



COUNCIL ON ANIMAL AFFAIRS

ANIMAL ASSISTED INTERVENTIONS
WELFARE OF HUMANS AND ANIMALS?

SUMMARY

The purpose and activities of the Council

The Council on Animal Affairs (*Raad voor Dierenaangelegenheden*, RDA) is an independent council of experts, which advises the Minister for Agriculture, Nature and Food quality of the Netherlands. This advice is submitted on request and by the Council's own initiative regarding complex, multidisciplinary issues relating to animal health and welfare. The RDA currently comprises some forty experts with a wide range of backgrounds and expertise, who serve on the Council in a personal capacity, independently and without any outside influence.

The Council on Animal Affairs considers issues across the entire spectrum of animal policy: on captive ("domesticated") and non-captive ("wild") animals, small-holding, or hobby farm animals, companion animals (pets), commercially raised animals and laboratory animals.

The Council records the conclusions of its deliberations in opinions. These documents provide an overview of the scientific and societal background to various issues, and include recommendations on policy options and avenues for resolving potential problems. Consensus is not a requirement for the inclusion of opinions; an opinion may contain views held by a minority of Council members.

Foreword

More and more animal assisted interventions are being carried out in the Netherlands. Known interventions are the training and use of assistance dogs and for example horseback riding with disabled people, but it can concern many forms of therapy, education, coaching or other activities involving animals. Such interventions can benefit the welfare of those people involved, yet it is not always clear if this is truly the case. Meanwhile it is not ruled out that the deployment of animals on these interventions influences the welfare of the animals themselves. Because of this the question arises if, and in what way animals can be deployed on interventions responsibly.

There are many factors surrounding animal assisted interventions which are not yet clear enough, like the precise extent and structure of the sector, the amount of applications and their effect on human and animal. Therefore the Council on Animal Affairs has focused on this topic and has issued an advisory report about it. With this report we hope to contribute to the responsible development of the sector.

This public edition offers a concise rendition of beforementioned advisory report. The integral version can be downloaded from the website of the Dutch Council on Animal Affairs/RDA.

The Hague, May 2019



Jan Staman, Chair



Marc Schakenraad, First Secretary

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SUMMARY



RAAD VOOR DIERENAANGELEGENHEDEN

Animal Assisted Interventions: welfare of humans and animals?

Independent advisory report

Question: There is an enormous increase as well as a large variation in the number of activities involving animal assisted interventions (AAI) in the Netherlands. Are these interventions of any use for humans, and are they necessary? What is the situation regarding the welfare of the animals involved and what measures can be taken to protect that welfare?

Background: ‘Animals are increasingly being used for activities aimed at assisting people or helping them get better’, says Nienke Endenburg, council member and chair of the Forum that looked at this question. She is a health psychologist and teaches at the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine at Utrecht University, and her special field of interest is the influence of animals on human development and behaviour. ‘The examples are numerous: assistance dogs, care farms, equine assisted coaching, plus many more. But we have very little data about numbers, applications and animal welfare, and there is also a lack of what you might term broad or sectoral organisation. You sometimes get the impression that alongside the many professional interventions, less professional interventions are also being conducted, although to be honest we simply don’t know precisely. Therefore the Council found it worthwhile to issue an advisory report on the legitimacy of animal assisted interventions and to examine the situation regarding the welfare of the animals involved.’

Considerations: ‘We first explored what is known from scientific research about whether animals can really make a positive contribution to human welfare, for instance, for people with autism or an addiction, for instance’, says Endenburg. ‘This generated plenty of research data, although at the moment this is generally not of sufficient quality to stand the test of scientific critique.’ Therefore, the conclusion was that there is insufficient hard evidence for any therapeutic contribution, despite this being a possible requirement for example for health insurance to cover animal assisted interventions. In addition, the welfare of animals used in AAI is hardly considered, if at all, in the beforementioned studies. The Council also examined how the sector is organised. ‘While some parts of the sector are well organised, others are evidently less so’, Endenburg comments about this matter. ‘Sometimes there a complete lack of organisation, and this also has consequences for the presence of professional training and follow up training, important aspects of professionalization. German speaking countries are better regulated: there you need to be properly accredited before you can train assistance dogs.’ The sector would benefit from professionalisation, Endenburg believes, but that is being hampered at the moment by a lack of infrastructure.

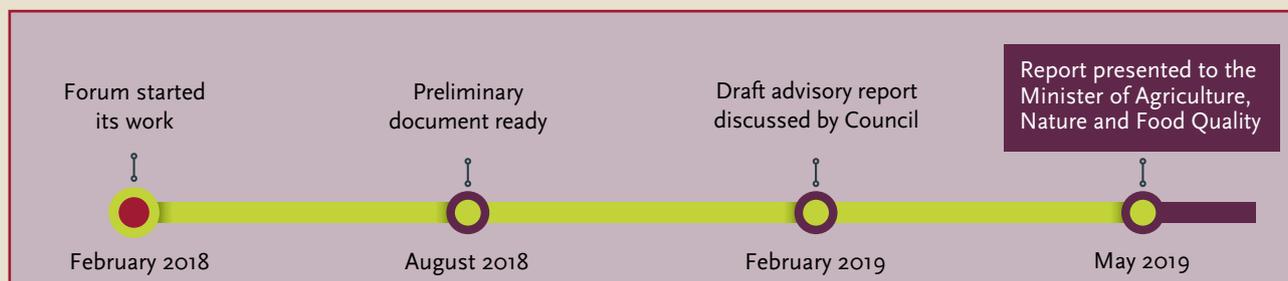


Council member and chair of the Forum Nienke Endenburg

Finally, the Forum examined the key question: ‘What does it do to animals when they are used as assistance animals?’ The Forum found there also was a lack of reliable research data available on this subject as well. Endenburg: ‘There are plenty of indications that animal welfare is compromised, but we know too little about the scale and seriousness.’ Research is needed in this field as well. However, The Forum was nonetheless able to make a preliminary conclusion in this regard. ‘You need to consider the result produced by the intervention’, says the chairman of the Forum. ‘If the intervention delivers

clear results, as is the case with for example signal dogs for the hearing impaired, the usefulness you do not have to doubt, you are likely to judge any possible harm to the welfare of animals differently than if no effect has been demonstrated. In the latter case you should reject anything that might compromise animal welfare. If there are alternatives to the use of animals, they should be considered.’

Recommendation: Proper scientific research is needed, with the associated quality criteria, on the effects of animal assisted interventions on humans as well as animals. The sector needs to be professionalised, with training programmes according to defined criteria, follow up training and a system of accreditation that provides clarity to consumers, people seeking assistance and insurers. This can facilitate professional practices and limit the possibilities for amateur providers without appropriate qualifications. The government can play an initiating and stimulating part in this. Much can be adapted from practices in German-speaking countries, of course modified to the situation in the Netherlands. It is also important that a professional association is established for the sector.



Brief summary of the report

1 Introduction

The number of animal assisted interventions has risen in recent years. Animal assisted interventions are activities conducted with people with a physical and/or mental disability, with the assistance of animals. The purpose is to achieve progress in the physical, social, emotional and/or cognitive health or functioning of an individual. Animal assisted interventions are applied to people of all ages and for a range of different issues, including autism spectrum disorders, behavioural problems, reading literacy deficit, ADHD, Down syndrome, depression and dementia. Planned, informal activities for the purpose of relaxation or team building and, for instance, the use of assistance animals such as guide dogs, are also considered animal assisted interventions.

The use of animals for the benefit of humans asks that we consider the usefulness and necessity of the practice compared to the possible harm of the animal welfare. The growing interest in animal assisted interventions prompted the Council on Animal Affairs to examine whether these practices include adequate safeguards for animal welfare and what is needed to ensure this in the future as well. For this reason the Council gives his view on the use of assistance animals for the benefit of humans in this advisory report, with as central question:

‘What is needed to ensure animal assisted interventions are conducted in a responsible manner, and in such a way that human and animal welfare continues to be safeguarded?’

2 Current situation

There is no specific legislation for animal assisted interventions in the Netherlands. Anyone can offer animal assisted interventions without having any type of training, skill or knowledge, provided it is not in violation of the Individual Healthcare Professions Act (*Wet op de beroepen in de individuele gezondheidszorg*). Therefore, the way of working with this group of animals varies significantly. The Netherlands lack a proper system of schooling and accreditation to safeguard the quality within animal assisted interventions. Other European countries have already made progress in this area, including Austria which has introduced legislation covering assistance and therapy dogs.

Our literature review shows that few scientific studies have been done on welfare issues among the animals that are being used in animal assisted interventions which can stand the test of criticism. Several studies report signs of stress, exhaustion and (occasional) mental or physical abuse. The interviews conducted in preparation of this advisory report indicate that abuse does sometimes occur, often due to inadequate knowledge of the behaviour and care of animals by those who use animals for interventions. There are also welfare risks for the people involved, including zoonosis, biting, scratching and kicking incidents. These risks increase because of the fact that the interventions involve vulnerable groups: children, the disabled, the elderly and people with mental health issues.



3 Conclusions and recommendations

Research to date has produced little concrete evidence that therapy assisted by an animal actually produces better results than therapy by a professional alone. Nonetheless, the use of animals may have added value for certain health-care applications and the Council notes the existence of

ongoing research to examine whether this is actually the case. If the usefulness and necessity of an intervention is not sufficiently demonstrated, at the very least animal welfare must be safeguarded. If interventions have a reasonable purpose and are useful and necessary, steps should be taken to minimise any harm to animal welfare. Therefore,

The Council considers animal assisted interventions to be acceptable, provided that the welfare of the animals concerned is adequately safeguarded and there are no reasonable alternatives available.

At the moment there is a growing industry around animal assisted interventions. Where animals are being used there is a risk of harming their welfare. The Council observes that it is difficult to make a reliable assessment of the actual scope of harm to animal welfare in the diversity of interventions. In the Netherlands this growing sector is poorly organised, and the fact that anyone can conduct animal assisted interventions it is even more important to protect and safeguard animal and human welfare. The Council believes that animal assisted interventions can be conducted in a responsible manner under certain conditions. Therefore the Council makes the following recommendations:



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Recommendations to the sector:

The Council believes it is necessary for the sector to organise and professionalise itself, so as to ensure that (1) animals are not used for interventions where the welfare of the animal is violated, without any reasonable usefulness and necessity; (2) if the usefulness and necessity of the intervention is established, animal welfare is guaranteed as far as reasonably possible; (3) abuse and ignorance or incompetence are prevented; and (4) there is transparency concerning the practices and quality systems employed in the sector. The establishment of a professional association, the setting up of a uniform training curriculum and a possible quality mark would contribute to safeguarding animal and human welfare.

- **Safeguarding (animal) welfare.** Animal welfare can be optimised by selecting suitable animals, establishing learning and training programmes appropriate for the animal, by using matching procedures, preventive and therapeutic veterinary care and by setting maximum work load limits. Human welfare risks can be minimised by introducing safety and hygiene protocols. The handler should also have sufficient knowledge of the animal concerned.
- **Professional association.** Uniform practices with regard to quality, safety and expertise can be achieved by establishing a professional association. Within this professional association, Articles of Association and regulations can be drawn up which impose requirements on the selection and training of animals as well as on the practising professionals. The association could consider attaching a quality mark to this quality system.



- **(Follow up) Training.** The establishment of a professional association also provides opportunities for imposing requirements on the training courses and programmes that are available in the sector. A uniform curriculum can be composed for this purpose. The requirements can be specified for each separate intervention type and animal species.

Recommendations to the government:

- **Additional clause Animals Act.** Section 2.3 of the Animals Act concerns the use of animals, although animal assisted interventions are not mentioned in the Act. The Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality can extend the scope of the assessment framework for production animals to include animals that provide services, as is also recommended in the RDA advisory report on the Assessment Framework for Production Animals (2016). In assessing whether or not an animal species is suitable for animal assisted interventions, it is possible to impose requirements on the trainer or handler, for example that they work in accordance with certification specifications.
- **Support for sector.** The Council advises the Minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality and the Minister of Health, Welfare and Sport also to facilitate the professionalisation of the sector, starting with bringing together the providers of animal assisted interventions. The sector can be supported in establishing a professional association and defining a quality mark.

Recommendations for research:

- **Research on animal welfare.** Research is needed to analyse the extent of welfare issues among assistance animals. It has to become clear where the strain placed on therapy and assistance animals differs from that placed on companion animals. The purpose is to evaluate what the impact of using these trained animals is on the animals themselves.
- **Research on the effectiveness of the interventions.** Research on the effects of animal assisted interventions is needed to gain an understanding of the added value of using therapy and assistance animals. This is needed to justify the use of animals as part of activities, education and therapies.
- **Research on alternatives.** The Council recommends that the effectiveness of alternatives for animal assisted interventions that are being developed in the field of technology and robotics is to be researched. If alternatives are at least as effective then there is a moral responsibility to choose the alternative in preference to animal assisted interventions.

Recommendations to health insurers and local authorities

- **Animal welfare included in reimbursement criteria.** Health insurers and local authorities can decide whether or not to provide reimbursements dependent on a professional structure in the sector providing animal assisted interventions. Safeguarding animal welfare is a criterion that should be included for accessing supplementary insurance coverage or to enable reimbursement under the Social Support Act. The quality mark referred to above can be leading in this regard.



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Recommendations to institutions

- **Responsible requests for animal assisted interventions.** The Council advises institutions intending to use animals for animal assisted interventions only to do so in collaboration with organisations that can demonstrate compliance with the proposed quality mark.

Appendix

This advisory report is a product of the full Council on Animal Affairs (RDA). It was prepared by a working group composed of RDA members dr. N. Endenburg (chair), W.T.A.A.G.M. van den Bergh, dr. L.J.A. Lipman, drs. R.A. Tombrock and former Council member H. Hopster. D. (Daniëlle) Hartman MSc, A.E. (Anne) van den Ende MSc MA and ir. M.H.W. (Marc) Schakenraad acted as secretaries of the working group.

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