

Summary

The aim of the study was to survey the current situation of animal shelters in Austria. The focus was placed on dog and cat housing conditions and the management of infectious diseases. Further, a first step to identify animal-based parameters for the evaluation of welfare of dogs and cats in animal shelters was undertaken. The goal of the study is to support the control by official vets with a handbook and checklists using resource-, management-, and animal-based parameters in order to assess animal welfare in shelters. Furthermore, the aim was to identify criteria which characterise good animal shelters. For this purpose 30 animal shelters, out of 46 official shelters, were visited. Standardised recording sheets and questionnaires were used for data collection. 10 Shelters were visited twice to assess the reliability of animal-based parameters.

In general, the infrastructure in shelters is sufficient. However, separate enclosures for puppies/kittens and for the isolation of diseased animals were rarely available. Record keeping and identification of animals, especially in cats, was found to be insufficient in some shelters. This may have an impact on the control of the physical and mental well-being of the animals. Furthermore, it may decrease the adoption rates. Personnel and running costs were found to be the highest expenditures. Only approximately one third of the staff had received animal-related education. However, in about only one half of the shelters written specifications for daily routines were found. Checklists to document daily routines were used even less frequently. On average, staff can spend about 15 minutes per day per dog or cat. This includes cleaning and feeding. That is why not much time remains to give the animals tender loving care or to train them. Especially animals which have behavioural problems should receive training in order to increase their adoptability. The high proportion of animals with low adoptability found in the course of this study may pose serious capacity problems to the shelters. Nevertheless, adoption processes were found to be carried out with care and the general request is that the new home should provide the animal better conditions than the shelter.

With regard to the housing of dogs in the visited shelters, the housing seemed to satisfy the animals' essential needs. However, single housing was frequently found and pens might be more enriched. Places to retreat were almost not present and the outdoor areas were even less structured. Noise might pose a problem in some shelters with large groups of pens within hearing range. The most stringent needs in dog care mentioned by shelter staff were more time to exercise, train and play with the dogs.

Cat housing was found to be problematic in about 25% of the shelters. Large group sizes and insufficient structure in the rooms with group-housed cats resulted in a deteriorated physical state of the animals. Concerning animal-based parameters, we were able to identify two in cats (% of very thin cats, % of cats with deteriorated coat) which meet the needs of reliability, feasibility and validity. As some cats seemed to be unable to cope with group housing, the provision of pens for single housing should be encouraged.

Disease outbreaks might occur at the intake of new animals as about 20% of the shelters provide quarantine areas which are insufficiently equipped.

In conclusion, the provision of shelters with standards of care should improve the weak points found in this study. These standards of care should allow work in shelters to be cost-effective and it should be possible to adapt them to the needs of the individual shelter. To alleviate record keeping, a centrally managed web-based data-base is suggested. This should allow shelters to manage and keep track of their animal population and provide a tool to enhance adoption throughout Austria.