Committee and Scottish Government on this topic.

Canine fertility clinics

Canine fertility clinics are businesses that advertise and perform a range of reproductive services for dogs. The most commonly advertised services are:

- Canine artificial insemination;
- Ultrasound pregnancy scanning;
- Progesterone testing;
- Cytology;
- Semen services including collection, analysis, chilling, freezing and/or shipping.

Many clinics offer additional services, such as microchipping, DNA testing, whelping support, amongst others. Some clinics also offer services ranging from BAER (brainstem auditory evoked response) hearing testing, vaccinations, storage of genetic material including cryopreservation, and some supply or administer medicinal products. Anecdotal evidence suggests some may be involved in performing invasive surgeries, including caesareans.

A small number of similar businesses existed prior to the covid-19 pandemic. However, during the pandemic numbers grew significantly and, as of December 2023, there were in the region of 412 canine fertility businesses advertising services across the UK, according to our research.

Whilst some canine fertility clinics do employ registered veterinary professionals, our findings suggest the majority do not. This is despite some common services constituting acts of veterinary surgery, such as canine artificial insemination.

Although there is no dedicated regulatory framework governing the activities of canine fertility clinics, businesses involved in the supply of veterinary medicines and/or performance of acts of veterinary surgery, would be expected to comply with the requirements of the Veterinary Medicines Regulations 2013 (“VMR 2013”) and/or Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (“VSA 1966”). In our experience reporting concerns to the authorities, however, shortcomings in the VSA 1966, such as low financial penalties for breaches and a lack of clarity about who enforces section 19 of the Act, means it has been difficult to rely on this piece of legislation to tackle potential illegality, leading to concerns customers could be accessing poor-quality non-compliant services that they assume are operating legitimately.

Relevance to the CMA investigation

As canine fertility clinics are involved in offering what are ostensibly veterinary services, we believe they are a relevant, albeit more specialist, part of the market the CMA is currently investigating. Our findings are that the majority of canine fertility clinics operate without the involvement of registered veterinary professionals and, whilst our most recent review of the UK landscape suggests the sector is contracting slightly, we do consider it a serious problem that the UK is now host to a fairly high number of businesses that are offering these niche veterinary services, yet appear to be operating outside the regulatory framework, and are therefore providing services to the public without the same costs, responsibilities and accountabilities as other providers.

We would therefore encourage you to consider canine fertility clinics, and their potential impact on competition and customers, in the course of your investigation. We appreciate that the scope of your investigation is limited to veterinary services targeted at pet owners. Although the primary client base for canine fertility clinics is people who breed dogs, many advertise to the public at large via websites and social media channels and provide a range of routine services. It is also our observation that people who breed dogs are a diverse group; some are career dog breeders who would fall within the category of “professional keeper.” However, some are pet owners who have decided to go on to breed from their family dog. We think this more novice group may find it particularly difficult to discern whether a canine fertility clinic is providing its services legitimately or not.

Thank you for your time and consideration. We would be happy to discuss the matters raised in this letter with you in further detail, or provide you with additional information, to support your inquiry. In the meantime, I attach our *Breeding Beyond Dogs’ Limits: Canine Fertility Clinics in the UK* report to provide further background information.

With best wishes,

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Attachments: *Breeding Beyond Dogs’ Limits: Canine Fertility Clinics in the UK*

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