



**Investigation into the operations
and procedures of
The Animal Welfare Directorate
in the case of four dogs left
abandoned in a field in Gudja.**

**Office of the Commissioner
for Animal Welfare**

July 2022



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Background leading to the investigation

On 16th June 2022 local news portal www.loveinmalta.com published a story about four dogs that were presumably abandoned in a field in Gudja (Ta' Loretu).

According to the news story:

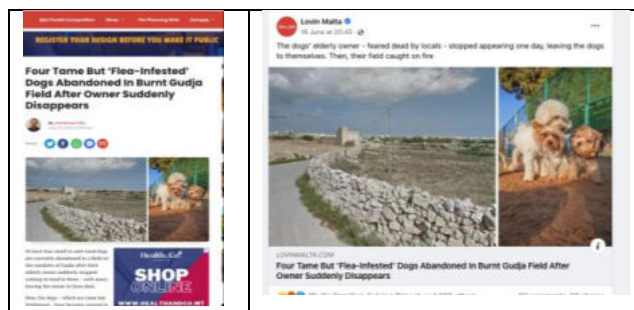
- the dogs were fox terrier type
- their elderly owner had suddenly stopped tending to them
- they were flea-infested
- a family who lived nearby had been feeding them sporadically
- AW had been contacted but refused to tend to the dogs because they were not microchipped
- since the first report that was made by the reporter to AW, the field had caught fire, putting the dogs in a worse situation
- the news portal used a stock photo of Yorkshire Terriers and a Poodle causing a bigger public outcry

News Story :

<https://lovinmalta.com/news/four-tame-but-flea-infested-dogs-abandoned-in-burnt-gudja-field-after-owner-suddenly-disappears/>

Facebook Share:

<https://www.facebook.com/1700937210129433/posts/3443076765915460/>



The next day, on the 17th June, 2022 Minister Hon Anton Refalo and the Parliamentary Secretary Hon Alicia Bugeja, via Permanent Secretary Mr Sharlo Camillieri, requested that The Commissioner for Animal Welfare to investigate the matter and make recommendations on the case.



Scope of the investigation

Following a request by The Commissioner for Animal Welfare for clarification on the precise scope of the investigation, on 17th June, 2022, Perm Sec Mr. Sharlo Camilleri clarified that:

"The investigation must be in accordance with Article 44a of the AW Act, to examine any shortcomings of the Department. The scope of the investigation must be to ensure that the officers from the Department have acted correctly according to the policy and procedures in place, on the basis of the situation they encountered when they went on the spot and with the resources at the disposal of the Department."



Sources of information

- Agrikoltura/Animal Welfare Website
- Reporter who contacted Animal Welfare
- All AW officers involved in the case
- Director AW
- Manager 2 AW Enforcement Unit
- Inspection report compiled by the AW officers who went on site on 5th June, 2022
- AW SOP governing Animal Ambulance Duties at Animal Welfare Directorate (SOP/AWPS/OP/003/01/2020) – effective as of 26th August 2020 to date
- AW SOP governing Inspections performed by the Animal Welfare Directorate (SOP/AWPS/OP001/01/2020) – effective as of 20th August 2020 to date
- Malta Police Force
- MSPCA Malta who trapped the dogs over a period of 4 days.
- Farmer registered to the land in question via MAFA.
- AW Assistant Manager



Summary of Findings

1. Although the news story reported the dogs to be 'fox terrier' type, they turned out not to be of this breed or mixed breed. This is relevant because fox terriers are very commonly found in rural areas, running around freely but not having been abandoned. The same applies for Tal-Kacca mix breeds, but not for the type of dogs that were found in this case. (see MSPCA photos)
2. According to AW SOP governing Inspections performed by the Animal Welfare Directorate - SOP/AWPS/OP001/01/2020) 5B(i) : "...inspection(s) are to be held not later than four days from receipt of the complaint."

The first call regarding this case was sent to AW by the Office of The Commissioner for Animal Welfare on the 25th May, 2022. The first inspection was held 11 days later, on 5th June, 2022..

3. According to AW SOP governing Animal Ambulance Duties at Animal Welfare Directorate - SOP/AWPS/OP/003/01/2020) 5.2(ii) : "All dogs shall be collected **except feral dogs in rural areas**. In cases where a decision to leave the animal on place is taken, it is to be ascertained that the animal is in its natural habitat and is neither subject to any clearly potential danger nor posing a danger to itself to other animals or humans prior to being left on site."

During the first inspection held on 5th June, 2022, officers observed that the dogs, which were in a rural area, looked healthy, well-fed, and active. However, upon speaking with officers it became clear that they did not get close enough to the dogs to be able to observe any lacerations, minor injuries, or fleas on the dogs. They also could not check if the dogs were microchipped.

The dogs could have been considered feral because they did not get close to the officers but if the reporter told the officers that they had attacked passers-by they should also have been considered dangerous.

Whilst still on-site Officer XXXXXX called Director AW to recommend the use of dog traps to trap the dogs. According to Officer XXXX, AW Director instructed him not to act for the time being, but to keep monitoring the situation. In their written report officers once again recommended the use of dog traps to trap the dogs.

During this inspection officers claimed that the feeder/reporter, who was on site with them, did not say that he planned to stop feeding. They also noted that they were instructed to monitor the situation by Director XXXXX.

Although Director XXXXX instructed officers to keep monitoring the case, the instruction was not followed up. From this investigation it transpired that no particular officer felt responsible or accountable for said monitoring.

If the dogs were not considered dangerous then SOP/AWPS/OP/003/01/2020) 5.2(ii) was adhered to but the Director's instructions to monitor the situation, was not.



4. According to MAFA's Website (Agrikoltura.gov.mt) : "...due to the large number of animals under the Directorate's care and custody, it is only animals which are not microchipped **and** are sick and injured that are picked up by the Animal Ambulance. In all other cases, the caller is advised to seek alternative shelter for the animal in a sanctuary...."

Officers did not or could not check if the dogs were microchipped or not, but given the history and the situation they assumed they wouldn't be.

5. An email sent by Director XXXXX on 12th July 2021 to XXXXX, XXXXXX, XXXXXX and XXXXXX, with an instruction to XXXXX to forward to all officers says that:

"When a dog is found without a chip the dog is taken to APH as usual."

This instruction was also not adhered to.

6. On 16th June, 2022 a Mr XXXXX (husband of the woman who first reported the case to CAW via email on 25th May, 2022) called AW again. He spoke to Officer XXXXX explained the situation and explained that since his first report, the field caught fire and that the dogs have become covered in fleas. According to Mr XXX he also informed the officer that he will soon stop tending and feeding the dogs.

After hanging up the phone, Officer XXXXX went to speak to Director XXXXXX who was in her office with another AW employee – XXXXXX. According to Officer XXXXX, he explained the situation to the Director, he added that this was not the first time that the caller had reported the case, that the field had caught fire since, that the feeder was not going to keep feeding and that the dogs were covered in fleas.

Officer XXXXX claims that the Director, replied that given that AW pens were full, and that the dogs were in a rural area, and not in imminent danger, this was not a priority case and that they would not collect the dogs. When the reporter was informed of this decision he was clearly upset, and subsequently went to the press.

7. Most of the content of the conversation between Officer XXXX and Director XXXX was corroborated by XXXXXX who was present. The only discrepancy, however, could have made a significant difference in the Director's decision. According to both the Director and XXXXX, XXXXX did not say that the feeder/reporter was going to stop feeding the dogs. XXXXX claims to have done so.
8. Following the news story in LovinMalta published on 16th June, 2022, MSPCA went on site to attempt capturing the dogs. They borrowed a dog trap from AW. MSPCA discovered a dead horse and informed Animal Welfare. During their initial inspection, AW Officers had not seen the horse which was in a hard to find and hidden area of the field. It took MSPCA 4 days to capture all the dogs after which they submitted a report on their experience to CAW. In their report MSPCA lamented of the fact that they received no assistance in trapping the dogs (except



for the loaned dog trap). The dogs were later taken to APH (on Animal Welfare's account). They were vet checked, vaccinated, and microchipped. They were found positive for anaplasmosis and were released without the necessary medication which MSPCA had to purchase themselves.

9. Following the news story AW organised a second inspection for the 19th June, 2022. By this time MSPCA had already captured three of the dogs. According to the officers who attended the second inspection their superior, XXXXX only instructed them to take photos of the dead horse and to try to check for a microchip. On the 23rd June, 2022, another inspection of the dead horse was held by AW, but a cause of death could not be established due to its advanced stage of decomposition. On the 24th June, 2022, the dead horse was removed from the field.
10. When contacted by CAW, the owner of the field claimed to have had nothing to do with the owner of the dogs who had been squatting on his land for years (at least 5 years). He was aware that the field had caught fire and that there were some dogs still there. He planned to visit the field but had not yet done so.
11. The presumed owner of the dog was identified (through the number plate of the car left on site) but is to date, still missing. The police established that he is not deceased and not recovered at Mater Dei Hospital or Mount Carmel Hospital. On the 1st of July, 2022 the Police issued a 'missing person' public announcement in an attempt to find him.
12. It has been concluded that the cause of death of the horse cannot be established.



Conclusive Remarks

Various actions, non-actions and circumstances led to the unnecessary spiralling of this situation. However, the main issues of concern which need to be addressed immediately are the following:

1. Contradictory and unclear procedures that govern how unchipped dogs that are found roaming are dealt with by AW.
2. Lack of standardized and recorded means of communication.
3. Lack of an agreed and established understanding and definition of what exactly constitutes 'monitoring' a situation.
4. Lack of space for housing abandoned animals



1. Contradictory and unclear procedures that govern how unchipped dogs that are found roaming are dealt with by AW.
 - a. SOP/AWPS/OP/003/01/2020 | 5.2(ii) leaves too much room for subjective interpretation regarding what constitutes "potential danger". In this case, the dogs were not on a busy street, they were in their natural habitat but had no proper shelter except for an abandoned car. It was inevitable that given the conditions in which the dogs were living, they would eventually end up infested with ticks. Tick infestations can lead to very serious (sometimes chronic, and fatal) conditions. However, during the first inspection the dogs had a good body score and the reporter was still feeding them.
 - b. SOP/AWPS/OP/003/01/2020) 5.2(ii) and the Ministry's website, contradict email instructions sent to officers on 12th July, 2021 by Director XXXXXX.

SOP/AWPS/OP/003/01/2020) 5.2(ii) says : "All dogs shall be collected **except feral dogs in rural areas.**"

The Ministry's Website reads ""...due to the large number of animals under the Directorate's care and custody, it is only animals which are not microchipped and are sick and injured that are picked up by the Animal Ambulance. In all other cases, the caller is advised to seek alternative shelter for the animal in a sanctuary...."

The email sent to officers in July 2021 says "When a dog is found without a chip the dog is taken to APH as usual."



2. Lack of standardized and recorded means of communication.

- a. The first report was sent by CAW to Mr XXXXXX (Manager Enforcement Unit) via email. Dir XXXXX was not copied. (25th May, 2022)
- b. The case was then passed on to Officers XXXXX and XXXXX. Neither officer could recall if the case was passed on to them directly by XXXXXX or if they 'voluntarily' picked it up from a pile of printed inspections that are left in a tray by XXXXXX, for officers to execute at their discretion.
- c. The reporter claims to have received a call from Dir XXXXXX asking him for the exact location and to meet officers on site.
- d. Once on site (10 days after the first report was lodged), Officer XXXXX called Director XXXXX (not XXXXXX who is his direct superior and in charge of such inspections at AW). (5th June, 2022)
- e. In their inspection report officers recommended trapping via dog traps and noted that they were awaiting a reply from Dir XXXX, however Dir XXXX was under the impression that her instructions were clear - to monitor the situation.
- f. A handwritten note on the inspection report says 'to discuss 8/7/22'. This note remains unexplained.
- g. The next conversation about this case was when the reporter called AW and spoke to Officer XXXX over the phone. The call was not recorded, but both the caller and Officer XXXXa agreed on what was said. (16th June, 2022).
- h. Immediately after that call, Officer XXXXXXXX verbally relayed the information to Dir XXXXX in what looks like to have been a very quick exchange of information whilst Dir XXXXX was busy in another meeting. Again, the conversation was not recorded, and versions differed slightly but significantly. All parties agree that Dir XXXXX gave instructions not to trap the dogs but to monitor them.
- i. Dir XXXXXX claims not to have been made aware that the reporter was planning to stop feeding the dogs.



3. Lack of an agreed and established understanding and definition of what exactly constitutes 'monitoring' a situation.
 - a. The instruction to monitor the situation was mentioned at various points during the unfolding of this case. Dir XXXXX intended to keep an eye on the situation for further developments and gave out the instruction to monitor.
 - b. However, no exact parameters were given to any of the officers on the level, frequency and type of monitoring that needed to be conducted. There is no SOP or guideline in place to define such monitoring.
 - c. As a result no monitoring whatsoever seems to have occurred. There are no records that between the first inspection on the 5th June, 2022 and the second on the 19th June, 2022, anyone from AW/ went back on site to monitor any developments, so much so that in the meantime the field had caught fire and AW were not aware.



4. Lack of space for housing abandoned animals

- a. In situations like this one, despite the contradictory SOPs and unclear instructions, **lack of space for housing abandoned animals is the biggest factor at play.**
- b. It is amply clear that if space was not an issue, any dog, microchipped or not, injured or not, roaming outside, would be picked up by Animal Welfare for their own safety. This was in fact the spirit in which the email sent by the Director on July 12th, 2022, was written in.
- c. However, when faced with such a dire situation of space AW is forced to prioritise which dogs to pick up and which not to pick up.
- d. Procedures are unclear, contradictory, and not direct, because they change according to the space situation at Animal Welfare.
- e. Lack of space also affects the 'type' of dogs that are picked up. Eg. Easy to home dogs (small breeds) are taken in because they are more vulnerable but also because they do not occupy pen space for too long. This confuses the public that sees AW as inconsistent in their operations.



Commissioner's Recommendations

1. Revise SOPs and instructions to have one clear operating procedure that governs such cases.
2. Utilise one single recordable and digital means of immediate and effective communication to handle all cases. The system should be kept updated at all times for anyone with authorisation to be able to check on a particular case.
3. Set clear time limits for logging reports, conducting inspections, updating internal reports after inspections and updating callers/reporters. The system should automatically red flag when dates are approaching or missed.
4. Eliminate verbal communication as much as possible. If not possible, any verbal communication should be followed up by a recorded means of communication (eg. Email). Any verbal instructions or actions on any case should be inserted in the system.
5. All calls from the public should be recorded including the ones that reach the animal ambulance directly.
6. Create an SOP that clearly defines and explains what is meant by 'monitoring a case', who is responsible and what basic steps are to be taken in each case.
7. Accelerate the expansion of new pens at Animal Welfare, to alleviate the situation of space as soon as possible. In the meantime, invest in more third-party kennels and monetarily incentivize people to foster.
8. Accelerate the hiring of more adequate staff (inspectors) to avoid delaying inspections due to lack of staff.
9. Accelerate the introduction (and enforcement) of new breeding laws and enhance enforcement to reduce the number of abandoned dogs on the street. This includes farm dogs and feral dogs with owners.
10. Strongly enforce microchipping and apply administrative fines. Advertise this enforcement to create a deterrent.

Commissioner for Animal Welfare
Ms. Alison Bezzina (MA Lond)



Public references and documents

1. Lovin Malta Article and Facebook Post
2. AW policy as found on MAFA website
3. MSPCA photos of trapped dogs
4. AW photos from site

Confidential documents available on request to authorised individuals

5. Email instructions sent to Officers on July 12th, 2021
6. AW SOP governing Animal Ambulance Duties at Animal Welfare Directorate (SOP/AWPS/OP/003/01/2020) – effective as of 26th August 2020 to date
7. AW SOP governing Inspections performed by the Animal Welfare Directorate (SOP/AWPS/OP001/01/2020) – effective as of 20th August 2020 to date
8. MAFA's Request to initiate investigation
9. Email correspondence with Malta Police Force
10. MSPCA report
11. Email correspondence with AWD
12. Email correspondence with Commissioner for environment and planning
13. Consent Forms
14. Interview notes
15. Farmer's identification (MAFA)
16. CAW email to AW reporting the case on 25th May, 2022
17. AW Inspection Report
18. Newsbook Missing Person Story (presumed Owner)

Four Tame But 'Flea-Infested' Dogs Abandoned In Burnt Gudja Field After Owner Suddenly Disappears



By Johnathan Cilla

June 16, 2022 at 8:41 pm

Share:



At least four small to mid-sized dogs are currently abandoned in a field on the outskirts of Gudja after their elderly owner suddenly stopped coming to tend to them – with many fearing the owner to have died.

Now, the dogs – which are tame but frightened – have become covered in fleas and ticks, and rely on food given to them by another family who has taken on sporadically feeding them ever since their original owner stopped appearing.

The dogs currently live in a field in the Ta' Loreto area of Gudja, a field featuring no structures save for a rundown, abandoned car they crawl under for shade.

The dogs, believed to be mixed Fox Terrier type dogs, are at risk of becoming infected from the pests infesting them, and are at risk of going feral, becoming strays in the street or even dying from possible infections, lack of food and worst off lack of water in this scorching heat.

However, after a member of the public reported the dogs to the Animal Welfare Directorate, he was informed that not only would the dogs not be tended to by AW officers as they are not microchipped, but that the order allegedly came from the AW Director herself.

However, it doesn't end there – over the last week and since the initial inspection by Animal Welfare, a bushfire erupted in the field the dogs currently live in. Though the dogs somehow survived, the field they live in is in an even more dire state than before.

Though the dogs are abandoned, in need of medical care and eventually rehoming, Animal Welfare is refusing to take them in and delouse them since they are not microchipped.

"If dogs are left with flea or especially tick infestations for a long time, they could get infected, and it can be fatal for them," one animal expert told Lovin Malta. "In my opinion these dogs can easily be picked up, taken to hospital, cleaned up, chipped and rehomed. They are small to medium sized and aren't feral (yet). They are friendly but scared dogs... they shouldn't be a problem to rehome them."

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The Animal Welfare Directorate has faced a number of damning accusations in recent weeks, from being **unable to carry out** inspections to **ethanising** animals unnecessarily.

A **protest held outside of Parliament** just yesterday demanded Maltese authorities take a good look at the current situation vulnerable animals in Malta face, releasing 10 proposals to help better the sector.

Cover photo left: Ta' Loretu, Gudja, right, Terriers stock photo

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Johnathan Cilia

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Animal Ambulance

The ambulance service provided by the Animal Welfare Promotion and Services Directorate is a 24/7 service which primarily provides assistance to sick or injured stray animals. This service is not made available to privately-owned pets.

The animal ambulance provides assistance in accidents involving animals. In such cases, our Team first attempts to verify the identity of the animal involved in the accident, and whether or not such animal has an owner. Should this exercise prove unsuccessful, the animal would be treated as a stray, and taken in for treatment and provided shelter by the Animal Welfare Directorate.

Animals presumed to be lost and found roaming in the streets may also be provided with assistance by the Animal Ambulance. Our Team are able to check whether the animal is microchipped, and thus return it to its owner. It is important to note that due to the large number of animals under the Directorate's care and custody, it is only animals which are not microchipped and are sick and injured that are picked up by the Animal Ambulance. In all other cases, the caller is advised to seek alternative shelter for the animal in a sanctuary. A list of sanctuaries around Malta & Gozo may be found [here](#).

The animal ambulance can be contacted on 1717.





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