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*Dear Caroline,*

Thank you for your email of 21 October on behalf of a number of your constituents about the sale of kittens.

The Government is serious about improving the welfare of cats in both breeding establishments and at point of sale. One of the ways this can happen is if potential buyers are more aware of what to look for when purchasing a cat or kitten. This is why we have helpful advice for potential buyers on the Government's official website. We also work with stakeholders to explore other ways in which such messages can reach those people considering buying a cat or kitten.

We are currently reviewing the laws on the animal activities licensing schemes, including those that regulate the selling of pet animals, including cats and kittens. Earlier this year, we consulted on a number of proposals including one to apply specific welfare conditions to pet vendors. We have not proposed a ban on "third party" sellers of pets such as pet shops. Such a ban is opposed by many of the established animal welfare charities as they fear it could drive the sale of cats and dogs underground. Pet shops are already required to be licensed and in fact many no longer routinely sell either cats or dogs. In addition the local authority has the power to restrict which types of pet can be sold at any pet shop on welfare grounds.

Instead we have proposed that modern standards of welfare are applied to all pet shops and other commercial pet vendors even if they are trading on-line or selling from their home. The standards include a requirement that animals are not sold at too young an age, which for mammals is defined as before they are weaned or should have been weaned, which for cats is likely to be at or below eight weeks. As part of the licensing review, we are looking closely at introducing provisions to clarify this requirement in the regulations and the advice on the Government website would change to reflect that kittens should not be purchased if they are under eight weeks of age.

While we accept that dog breeding needs to be closely regulated, we do not consider that cat breeding requires the same sort of control. Dog breeding has attracted rogue breeders with little concern for animal welfare because they can make high profits from the sale of just a few puppies. The desire for pedigree dog breeds or specialist cross-breeds runs very high and the cost of acquiring such a dog can run into hundreds, or even thousands of pounds. Uncontrolled dog breeding can also lead to other issues relating to public safety and public nuisance. This is generally not the case with cats. Of course there can be unscrupulous people who exploit people's desire for pets to the detriment of animal welfare, but the welfare of all captive animals is protected by the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

If anyone has any concerns about the welfare of animals at a cat breeding establishment they can report the matter to their local authority or the RSPCA who have the powers to investigate such concerns. There are stiff penalties in place for anyone who flouts the law.

Yours sincerely,  
John