

2 Meeting dates

11/10/2016, 08/12/2016, 01/2017, 14/03/2017, 19/04/2017, 06/06/2017, 13/09/2017, 23/10/2017, 08/01/2018, 05/02/2018 + additional meetings of the Flemish Council for Animal Welfare on 22/05/2018 and 30/05/2018

3 Summary of meeting findings

Introduction and context

The animal welfare legislation pertaining to the breeding and trade of companion animals, in particular dogs and cats, (Royal Order of 27/04/2007 defining accreditation conditions for animal facilities and conditions for the trading of animals) are amongst the best in the European Union. However, this dates back to 1997. For this reason, competent Minister Weyts requested that the Animal Welfare Council formulate proposals for potential improvements. The Council established a working group in order to facilitate this. All relevant stakeholder groups are represented in this working group.

Facilities that are pending accreditation (such as shelters, breeding kennels, shops etc.) must comply with various conditions. Upon a proposal from the chairperson, members of the working group were asked to share their concerns about existing conditions and suggestions for new ones. These comments were discussed during the meetings.

Discussion points

- Illegal breeding and trade currently poses a major threat to the general welfare of dogs and cats at home and abroad. The Council therefore wishes to take action against this type of fraud on several levels and makes the following points:
 - 1) The legislation pertaining to the **identification and registration (I&R)** of dogs in Flanders is amongst the best in Europe. Nevertheless, figures from shelters and inspections conducted during animal shows and the former BVIRH¹ reveal that 25%-30% of dogs are not correctly chipped and/or registered. Given that I&R is the only conclusive means of tracing the origins of a dog/cat, this figure must be reduced. An effective I&R of all dogs/cats can help to prevent illegal breeding and trading.
The exception for occasional breeders who sell to breeder-traders must also be removed for this reason. This exception provides that occasional breeders need not wait for their final registration certificates following identification, and are permitted to sell their puppies with provisional certificates when selling to a breeder-trader. This regulation was introduced because, in the past, registrations were predominantly submitted by the breeder, and subsequently the trader, via the post, which resulted in delays. The working group recommends that, in future, the I&R of dogs is solely permitted via the online procedure, which executes the registration immediately.

¹ BVIRH: Belgian Association for Identification and Registration of Dogs

2) Young puppies and kittens are frequently sold via the internet. Although current legislation requires the specification of an accreditation number on every advertisement, verifying this is difficult or next to impossible. **Raising awareness** on the dangers of **internet sales** and associated passport fraud is an important step in tackling this problem. Consumers must be informed about the prerequisites that a dog must satisfy upon sale, and impulse purchases must be discouraged and avoided. For health reasons, the **adoption of foreign shelter dogs** also deserves some caution. Flanders sets strict rules for animal shelters, yet has no control over shelter policy abroad. There is no insight into the reason a dog has entered the shelter and even less into the adoptive dog's character. This can result in the animal entering a domestic shelter or requiring euthanasia. The Council refers to its opinion of 09/12/2010 pertaining to the importation of dogs into Belgium. Strict rules apply to both domestic and foreign breeders and thus also to the commercial **importation of foreign puppies**. The competent Flemish administration must strengthen its ties with foreign colleagues to ensure a more accurate assessment of these requirements. A restriction on these imports was considered, yet is impossible to implement owing to the free trade arrangement within Europe.

- The outdated housing of accredited facilities adversely impacts the welfare of the animals that reside in them. Some facilities make use of concrete **slatted floors**. However, slatted floors compromise the animals' comfort and reduce hygiene levels. Some facilities make use of former pigsties for the housing of breeding bitches. These animals are consequently housed on concrete slatted floors situated above manure cellars. This increases the risk of toxic gases, temperature fluctuations and contamination.
- The use of concrete slatted floors must be avoided and companion animals must never be kept above manure cellars. The welfare of **rodents, reptiles and ornamental fish** in pet stores can also be improved. Pet stores must therefore provide degus and chinchillas with a permanent sand bath. All reptiles, with the exception of snakes, must be provided with UVA and UVB light. All ornamental fish must be housed in aquariums that are sufficiently large and adequately filtered.
- **Contract veterinarians** bear significant responsibility, yet risk being pressurised by their clients. Additional supervision of accredited facilities must be considered, in which recourse is made to veterinary practitioners performing similar inspections to those conducted by independent veterinarians in abattoirs. In addition, the contract veterinarian's inspection report must be expanded. It must provide the opportunity for incorporating recommendations and comments from the contract veterinarian.
- The Council is extremely concerned about the socialisation of dogs in accredited facilities. Considerable attention has focused on devising a suitable test that can determine the degree of a dog's socialisation. Research has shown that existing tests are inaccurate and strongly dependent on time and place. In addition, dogs can respond differently to different people, which means that final results also differ. Yet the socialisation of breeding bitches is of critical importance to the puppies' subsequent development. The legislation must therefore emphasise socialisation, amongst other things

via the introduction of **basic handling** such as stroking and brushing the dogs, providing food and encouraging play and grooming.

- Scientific research also demonstrates that shelter- and commercially bred dogs that have been kept in groups exhibit less stereotypic and problematic behaviour following adoption. Outdoor runs additionally ensure increased complexity and enrichment of the environment. It is therefore recommended that both **group housing and outdoor runs** are imposed at accredited facilities.
- The current **quarantine period** for puppies in commercial breeding kennels is 5 days. This may be shortened providing it has been permitted by the contract veterinarian. This period may be extended on the advice of the contract veterinarian or the Service. However, the most prevalent animal diseases have an average incubation period of 10 days. Vaccination does not provide full protection from these diseases. The Council therefore wishes to extend this period to 10 days, based on a scientific research publication by Ghent University² and the vision of academics such as Prof. Dr. H. Nauwynck and Prof. Dr. T. Dekeuster.

The Ani-Zoo professional association does not share this opinion and supports this with a document containing various relevant scientific articles and the views of various breeders and contract veterinarians. The primary reason for their protest is that an extended quarantine entails more health risks than it offers solutions. Ani-Zoo opts for prevention by vaccinating the puppies prior to their entry into pet stores. An extension to the quarantine period additionally leads to the reduced socialisation of the puppies. For these reasons, Ani-Zoo requests the inclusion of a minority opinion for this point and wishes to maintain the law in its current form, provided that the mandatory vaccination is performed prior to the puppies arriving at the pet store.

- It also transpires that quarantine is not being performed correctly (separate pens, separate air supply, hygiene sluice etc.).
- The working group invited a lawyer from the Government of Flanders' Policy Development and Legal Support division to provide advice on the **guarantee certificate**. This certificate must not conflict with consumer law.

The new certificate must place even greater emphasis on consumer law. The number of warranty days per disease described in the current certificate does not correspond with the average incubation period of these diseases.

4 Accompanying documents

- Council for Animal Welfare 2010. Council for Animal Welfare opinion pertaining to the importation of dogs into Belgium
- Animal Welfare Service 2017. Outdoor runs and group housing for kennel dogs Presentation
- Animal Welfare Service 2018. Presentation on the preliminary revisions to kennel decree
- Ani-Zoo 2017. Position pertaining to quarantine

² Dendoncker, P-A., de Rooster, H., Abma E., Wydooghe, E., Dewulf, J.,(2017) Biosecurity measures for dog merchants and canine breeding kennels.

5 Opinion approval by the Flemish Animal Welfare Council

Approved on 27/06/2018.