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OPINION 21/06/2023 – Flemish Animal Welfare Council

Overpopulation in shelters

Definition of the problem

Within the Flemish Animal Welfare Council, representatives of animal shelters reported that they are struggling with an unprecedented overpopulation of animals in their shelters.

Together with interested Council members, behavioural experts and staff from Animal Welfare Department (Flemish Government), the Council sought to identify causes and solutions to that overpopulation.

The focus was on dogs and cats, and the greatest attention was directed towards dogs.

Overview

A survey by Animal Welfare Department of competent authorities in other European countries showed that the majority of them are also observing an increase in the number of animals in shelters. The arguments cited are:

- animals being surrendered after having been purchased during the coronavirus pandemic
- the economic crisis
- a higher number of dogs with complex behaviours in shelters

Analyses of databases

To gain an understanding of the issues, analyses were conducted of various databases¹ and the following conclusions were reached:

- Every year, 160,000 new dogs are registered in Belgium, just under 100,000 (\pm 63%) of which in Flanders.
- The proportion of dogs entering shelters is proportional to the proportion of their origin (breeding centre, shelter, private) within the overall figure.
- The age at which dogs end up in shelters depends on the breed. Golden retrievers, German Shepherds and Staffordshire bull terriers, for example, enter the shelter at a young age, whereas smaller breeds such as Maltese are entering animal shelters later in life.
- The median age at which a dog is brought in is 2.5 years.
- Shelters can enter the reason for relinquishment into a database, but owners do not truthfully report the reason why they are relinquishing the animal (behavioural problems, for example, are rarely reported). In the case of dogs, a lack of time and changes in family situation are most frequently given as specific reasons, whereas in cats, the death of the owner and a relocation are the most frequently cited reasons.

Information about shelters

Reports received by Animal Welfare Flanders and the competent Minister's office about the operation of animal shelters were also collected (for example, limited communication with prospective adopters, complicated adoption procedures, strict selection of adopters).

Shelters shared their experience about taking care of relinquished and confiscated animals:

- In comparison to previous years, a high proportion of dogs with behavioural problems reside in shelters. These animals stay in shelters for longer than average. As a result, fewer places are then available for new arrivals. Dogs with behavioural problems also require a lot of care and therefore time and financial resources.
- According to the experience of shelters, it is not possible to point to any particular group (e.g. age group, social class) that is likely to relinquish dogs or cats.

An integrated approach is needed

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council is of the opinion that an integrated approach is needed in order to address this problem.

The Council proposes the following measures relating to the purchase of an animal, its relinquishment, animal shelters and seizures:

¹ DogID (the official platform for registration of dogs in Belgium), TRACES (TRAde Control and Expert System) and Animal Shelter (data platform for Flemish shelters)

1. PURCHASING AN ANIMAL

- **An awareness campaign should discourage the purchasing of a dog without a purchaser-adopter undergoing prior screening.**

There is a lot involved in keeping a dog and caring for a dog takes a lot of time and requires a clear daily routine. When an owner takes in a dog, he/she will need to make adjustments to his/her life for 10 to 20 years. Before a purchase takes place, it will therefore be necessary to verify that the character and type of dog will be suitable in terms of the owner's home, budget and lifestyle.

- **An overview of the different channels for purchasing a dog, together with the advantages and disadvantages for each channel needs to be drawn up and made available**

Dogs (and cats) can be purchased through various channels. Each channel has its advantages and also its disadvantages. For future owners, there is currently no objective overview of those channels that also provides the associated information. This need must be met and the government must take on an informing role in that regard. In this regard, account may be taken of the Council's opinion on the intake of street and shelter dogs.

- **Introduction of a take-back obligation for all providers of dogs (subject to conditions to be determined)**

A provider bears a responsibility to match a dog that is available to a future owner. If this is not done carefully, an animal is more likely to be resold or abandoned (quickly). In order to ensure that providers carry out that matching in a very intentional way, a take-back requirement must be introduced. Moreover, this approach may also reduce the influx of dogs into shelters. This take-back obligation differs from the warranty certificate.

- **Mandatory sterilisation and identification of cats**

Cats are required to be sterilised and identified in Flanders². The Flemish and local government entities must continue raising awareness and enforcing this obligation.

2. RELINQUISHING AN ANIMAL

- **Draw up and provide a leaflet/web page listing the various ways in which to obtain (professional) help if a person experiences problems with a dog or a cat**

² Government of Flanders Order of 23 February 2018 on the identification, registration and sterilisation of cats

When an owner has problems with his/her dog, one of the more commonly known solutions is to relinquish the animal. However, appropriate, less well-known measures (medical and behavioural) can enable the dog to stay with the owner. These measures include behavioural therapy, dog training, etc. It is not always clear, however, where an owner can go to obtain these. A flyer/web page should give guidance to owners about this. Animal shelters and veterinary surgeons can also refer them to this information.

- **Develop and provide a medical certificate that includes information about behaviour**

If a dog/cat is relinquished, the former owner does not always, or only to a limited extent, provide information about the animal's medical and/or behavioural problems. In some cases, an animal shelter or the new owner is therefore finds themselves facing some surprises. For an animal shelter and a future owner, a medical certificate (with behavioural information) issued by a veterinary surgeon can help ensure appropriate care and can correctly inform future owners. Shelters may require that type of certificate as a condition of accepting an animal for admission.

- **Encouraging mediation when placing a pet**

When owners decide to relinquish an animal, it is usually advantageous from an animal welfare view that an animal goes from its old environment directly to a new environment with its new owners, without having to undergo an intermediate step via a shelter. To find a suitable match for the animal, mediation with screening is recommended. Mediation of this type should be encouraged and can be organised by a shelter.

3. ANIMALS IN SHELTERS

- **All shelters should use a standard questionnaire for prospective adopters**

Most shelters work with a questionnaire that prospective adopters must fill in. Based on that questionnaire, a shelter will consider whether or not the adopter can be matched with an animal. At the present time, each shelter has its own questionnaire and procedure. A standard questionnaire should be put in place, so that prospective adopters only have to fill out one questionnaire that is valid for all shelters. It is also recommended that a standard procedure be developed for the processing of those questionnaires.

- **Preparation of an assessment framework for the euthanasia of dogs and cats**

For animal welfare reasons it is sometimes advisable for the animal to be euthanised. Each case must be assessed individually. To carry out that assessment, a standard assessment framework needs to be drawn up in collaboration with animal shelters. Assessment frameworks from other countries can serve as examples.

- **Evaluating the two-cat adoption policy**

In several shelters, cats are offered for adoption in pairs for the purpose of socialisation. There have been recent publications³ on this subject, indicating that as a result of such policies, cats may be less likely to be adopted and may therefore stay longer in shelters. Guidelines need to be developed to help shelters decide which cats would benefit from adoption in pairs (and which would not).

4. SEIZING OF ANIMALS

- **To the extent possible, animals should not be seized but measures imposed during animal welfare checks**

When carrying out animal welfare checks, the seizing of animals is not always appropriate. Whenever possible, measures should be imposed to improve animal welfare right there. The best interests of the animal must be put first. Training should be provided for police forces so that they can assess these situations appropriately. Furthermore, the regulations should be adjusted with regard to the measures imposed during an animal welfare check: if these measures are not carried out, and the police or Animal Welfare Department then has to carry them out, the costs for this should be recoverable from the owner.

³ Finka LR. 2022 Conspecific and Human Sociality in the Domestic Cat: Consideration of Proximate Mechanisms, Human Selection and Implications for Cat Welfare. *Animals* 12(3):298. Engebrecht L, Smith T and Suchak M. 2022 Single vs multiple cat adoptions: A trade-off between longer adoption times and social bonding in shelter cats. *Animal Welfare* 31: 329-339