

# END OF YEAR REPORT 2023

COMMISSIONER FOR ANIMAL WELFARE  
MALTA



Ms. Alison Bezzina (MA Lond) | March 2024



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## FORWARD

*2023 - a year characterised by progressive but painfully slow strides*



As Commissioner for Animal Welfare, I have the privilege of working alongside dedicated individuals and organisations who share a common goal - to improve the welfare of animals across our nation. However, it is no secret that my efforts are often hindered by systemic challenges, lack of resources, and misconceptions about the scope of my authority.

The operational structure of the Commission presents practical and ethical difficulties, lacking executive powers and heavily relying on cooperation with the Ministry. Balancing authority with cooperation adds complexity to our operations, and misconceptions about our role and lack of executive powers often lead to unwarranted criticism and sometimes even abuse from the public.

One of the most significant challenges is that of instilling a sense of urgency in those responsible, authorised, and in a position to execute much-needed actions. Animals are sentient beings and should not be subject to undue delays, red tape, and bureaucratic waits. We are not dealing with inanimate objects, and while protocols and procedures are commendable, the well-being and welfare of sentient beings should take precedence. The delay in executing much-needed changes is agonising, knowing that every moment lost could potentially impact the lives of vulnerable animals.

Despite these challenges, I remain optimistic about the future of animal welfare in our country. The tireless efforts of passionate advocates, employees, activists, and volunteers, continue to drive progress, albeit slow, and raise awareness about the importance of this cause. Their commitment to speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves is commendable, and I am grateful for their unwavering dedication.

Alison Bezzina (MA Lond)  
Commissioner for Animal Welfare



## 2023 – CAW ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

### *Media Presence*

In compliance with CAP 439 ART 44A, which mandates CAW to enhance awareness and foster social dialogue on animal welfare, the Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare actively engaged in heightened media visibility. This involved direct participation in a good number of news stories and interviews, often catalysing additional media coverage on various aspects of animals and general animal welfare issues. Furthermore, CAW actively contributed to several television and radio programs, including a dedicated weekly segment of 15 minutes on TVM's Animal Diaries. Throughout 2023, CAW also disseminated numerous informative posts across various social media platforms.

### *Radio and Digital Campaign*

CAW embarked on an extensive animal awareness campaign, consisting of radio messages broadcasted in both English and Maltese across various radio stations. Additionally, a digital display campaign on Google platforms and local websites disseminated these messages visually. These communication channels were strategically chosen to reach a diverse audience, spanning different ages and backgrounds, extending beyond those with existing animal advocacy interests. The campaign promoted responsible pet ownership, reporting cruelty, and supporting animal rescue organisations. It emphasised adhering to leash laws, maintaining cleanliness, providing preventive care to pets, and microchipping dogs and cats. Moreover, the initiative aimed to cultivate a culture of pet adoption from shelters, prioritising the welfare of animals over personal preferences.

### *Animal Welfare Inspections and Follow Ups*

Throughout the year, The Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare proactively submitted and tracked numerous requests for inspections through the Animal Welfare and Veterinary Regulations Directorates' Enforcement Units. Notably, these requests were made on behalf of individuals from the public who, despite the established protocol of reporting abuse and inspection requests directly to the AWD or VRD, harboured reservations or lacked confidence in doing so. CAW, recognising the importance of maintaining public trust and streamlining procedures, willingly assumed the role of a mediator between the public and AWD/VRD in facilitating these requests.

### *Public Assistance and Involvement*

The Office extended daily support to individuals, local councils, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), private entities, and businesses seeking practical guidance and intervention in the management of diverse animal-related issues. These encompassed matters such as stray cats, roaming chickens and roosters, feral pigeons, ducks, and various other animal concerns. Such assistance aimed to address the complex challenges posed by these situations and contribute to fostering responsible and humane animal management practices within the community.

### *Educational Sessions and School Publications*

Throughout the year 2023, The Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare (CAW), in strategic collaboration with the Animal Welfare Directorate (AWD), conducted a total of 150 educational sessions. These sessions were disseminated across a diverse spectrum of educational institutions, reaching over 2,500 students in 80 distinct schools and locations. The outreach efforts extended to primary schools, Skola Sajf programs, and day centers, collectively fostering an increased awareness and understanding of animal welfare issues among the student population. This collaborative



initiative aimed to instill a sense of responsibility and compassion towards animals while promoting ethical treatment and care within the educational framework.

For the fourth consecutive year CAW distributed a new publication, which was disseminated to all schools visited during the outreach programs. This publication, presented in the form of a narrative from the perspective of a stray cat named Molly, recounts her rescue by a compassionate individual. This creative storytelling approach serves as an indirect method to impart important lessons to children, particularly focusing on appropriate actions in emergency situations and animal rescue scenarios.

Additionally, CAW collaborated with the Animal Welfare Directorate (AWD) on a secondary publication titled "Hbieb tal-Annimali." This publication showcased the poetic works of children participating in the Skola Sajf program, expressing their affection and care for their pets. Through these collaborative efforts, both publications aimed to reinforce essential values related to animal welfare and cultivate a sense of empathy and responsibility among the younger audience.

#### *The Third Edition of The Animal Honours Awards*

In October 2023, the third iteration of the Animal Honours Awards took place, acknowledging individuals and animals who demonstrated exceptional achievements in the animal sector. Recognitions were bestowed upon those who exemplified qualities of compassion, kindness, and diligent efforts in their contributions to the welfare of animals.

#### *[Adoptapet.gov.mt](https://adoptapet.gov.mt)*

In 2023, The Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare (CAW) inaugurated the 'AdoptAPet' website, strategically designed to serve as a centralised and user-friendly platform for individuals interested in adopting animals. This initiative aims to enhance the efficiency of the adoption process by consolidating relevant information in one accessible location.

The platform comprehensively presents details about animals currently housed in sanctuaries, including visual representations, age, names, and specific animal types. This electronic platform represents a progressive step towards simplifying the animal adoption procedure, benefiting both potential adopters and sanctuaries in Malta and Gozo.

#### *Pet Food Collections, Bedding Drives and Loaning of Cat Traps*

The Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare co-ordinated multiple initiatives, including campaigns focused on gathering pet food and bedding, to support the Animal Welfare Directorate (AWD), which consistently operated at full capacity and beyond. The collection process involves sourcing pet food and bedding from both the public and educational sessions conducted by CAW. Subsequently, the gathered resources are systematically delivered to the Animal Welfare Directorate as well as various non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The Office also oversees a cat trap loaning system designed to aid cat feeders and other individuals. This system allows them to borrow cat traps at no cost, facilitating their participation in the nationwide neutering campaign initiated in mid-2023.



## 2023 - CAW INVESTIGATIONS

During 2023 The Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare conducted three investigations as per CAP 439 ART 44A.

1. Investigation into the case of Pixie - a Pitbull mix whose private adoption failed and where AWD's intervention was subsequently sought by activists. – January 2023
2. Investigation into the operations and procedures of The Animal Welfare Directorate (AWD) in the case of a confiscated Muscovy duck that was confiscated from Cirkella Circus and which was returned back to the circus. – January 2023
3. Investigation into the operations and oversight of the VRD Regarding Allegations of Animal neglect and Sub-standard Animal Care at MCAST Centre of Agriculture, Aquatics, and Animal Sciences – October 2023

CAW investigations can be accessed [here](#)

Throughout the investigation process, a comprehensive level of collaboration was observed from both AWD and VRD, although occasional delays were still noted in answering questions related to investigations. Regrettably, once investigations are finalised and disseminated to all relevant stakeholders, CAW experiences minimal, if any, feedback at all. This lack of responsiveness from stakeholders poses a challenge to the effectiveness of the investigative process.

It is essential to recognise that CAW's investigations lack both disciplinary and executive authority. Consequently, if the recommendations for improvement, stemming from these investigations, are not given due consideration and subjected open discussion, the investigative efforts become essentially futile and result in a significant misuse of everyone's valuable time.

Below are the recommendations that emanated from the investigative efforts conducted by CAW in 2023. Despite receiving no feedback on these recommendations per se, it is noteworthy that the Animal Welfare Reform document, launched by The Ministry of Agriculture in mid 2023, substantially addresses the majority of the identified issues.

- Communication processes at AWD need to improve and be digitized.
- The transportation of animals by AWD should adhere to the highest standards of care and welfare.
- AWD Officers should be fully aware and familiar with of all the details of the Animal Welfare Act (CAP439) and all its subsidiary legislation.
- People conducting rehoming and adoption services should receive compulsory training and be obliged to follow a standard process including the minimum requirements that one must follow to increase the chances of a successful adoption. This process and the adoption itself should be overseen by AWD or by an NGO.



- In cases where an animal is in imminent danger of injury or serious suffering, there should be an emergency inspection service that operates around the clock.
- Updating reporters on their cases has long been a bone of contention between activists, reporters, and the AWD. If the decision not to update reporters is a permanent one then this should be communicated clearly to the public to manage expectations.
- When AWD conducts an inspection and finds issues only with an animal's environment, the standard procedure is to give the owner a verbal warning and a set amount of time to address the problem, especially if the animal is in good health. However, this approach, while suitable when a law is newly introduced, becomes counterproductive over time. It increases the workload for AWD, undermines the authority of the Directorate, and encourages owners to flout the law until caught. Like with any other laws, immediate penalties should be imposed for breaching the AWD Act. While confiscation of the animal can be postponed, owners should still face administrative fines or other punitive measures during the initial inspection.
- AWD's reputation of not responding appropriately and in a timely manner needs to be addressed and then advertised. The first step needs to be the engagement of additional human resources for pivotal roles.
- The need for more transparency and timely reactivity from VRD is crucial to ensure effective communication and alignment between all parties involved.
- Additional human and other resources should be allocated to VRD to enhance their capacity for conducting inspections in a more timely manner.



## PAST CAW RECOMMENDATIONS

In accordance with The Animal Welfare Act CAP 439 Article 44A(e), The Commissioner for Animal Welfare is mandated to propose standards, guidelines, and regulations concerning animal welfare to the Minister and the Council.

In 2021, The Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare (CAW) put forth 15 recommendations to the Ministry. In the subsequent year, there was a shift in approach, with CAW modifying the frequency of recommendations. The decision to adjust the frequency of official recommendations from The Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare (CAW) was informed by several key considerations - in 2021 and 2022, CAW's recommendations covered various pressing aspects of animal welfare and as the year progressed, it became apparent that the recommendations were outpacing their effective implementation rate, prompting a strategic decision to moderate their pace. This adjustment was deemed necessary to allow the Ministry sufficient time for execution.

In addition, in May 2022, CAW actively participated in the National Animal Welfare Strategy public consultation, providing an extended scope and opportunity to present additional recommendations. Moreover, two investigations conducted in 2022 generated further opportunities for recommendations. The outcomes of these investigations, along with the associated recommendations, can be explored through the provided links.

In 2023, The Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare (CAW) continued its advocacy through various channels, including recommendations arising from investigations, significant contributions via the animal welfare reform public consultation, and active involvement in the National Welfare Strategy Committee.

STATUS OF COMMISSIONER'S OFFICIAL RECOMMENDATIONS AS SUBMITTED TO THE MINISTRY OF AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND ANIMAL RIGHTS (MAFA).

### **Recommendation 1: (submitted to MAFA in March 2021)**

*Enable the Directors of Animal Welfare and Veterinary Services to temporarily ban someone from keeping more animals after a confiscation. This ban would apply until the court decides otherwise or confirms the decision.*

This recommendation was accepted and fully implemented but not yet invoked.

### **Recommendation 2: (submitted to MAFA in March 2021)**

*Increase the sizes of dog enclosures that are legally acceptable by law.*

This recommendation was accepted and fully implemented.

### **Recommendation 3: (submitted to MAFA in March 2021)**

*Amend the law to give the court a wider possibility to ban people found guilty of animal cruelty from owning other animals.*

This recommendation was accepted and fully implemented.

### **Recommendation 4: (submitted to MAFA in March 2021)**

*Dogs should not be permanently kept on roofs, garages, and yards.*

This recommendation has still not been accepted and is still under discussion.





**Recommendation 5: (submitted to MAFA in March 2021)**

*Stop cub petting in zoos.*

This recommendation has still not been accepted and is still under discussion.

The new zoo regulations have still not been published. The public consultation on the matter closed on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 2021. No ETA on the matter has been provided so far.

**Recommendation 6: (submitted to MAFA in June 2021)**

*Regulations to license re: Animal Trainers, Groomers, and Pet Sitters*

This recommendation was accepted but not implemented. No ETA on the matter has been provided so far.

**Recommendation 7: (submitted to MAFA in June 2021)**

*Humane treatment of unowned farmed birds and pigeons*

This recommendation has been accepted and implemented but only in principle because the practicality of providing suitable habitats for these species exacerbates with each passing day. Various farmed birds, including chickens, roosters, ducks, and even geese, now roam different parts of the island, and pressing need for a dedicated sanctuary for these animals has become evident, as the absence of such a facility points towards an impending scenario where culling may become the only viable option.

**Recommendation 8: (submitted to MAFA in June 2021)**

*More human resources for The Animal Welfare Directorate*

While this recommendation has found acceptance and integration into the animal welfare reform document published in May 2023, the staffing landscape within the Directorate remains uneven. Despite some positions being filled, a considerable number of roles, notably inspectors, officers, dog walkers, trainers, and caregivers, continue to grapple with insufficient staffing levels. It is crucial to note that not only is pre-job training imperative for staff, but there is also a need for evaluations encompassing non-academic criteria, including attitudes and soft skills in working with animals.

**Recommendation 9: (submitted to MAFA in June 2021)**

*Expressly outlaw bestiality.*

This recommendation was accepted and fully implemented.

**Recommendation 10: (submitted to MAFA in June 2021)**

*Given enough prima face evidence the Director of AWD or VRD have the power to enter private property to save an animal without waiting 24 hours or pre-advising the owner.*

This recommendation was accepted and fully implemented but not yet invoked.

**Recommendation 11: (submitted to MAFA in September 2021)**

*A state-funded national neutering campaign for dogs and cats.*

This recommendation was partially accepted and partially implemented (for cats only).

**Recommendation 12: (submitted to MAFA in September 2021)**

*Better, stricter and enforced regulations on the breeding of dogs.*

This recommendation has been fully accepted in principle but has not yet been implemented. No ETA on the matter has been provided so far.



**Recommendation 13: (submitted to MAFA in September 2021)**

*Obligatory electronic Microchipping of pet cats.*

This recommendation has not been accepted but it has been agreed to finance an awareness campaign about the benefits of microchipping pet cats.

**Recommendation 14: (submitted to MAFA in September 2021)**

*Improving and increasing dog-friendly beaches.*

This recommendation has been accepted and some additional dog-friendly beaches were announced in summer 2023.

**Recommendation 15: (submitted to MAFA in September 2021)**

*A central online portal to kickstart all animal adoptions.*

This recommendation was accepted and fully implemented.

**Recommendation 16: (submitted to MAFA in May 2022)**

*More dog friendly run free spaces.*

This recommendation has been accepted but not implemented.

**Recommendation 17: (submitted to MAFA in May 2022)**

*National census of captive animals in Malta and Gozo.*

This recommendation has been accepted but the only way it can be implemented is through the 2030 Household Census.

**Recommendation 18: (submitted to MAFA in May 2022)**

*Improving the electronic microchipping system and its enforcement.*

This recommendation has been accepted but not implemented.



## ANIMAL WELFARE GOVERNANCE

### *The impact of a change in leadership at The Animal Welfare Directorate*

In early 2023, a change in leadership occurred at The Animal Welfare Directorate, resulting in delays for the newly appointed director to assume full responsibilities due to prior commitments. This situation echoed a past instance when less than two years ago, the director's position remained vacant for months, causing administrative challenges. In both instances, the delay in the new director's engagement led to operational difficulties, contributing to a transition period within the Directorate.

### *Changes at Ministry level*

Dr. Alicia Bugeja Said assumed the role of Parliamentary Secretary in mid-2022, taking charge of overseeing and managing Malta's Animal Welfare sector within the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Animal Rights. This appointment has brought about positive outcomes, but despite the evident goodwill and newfound energy that are gradually making a positive impact, there remains an elusive and unexplainable lack of timely action and allocation of adequate resources. While the positive changes are slowly becoming apparent, the presence of this intangible delay in taking necessary actions remains the main concern.

## PROGRESSIVE INITIATIVES

### Animal Welfare Reform

In May 2023, a comprehensive three-year reform initiative was launched with the aim of restructuring the Animal Welfare Directorate and addressing systemic issues comprehensively. As part of this initiative, several administrative, legislative, structural, and operational changes were promised. The full reform document can be accessed [here](#).

### Completion of a cattery

This project has now been finalized and is fully functional and running smoothly.

### Construction of a new dog section with pens to increase capacity by 100%

This project has only reached its first phase, with only a portion (25%) of the planned capacity being finalised and operational.

### Establishment of a pet memorial

Detailed plans for this project have been long finalised, but no significant strides have been made on the actual implementation of the memorial.

### Development of a Rehoming Centre in Ta' Qali

Similar to the pet memorial, comprehensive plans for this project have been finalised, but construction has not yet begun.



### [Removal of 24-hour waiting period](#)

A legislative change has been enacted to address the requirement of a 24-hour waiting period for the Animal Welfare Directorate (AWD) to inspect private dwellings suspected of animal abuse or neglect. Previously, this waiting period presented challenges as it afforded suspects the opportunity to alter or dispose of evidence before inspection could occur. However, with the implementation of Article 45(b) of the Animal Welfare Act, this waiting obligation has been eliminated. The directors of AWD and VRD now possess the authority to enter private premises without prior warning if there is sufficient prima facie evidence of neglect or abuse. While this amendment signifies a significant advancement for animal welfare, it is noteworthy that this provision has not yet been invoked by either of the Directorates.

### [Judicial Process and Punishments](#)

Many more cases are being prosecuted and offenders found guilty however punishments handed down in most cases are very often perceived as minimal and ineffective. Magistrates have the authority to impose fines ranging from €2000 to €65,000, as well as sentences of up to 3 years in prison, and lifetime bans on animal ownership for first-time offenders. Given society's growing concern regarding animal abuse, there is a notable call for courts to consider moving beyond minimum sentencing and instead opt for higher penalties as permitted by law.

### [National Animal Welfare Strategy](#)

The commissioning of a National Animal Welfare strategy by the Government signifies a pivotal step forward in acknowledging the importance of animal welfare in our society. By undertaking this initiative, the government demonstrates a heightened commitment to addressing the welfare needs of animals comprehensively. However, it is imperative that this strategy transcends mere documentation and is actively implemented to effect tangible change. It is not enough to merely draft the strategy; its successful execution and ongoing refinement are essential to ensuring meaningful improvements in animal welfare standards and practices. Furthermore, timely implementation is crucial to avoid the prolonged delays that have often plagued initiatives related to animal welfare, emphasizing the urgency of action in this regard.



## *ENDURING CHALLENGES*

### Accommodation Challenges

The issue of insufficient accommodation for abandoned animals persists, perpetuating overcrowding. This is further exacerbated by the absence of a national neutering campaign for dogs, coupled with ineffective measures to curtail abandonment.

### Human Resource Shortage

A chronic shortage of qualified and well-trained human resources remains a pressing concern affecting both the Animal Welfare Directorate (AWD) and the Veterinary Regulations Directorate (VRD), intensifying the burden on staff and volunteers.

### Communication Issues

All CAW investigations concluded that communication challenges persist within the Animal Welfare Directorate (AWD), affecting internal operations as well as public relations and perception. This year, a new policy change led to AWD refraining from providing updates to individuals reporting cases of suspected abuse, straining the Commission for Animal Welfare's capacity to address reported cases efficiently and further deteriorating public perception of the AWD. CAW investigations can be accessed [here](#).

### Closure of APH Veterinary Hospital in Ta' Qali

Another major challenge faced this year was the closure of the APH Hospital, the only 24-hour veterinary hospital on the island. This issue has garnered attention in Parliament and has led to public outcry. While all veterinary clinics are required to provide round-the-clock service, only a few approved clinics offer essential facilities like X-ray, ultrasound, overnight stays, and diagnostic services. The closure of APH, coupled with the limited availability of these essential services outside regular hours, has created a significant gap in emergency veterinary care services, causing considerable difficulties for both pet owners and veterinarians.

### Legislation and Enforcement

While our legislative framework concerning animal welfare deserves commendation, it is crucial to acknowledge the significant gaps that have persisted for too long. These include the absence of legislative regulations to control breeding practices and regulate professions such as pet groomers, sitters, and trainers. Furthermore, the effectiveness of our current legislative framework is often undermined by resource limitations, leading to enforcement challenges. For instance, mandates such as microchipping of dogs and bans on practices like ear and tail cropping often lack teeth due to insufficient resources allocated for enforcement. The absence of a robust system and a dedicated legal office to facilitate the enforcement of existing animal-related laws compounds the challenges faced by the AWD.

### Shift of 1717 to servizz.gov

As part of the reform initiatives, the 1717 call centre service was transitioned to the servizz.gov (153) service. While this move aimed to enhance customer handling, it is evident that there are significant gaps in training and monitoring, leading to a notable percentage of unanswered calls and instances of misinformation provided to callers.



## COMMISSIONER'S FINAL NOTE

In 2023, we've seen both progress and obstacles in animal welfare. While some slow strides have been made, significant challenges remain. It's clear that urgent action and strategic planning are needed to tackle the complex issues in this area.

The urgency lies in the fact that despite some progress on various initiatives, the pace of implementation has been frustratingly slow, if not stagnant. The completion of a cattery, the construction of a new dog section, and the national cat neutering campaign, while commendable in theory, have all been marred by significant delays. The same applies for the persistent accommodation shortages, and human resource shortages. All this coupled with communication breakdowns exacerbated by the lack of enforcement, continue to test our resolve and condemn countless animals to lives of unnecessary suffering and neglect.

I once again take this opportunity to urge all stakeholders to heed the recommendations put forth by the Commissioner's Office. These recommendations, grounded in rigorous investigations and stakeholder consultations, offer actionable insights and pragmatic solutions to address systemic issues and drive meaningful change. We cannot afford to approach this challenge half-heartedly, merely ticking them off a list to appease bureaucratic requirements. We must act with purpose, conviction, and a sense of urgency, recognising that we are not dealing with mere paperwork but with the lives and well-being of sentient beings who feel and suffer with every delay.

Nevertheless, despite the challenges we face, the dedication and passion displayed by many within our ranks, as well as the unwavering support of compassionate individuals and organisations, keep serving as unwavering inspiration.

Alison Bezzina (MA Lond)  
Commissioner for Animal Welfare



## GLOSSARY

|      |   |                                                       |
|------|---|-------------------------------------------------------|
| CAW  | – | Commissioner for Animal Welfare                       |
| MAFA | – | Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Animal Rights |
| AWD  | – | Animal Welfare Directorate                            |
| VRD  | – | Veterinary Regulations Directorate                    |
| AW   | – | Animal Welfare                                        |