



Pet Abduction Bill Northern Ireland Legislative Consent Memorandum

Cats Protection Briefing

Cats Protection, the UK's leading cat welfare charity, helps thousands of cats every year. Our campaigns change laws to give cats more protection and we continue to call for a better deal for cats. We help cats in Northern Ireland through our Belfast Adoption Centre and our five branches in Armagh, Downpatrick, Erne, Greater Belfast and North Antrim & Glens.

Summary

The proposals in the Pet Abduction Bill will help in three fundamental ways:

- **By deterring those looking to exploit animals for financial gain.**
- **By giving pet-owners a specific legal framework to ensure their case is actively investigated.**
- **By requiring police to log and investigate these crimes as pet theft rather than property, which will lead to the collating of data about this crime, helping to provide information about any patterns emerging.**

Background on Cat Theft

- Cat theft has a devastating effect on cats and their owners: Cats Protection's CATS Northern Ireland report 2023 showed that **91% of owners consider their cat part of the family**.¹
- A report by Pet Theft Awareness² found that in 2021 UK police forces recorded **cat theft increased 40% since the previous year and has more than quadrupled since 2015**.
- In 2021, a freedom of information request found **PSNI recorded four cat theft crimes, this included 2 kittens, a black and white cat, and an unidentified cat**.³

The Pet Abduction Bill

- The Bill would create **two new criminal offences of dog abduction and cat abduction in England and Northern Ireland**.
- The two provisions (the "dog clause" and the "cat clause") are different in that the dog clause expressly applies the provision where a person either detain[s] a dog or take[s] it, whereas the cat clause refers only to taking.
- Cats Protection believes this is a **fair and sensible approach**; providing the right balance in terms of deterring criminals and protecting cats while also avoiding interfering with cats roaming enjoyment as well as their routines with friendly neighbours.

The Bill does not seek to interfere with those acting altruistically

- During Second Reading of the Bill in the Commons, there was discussion around "Granny Meow" and whether the Bill could prosecute people such as her who *"had 14 cats... [and] had gone out and picked them up, because she thought they were strays. She was a completely innocent old lady"*.⁴ Since that debate, there have been various news reporting suggesting that the Bill's proposals could criminalise people who interact with a cat on the street for example by calling or stroking it – if this behaviour was considered to constitute 'coaxing'⁵.
- **Cats Protection believes that this is a misunderstanding of the scope of the proposals as the Bill contains clear safeguards to ensure those with altruistic intentions are not criminalised**; by providing a 'reasonable excuse' defence as well as in the distinction between the way in which cats and dogs are treated in the Bill.

¹ [Cats Northern Ireland Report 2023](#) pg 41

² [Pet Theft Awareness, Cat Theft Report 2022](#), Main Findings.

³ [Freedom of information request on cat theft](#)

⁴ [Sir Edward Leigh, Pet Abduction Bill, 19/01/2024, c1169](#)

⁵ See [Telegraph article](#) and [Times](#)

- The main purpose of the Bill is to deter those looking to exploit animals for profit, by stealing cats and selling them on or using them for breeding (and the increasing prevalence of and trend for pedigree cats makes this financially rewarding).

The proposals would help police collect accurate data regarding pet theft

- The secondary benefit of the Bill is the collation of data about pet theft in Northern Ireland. Currently pet theft is recorded under the category of property. This Bill would require reports to be recorded accordingly, allowing PSNI to build up an accurate picture of pet theft and look at trends across Northern Ireland. This will help in terms of prevention strategies.

Amendment to remove the offence of cat abduction from the Bill

- During the Pet Abduction Bill's House of Commons Report Stage there was an amendment tabled to remove the offence of cat abduction from the Bill⁶. Both the Bill's sponsor and the UK Government expressed that they could not support removing cats from the scope of the Bill⁷. The amendment was withdrawn.

For any further information please contact alice.palombo@cats.org.uk

⁶ [Pet Abduction Bill, As Amended, 04/03/2024, p3](#)

⁷ [Pet Abduction Bill, 19/01/2024, c573](#)