

Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP  
Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice.  
House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

Dear Lord Chancellor

**Re: Pet Theft Reform**

We are grateful that, following the Petitions Committee debate on October 19 2020, the Government wrote to the Sentencing Council asking them to update their Guidelines on dog theft taking into account the dog's intrinsic value rather than its monetary or sale value when sentencing on dog theft. We are aware that the Government now needs further information on the deterrence impact of such a change and trends in dog theft to convince the Sentencing Council of the need for such a change to their Guidelines. Such a change could include that the court can consider, when sentencing any proven cases of pet theft, the animal's intrinsic value to the owner so allowing sentencing guidelines to include pet theft at levels other than category 3 or 4 offences. We support such a move and are providing some evidence to support you in getting this updated Guidance.

On trends, during the past eleven months of Covid-19 restrictions, there is emerging evidence that dog theft has increased in some areas. For example, one police force area saw a large increase in recorded crime against their 5-year average for 2015-2019 (74% increase)<sup>1</sup>. Data from DogLost also shows regional increases in stolen dogs (with Crime Reference Numbers) registered on their website in 2020, compared to 2019. It has been widely reported that lockdown has increased the public's desire to own a dog and in many cases the supply of puppies has been unable to meet this immediate demand. This has resulted in a doubling of dog prices for the most popular breeds, a twofold increase in legal imports of dogs into the UK and an increase in opportunistic thieves stealing owned dogs in the UK. We know from FOIs that the Stolen and Missing Pets Alliance (SAMPA) has undertaken that certain police forces are reporting increased reporting of dog theft.

On deterrence we believe that dog thefts are either being undertaken by organised gangs or are opportunistic. Regardless of the perpetrator, the likelihood of being caught, charged and prosecuted is very low. For example, recent research<sup>2</sup> has found that 1% of pet theft led to charges in 2019 and less than 1% in 2020. Raising the category of the offence should lead to more prosecutions which should in turn have a deterrence effect. Indeed, research has shown that certainty of prosecution can prevent crimes<sup>3</sup>. So, we are convinced that both sets of information the Sentencing Council requires, can be met. We must act urgently to curb this pattern.

Within the UK it is estimated that 41% of households have a pet, with dogs and cats proving particularly popular (9m and 7.5m respectively). Owning pets offers many different benefits, indeed in recent years there has been an increasing body of research demonstrating the positive impact that animals have on the mental and physical health of people. For some people, their pet is their sole companion, reducing feelings of loneliness and isolation. The bond and connection between people and their pets is exceptionally powerful. However, this relationship and the fact that many pets are considered priceless, irreplaceable family members, is not reflected in current theft legislation. Rather, their value is considered similar to that of inanimate objects.

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<sup>1</sup> Selby-Fell, H. and Allen, D. (2021) Dog Theft: What can we infer from the evidence so far? 24<sup>th</sup> February 2021. Available at: <http://www.pettheftreform.com/research>

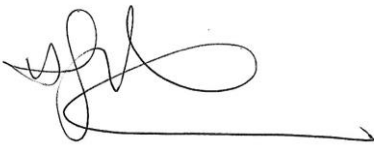
<sup>2</sup> Evidence from Dr Daniel Allen, Keele University. FOI Research: Data Requests to Police Forces by Dr Daniel Allen. Submitted to the Petitions Committee on 12 October 2020. <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/12901/default/> Accessed 15th March 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Ashworth, A. (2007) 'Sentencing' in Maguire, M., Morgan, R. and Reiner, R. (eds.) The Oxford Handbook of Criminology, fourth edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press pp 990-1023.

We are therefore seeking your reassurance that the Government remains committed to solving this issue and hope the information enclosed will be sufficient to revise the sentencing guidelines so that the sentencing available for pet theft is proportionate to the harm caused to pet owners and the impact on pet welfare.

We look forward to hearing from you and would welcome the opportunity to discuss this further with you and your team.

Yours sincerely and on behalf of all the organisations below,



Mrs Heidi Allen  
Director of Advocacy and Policy, RSPCA.

