

Flemish government

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MEMORANDUM 28/09/2023 – Flemish Animal Welfare Council

Strengthening a local animal welfare policy

In addition to federal and regional elections, municipal elections are also due to be held in 2024 in Flanders. Many cities and towns in Flanders already have designated an alderman with animal welfare as a specific competence.

With a view to drawing up an election programme or a local policy plan, the Flemish Council for Animal Welfare is putting forward some potential action points.

Stray cat policy

A local stray cat policy is a legal obligation (Government of Flanders Order of 5 February 2016). This means that your city or municipality is obliged to catch and spay/identify stray cats.

Since 2016, every local government entity must:

- draw up and implement an adequate plan to deal with nuisance stray cats
- establish a central reporting centre
- feed and provide protection to stray cats in a controlled way once released

For a city or municipality, this requires an effort to be made and for the necessary budget to be provided for that purpose. In that regard, it is important that this effort be budgeted for on a longer-term basis, so as to keep the number of stray cats at least at the same and preferably reduce it.

This can be achieved by means of effective colony management. Your city or municipality can obtain support for this from volunteers or from licensed animal shelters, among others.

Animal Welfare Flanders provides a comprehensive online brochure that contains guidance.

https://assets.vlaanderen.be/image/upload/v1678788308/Gids_gemeentelijk_zwerfkattenbeleid_mgdm4s.pdf

Sample materials that can be copied are also available (a message to inform citizens of a trapping campaign, a template for a feeder's pass, etc.). <https://www.vlaanderen.be/dierenwelzijn/informatie-voor-lokale-overheden/gemeentelijk-zwerfkattenplan>)

Fireworks

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council is calling upon local government entities to include a ban on the use of fireworks by private individuals in the municipal regulations. The Council is doing this based on concerns about and experiences of the impact of fireworks on animals. The unrestricted use of fireworks by private individuals leads to loud bangs and flashes of light at unpredictable times. As a result, animal owners are unable to take precautionary measures. Besides animal welfare, there are other important reasons for including such a ban. These include life-threatening accidents being caused to humans, fire risks and air pollution.

A Flemish Decree to regulate the setting off of fireworks throughout Flanders (while retaining the ability of local government entities to grant permission under certain conditions) was annulled by the Constitutional Court because the matter is not a Flemish competence. Local government entities have the ability to regulate this by means of their municipal regulations.

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Controlling rats and mice

The Council suggests consulting the Animal Welfare Department website for information about controlling rats and mice in an humane way. (<https://www.vlaanderen.be/dierenwelzijn/informatie-voor-lokale-overheden/diervriendelijk-beheer-van-ratten-en-muizen>). A specific brochure is available for local government entities.

The focus is on prevention, such as avoiding food scraps and material left lying around that can be used as nesting and hiding places. After all, pesticides should not be resorted to in all cases. It is also the case that not all types of mice can be controlled.

As a city or municipality and whenever control is necessary, you must therefore use or offer those methods that avoid affecting other species as much as possible and that cause a quick death. Commonly known as mouse or rat poisons, anticoagulants are some of the most frequently used methods. As methods go, however, this causes the animals pain, so it is very animal-unfriendly. More humane alternatives are mousetraps and electrocution traps. A good mousetrap will kill a mouse or rat immediately or extremely quickly.

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Managing pigeon populations in cities

Managing a pigeon population is a major concern, especially for cities. This is also a competence that is exclusive to civic and municipal authorities. To reduce nuisance and control pigeon populations, a city can employ various strategies, such as relocating populations, euthanising pigeons, reducing births and limiting food sources.

The biggest impact on the growth of an urban pigeon population can be attributed to the availability of food sources: if pigeons have enough food, then natural selection can no longer occur and an overpopulation is artificially maintained. Successfully controlling a pigeon population requires an integrated policy that limits the population size to acceptable levels. A city will need to combine several strategies in order to achieve that. The

situation is different for each city, but there is a general action plan consisting of several steps. The Flemish Animal Welfare Council has already published a recommendation about this.

https://assets.vlaanderen.be/image/upload/v1614348980/Advies_beheer_duivenpopulaties_steden.pdf

Shelter for animals kept outdoors

https://assets.vlaanderen.be/image/upload/v1614348979/Advies_beschutting_voor_dieren_buiten_gehouden_worden.pdf

The Flemish Animal Welfare Council believes that animals kept outdoors (mammals and poultry) should always have access to natural or artificial shelter. In the new animal welfare legislation (codex) and subject to the necessary transition period, a suitable provision to that effect is going to be provided (initially approval in principle).

As a city or municipality, you can support leaseholders or landowners in this regard by offering free shade trees (an example of which is the now-ended 'airkoe' campaign by the province of West Flanders

<https://www.west-vlaanderen.be/airkoe>).

There is already legal provision for equines to have a shelter or natural shelter in cases where they cannot be stabled. However, permanently keeping animals in stabling must be avoided.