I write in response to points raised in the recent submissions by the Scottish Government and partners in Scottish Wildcat Action (SWA). These convince me more than ever that current measures are not working, and that far more effective measures are needed now.

**Context.** The evidence I previously presented demonstrated that we are in a rapidly changing situation with our pet cat population in Scotland, namely a spiralling increase driving us beyond all possibility of meeting every cat’s needs\(^1,2,3\). The 13% of owners that keep unneutered cats in Scotland produce enough new cats to more than double the pet cat population every four years at a time when the number of homes available is static\(^4,5,6,7\). This means that seven in every 10 kittens born will face homelessness at some point during their lifespan\(^8,9\). This poses catastrophic consequences for our pet cat population and undermines all the good work achieved by the pet charities and responsible owners.

Now the SWA report of its first three years of work also confirms that the unneutered domestic cat population is too great and is a serious ongoing threat to the wildcat if it does not change\(^10\). The report finds that Trap Neuter Vaccinate Return (TNVR) although it has an impact cannot be sustained indefinitely. They propose neutering of all pet cats by law as the only measure that can reduce these difficulties to manageable proportions.

Since I first brought my petition to Parliament to draw attention to the difficulties faced by unwanted cats, I have to report that 2018 has been the worst ever in twenty-two years of working with homeless cats. Swamped with reports of kittens and pregnant cats I have been unable to reach even half of the sites reported and I know colleagues in pet centres are experiencing similar surges in unwanted pregnant and nursing cats.

Current voluntary schemes are clearly now inadequate. Research suggests difficulties with timing rather than finance is the reason cats are still kept unneutered\(^11\). Specifying timing of neutering in law would potentially create the clear message needed.

Proposals to tighten up on some cat breeders or some perpetrators of cruelty whilst welcome will not make any difference to the vast bulk of cat suffering whose roots lie in the extreme high reproductive rate of the domestic cat combined with an unregulated breeding system across the spectrum of owners. This combination has forced cumulating numbers of cats into homelessness and its associated negative impacts on welfare and health.

The SWA report considers that any new measure must be enforceable in law to be effective. I agree with this and would add that this process opens up opportunities for our currently weak legal protections for cat welfare to be strengthened. However, I am convinced that to strengthened protection must extend to all our cats (prevention of harms) and not stop at owned cats (property) and victims of individual acts of cruelty (AHW Act).
This is a cat public health issue, and we need to approach it by bringing preventive approaches to bear. Individuals who smoke in public places aren’t necessarily aware of the cumulative negative impacts of their actions, so it needed legal backing to make clear the message that smoking in public places puts the health of us all at risk not just that of smokers. Individuals using single-use plastics are not readily aware of the cumulative harms that result from their actions, so it needs legal backing to make clear the message that single-use plastics put the health of us all at risk.

Similarly, individuals letting their cats have litters are not readily aware of the cumulative harms that result from their action, so it needs legal backing to make clear the message that producing too many cats puts the health of all our cats and our environment at risk. The very fact of making cat neutering happen by law makes it more likely people will back it.

The Scottish Government was asked to expand on what was meant by “unintended consequences” which had been put forward as potential barriers to mandatory neutering. These have been useful and have highlighted we all agree that cat welfare is paramount. However, things will not stay the same even if we do nothing differently from now. The only certainty is that risks will escalate for a great number of cats – the question is whether we kick the decision down the road or whether we put into effect measures that we know can work if we make it happen now.

I will address these concerns individually.

“Why neuter pet cats in areas where there are no wildcats?”

The wildcat report makes clear that wildcats in Scotland do and will always live in territories that include human populations of considerable size, meaning they will always be in proximity with domestic cats. As things are many of these will be unneutered and unvaccinated.

The kitten born in the centre of Glasgow or Bathgate can and frequently does become the unneutered pet of a rural resident and could become the next abandoned cat at the top of a glen. Wherever there are roads there are abandoned cats.

Ninety-one per cent of veterinary professionals put neutering at the top of the list of important things for cat welfare, and neutering is widely considered now an essential part of good welfare. Why would we want lower standards for some cats? (leaving aside individual special needs)

“Would legally enforceable neutering be unaffordable to owners?”

No. In a recent research study carried out in Scotland only 16% of owners mentioned cost as the reason for not neutering their cats. If 16% of currently unneutered pet cats needed financial help towards their neutering that would be around 16,000 payments as a one-off outlay. In 2016 the UK’s biggest cat charity neutered 152,000 cats in the UK, 16,000 of them in Scotland, so this is not beyond current levels.

Timing was the reason most owners gave - “I’m waiting until my cat is older.”
This suggests that most owners have nothing against neutering in principle and that they would adjust their actions to fit in with a legally prescribed timing of neutering if the required steps were made simple and clear and everybody else was doing it.

If something is important enough to be mandated in law it clearly lends dignity and value to that objective – most people choose to comply with law for the sense of social responsibility and dignity that compliance brings.

“Would legally enforceable neutering lead to a greater number of abandoned cats?”

Not if we plan for the transition. A clear staged pathway, with unambiguous messaging about what needs to be done, by whom, by when and where resources are available would ease anxieties and effect behavioural adjustment.

Other countries are taking a proactive approach to similar cat population problems\(^3\). The Belgian model introduced mandatory neutering for all cats *given or sold* (breeder to bear the cost) for a year before extending it to all cats\(^14\). Alternatively, the staged introduction could be by area as the SWA report to the Scottish Government proposes, or elements of the two.

A staged pathway could also plan for the possibility for a spike in abandoned cats. Compared to the numbers that will pour out abandoned or under their own steam if we fail to introduce mandatory neutering, any spike in numbers dumped during the transition will be (a) a one-off and (b) small by comparison.

“How would enforcement of mandatory neutering work – how would we motivate owners to neuter their cats?”

In a recent research study no owners of unneutered female cats gave “I want my cat to breed” as a reason for not neutering\(^11\). There is therefore no evidence that neutering in principle would be resisted. This matches exactly my own experience of thousands of owners keeping unneutered cats. Reasons were mainly ‘never got round to it’ and ‘won’t ask a charity’.

One owner of multiple unneutered cats told me recently when I was describing the Belgian model “If that had been the law here it would have saved me from getting into this mess”.

There is a large body of evidence demonstrating that people adjust their behaviour following a legal ban being introduced e.g. in relation to smoking in public places and single use plastics. The very fact of something taking effect makes people more likely to accept it – they just get on with it\(^13\).

As things are the high reproductive capacity of the domestic cat runs ahead of owners and they lose control of the situation. Mandatory neutering by law would signal age of neutering so people can take action in time.

People who opt in to breed would follow a pathway introducing them to the competencies and responsibilities that would be required, including registering and licencing.
“What are the risks around surgical procedures involved in neutering?”

Risks to life from serial pregnancies and territorial behaviours are higher than from neutering\(^\text{13}\). The Cat Population Control Group and the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) recommend neutering of cats at 4 months old and in the case of feral and rescue kittens neutering at 8 to 12 weeks is “safe and appropriate” and “the welfare implications of neutering are outweighed by the social, health and population controls benefits”.

From my own experience I can say that modern anaesthetics and neutering procedures are noticeably ‘light touch’ compared to when I started TNR. I have seen 4,500 recoveries from surgery for neutering without problems. Kittens bounce back as if nothing happened. Females have tiny incisions (about an inch), sutures are absorbed by the skin over subsequent weeks and males require only a brief anaesthetic and no stitches at all.

As things are, ‘accidental’ breeding puts cats and their offspring at risk by spreading feline viruses and genetic problems which bring risks of complications at such times as surgery. Planned breeding and pre-booked adoption of kittens mitigates against the spread of these conditions – with the result that fewer high risk cats will be presenting for neutering following the introduction of a breeders’ register and licencing system.

From a veterinarian’s perspective, the procedure would not differ from now – where there is deemed to be clinical risk, the veterinarian would not proceed and instead issue an exemption statement. Once universal neutering is in place succeeding generations of kittens will be healthier so reducing the numbers of cats with feline diseases and genetic problems.

Ear tipping is a universally used and internationally accepted procedure that provides a visible sign that a cat has been neutered\(^\text{13}\). Cats that are living ferally and many long-term homeless cats cannot be picked up to be scanned for a microchip. Without an ear-tip a previously neutered cat would not be identifiable. It would have to be re-captured (which may be impossible), transported and sedated in order to be scanned. Not to ear-tip such cats at the time of neutering causes unnecessary stress in future and a waste of effort and time for people delivering neutering programmes\(^\text{13}\).

“What is likely to happen to the gene pool and will it be reduced?”

In their submission BSAVA et al supported the responsible breeding of cats and define this as “the selection of cats from healthy lines, performance of pre-breeding health screening, the finding of appropriate homes for kittens and the encouragement of responsible ownership (microchipping, neutering and vaccination) to prospective owners. In terms of the requirement that all those breeding cats should be registered, BVA would support this idea in line with our support for registering dog breeders”.

As things are, ‘accidental’ breeding poses significant risks to the health and diversity of the genepool through the common occurrence of inbreeding. There is no reason...
planned breeding should produce only pedigree cats. Cat breeding would become a positively selected choice (opt-in) putting it on an equal footing with other commonly kept animals and opening up fresh opportunities for a 'new breed' of responsible breeders, who would be interested to maintain genetically diverse healthy cats and to supply the demand there will always be for our much cherished moggies.

Calculations suggest that around 60,000 home vacancies a year arise as owned cats come to the end of their lives. This means there is a potential ‘demand’ for that number of new cats to take up the vacancies in homes.

“Is there a need to cull unowned cat populations?”

NO. As things are, it is the sheer high volume of the current homeless and unwanted cat population that pushes cats into conditions that widely harm them, such as proximity to dangerous machinery, chronic malnutrition, being seen as ‘pests’ and being killed on roads.

The fastest and most effective way to reduce the current high rates of killing and suffering is to reduce the sheer high numbers of homeless cats in these unsafe areas, that is neutering of all pet cats combined with TNVR programmes.

The culling of homeless cats is unacceptable on ethical and moral grounds to the public.

In my experience, where cats are subject to lethal control the effect is selective survival of the super-survivors which are extremely difficult to catch for neutering so there is a strong case that lethal control is making matters worse and a waste of resources.

However, there are also efficacy reasons NOT to remove cats from their territory. When neutered cats are returned to their territory they maintain a stable population, meaning capture of new cats for neuter is more successful.

Cats are above all else territorial animals and for welfare and efficacy reasons should be returned to their known territory with the minimum of containment. Relocation should not be considered.

As now only fully recognisably socialised cats should be transferred to an animal centre – to protect semi-socialised cats from inappropriate containment and the associated stress.

It is absolutely right that pet organisations should not be taken down a road that could result in them being pressured into uplifting cats that are living homelessly or ferally. A mandatory neutering scheme would mean pet and cat organisations can uplift a cat for purposes of neutering, vaccinating and microchipping but are not enforced to do so and are limited to those procedures, minimum containment and the cat returned to its territory.

As things are, cats currently are not euthanased by veterinary professionals unless they are injured or ill and cannot reasonably be treated. This would not change. A mandatory neutering scheme would allow some exceptions including on clinical grounds as now. It would mean a vet can carry out a neutering procedure but is not
enforced to do so and is limited to the specified procedures of neuter, vaccinate, microchip and register.

The major cat organisations and SWA have tried and tested high welfare protocols for TNVR with homeless and feral cats which would form a robust protocol. With the input of the vet and pet organisations it should be possible to avoid ambiguity that could threaten cats. The more widely TNVR is carried out in future the more its effectiveness will be witnessed and so persuade more people there is no need to kill cats.

I appreciate that a mandatory neutering scheme (with some exemptions) could seem disproportionate on the face of it to some of the public who don’t know the severity of the problem, and could still worry pet organisations who are well used to being used as ‘pest control’, but this way we can prevent truly draconian measures in the not too distant future.

References

1. [http://www.parliament.scot/S5_PublicPetitionsCommittee/Submissions%202017/PE1674_A.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/S5_PublicPetitionsCommittee/Submissions%202017/PE1674_A.pdf)
2. RSPCA report Animal charities warn of potential cat-astrophe 27/02/18
4. PFMA 2016 regional ratio’s applied to PDSA/YouGov report figures 2018
5. PFMA historical data: 19% of households owned cats in 2012, now declined to 17%.
7. 260,000–80,000=180,000 excess to the homes available i.e. homeless or displaced older cats.
8. 104,000/2 = 52,000 females X 5 per litter = 260,000 using conservative estimates of one litter per year and not counting offspring reproduction
9. Based on an estimated average 10-year lifespan for an owned cat. The longer cats live the fewer vacancies occur annually.
10. Domestic cat neutering to preserve the Scottish wildcat. Veterinary Record letter 17 July 2018, 27-28
    [https://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/vetrec/183/1/27.2.full.pdf?ijkey=1RbNyFFSaLkNA&keytype=ref&siteid=bmjjournals](https://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/vetrec/183/1/27.2.full.pdf?ijkey=1RbNyFFSaLkNA&keytype=ref&siteid=bmjjournals)
12. Laurin K. Inaugurating rationalization: three field studies find increased rationalization when anticipated realities become current, Psychological Science 29 (4) 483-495
14. Stirling E. What would responsible cat ownership look like? 01 05 18