



Petitions Committee

House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA

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Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice

17 June 2020

Dear Robert,

Since 2018, petitioners have been pressing both Parliament and Government to make changes to the law on pet theft to ensure that the value of pets is fully recognised in statute and that sentencing options available to the court are a real deterrent against committing what can be a devastating crime.

The Petitions Committee is today publishing a video and transcript of a discussion held earlier this month on this issue between Tom Hunt MP, a member of the Committee, Dr Daniel Allen, the creator of three petitions calling for pet theft reform, which combined have received almost a quarter of a million signatures, and campaigners on this issue. Dr Allen's most recent petition "[Make pet theft crime a specific offence with custodial sentences](#)" calls for a minimum two-year sentence for the crime. I would encourage you and your Ministerial colleagues to watch this discussion and see the impact that pet theft can have on the pet owners who have had to deal with it. It is available on the UK Parliament YouTube Channel at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOKQOIPVIpM>.

It is clear to us from this discussion that the responses from the Government to successive petitions, relying on guidance from the Sentencing Council on the level of harm a theft causes, is not enough to deal with this crime. As Dr Allen raised in our discussion, these are acts undertaken by criminals "despite knowing the devastating impact pet theft has on families". Freya Woodhall, who spoke to us about her 20-month search for her stolen sprocker spaniel Willow, described how she and her family have spent more than a year and a half "living in limbo."

Sentencing Council guidelines make no specific reference to animals, but only require judges to consider whether "Items stolen were of substantial value to the loser – regardless of monetary worth" and whether there was "emotional distress". These criteria would allow courts to consider sentences of up to 7 years imprisonment; however, we are not aware of any cases where this sentence has been levied, and we have been told of many occasions where sentences were felt to be trivial compared to the impact of the crime. We have

also been made aware of the calculated risks some criminals are taking in stealing pets for profit, undeterred by the paltry fines levied in the few cases where charges are brought.

Without a specific offence of pet theft, it remains difficult to confirm the true scale of the problem in the UK but based on limited reporting by police it is likely to extend to thousands of cases each year. Research by pet theft reform campaigners has shown that the number of thefts is increasing each year, but the number of charges is going down. By creating a specific offence of pet theft these cases could be both punished and deterred more effectively. At the very least, the Government should require the police and courts to specifically record the number of reported crimes, arrests and convictions for the theft of pets so the true scale of this problem is made clear.

While we accept that it is a matter for the courts to decide on the sentence imposed on someone found guilty of theft, that does not mean the Government does not need to act. Ministers could bring forward legislation, either by amending the Theft Act or the Animal Welfare Act, that would create a specific new offence of pet theft with an appropriate sentencing range that will act as a deterrent and provide a punishment that reflects the impact of stealing a living creature and companion.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, people and their pets have been brought together more than ever. But we have also heard from petitioner and campaigner Beverley Cuddy that pet theft has “gone through the roof.” In recent years, Parliament has passed Finn’s Law to ensure that service animals are protected and Lucy’s Law to crack-down on puppy farming. Bringing forward a specific offence of pet theft would be an important and welcome addition to new laws to protect animals. So, we are asking you to reconsider the repeated refusal to bring forward this change, in spite of the significant support that this campaign continues to receive, and the cross-party consensus on this issue.

Yours sincerely,



Catherine McKinnell MP
Chair, Petitions Committee



Tom Hunt MP,
Petitions Committee