



World Society for the Protection of Animals

COMPANION ANIMALS UNIT

Alternatives to animal shelters

Internal document: guidance for WSPA staff and member societies



Aim: Building an animal shelter might not be the most effective solution to local animal welfare problems. This document aims to provide information about strategies and activities that organisations could undertake to benefit animal welfare without building a shelter.

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World Society for the Protection of Animals

Introduction

All animals that are kept in captivity (such as those in farms, zoos, shelters, kennels or in the home as pets) are solely dependent on human caretakers to provide for their basic needs. It is important that anyone responsible for looking after animals fully understands these needs and how best to accommodate them. Failure to, for example, provide a suitable diet or appropriate housing is likely to lead to poor welfare.

A useful framework within which to consider animal welfare is the “five freedoms”¹. This concept was first developed by the UK’s advisory body on farm animals, the Farm Animal Welfare Council, and has been used to form the basis of assessments of the welfare of animals in confined situations. The framework outlines five “freedoms” that are considered essential for good welfare. When used with respect to animal shelters, the framework illustrates the difficulties of maintaining high standards of animal welfare in shelters (see Figure 2).

Providing for the needs of animals in the shelter environment is not an easy task and requires a great deal of thought and commitment. Moreover, embarking on the construction and management of an animal shelter can be an expensive undertaking. The process of building and running a shelter requires many further considerations, including gaining approval, meeting regulatory requirements, planning activities, construction and ensuring that animal care staff are trained to a high standard. Availability of funds to meet at least the first year’s running costs should also be considered. With a myriad of issues to take into account, problems and setbacks are likely. Even experienced, well-funded, animal protection organisations continue to learn by their mistakes.

Although many organisations see the building and running of a shelter as the most urgent need in response to an animal welfare problem, it is not always the most effective strategy. The construction of a shelter does little to tackle the cause of unwanted animals, and does not provide the solution to the stray animal problem. Furthermore, once built, the running costs of a shelter represent a continual financial burden and often leave no time or money to tackle other important issues such as humane education, campaigning and lobbying for changes in legislation.

Poor planning and underestimating the financial commitment and operational requirements can have disastrous results. Moreover, lack of experience and insufficient funds can lead to the welfare of animals in a shelter being seriously compromised.

¹ Farm Animal Welfare Council. Five freedoms. <http://www.fawc.org.uk/freedoms.htm>

Disease, overcrowding, social conflicts, inadequate housing, and lack of exercise and stimulation are common problems in shelters, and if dogs are sheltered for too long, they can become “institutionalised” and difficult to rehome. Some societies have an anti-euthanasia policy, causing the shelter to quickly fill to capacity with animals that are not possible to rehome. Under these conditions the shelter can have no meaningful role in improving the plight of stray animals outside its gates. Furthermore, running a shelter can put considerable pressure on the organisation’s staff and volunteers; this is especially true when they are faced with caring for these animals long-term and have to turn animals in need away.

WSPA believes that it is the responsibility of governments to provide population management services. Non-governmental organisations taking on this role are therefore allowing the government to avoid addressing the issue. Sadly, an animal shelter often achieves very little in terms of national improvements to animal welfare. A shelter attempts to deal with the effects of animal overpopulation but does nothing to address the cause.



Figure 1. Too many animals and too few resources can have serious consequences for animal welfare.

Any strategy that attempts to manage companion animal populations should be humane, coordinated and comprehensive, and include some or all of the following elements:

- Legislation with effective enforcement
- Registration and identification of owned animals
- Neutering schemes
- Controlled sale and breeding of pets
- Education in responsible ownership

The International Companion Animal Management (ICAM) Coalition has produced guidance on humane dog population management², which should be consulted for further information.

² International Companion Animal Management (ICAM) Coalition (2007) Humane Dog Population Management Guidance. Available from WSPA.

– FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST –

Regular access to fresh water and a suitable nutritionally balanced diet that will maintain full health and vigour

- Access to food and water should not be impeded as a result of kennel design, unsuitable presentation or location of food and water stations, or social grouping
- Steps should be taken to prevent food and water becoming contaminated with urine, faeces, debris or cleaning fluids

– FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT –

Provision of an appropriate environment

- Measures in place to ensure thermal comfort
- Access to shelter from inclement weather and solar radiation
- Kennels designed, built and maintained so that they are comfortable for animals
- Provision and access to a comfortable resting area
- Noise reduction measures

– FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY OR DISEASE –

Suitable preventative measures to reduce the incidence of injuries

- Well maintained accommodation
- Stable social groups

Prophylactic health measures: Good preventative veterinary care and health plans

- Vaccination
- Anthelmintic regimes
- Neutering schemes
- Appropriate husbandry procedures
- Quarantine areas - for newly arriving animals, pregnant and nursing animals, young, sick and injured animals

Rapid diagnosis and treatment of disease and injury

- Trained animal shelter staff
- Access to a veterinarian
- Sufficient numbers of staff to conduct thorough husbandry routines and observe animals
- Humane methods of euthanasia by suitably qualified persons

– FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOUR –

Providing sufficient space

- Adequate space to allow performance of natural behaviour - minimum kennel dimensions should allow animals to lie, stand, turn around, jump up and freedom to perform all normal ranges of movement
- Suitable and sufficient exercise space that can be accessed at regular intervals

Providing proper facilities

- Kennel design should not impede animal behaviour
- Appropriate forms of environmental enrichment

Company of the animals own kind and human caretakers

- Animals should be provided with opportunities for socialisation with their own kind (in a suitable number) and humans, as appropriate for the individual animal

– FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS –

Ensuring conditions avoid mental suffering

- Suitable handling and restraint methods to be employed by animal shelter staff
- Animals should be housed in stable social groups

Figure 2. The five freedoms and animal shelters: using this framework helps illustrate the difficulties of maintaining a good standard of animal welfare in shelters.

Alternative activities

Much can be accomplished to achieve long term improvements in animal welfare in the community when organisations or individuals dedicate their efforts to alternative, non shelter-related activities. Examples and suggestions of alternatives are outlined in the remainder of this document. The case studies illustrate how local animal welfare groups have achieved improvements in animal welfare without setting up shelters.

CASE STUDY 1. Alternative activities to shelters

A Spanish animal welfare group owns a plot of land that would be suitable for development for an animal shelter. After looking into the financial commitment and planning processes for building, the group decided not to proceed. The main reasons included:

- Planning, building and running the shelter would be time consuming for its volunteers and employees
- The shelter would require a large initial financial outlay
- The continued financial commitment required would be enormous and would limit the group's other, equally important, priorities

The group decided that they could have a greater impact on animal welfare if they dedicated their time and resources to other activities. The group run educational programmes for children and awareness campaigns for adults; they lobby for neutering and microchipping of owned animals and press the local municipality to enforce regulations on the registration of dogs. In addition, they help groups that do run shelters by sponsoring pens and making donations of food and supplies.

CASE STUDY 2. Rehoming website

The same group discussed in Case Study 1 recently set up a rehoming website. Private individuals that can no longer care for their animals can now contact the group to find a new owner for their pet. They are asked for relevant information about the animal and the reasons why they cannot look after it. The animal is checked, and if suitable for rehoming the details are placed on the website. Prospective new owners contact the group directly and are screened for their suitability for adopting an animal. If the application is successful, an adoption contract is signed and an adoption fee paid. The adoption fee covers the cost of microchipping, vaccinating and neutering the animal, performed by a local veterinarian.

Anyone wishing to advertise puppies for rehoming must provide a certificate as evidence that the bitch has been neutered before the group will advertise for new homes. Local shelters are also encouraged to advertise animals for adoption on the website. There are also dedicated webpages providing information on pet care and responsible pet ownership.

1. Legislation and lobbying

Permanent improvements in animal welfare often need to be achieved through the enactment of effective legislation followed by committed enforcement. Lobbying for changes in legislation and enforcement might be a lengthy undertaking but should be viewed as a necessary and worthy activity for the advancement of animal welfare. Historically, animal welfare organisations have often been the driving force behind positive changes in legislation relating to animal cruelty, animal ownership, pet care, humane methods of stray animal management and euthanasia.

Lobbying for change can take place at a local, as well as national, level. Examples include: pressing municipalities to honour their legal responsibility to humanely manage stray animals, requesting that they actively enforce mandatory registration or seeking the enactment of local regulations for improvements in conditions in municipal holding centres or pounds.

The Council of Europe Convention on Pet Animals³ is a good example of the type of protective provisions for pet and stray animals that should be incorporated into legislation. This treaty is signed by the member states of the Council of Europe, in order to achieve a common standard of animal protection/welfare legislation. It can act as a useful benchmark for lobbying purposes.

The effectiveness of lobbying activities can often be improved by cooperating with other organisations, which might be seeking similar regulatory changes (for example veterinary and public health authorities). Gaining the support of the general public will provide additional momentum for authorities to institute changes in legislation. Media coverage and campaigning activity can expose some of the areas of greatest welfare concern and help bring about a climate more favourable to legislative change. However although this kind of publicity can be effective in that it shocks and demands attention, it should be coupled with positive suggestions for change, so that pressure on the authorities can be sustained and their cooperation encouraged.

CASE STUDY 3. Lobbying

In many countries local authorities and municipalities have a legal obligation to manage stray animals. This might include the collection and housing of stray animals for the statutory holding period. One European animal welfare group were concerned about the numbers of stray animals in their local area. The group researched the local legislation regarding stray animal management so that they were clear of the legal commitments of their local municipality. They then began to lobby the municipality to meet their responsibilities.

To facilitate the lobbying process, the group organised a workshop involving talks and demonstrations (see Figure 1), and invited representatives from the municipality. The group also initiated a public awareness campaign to involve local residents in asking the municipality for changes in conditions. This had the additional effect of raising local residents' awareness of the importance of responsible pet ownership and rehoming unwanted animals from the municipal shelter.

The group's efforts led to improvements in the methods of stray animal management, catching methods and conditions in the holding facilities and municipal shelters.

Furthermore, the workshop and campaigns strengthened the relationship between the group and the municipality so that they can combine effort in other areas of work such as assisted neutering campaigns, animal registration and identification, animal health and responsible animal ownership. They have subsequently set up a twice yearly workshop that covers all aspects of pet animals in the city and is attended by the police, municipal animal wardens, other animal welfare groups, veterinary authorities and staff from other local authorities. Moreover, neighbouring local authorities and municipalities have seen the improvements and are beginning to set up similar changes in their cities.

STRAY CONTROL IN THE CITY – WORKSHOP

Sunday, 11th November 2007

Programme of talks and workshops:

DAY 1

Pets in the city environment
Local supervisory responsibilities
Current regulations and amendments on cat and dog legislation
Animal welfare in municipal pounds
Shelters: solutions and future scenarios

DAY 2

Stray cat control problems and solutions
Stay dog control problems and solutions
The new city wide animal microchip register
Cooperation and collaboration with NGO's

Figure 3. Sample programme of seminars and workshops co-organised by an animal welfare group with the local municipality.

³ European Convention for the Protection of Pet Animals. . CETS No 125. Strasbourg, 13.XI. 1987. <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun?QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=125&CM=7&DF=10/4/2007&CL=ENG>.

1. Education and raising awareness

Leaflets and educational materials about responsible animal ownership can be used to help raise awareness and disseminate key messages, so that people can take practical steps to improve companion animal welfare. It is important to research what are the key welfare issues that require change, which section of the population should be targeted, and how this can be done effectively, because different audiences require different strategies.

CASE STUDY 4. Education

An animal welfare group in eastern Europe developed a responsible pet ownership education programme for school children. Each year in one particular district the group visits schools and teaches 3,500 children over several visits. Since this programme began the organisation has observed a significant decrease in the number of stray animals being collected by the local municipality. The scheme has been so successful that the municipality has agreed to help finance booklets and educational material.



Figure 4. Children can learn about responsible ownership through fun activities.

If the existing material is not suitable or adequate, it may be possible to collaborate with another organisation to share design and printing costs. Such collaborations may be with non-animal organisations such as public health departments, which also seek improvements in animal ownership but for different reasons (such as increased dog rabies vaccination uptake by owners, improved supervision of dogs in public places and improved human–dog interaction to reduce dog bite incidence). When organisations and authorities collaborate a larger and wider audience may be reached.

Research should also be undertaken into the material already in circulation from other organisations, to avoid duplication of work. Material already available may include: guidance on how to care for a companion animal, advice about how to avoid getting bitten by a dog, promotional material for neutering and guidance on local regulations with respect to animal ownership.



Figure 5. Children being taught about dog behaviour - the pictures on the board depict different dog body language. Teaching children about dog behaviour can improve their interaction with dogs and prevent them getting bitten.

How to Avoid Dog Bites

(cont'd)



If a growling dog gets close to you, pretend to be a tree: stand still with your hands at your side. Allow the dog to sniff you and it will usually go away.

If a dog attacks, assume a position of a rock. Curl into a ball and protect your face and body.



If bitten:

- Immediately wash thoroughly with soap and running water for 10 minutes
- Go to a hospital
- Isolate the dog (or remember what the dog looks like)

It is important that the educational material is distributed through as many channels as possible – particularly veterinary clinics and hospitals and, in regions where animals need to be registered, at registration centers, dog clubs or breed clubs, municipal animal holding facilities, schools and clubs. Key messages such as the importance of responsible pet ownership and the “human/animal bond” can also be publicised through the media – television, radio, newspapers and magazines. This can raise awareness of the situation and the efforts of your organisation among a wider audience.

Figure 6. Taken from information leaflet distributed in Sri Lanka post-tsunami.

CASE STUDY 5. Collaboration in Education

On 26 December 2004 an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra triggered a tsunami that killed 250,000 people. Countless numbers of animals were also killed, and there was a massive increase in stray animals (due to the death or displacement of their owners). This meant an increased risk of rabies outbreaks and a breakdown in veterinary services in the tsunami-affected areas. On the south and east coast of Sri Lanka, local animal welfare organisations set up education programmes alongside veterinary clinics, which carried out vaccination and neutering. They distributed leaflets on dog and cat care and bite prevention (see Figure 3), and gave talks at community centres and local schools. They also promoted communication between the vet team members and the public at the clinic site (including introducing the animal owners to their local vet who attended the clinics to support the programme and be familiarised with surgical neutering techniques). These were planned and designed with input from schools and local authorities (Public Health Inspectors) and run in coordination with other local welfare groups.

3. Fostering network

A fostering network may be a good option for organisations wanting to provide direct practical aid to unwanted animals. If well organised and managed, this can be a more effective method of rehoming animals than sheltering because the animals remain in a home environment and do not become “institutionalised”. The key elements of a successful scheme are:

- **Central control and organisation**
A contact point for potential foster carers, potential adopters, animal wardens, police and other authorities finding stray animals or even animal shelters.
- **Good record keeping**
Each animal entering the system should have its photograph taken and its own record card completed. If the animal’s past history can be ascertained this should be included, together with detailed observations during the quarantine/observation period. All treatment details should be included, as well as details of quarantine location, foster carer and (eventual) rehoming.

- **Good veterinary support**

Each animal should be examined by a veterinarian on arrival, vaccinated and given any appropriate treatment. Supervised, isolated quarantine and observation is essential. All animals should ideally be neutered before being placed into foster care or at least be neutered before rehoming.
- **Appropriate network of foster carers**

Potential foster homes should be assessed for suitability. If suitable, they should be given a limitation on the number of animals to be cared for at any one time in the accommodation examined; this should probably not exceed two or three dogs, and three or four cats per home. Foster carers should be provided with equipment, food, any necessary medication and other support as required.
- **Control of potential adopters**

Potential adopters should be assessed as to their suitability for animal ownership. They should have appropriate accommodation for the species and demonstrate the ability to care well for an animal's needs. The assessor needs to ensure that the animal is wanted for the right reasons and that the potential adopter is aware of the responsibilities and duties of pet ownership.
- **Contracts**

Appropriate contracts should be agreed with both foster carers and adopters, enabling the organisation to take the animal back if it is not cared for properly. At least one follow-up visit should be made to the animal in its new home following adoption.
- **Adoption centre**

Because the animals will be fostered at various locations, potential adopters can initially look at photographs and descriptions of the animal and then arrange a meeting. Alternatively, a special central location can be used for approved potential adopters to view the animals that are available for adoption. A town hall, or a park, could be used for this purpose on a regular basis, e.g. every Saturday. Caution must be exercised to not rehome animals in the vicinity of where they were found, as this could have negative implications for the animal (e.g. provoking wandering or anxiety) and owner (former or present).
- **Publicity**

It has been shown that media coverage significantly increases the rehoming rate of such schemes. However, if media coverage is great, potential adopters need particularly careful screening to ensure that they are not “impulse” adopters.
- **Education**

The organisation should provide a range of educational materials such as information on the responsibilities of animal ownership, how to care for companion animals and the advantages of neutering. When original owners reclaim their animal, they should be given educational materials and taught about responsible ownership.

CASE STUDY 6. Cat fostering network

In 2006 an animal welfare group operating in the Baltic states in northern Europe set up a fostering network for stray cats suitable for rehoming. Potential volunteer foster carers were carefully vetted, and their homes inspected, to ensure their suitability for the role. Ten foster carers were selected, who were required to sign an agreement to abide by the organisation's standard operating procedures. The foster carers are only permitted to take in animals through the organisation and the number of animals they can accommodate at any one time is predetermined to ensure that they do not take in more cats than they can provide for.

The organisation provides food for the cats (often donated by members of the public) and covers the cost of veterinary treatment such as neutering, vaccination, worming, treatment against fleas and any emergency treatment required. Cats are advertised for rehoming through a website, local veterinarians and the local newspapers. The organisation carefully vets prospective new owners, who are "matched" to particular cats before they are allowed to visit the cats. In the first year of operating, this fostering scheme, with just ten volunteer foster carers, rehomed more than 100 cats.

The cost of establishing a fostering network can be low in comparison with the cost of housing cats in animal shelters. This is because a fostering network relies on committed volunteer foster carers and food donations from members of the public. With low overheads, more of an organisation's funds can be directed to prophylactic veterinary treatment, which is beneficial for the animals and increases their desirability to potential new owners, hence improving the rehoming success of the network.

A fostering system is less stressful for cats than an animal shelter, where there is often social stressors and competition for resources. In addition, foster carers have the necessary time to socialise the animals and rehabilitate them if necessary, improving their rehoming prospects. Foster carers are also better able to inform prospective owners about the cats' behaviour and needs. This might reduce the risk of new owners relinquishing the cat as a result of incompatibility.

Summary

These are just some of the ways in which organisations can help to improve animal welfare without building and running an animal shelter. Please contact WSPA if you would like further information and advice.

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