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Dear Constituent,

Thank you for contacting me about pet theft.

To their owners, pets are cherished members of the family, so I entirely agree with you that stealing one from a loving home is a particularly vicious crime. Of course, all reported crimes should be taken seriously, investigated and, where appropriate, taken through the courts and met with tough sentences. Currently, the theft of a pet is a criminal offence under the Theft Act 1968 and the maximum penalty is seven years' imprisonment.

My colleagues in Government take the issue of pet theft very seriously and are concerned by suggestions that occurrences are on the rise. The Home Secretary has now announced a taskforce to tackle this vile pet crime and has met with the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss a cross-government approach to combating this issue. The taskforce will examine every option available to protect families from this appalling crime and make sure perpetrators feel the full force of the law.

Of course, sentencing is a matter for the Courts and should consider the circumstances of each case. When deciding on an appropriate sentence, the Courts may consider aggravating and mitigating factors, in line with sentencing guidelines issued by the Sentencing Council. In February 2016, the Sentencing Council updated its guidelines in relation to sentencing for theft offences. I understand that the guidelines take account of the emotional distress, and therefore harm, that theft of a pet can have on the victim, and accordingly the guidelines recommend higher penalties for such offences.

I am also aware that if someone causes an animal to suffer in the course of stealing it, they are also liable to prosecution under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. I am pleased that the new Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act will now enable tougher prison sentences for the most serious perpetrators of animal cruelty, from the previous maximum of six months to up to five years. I believe that this increase in sentencing will send a clear message that this behaviour will not be tolerated. The maximum five-year sentence will be one of the toughest punishments in Europe, strengthening the UK's position as a global leader on animal welfare.

Thank you again for taking the time to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

CHRIS HEATON-HARRIS MP
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR DAVENTRY