29 January 2018

JOINT BVA SCOTTISH BRANCH, BSAVA AND BVZS RESPONSE TO PUBLIC PETITIONS COMMITTEE REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK ON PUBLIC PETITION NO. PE01674 MANAGING THE CAT POPULATION IN SCOTLAND

1) BVA is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom and has over 17,000 members. Our primary aim is to represent, support and champion the interests of the veterinary profession in this country, and we therefore take a keen interest in all issues affecting the profession, including animal health and welfare, public health, regulatory issues and employment matters.

2) BVA’s Scottish Branch brings together representatives of the BVA’s territorial and specialist divisions, government, academic institutions and research organisations in Scotland. The Branch advises BVA on the consensus view of Scottish members on Scottish and United Kingdom issues.

3) The British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) exists to promote excellence in small animal practice through education and science and is the largest specialist division of BVA representing over 10,000 members.

4) The British Veterinary Zoological Society (BVZS) is the specialist division of the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and has over 400 active members. The membership includes registered veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses working with exotic species at all levels, from those in general practice providing a service for herpetologists, aviculturists, aquarists and the owners of exotic pets including primates, to those working in animal sanctuaries, wildlife parks, bird gardens, zoos and aquaria, and with free living wild animals.

5) We welcome the opportunity to input into the Public Petition Committee’s consideration of public petition No. PE 01674 on managing the cat population in Scotland. We recognise the negative impact of hybridisation with the domestic cat on the Scottish wildcat population. We consider that the veterinary profession has a clear role to play in promoting the responsible ownership of domestic cats and in the provision of services to manage the domestic cat population, including neutering, microchipping and vaccination. We also recognise the need to manage the stray and feral populations of cats in a humane and welfare-friendly way. BVA would welcome the exploration of management and conservation strategies that promote collaborative working amongst key stakeholders to protect the Scottish wildcat Population, such as those set out in the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan. However, whilst we recognise the concerns surrounding feral and stray cats and their impact upon the Scottish wildcat, it is important to recognise the need to protect the welfare of domestic cats and stray/feral cats within any management or conservation strategies that are employed.

6) Microchipping and registration
The registration and permanent identification of cats through microchipping can facilitate
the prompt return of strays to their owner and may provide opportunities to reinforce the responsibilities of the owner under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Due to the free-roaming nature of domestic cats and the presence of unowned stray/feral cat populations, compulsory microchipping would not present a blanket solution to the issue of hybridisation with the Scottish wildcat population and potential disease transmission, any microchipping strategy would need to be employed in conjunction with the promotion of overall responsible cat ownership, as has taken place in the Cairngorms Wildcat Project.

7) Neutering
We strongly support the practice of neutering cats (castration of tom cats and spaying of queens) to prevent the birth of unwanted kittens. The British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) advises that cats can be neutered from 16 weeks and in the case of feral and rescue kittens we recognise that it may be necessary to neuter earlier than 16 weeks (due to the age of trapping). In these circumstances, neutering at eight to 12 weeks is considered safe and appropriate compared with the harm for non-neutering. With this mind, we welcome the promotion of a co-ordinated approach to the Trap-Neuter (vaccinate) and Release (TNR) of feral domestic cats in priority areas as set out in the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan. However, we consider that compulsory neutering of the domestic cat population as a strategy to conserve the Scottish wildcat is a disproportionate response, especially given that domestic cats in large urban areas will have little potential impact on the Scottish wildcat population.

We do not currently support compulsory neutering in domestic cats, as, whilst we acknowledge that the welfare implications of neutering are outweighed by the social, health and population controls benefits, neutering is not a trivial surgical procedure. As with any invasive surgical procedure, a veterinary surgeon has a duty to take account the individual health and welfare needs of the animal under their care (as set out in the RCVS Code of Conduct), which may result in the neutering procedure being an unacceptable surgical intervention for some cats.

With regard to identifying feral cats at time of neutering with a visible mark, we would consider that any form of marking or tagging must not result in a potential welfare compromise for the individual cat in question. In this respect microchipping may be preferable to ear notching or other ‘visible’ methods.

8) Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan
As mentioned above, we support the actions set out in the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan and the positive lessons learned in the Cairngorms Wildcat Project, including encouraging stakeholders to work together towards a co-ordinated TNR approach to feral domestic cats, as well as promoting responsible ownership. We note that the action plan’s delivery phase will run from September 2014-2019. With this in mind we would recommend waiting until the completion and review of this delivery phase, including monitoring of wildcat population trends in priority areas, to inform further strategies to conserve the Scottish Wildcat population and manage the domestic and feral cat populations in Scotland. This will help to ensure that these strategies are evidence-based.

9) Promoting responsible cat ownership
The veterinary profession has a clear role to play in promoting responsible cat ownership
to both existing and prospective cat owners. This includes promoting the health and welfare benefits of microchipping, neutering and vaccination to owners.

Building upon the action set out in the [Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan](#), consideration should be given to a targeted, public awareness campaign in the five wildcat conservation areas that is supported and promoted by all key stakeholders including the Government, vets, land owners and animal charities. Such a campaign, as has been the case in the Cairngorms Wildcat Project, should promote responsible ownership of cats (including microchipping, neutering from 16 weeks if required and vaccination) and improved awareness of the implications of domestic and feral cats on the Scottish wildcat population.

10) **Responsible breeding**
We support the responsible breeding of cats, that is to say 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. However, we are not clear as to how this would work in practice for cats. At present that is not such a scheme for registering dog breeders that could be replicated and the higher rate of reproduction that takes place in cats would also need to be taken into account.

In addition, we are concerned that the compulsory neutering of all domestic cats would have unintended consequences for those looking to breed responsibly from healthy lines of cats, in that breeders may then have to source their cats from other, inappropriate, sources.

11) **Proposal for neutered cats to be considered as ‘under human control’ and exempt from non-native species legislation.**
BVA understands that this petition asks that unneutered and unowned cats are defined as non-native species and so it would be an offence to release or allow them to escape. In practical terms, we are not clear as to how this could be enforced and we are concerned that such a change could have unintended consequences on humane approaches to the population control of feral/stray cats and in turn their wider welfare. BVA believes that in any approach to the management of the stray and feral cat population, their welfare must also be duly considered alongside the conservation needs of the Scottish wildcat population. Therefore, BVA supports the humane population control of feral and stray cats through the trap, neuter, release approach, that is already being carried out and would not support the proposal for only neutered cats to be considered as ‘under human control’ and exempt from non-native species legislation as this does not reflect current cat ownership and would potentially put unneutered cats at risk.
12) Concluding remarks

The veterinary profession has a clear role to play in the promotion of responsible cat ownership and the provision of veterinary interventions such as microchipping, neutering and vaccination to manage the domestic cat population. Microchipping has a potential role to play in the prompt reuniting of lost cats with their owners. Neutering, following an assessment of the individual health and welfare needs of the individual cat, also has a role to play in the management of the domestic cat population.

We would welcome involvement and collaborative working with other key stakeholders in a national campaign to promote the responsible ownership of cats (including microchipping, neutering from 16 weeks and pre-pubertal neutering if required, as well as vaccination) and improved awareness of the implications of domestic and feral cats on the Scottish wildcat population.

Any strategy to manage the domestic and stray/feral cat populations should be evidence-based and take the specific welfare needs of these populations into account, in addition to the conservation needs of the Scottish wildcat. We are looking forward to a review of the delivery phase of the Scottish Wildcat Conservation Action Plan to inform future humane and welfare-friendly strategies to manage the cat population and conserve the Scottish wildcat.