The Scottish SPCA welcomes the invitation from the Committee to comment on the above petition raised by Ms E Stirling regarding the cat population in Scotland.

I have known the petitioner for many years, mainly through her work in Badger conservation and in her work as a volunteer for the charity Cats Protection. The Society has no comment on the scientific evidence or figures given by Ms Stirling to the committee.

The Scottish SPCA was established in 1839 and is the largest animal welfare organisation in Scotland, the Society deals with all species of domestic, livestock and wild animals throughout the whole of Scotland.

The Scottish SPCA is an animal welfare organisation and not a species conservation body.

Scottish SPCA Inspectors are authorised by the Scottish Minister to enforce the welfare provisions of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 and regularly provides reports to the Crown Office Procurator Fiscal Service with a view to prosecution of alleged offenders, in all cases, it is the Procurator Fiscal service who ultimately decides to proceed to court proceedings or not.

The Scottish SPCA also has nine Animal Rescue and Rehoming Centre’s (ARRCs) throughout Scotland, who deal with over 12,000 animals per year and one dedicated National Wildlife Rescue Centre, which dealt with just under 10,000 wild creatures of all species in 2017.

Domestic cats can come into the care of the Scottish SPCA for a variety of reasons; through neglect, intentional cruelty, abandonment, road traffic accident (RTA), injured or ill stray cats or following the death of an owner.

Many ill or injured cats that have roamed from home or have been involved in RTAs are returned directly to their owners by our Animal Rescue Officers and Inspectors after veterinary examination as their owners have been traced through the cat being microchipped.

All other cats are taken to one of our ARRC,s to be cared for until they are claimed by an owner or rehomed to a loving new family home. All cats reclaimed by an owner will be
microchipped before being returned.

The following numbers of cats were reclaimed by their owners from one of our ARRCs by either visiting a centre of seeing the cat on our website.
2015 - 323 reclaimed
2016 - 345 reclaimed
2017 - 323 reclaimed.

The Scottish SPCA has a strict non destruction policy for physically and mentally healthy animals; cats are only humanely put to sleep on welfare grounds following the advice of a veterinary surgeon.

All cats rehomed by the Scottish SPCA are fully health checked by a veterinary surgeon, vaccinated, and spayed or neutered prior to rehoming, along with 40 days free pet insurance.

If a kitten is too young to be spayed or neutered at the time of rehoming the new owner has to undertake to have the kitten returned to be spayed or neutered at a suitable age or have the operation carried out by their own veterinary surgeon with the Scottish SPCA meeting the cost.

The Scottish SPCA currently has over 270 cats in our ARRCs and has rehomed the following numbers of cats,
2015 – 2,237 rehomed.
2016 – 1,940 rehomed.
2017 – 1,943 rehomed.

The Scottish SPCA does not routinely deal with feral cats unless they are sick, injured or diseased. The Scottish SPCA does not carry out trap, neuter release schemes that some other very reputable organisations do.

The Scottish SPCA has a very large education programme for school children of primary school age (over 280,000 school children involved in 2017) and strongly promotes responsible pet ownership to all members of the Scottish public.

The petition presented appears to have a dual purpose,
1) to protect the Scottish Wildcat and,
2) protect the health status and reduce the overall number of cats in Scotland; these are separate issues and should be addressed as such.

1) True Scottish Wildcats are protected by legislation.
The Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime legislation and guidance group set up by the Scottish Government has recommended that the term Scottish Wildcat is further clarified, only true Scottish Wildcats are protected by the legislation, in days gone by, Scottish Wildcats were identified by their pelage and appearance along with a few post mortem indicators, however, modern genetic testing has indicated that hybridisation may have decimated the pure Scottish Wildcats as such the damage may have already been done.

When the Scottish Wildcat Action group was formed, certain parts of Scotland (Strathbogie, Angus Glens, Northern Strathspey, Morvern and Strathpeffer) were identified as important areas where the Scottish Wildcat may be helped by controlling domestic or feral cats within those defined areas, this was the first time that only cats "under the control of man" was muted, but that was specific to those small designated areas. The proposal at that time was to have an extensive trap, neuter and vaccinate release scheme within these areas.

A proposal to make cat neutering legally compulsory throughout Scotland in an effort to protect the Scottish Wildcat does not make sense, cats in the central belt and major cities and towns do not pose a threat to Scottish Wildcats.

2) Health status and overall cat population
The number of unwanted cats has increased slightly over the years; this is accompanied by a continual cycle of cat flu outbreaks, both of which causes the Scottish SPCA and many other reputable organisations problems.

There is a proposal by the Scottish Government to regulate all organisations that act as animal sanctuaries or rehoming agencies, part of those regulations could include only rehoming neutered cats, which most of the reputable organisations already do.

As stated previously, the Scottish SPCA and many other reputable organisations support vaccination, microchipping and the neutering of cats and there is certainly more public education required in that area, however, making neutering compulsory would be cost prohibitive to many cat owners and could lead in an increase of cats and kittens being abandoned.

The Scottish SPCA would also question as to how such a law could be enforced and by whom.
This would require a central or local government agency to check cats have been neutered and deal with those that have not, if this becomes a compulsory measure, it would be unreasonable to expect charities to fund the overflow that would inevitably
follow. The appointed agency would also have to develop and monitor a licensing system for those who legally breed cats.

The committee also has to consider the unintended consequences of any such legislation.

The non-native species list involves invasive species such as the Grey Squirrel, which was first released into the wild in the UK in the late 1880s. Any Grey Squirrel that comes under the control of man cannot be released back into the wild, as such would have to be kept in life long captivity (which the Scottish SPCA does not condone or do) or be humanely destroyed.

If the neutering of cats is made compulsory, what would be the fate of cats found un-neutered, the Scottish SPCA would certainly object to otherwise healthy cats being humanely destroyed or being confined for life.

The Scottish SPCA agrees with the petitioner that there is a problem in these areas but we believe alternative solutions should found.

The Scottish SPCA would be happy to discuss the matter further with the petitions committee if required.