

# Report No. 54 of the Director of Audit — Chapter 4

## CONTROL OF PET ANIMALS

### Summary

1. Over the past 10 years, there was an increase in the number of licensed dogs kept as pets (from 67,000 in 2000 to 317,000 in 2009). Meanwhile, licensed pet shops selling dogs and cats increased from 77 to 155, while licensed hostels for dogs and cats increased from 5 to 25.

2. The Animal Management Division (AMD) of the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (AFCD) is responsible for the control of pet animals with the aim of protecting public health and safeguarding animal welfare. To meet this aim, the AMD carries out licensing, inspection, prosecution and other animal administration work through four Animal Management Centres (AMCs). The Audit Commission (Audit) has recently conducted a review of the AFCD's work in controlling pet animals with focus on dogs and cats.

#### Control of pet trade

3. *Unlicensed pet trading and boarding (PTB) establishments.* In December 2009, Audit found some suspected pet shops and pet grooming shops selling pets without an animal trading licence (ATL), or providing pet boarding service without an animal boarding establishment licence (ABEL), both of which were issued by the AFCD. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should step up efforts to cope with the problem of unlicensed PTB establishments.*

4. *Renewal of PTB licences.* In each of the past three years (2007 to 2009), 50% or more of the ATLs and ABELs were not renewed in time. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should take measures to ensure the timely renewal of ATLs and ABELs.*

5. ***Inspection of PTB establishments.*** In their inspections of PTB establishments, the AMC staff did not always check whether all the essential licensing conditions had been complied with. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should draw up a comprehensive inspection checklist for the AMCs to follow and conduct supervisory checks of these inspections.*

#### **Administration of dog keeping**

6. ***Licensing of dogs.*** Since late March 2009, the AMD has launched a trial home visit programme to urge keepers to renew expired dog licences. From March to early November 2009, an AMC conducted 105 visits but only succeeded in renewing three licences. As at 30 November 2009, of the 177,000 expired dog licences, 86,000 involved dogs which were probably alive and warranted the AFCD's attention. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should: (a) review the cost-effectiveness of the trial home visit programme; and (b) step up efforts to tackle the issue of expired dog licences and monitor their effectiveness.*

7. ***Keeping of dogs in public housing estates.*** To improve environmental hygiene, since 1 November 2003, the Housing Authority (HA) has prohibited public housing residents to keep dogs in their flats unless they have obtained its written approval (e.g. keeping guide dogs). Based on the AFCD's dog licensing data, Audit found that, as at early December 2009, there were 12,949 suspected cases of unauthorised dog keeping in public housing flats. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Housing should liaise with the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation to tackle the problem of unauthorised dog keeping in public housing flats.*

8. ***Arrangements with private veterinary surgeons (private vets) on licensing of dogs.*** To obtain dog licences, dog keepers may bring their dogs to the AFCD's authorised private vets for inoculation against rabies and microchipping. Stocks of rabies vaccines and microchips are supplied by the AMCs to the private vets on credit. Audit found that there were inadequacies in the reporting of stocks usage by the private vets, and in the stocktaking conducted by the AMCs at the private vets' clinics. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should: (a) warn those private vets who are repeatedly late in filing stocks usage reports that their names may be deleted from the AFCD list of authorised private vets; and (b) provide guidelines to the AMCs to ensure the proper performance of stocktaking at the private vets' clinics.*

## **Enforcement action**

9. ***Enforcement against pet traders' offences.*** Audit found that the AMCs did not always take enforcement actions (e.g. giving warnings or initiating prosecutions) against pet traders who had not complied with the licensing conditions governing their operations. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should take appropriate enforcement actions against pet traders for breach of the licensing conditions.*

10. ***Enforcement against pet keepers' offences.*** Audit found that: (a) there were inconsistencies in the AMCs' practices of prosecution against pet keepers' offences; (b) the AFCD had difficulties in prosecuting dog abandonment offences (from 2007 to June 2009, there were only two such prosecution cases); and (c) the AFCD did not levy a detention fee on keepers who refused to reclaim their abandoned dogs (which were caught and detained by the AMCs). *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should: (a) conduct an overall review of the prosecution practices adopted by different AMCs and issue guidelines to ensure that a consistent enforcement standard is adopted; (b) take measures to resolve the difficulties in taking prosecution action against pet keepers' offences; and (c) review the practice of not charging detention fee.*

11. ***Prosecution cases not pursued.*** From 2007 to June 2009, the AFCD's Prosecutions Unit (PU) did not pursue 31 prosecution cases submitted by the AMCs. Audit found that the prosecution files of 6 of these cases were missing. There was also a delay in submitting prosecution files to the PU in 3 cases which were time-barred from prosecution. Furthermore, there was no follow-up on alternative prosecution action in 1 case. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should: (a) institute a proper file control system to track the movement of prosecution files; (b) remind the AMC staff to take prompt action on prosecution cases, with due regard to the relevant statutory time bar; and (c) require the AMCs to properly follow up with the PU on viable prosecution actions.*

12. ***Staff training and other related matters.*** Field Officers (FOs) and Animal Management Inspectors (AMIs) are frontline staff responsible for performing enforcement duties. Audit found that: (a) these staff had not received adequate enforcement training; (b) in 2008 and 2009, the turnover rates of these staff in some AMCs exceeded 40%; and (c) for over 65% of the investigation cases they handled, the FOs and AMIs did not initiate prosecutions. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should: (a) provide more structured training for the FOs and AMIs; (b) conduct a review of their high turnover and devise an appropriate staff retention strategy; and (c) consider setting up a quality review system to examine cases not initiated by FOs and AMIs for prosecutions.*

## **Control of stray dog and cat population**

13. *Strategy to control stray animal population.* The AMD spent substantial resources on its strategy to control the population of stray dogs and cats. For 2009-10, the costs of capturing, keeping and euthanising stray dogs and cats were about \$30 million. The AFCD needs to review the cost-effectiveness of its strategy and the AMC methodologies in capturing stray dogs and cats. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should: (a) review the cost-effectiveness of the AFCD's existing strategy for controlling the population of stray dogs and cats; and (b) examine the practicality of outsourcing stray animal capturing operations.*

## **Animal welfare matters**

14. *Education and publicity programmes (EPP).* The AFCD had been endeavouring to build up a culture for protecting animal rights and interests through various EPP. To ensure that the EPP are effective, it is a good practice to have proper planning and evaluation. There is also a need for consumer education to help reduce the chance of buying sick animals from pet shops. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should: (a) allocate resources, formulate an annual plan and develop performance measures for EPP on animal welfare; and (b) step up efforts on protecting the interests of pet buyers.*

15. *Handling of reported lost pets.* The AMCs use information on reported lost pets to help reunite stray dogs and cats caught with their keepers. Audit found that the completeness of such information needed to be improved. Dogs' microchip numbers could help the AMCs unite lost dogs with their keepers. However, Audit sample check showed that half of 104 reported lost dogs were not microchipped and licensed. *Audit has recommended that the Director of Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation should: (a) consider setting up in the AMCs a computerised lost animal register; and (b) publicise the benefit of having dogs implanted with microchips, and consider taking appropriate enforcement action against keepers who failed to obtain licences for their dogs.*

## **Response from the Administration**

16. The Administration accepts the audit recommendations.

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