

LCQ11: Control of wild and stray animal nuisances

Following is a question by the Hon Chan Hak-kan and a written reply by the Secretary for Food and Health, Professor Sophia Chan, in the Legislative Council today (December 18):

Question:

The Director of Audit published, in October this year, the results of a value for money audit on the "control of wild and stray animal nuisances". Regarding the work of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) in this respect, will the Government inform this Council:

(1) given that in the last financial year, (i) AFCD staff did not conduct on-site visits in respect of 65 per cent of the complaint cases which would need their on-site visits, and (ii) in respect of the 1 917 complaint cases analysed by the Audit Commission, there were delays in the interim and substantive replies given by AFCD for 3 per cent and 21 per cent of the cases respectively, whether AFCD has reviewed the causes for such situations and what improvement measures have been put in place;

(2) given that in the last financial year, among the 10 partner organisations which collected cats and dogs from AFCD for rehoming by members of the public, only two submitted rehoming records as required, (i) how AFCD calculates the numbers of animals rehomed under such circumstances, and (ii) whether AFCD has counted those animals that it transferred to its partner organisations but not yet rehomed towards the numbers of animals rehomed; whether AFCD has required its partner organisations to submit rehoming records of other animals (e.g. turtles and rabbits); if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(3) given that the numbers of dogs and cats rehomed in the past five years dropped by 26 per cent and 43 per cent respectively, and that two stray dogs which had passed the health and temperament assessments (rehoming assessments) were euthanised in the last financial year as no rehoming could be found for them, whether AFCD will upload the information of those dogs, cats and other animals which have passed the rehoming assessments onto its website in order to increase their chances of being rehomed;

(4) given that according to AFCD's guidelines, stray cats and dogs will be euthanised if they are not reclaimed within the detention period of four days after being caught and if they have failed the rehoming assessments, while in the last financial year, the actual detention periods for cats and dogs ranged respectively from 0 to 51 days and from 0 to 93 days, and 47 cats and dogs were euthanised in less than four days of detention, whether AFCD has reviewed the causes for such situations, and what improvement measures have been put in place;

(5) given that in 2007, nine of the 18 District Councils (DCs) supported in principle the implementation of the "trap-neuter-return" pilot programme for dogs in their districts, whether AFCD will consult the other DCs on the programme after the new DC term commences in January next year so as to extend the scope of implementation of the programme; if so, of the details; if not, the reasons for that;

(6) as many animal welfare organisations have relayed the difficulties in operating a rehoming centre, including finding suitable premises and shouldering high rents, whether the Government will dedicate certain floors of the new Animal Management and Animal Welfare Building Complex (Complex) proposed to be built in the Kai Tak Development Area for renting to such organisations by drawing lots; if so, of the details; if not, whether it will provide them with rental subsidies;

(7) whether AFCD will provide public veterinary services in the Complex; if so, of the details; if not, whether healthcare vouchers for animals or other subsidies will be provided to animal owners with financial needs; and

(8) whether AFCD, apart from entrusting the work on animal rehoming to its partner organisations, will provide its own (i) animal rehoming centre and (ii) online animal rehoming platform?

Reply:

President,

In consultation with the Environment Bureau and the Environmental Protection Department, my reply to the question is as follows:

(1) When handling complaints about wild animals, the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) has been making appropriate attempts to deal with each case on its individual merits in accordance with internal guidelines.

For cases that involve wild animals causing nuisances to the public, AFCD will recommend preventive measures to the persons affected and take appropriate management actions as and when necessary after conducting on-site visits to investigate the cause and situation of the wild animal sighting.

As for cases involving only the sighting of wild animals with no nuisance caused, or repeated complaints, AFCD may not arrange on-site visits but will approach the complainants to look into the situation and offer appropriate advice or take appropriate actions as and when necessary.

In response to the Audit Commission's recommendations, AFCD will review the relevant guidelines, and take measures to ensure adequate recording of information in the register of wild animal nuisances, as well as deploying additional resources and manpower to facilitate timely handling of cases involving wild animal nuisances.

(2) AFCD is currently collaborating with 18 non-profit making animal welfare organisations (AWOs) to arrange rehoming of suitable animals (including cats, dogs, rabbits and turtles). All animals transferred to these organisations for arranging rehoming are recorded as "animal rehomed". AFCD will maintain close liaison with these partnering AWOs and regularly remind them of the need to submit rehoming records of relevant animals in a timely manner.

(3) and (8) The number of cats and dogs received and caught by AFCD dropped from 7 995 in 2014 to 2 943 in 2018, while the ratio of their adoption increased from 11.1 per cent to 22.6 per cent.

The above 18 partnering organisations of AFCD provide animal rehoming services in various districts across the territory. These services include assessing the suitability of prospective adopters and their living environment for animal adoption, and following up with adopters to see if the adopters take proper care of the animals rehomed. Some partnering organisations have already uploaded the information of animals awaiting adoption onto their websites, answer enquiries and provide matching services online. These organisations are armed with relevant experience and adopter network, and could provide members of the public with more service locations and better meet the current needs of the community. Meanwhile, AFCD is actively liaising with other AWOs with a view to further increasing the number of partnering organisations.

(4) Upon receiving a stray animal, AFCD will try to identify its owner based on the information on the microchip implanted or in the loss report. If an animal without a microchip and not reported lost has been left unclaimed for four days, a veterinary officer will assess its temperament and health condition for arranging rehoming. For animals whose health conditions or temperament are assessed as unsatisfactory but still possible for rehoming after appropriate treatment or temperament improvement, the veterinary officers will provide them with treatment and improve their temperament as far as possible in order to increase their chance of adoption. Since the time required differs among these animals, the duration for keeping them at AFCD's Animal Management Centres varies accordingly.

The 47 cats and dogs mentioned in the Audit Report were euthanised as they were assessed by veterinary officers as having a low chance of survival due to injury or illness or temperamentally unsuitable for rehoming in accordance with AFCD's guidelines. However, the staff concerned forgot to record the reasons for three of these animals in the computer system, resulting in incomplete information. AFCD has already reminded its staff that the reasons for euthanising animals must be properly recorded.

(5) AFCD assisted two AWOs in conducting the Trap-Neuter-Return trial programme for stray dogs at two sites between 2015 and 2018. The results showed that the programme failed to achieve its predetermined performance targets. Nevertheless, we will keep an open mind and offer assistance to AWOs that are interested in conducting such trial programme at other sites. AFCD will consider the proposed sites on a case-by-case basis, taking account of

factors such as geographical location, population density, proximity to community facilities and traffic conditions. If a site is found suitable, AFCD will help the AWOs concerned liaise with relevant District Councils and local stakeholders, and seek relevant legislative exemption from the Legislative Council.

(6) Since the reference plot ratio for the site of the proposed Animal Management and Animal Welfare Building Complex (the Complex) in the Kai Tak Development Area has already been fully utilised, there is no extra space available for other uses (including uses by AWOs).

According to AFCD's understanding, many AWOs rely mainly on foster homes to take care of animals awaiting for adoption. This could provide more opportunities for the animals to interact with people and increase their chance of rehoming. Those AWOs in need of premises for running rehoming centres may consider the suitability of vacant government sites (including vacant school premises) under the management of the Lands Department that are available for leasing by non-governmental organisations for community purposes by short-term tenancies. AWOs may also apply for subsidies under a funding scheme administered by the Development Bureau to carry out one-off, basic and necessary restoration works so as to put the vacant government sites fit-for-use as rehoming centres.

(7) The number of local registered veterinary surgeons has been increasing in recent years with the current total at 1 049. There are around 140 veterinary clinics providing general and specialist consultation services in the territory. In addition, the Veterinary Medical Centre of the City University of Hong Kong provides veterinary services. According to the findings of a consultancy study on the development of the veterinary profession in Hong Kong released by the Veterinary Surgeons Board of Hong Kong in 2017, our vet-to-pet (dogs and cats) ratio would drop in 2019 to 1:523, much lower than that in Singapore (1:2 543), the United Kingdom (1:2 374) and the United States (1:3 072). The vet-to-pet ratio is a common indicator for assessing the overall situation of veterinary services: the lower the ratio, the greater the number of veterinary surgeons. Hence, there are currently sufficient veterinary surgeons and clinics to provide various services in Hong Kong. In addition, AFCD has been subventing AWOs in support of their work on safeguarding animal welfare, including the provision of veterinary services. In view of the above, the Government has no plan to provide public veterinary services in the above new Complex or provide members of the public with subsidies for veterinary services at this stage.