

Kept Animals Bill: Briefing for Second Reading

The Kept Animals Bill is an important step forward for animal welfare that will improve the lives of companion and farm animals. The measures proposed within it have been proposed by welfare campaigners for many years, with strong public support. It is encouraging to see the Government deliver them as part of its promise to improve animal welfare standards after Brexit.

However, two parts of the bill require amendment in order to meet the full ambition of the Government's animal welfare commitments. The new licensing system for primates should be based on a complete ban on the breeding and sale of primates as pets, and the prohibition of live exports for slaughter should extend to adult poultry. Ahead of second reading of the bill in the House of Commons on 25 October 2021 we set out the case for these improvements to the bill.

1) Strengthening the licensing system for keeping primates as pets

The complex social, physical, behavioural, and environmental needs of primates means that they are wholly unsuited to be kept as pets. To do so causes unnecessary animal suffering. Despite this, it is estimated that 4,000-5,000 primates are currently kept as pets in the UK.¹

Part 1 of the Kept Animals Bill would establish a licensing system to govern the keeping of these primates, allowing local authorities to withhold and withdraw licenses if animal welfare conditions are not met by keepers.

Whilst this is a step forward, it represents mitigation rather than resolution. The very act of keeping primates as pets results in animal suffering. Keeping highly social and complex animals in solitary conditions (or occasionally in pairs), managed by non-experts with limited resources for appropriate care, will always be to the detriment of primates. The licensing system as set out in part 2 of the bill will limit this suffering by enforcing welfare standards, but will not stop it. Local authorities will be able to grant licences that permit the breeding and sale of primates, meaning that the private breeding and trading of primates can continue in the long term under an officially sanctioned scheme.

The licensing system should be strengthened to include a mandatory requirement not to breed or trade primates. A specialist keeper license should be contingent on the licensee permitting no deliberate breeding to occur, and not participating in the trade (commercial or non-commercial) in primates. This would allow existing owners to retain their pets, with new welfare conditions applied and enforced through the licensing system, whilst preventing any growth in the numbers of primates kept as companion animals. Overtime these numbers will fall, allowing the gradual phasing out of this harmful practice.

¹ <https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/other/primates>

The Government has rightly accepted that it is wrong to keep non domesticated animals in domestic settings. Acknowledgement should be followed by action to end primate pet keeping in the long term, rather than the mitigatory approach represented by the current licensing proposals. The Government should also acknowledge that other non-domesticated pets, such as snakes and parrots, present welfare issues which may also require welfare interventions.²

In addition to including a no breeding or sale ban into the licensing system, the Government should also increase the fines for those breaching the terms of a primate license. The current text of the bill sets the maximum fine at level 4 (£2,500). Given that primates can sell for over £5,000, this figure is too low and does not create sufficient disincentive for non-compliance. Fines should be unlimited, to allow for costs equivalent or greater than the value of the animal to be imposed.

2) Extending the ban on live export for slaughter to adult poultry

Part 3 of the bill prohibits the export of specified livestock for slaughter. This is a welcome prohibition which will prevent animals from suffering the extreme stress that live export inflicts, followed by slaughter in countries that have low slaughter standards than the UK.

The list of specified livestock covered by ban includes the majority of farmed animals, with one notable exception – adult poultry. A significant number of adult poultry are subject to live export from the UK. In 2014, the last year with publicly available figures, 53,000 live poultry animals with a weight over 185 grams (denoting an age greater than two weeks) were exported from the UK.³

These adult poultry animals will be subject to the same stresses that have led to the ban on live exports for other farmed animals, including deprivation of food and water, lack of rest, extremes of temperature and humidity, handling by humans, exposure to a novel environment, overcrowding, insufficient headroom and noise. A 2017 University of Wageningen paper studied the transport of live poultry for slaughter and found 'during the transport, birds with broken bones suffer from pain, are not able to stand up and reach water supply, are stepped upon by other birds, and are prone to die'.⁴

To avoid the continuation of this suffering in UK animals, adult poultry should be added to the list of specified livestock prohibited for live export for slaughter by section 42 (7) of the bill. This inclusion would not affect the separate trade in live chicks from the UK, which is primary for breeding rather than slaughter purposes.

For questions or further information please contact:

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[Wildlife and Countryside Link](#) (Link) is the largest environment coalition in England, bringing together 62 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature and animals.

² <https://www.rspca.org.uk/-/news-urgent-review-of-current-exotic-pet-legislation-following-joint-report>

³ <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/wrans/?id=2014-10-20.211113.h&s=poultry+live+exports#g211113.r0>

⁴ <https://library.wur.nl/WebQuery/wurpubs/fulltext/420339>