

Written evidence submitted by the Pet Theft Awareness (PTA) (PWA0048)

Committee Inquiry Call for Evidence – Pet Welfare and Abuse

I represent Pet Theft Awareness (PTA), an organisation dedicated to highlighting the growing threat of pet abduction within the public and parliamentary consciousness. Originally founded in 2013 by Richard Jordan and Arnot Wilson, I subsequently joined the team following the theft of my much-loved Siamese cat, Clooney, in June 2013, when it became apparent that the abduction of family cats was not being properly recognised by the police authorities. I am Campaigns Director and author of the annual Cat Theft Report, the only evidence-based primary research into the scale and nature of cat theft across the country as a whole.

The primary reason for this submission of evidence is to ensure that cats are afforded the same protection as their canine counterparts under the proposed Pet Abduction Offence in the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill.

Will the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill (as currently drafted) take a significant step to tackling poor pet welfare and abuse’?

Pet abduction is a welfare and abuse issue. It causes immense misery, suffering and harm to both the pet and the owner, impacting to an incalculable extent on the physical and psychological wellbeing of a cherished family member (92% of owners consider their cat as family—Cats Protection survey, Cat Report 2022).

My interest in this Committee Inquiry is primarily focused on the proposed Pet Abduction Offence in the Kept Animals Bill (KAB). As you will be aware, the Government commissioned a Pet Theft Taskforce (PTTF) to investigate the perceived increase in pet theft over the pandemic, with its report proposing the creation of a new offence of pet abduction. This was in recognition that the theft of our family pets was an animal welfare concern since they have, as sentient beings, an obvious capacity to suffer when stolen. Much of the narrative throughout the PTTF report appears to be in full support of an inclusive pet abduction offence and it is very much recognised that sentience and the capacity to suffer is not limited to dogs.

“The creation of a new offence of pet abduction is absolutely the right approach because it recognises that pets are more than mere property that can often be replaced, but sentient beings. It acknowledges not only the owner’s loss but also reflects the worry and anxiety that can be caused through the uncertainty of the safety and well-being of a loved friend and member of the family”.
Robert Buckland QC MP, then Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (from Pet Theft Taskforce Report, 2021).

The PTTF report continues with the recommendation that *‘the development of legislative options (should begin) at pace for a new pet abduction offence to acknowledge the welfare of sentient animals’* and that this should *‘include dogs, and the applicability to other types of animal should be explored during the development of the policy’*.

As the Bill is currently drafted, the government has chosen to limit the scope of the proposed offence solely to dogs, leaving our stolen family cats to be treated as inanimate objects under the Theft Act 1968 with their sentience and intrinsic value not fully recognised. This confusing decision appears to be very much at odds with the narrative in the PTTF report leaving us concerned that it

would also create the potential for unintended consequences: namely altering the risk/reward trade off and so making the theft of family cats and pets of other species more attractive to thieves. This would certainly amplify the welfare and abuse risk to cats – and this from the introduction of a Bill designed to tackle and ameliorate animal welfare issues, not just the welfare of dogs. After years in which Pet Theft Awareness has campaigned for the theft of all our pets to be recognised as a specific crime in its own right, it concerns us that the Government has failed to grasp that ALL pets are family with an equal right to legal protection from abduction and the deterrent that this affords.

However, this decision to exclude cats seems at odds with the encouraging news that the government is honouring its commitment to introduce compulsory microchipping of cats. Surely this is a tacit acknowledgement that cats are indeed family and that by definition, they meet the criteria for inclusion in the forthcoming Pet Abduction Offence: they are commonly kept as pets; can form bonds with their owner and their wellbeing would be adversely affected should they be removed from that person. *(See figure 1, Charts & Tables)*

Whilst we acknowledge that there is provision within the Bill to extend the scope of this offence to include other species at some time in the future via the Enabling Powers, it is our contention that the evidence-based research and analysis contained within this submission more than justifies the inclusion of cats in the proposed Pet Abduction legislation from the outset.

The Pet Abduction Offence: Why we believe the government is wrong to exclude our feline family.

So, what is the rationale for limiting the pet theft offence to dogs? It appears to be just a question of numbers; more specifically, the often-cited statistic that seven out of 10 thefts are dogs. However, closer inspection reveals that this headline figure relates solely to the Metropolitan Police area and spans the entire 10-year period since the Met first established its Dashboard in 2012. Crucially it ignores the rapidly changing dynamic that has seen cats increasingly becoming the target of thieves over time.

Whilst data is important in ensuring that the theft of our family cats can be thrown into the parliamentary spotlight alongside our canine companions, anyone who acknowledges the capacity of our family pets to feel traumatised when stolen surely should be focusing on sentience rather than statistics. Should it really matter whether six or seven out of 10 stolen pets are dogs, cats or horses; what matters is that 10 out of 10 suffer equally - as do their owners. The proposed Pet Abduction Offence should be there to protect dogs, cats and potentially, all pets by acting as a deterrent to the vile crime of pet theft that causes immeasurable misery and harm.

It is perhaps easier to understand why the Pet Abduction offence suddenly became a 'dog abduction offence' when you scrutinise the contributors to the PTF report and appreciate that the numerous animal charities and academic researchers who informed the PTF were almost without exception organisations or individuals representing the interests of dogs (Dogs Trust; Dr D Allen and Dr H Selby-Fell, both dog researchers; RSPCA; Dog Lost; The Kennel Club; South Wales Police GAIN co-ordinator and Chair of Dog Theft/Illegal Breeding-Strategic Working Group). Cats Protection and Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, both vocal advocates and staunch defenders of feline welfare issues, were notable by their absence. The report reflected this imbalance with an overwhelming plethora of academic research on dog theft, naturally placing the spotlight on the theft of our canine companions. The relative absence of similar studies on cats should not, however, justify their exclusion.

Pet Theft Awareness did in fact, provide our previous cat theft data (2015-2020) to the PTF, but the approach came very late in the evidence gathering process and we were not invited to present our findings at the working party meetings. PTA is, however, referenced twice in the final report.

The Evidence: Cats are a target of theft too.

The evidence contained in this submission is the result of detailed and extensive research using data gathered year-on-year under a Freedom of Information request to all UK police forces. It spans the period 2015-2021 and aims to bring the theft of cats under greater scrutiny. Very little data on the subject had previously existed and it seemed to us that if we were ever to begin to understand the scale and nature of the threat to our family cats when it came to theft then we needed to address this. (Please note, we are currently still awaiting the complete 2022 FOI cat theft figures).

- **Police recorded cat theft jumped 40% in 2021 to an all-time high of 560.**

Given that as a nation we save a space on our sofas for an estimated 12 million cats (PFMA survey 2021), our suspicion remains that the aggregate figures continue to understate the extent of cat theft as recorded by the police, despite our figures for 2021 showing a startling annual increase of 40%. If we further consider that in the 12 months to end-September 2021 total theft and burglary actually *declined* by 18% and 21% respectively (Crime survey for England & Wales), the surge in the number of cat thefts is even more concerning. The total for 2021 of 560 is more than four times higher than was recorded just seven years previously in 2015 (*see figures 2 and 3*).

It is clear that the theft of dogs is a major concern; they are not legally allowed to wander and therefore theft is largely unambiguous. By contrast, cats enjoy freedoms that put them at risk of vanishing and herein lies one reason for the suspiciously low cat theft figures. However, a right to roam is hardly licence for the police to dismiss our claims of theft – as personal testimonies suggest. Our family cats can also fall victim to the particularly insidious and invisible crime of ‘Theft by Finding’ whereby someone assumes possession without taking reasonable measures to find the true owner. Whilst difficult to quantify, we are certain that the true scale of the theft of our family cats is potentially huge. ***In the absence of the legal protections that the Pet Abduction Offence would confer as with dogs, there will be little incentive for those who either overtly steal, or furtively ‘adopt’, to think twice. It is our fear that this concerning trend can only continue to rise.***

- **Data from the Met shows that cat theft as a proportion of total pet theft crimes has risen from 6% in 2012 to 31% in 2021.**

The very comprehensive Metropolitan Police Dashboard reveals that recorded cat theft has risen from just 19 in 2012 to 234 in 2021—a twelve-fold increase. In fact, if we turn the spotlight on 2021 figures, the Met reported a shocking increase of 74% in the London area over the 12 months. On this basis, fewer than six in 10 recorded thefts were dogs, whilst more than three in 10 were cats. ***The composition of pet theft crime is therefore clearly changing*** (*see figure 4*).

- **Only two cases resulted in prosecution in 2021. This represents just 0.35% of total cat thefts during the year.**

25 out of 39 forces have failed to prosecute a single case in the last seven years. In fact, in 2019 there were zero prosecutions across all police forces providing data (*see figure 5*).

- **Several police authority areas did not record a single case of cat theft in 2021.**

There were several forces who recorded NO cases of cat theft at all in a whole year – and some for consecutive years. Can they really be cat crime-free zones? We are far from convinced that they are listening. Infinitely more compelling is the conclusion that it's just not possible that these are perfectly law-abiding areas of the UK when it comes to stealing cats, rather that they represent worrying regions of police indifference alongside a disparity in recording systems. Indeed, if all police forces took the issue of cat theft as seriously as the

Metropolitan Police Service, matching their diligence and recorded the same rate of thefts per head of population, the total number of cat theft crimes across the country as a whole would exceed 2,000 a year.

- **Despite the public's growing awareness of pet theft, the number of police forces unable to provide any basic data, due to either cost considerations or data systems limitations, increased to seven.**

There is increasing evidence that some police forces are actually de-prioritising cat theft. In 2021, West Midlands Police became the latest constabulary declining to provide us with information, joining Staffordshire Police, Greater Manchester Police, Police Scotland, North Wales, Hampshire and Thames Valley who have opted out in previous years.

In common with the recommendations of the Pet Theft Taskforce Report, we believe that pressure should be brought to bear on ALL police forces in the UK to provide the requested information. This would help form as clear a picture as possible about the true scale and nature of cat theft in this country. ***If our family felines were included alongside dogs in the proposed Pet Abduction Offence the police would be obliged to collect and store such data routinely.***

- **Why are cats being stolen?**

Breeding: The price of kittens has risen dramatically, particularly for desirable breeds, typically now in excess of £1,000. Breeding for profit without care or knowledge places welfare at serious risk.

Resale: Pedigree cats are sought after and will still fetch £250 upwards.

Theft by Finding: It's all-too easy to simply absorb a visiting cat into a household with little or no repercussions, leaving true owners with an open-ended grief.

Pet Theft Awareness has been campaigning since November 2021 for cats to be included alongside dogs in the proposed Pet Abduction Offence. After continuously lobbying the ever-changing incumbents of ministerial positions within DEFRA and following communications with Cats Protection, the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Cats and MPs, PTA were present at an APGOCATS drop-in event in March 2023 handing out our Cat Theft Report 2022 – The Summary to MPs. This was attended by over 50 MPs who pledged their support for an amendment to include family cats in the Bill. There appears to be a lot of support amongst the cat owning community for legal protections from theft for cats with over 10,000 emails sent by members of the public to their MP.

What additional measures should the government take to stop bad practices, improve overall domestic pet welfare and assist those involved in supporting domestic pet welfare?

1. ***Introduce an amendment to include cats in the proposed Pet Abduction Offence within the Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill*** and expedite its progress through parliament.
2. Whilst we are delighted it will become a legal requirement for all cats to be microchipped from June 2024, this alone is insufficient to ensure the safe reunification of pets with their registered keepers. To guarantee this, ***it should also be compulsory for veterinary practices, charities, re-homing centres, animal rescues and Councils to scan and check keepership details on first presentation and to contact the registered keeper.*** In the absence of such legislative pressure, at present when a microchip is scanned for and

detected there is no obligation outside of 'best practice' on the person or organisation to either cross-reference with the relevant database or to ensure that the registered keeper is contacted. I have first-hand experience of this. In March 2019, following a routine phone call with my database company and six years of searching for Clooney as well as campaigning for tougher penalties for pet theft to serve as a deterrent, I discovered that 11 months previously two separate, but identifiable veterinary practices had looked up Clooney's chip number and accessed my details. Despite this and a missing flag against the account, neither the database company, nor either of the vets concerned, contacted me. The details of my stolen cat's provenance are now in the hands of his abductors, which they can use to their advantage.

Considering that 'companionship, reducing loneliness and stress were collectively the top reasons for owning a cat (51%) for the third consecutive year' according to the Cats Protection survey (Cat Report 2022), shouldn't we be doing all we can to protect both the wellbeing of our family cats and the mental health benefits that pet ownership confers? The theft of a loved pet throws all of these psychological benefits on its head, plunging owners into a state of panic, despair and fear for the health, safety and welfare of their beloved pet. Their trauma is a loving owner's trauma – and we need legal protections from this.

Toni Clarke
Pet Theft Awareness

April 2023

Charts & Tables

Figure 1: Power to extend Section 43 of Animal Welfare (Kept Animals) Bill

The criteria for the Secretary of State to extend the proposed legislation for dogs to other companion animals (including cats) are as follows:

- a. That animals of that species are commonly kept as pets, and
- b. That there is evidence that—
 - i. Animals of that species are capable of forming bonds with people who keep them, and
 - ii. Removing an animal of that species from a person with whom it has formed a bond may adversely affect its wellbeing.

Our contention is that these conditions for inclusion in the proposed legislation apply just as much to cats as they do to dogs—why wait?

Figure 2

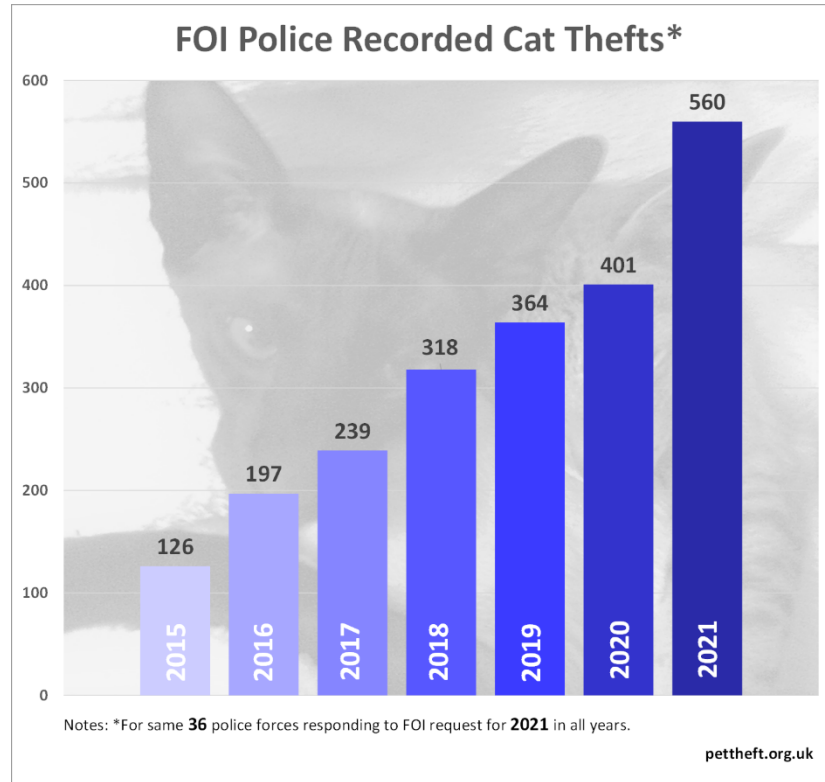


Figure 3: Annual Recorded Cat Theft Crimes by Police Authority 2015-21

Public Authority	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2015-2021
Avon & Somerset Constabulary	3	8	5	6	2	1	1	26
Bedfordshire Police	4	2	8	2	4	2	3	25
British Transport Police	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cambridgeshire Constabulary	N/A	N/A	0	5	8	5	8	26
Cheshire Constabulary	0	0	1	1	0	9	11	22
City of London Police	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cleveland Police	2	3	2	5	4	5	3	24
Cumbria Constabulary	0	0	3	3	2	9	6	23
Derbyshire Constabulary	1	2	0	1	1	0	0	5
Devon & Cornwall Constabulary	8	13	14	31	29	24	27	146
Dorset Police	2	4	8	3	8	8	10	43
Durham Constabulary	0	4	0	0	0	2	4	10
Dyfed-Powys Police	1	1	1	12	3	4	5	27
Gloucestershire Constabulary	1	2	0	0	2	1	0	6
Gwent Police	0	0	1	5	9	7	6	28
Hertfordshire Constabulary	3	7	8	10	9	14	5	56
Humberside Police	7	2	1	22	7	12	14	65
Kent Police	18	25	24	13	31	29	38	178
Lancashire Constabulary	6	8	2	14	7	13	20	70
Leicestershire Constabulary	2	0	0	2	6	11	3	24
Lincolnshire Police	0	0	0	3	3	2	2	10
Merseyside Police	5	9	2	4	3	0	8	31
Metropolitan Police Service	33	41	50	73	114	133	234	678
North Yorkshire Police	3	1	2	3	3	1	10	23
Northamptonshire Police	3	1	3	0	3	4	0	14
Northumbria Police	6	6	9	6	9	19	14	69
Nottinghamshire Police	0	2	3	10	6	4	10	35
Police Service of Northern Ireland	4	1	1	1	1	0	5	13
Port of Dover Police	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	0	0
South Wales Police	2	3	4	5	1	0	0	15
South Yorkshire Police	5	2	17	17	21	9	15	86
Suffolk & Norfolk	4	12	20	11	21	15	18	101

Figure 4

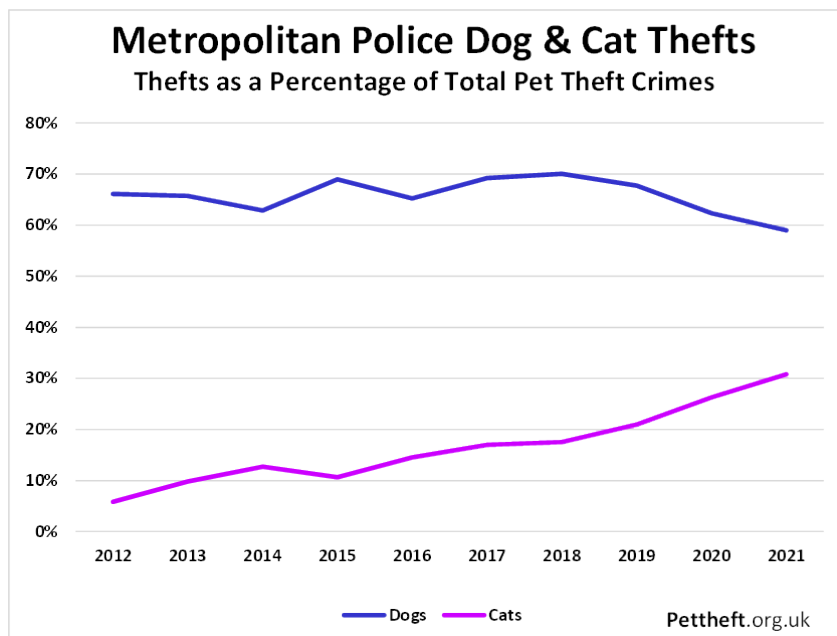


Figure 5

