



Advice of the Brussels Animal Welfare Council

Evaluation of the Cat Plan

The Secretary of State in charge of Animal Welfare requested that the Brussels Animal Welfare Council evaluate the current Cat Plan - as foreseen for in the decree of 03/08/12 concerning the multi-annual plan for the neutering of domestic cats - based on the statistics obtained from Brussels animal shelters. On this basis, the competent Minister may, after consultation of the Council of Ministers, decide to extend the measures to all those responsible.

On the basis of the collected data, experience and expertise, and guided by ethical and animal-friendly considerations, the Council has reached the following conclusions.

The domestic cat, *Felis silvestris catus*, originated by domestication of an African subspecies, *Felis silvestris lybica*, descended from the wild cat, *Felis sylvestris*. Uncontrolled reproduction and absence of predators results in large populations of stray cats and also an overpopulation in shelters. In addition, many cats continue to be abandoned by their owners each year. Stray cats included, this amounts to 1700 to 3000 cats being abandoned and taken care of by Brussels animal shelters. Every year, approximately half of these cats are euthanised by the shelters.

If sufficiently effective measures are not taken to control cat reproduction and eventually reduce the stray cat population to zero, this situation will be hazardous to cat welfare, the welfare of other animal species (through predation) and to public health (through transmission of viruses and parasites).

From the figures provided by the nine animal shelters in Brussels, and obtained by the Animal Welfare Department, the following can be concluded:

- not all shelters adhere to the current cat plan in terms of compulsory neutering, identification and registration;
- the number of cats being rescued has decreased (at least for the six shelters from which figures were obtained for 2013 to 2016), but the emergence of new shelters (with stray cats as a specific niche) has resulted in a rise of the overall figure;
- euthanasia rates remain high.

Reproduction in domestic cats can be prevented by rendering male and female animals infertile, and this is preferably done before sexual maturity. Since the euthanasia rate and the number of cats rescued by animal shelters remains high, the Council considers it necessary to introduce an obligation to neuter all domestic cats, on top of the measures that are current already included in the Cat Plan. This excludes cats intended for breeding, kept by accredited and occasional breeders, and cats destined for foreign countries.

The introduction of compulsory identification and registration of cats will allow better monitoring of this measure. In addition, the identification mark of stray cats (an incision in the ear) will allow a distinction to be made between stray and domestic cats and will accelerate the rapid return of lost domestic cats to their original owner.

There is some debate regarding the appropriate timing of the spaying or castration. The current Cat Plan requires neutering before adoption or trade, regardless of the age of the cat or kitten. This means that in some cases an early spaying or castration of the kitten will have to take place.





Scientific studies indicate that early spaying of kittens at the age of 8 weeks is responsible veterinary practice. However, in practice, not all veterinarians are comfortable carrying out this neutering technique. Higher anaesthesia risks, the hazard of reactivating latent viruses and higher levels of post-operative aftercare are arguments which make some veterinarians reluctant to use this surgical technique on an 8-week-old kitten. For these reasons, the introduction of mandatory neutering from the age of 6 months should be adopted.

The Council draws attention to the fact that on-the-ground inspection is necessary in order to achieve the desired results of legally mandatory neutering for all responsible parties. It is proposed that animal shelters be permitted to check compliance with the law. It is also important to make buyers and adopters aware of the need for regular veterinary care via breeders and animal shelters. This also allows veterinarians to help raise awareness about animal neutering. Repeated awareness-raising campaigns are needed to achieve a change in mentality in the human population. A change of mentality will also be aided by time. Similarly, some time after the introduction of compulsory identification and registration for dogs, it became generally accepted that dogs should be (micro)chipped by their owners.

Another problem arises in the area of occasional breeders. Occasional breeders are those breeding fewer than three litters a year. They are not accredited cat breeders and therefore the relevant authorities have no knowledge or traceability of them. An amendment to the Royal Decree of 27 April 2007 (defining the conditions for the accreditation of animal establishments and for the trade of animals) will be necessary in order to provide for the traceability of cats from occasional breeders. At present, the Animal Welfare Department has no knowledge regarding the number of occasional breeders in the Brussels Capital Region. Cats that are kept by accredited breeders but no longer used for breeding should also be neutered. Identifying and registering all cats in a central database will enable the traceability of cats. In Wallonia, it has been decided to introduce a "light" version of accreditation for occasional breeders. This allows private individuals, by a simple procedure, to obtain an approval to breed their cat. The Council approves of the Walloon solution.

The Decree of 15 December 2016 by the Walloon Government on the neutering of domestic cats is supported by Council. Only the date of its entry into force (1 January 2019) is considered to be too late.

When the statistics are requested from the Brussels animal shelters, clear definitions must be drawn up so that each parameter is interpreted in the same way by all shelter staff. For this reason, figures could not be differentiated for stray cats and abandoned cats for the years up to and including 2016. It is also important to ask if any cats are returned after adoption. Ultimately, these cats could be included in the figures several times, even though only one cat is concerned. A template should be used, provided to shelters by the Animal Welfare Department at the beginning of each calendar year, so that shelters can use this to collect the figures.

Additionally, the question has been raised as to whether - if neutering is made mandatory for all domestic cats - an exception should be made for older cats, or cats with health problems, for whom neutering would pose a risk. According to the Council, there are not many of such cats and they are individual cases, for whom the possibility may be considered that its veterinarian may issue a certificate if he or she considers that the risk of the operation does not outweigh its benefits. The Council agrees that no specific exemption should be included in the law.





In addition to effective castration, in some areas of France a "vasectomy" is performed on male cats. The advantage is that this procedure is cheaper. The disadvantage is that the behaviour of the males remains the same, so this procedure is not a solution to nuisance due to behavioural issues (night noise, fights between males). When there are difficult areas, for example with a very high concentration of cats and a municipal budget that does not permit the neutering of all cats, this technique may be considered.

Another problem occurs with people having a limited income. Some people have problems paying for the operation, especially if they didn't perform the neutering in time, so that operations on both the mother and her kittens become necessary. Some municipalities (e.g. Anderlecht) make a number of cheques available to support people with financial difficulties with regard to veterinary costs. The Council therefore recommends that more funds are made available in each municipality to financially assist cat owners to have the procedure performed.

Accepting the age of 6 months as the age at which all cats are required to be neutered means that shelters, as well as licensed breeders, will once again have the opportunity to work under a neutering contract for all cats under 6 months of age that are adopted or sold. A legal framework should be provided for this.

Conclusion:

The Cabinet has already submitted a proposal for a decision to the Council that provides for the compulsory neutering of all domestic cats:

1° before the age of 6 months if the cat was born after the entry into force of this decree;

2° before 1 January 2018 if the cat was born before the entry into force of this decree.

The Council agrees to the introduction of compulsory neutering of domestic cats, but wishes to amend the Cabinet's proposal on the following points:

- Provision of a (" light ") version of accreditation for occasional breeders. These breeders are not accredited at present.
- Eliminate the early castration or early spaying obligation altogether - apply the age of 6 months to all cats. For this purpose, the relevant articles of the current Cat Plan should be eliminated.
- Provide shelters and breeders with a contract for adoption cases occurring before the age of 6 months

