Thank you for your letter of 12 December 2017 seeking my views on the actions called for in the petition, in particular with regard to the connection between the animal welfare and conservation aspects of the petition.

Animal Welfare

The Scottish Government acknowledges that many people in Scotland keep and breed domestic cats responsibly, and that the Scottish Government’s Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats approved by the Scottish Parliament on 27 January 2010, informs cat owners of the many benefits of neutering their cats, not least the birth of unwanted kittens.

The Scottish Government encourages all owners, in its Code of Practice for the Welfare of Cats, to microchip their pets as the best way of being reunited with them should they be separated. If an owner chooses to do this the owners’ details will be recorded by the database operator.

Compulsory microchipping, introduced for dogs in 2016, also allows authorities to directly identify dog owners and hold them accountable for their behaviour. Cats have a much lesser impact on their surrounding environment than dogs, will often go about their business unnoticed and are unlikely to pose a danger to a member of the public. As such, the Scottish Government does not consider compulsory microchipping to be required for cats.

I announced on 11 May 2017 that the Scottish Government will update regulations governing the licensing of dog, cat and rabbit breeding and dealing, which may address some of the petitioner’s concerns about irresponsible cat breeding and sale. That commitment was reiterated by the First Minister in the Programme for Government on 5 September 2017. However, there will be a need to look very carefully at any scheme that proposed further legislation in this area, especially considering that the risk to Highland Wildcat genetics is associated with feral domestic cat populations in certain parts of Scotland, rather than with owned domestic cats more generally.

Conservation

You ask whether we would be prepared to review the non-native species Code of Practice under the Wildlife and Natural Environment (Scotland) Act 2011. I should say at the outset that changing the Code of Practice does not, of course, change the law in any way and also that I am not certain that viewing the problem of uncontrolled un-neutered cats as a non-native species issue is necessarily a helpful approach. However I am prepared to ask the Non-native Species Action Group (a group of officials and stakeholders that operates under the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy) to look at this issue and consider whether making changes to the Code as regards domestic cats would be helpful for the purpose of protecting biodiversity in Scotland.

In considering any changes to the Code, the Group will bear in mind biodiversity issues, including impacts on small birds, mammals and amphibians. They will also in particular bear in mind the impact on the Scottish wildcat. In this context I should mention that we support, and work closely with, the partner organisations who are helping to implement the Scottish Wildcat Action Plan. A key part of that is ‘Scottish Wildcat Action’ an ambitious five
year project that has the ultimate vision of restoring viable populations of wildcat north of the Highland fault line.

To date this work has focussed on six ‘Priority Areas’, and has so far included one of the most intensive camera trapping surveys ever done, a first season of TNVR (Trap Neuter Vaccinate Release) of feral cats and hybrid cats that show clear domestic cat ancestry, the ‘Supercat’ campaign to promote responsible cat ownership, and engagement with land managers to improve land management practices in relation to wildcats. The Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) endorsed action plan also includes a conservation breeding component, led by The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland. The ultimate aim of this program is to establish a viable captive insurance population of wildcats for eventual re-release into the wild.

On a final note, the petitioner mentioned, in her evidence to the Committee on 7 December 2017, responses to her letters from the animal welfare section but not from the conservation section. I would like to take this opportunity to put on record that the responses provided included contributions from both of those branches although they issued from only one.

I hope this reply is helpful to the Committee in its consideration of the Petition.