



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report August 2010 (Germany) – Paderborn city is a pioneer in dealing with the problem of feral cats

In many cities in Germany, feral cats are rising in number and are increasingly becoming a problem: they can lead to traffic accidents, are a nuisance in places where they should not be, and carry diseases which affect other species too. They are the descendants of domestic cats, which in the past have been abandoned and have succeeded in staying alive in urban environments and procreate. It is estimated that there are about 40,000 feral cats in Cologne, and in Berlin the number is even estimated to be close to 100,000. Since it became socially unacceptable to kill kittens, as was very much the norm in earlier ages, this proliferation has taken place – cats are now living in cemeteries, allotments, parks, but also in parking facilities and other public spaces. For the past years, local animal protection associations, which are very much at the forefront of dealing with those cats, have reported that they are overwhelmed by the number of feral cats, so this is not a localised problem in some cities, but rather countrywide.

Cats are very popular as pets in Germany, however their reputation for independence is often combined with the assumption that they can also fend for themselves outside, and compared to dogs, cats are more often abandoned when households move or any other kind of change takes place. In recent years, cats have literally clogged up animal shelters across the country, and many shelters now refuse to take cats. Cats have a high fertility rate – one female cat can have up to 150 kittens in just two years, so it is no wonder that the number of cats has been increasing rapidly.

In Germany, municipalities have only responsibility for domestic animals insofar as they have a duty to care for lost domestic animals. Therefore, a municipality will normally have an arrangement under which lost cats and dogs are caught and cared for at a local shelter, until the owner collects them. The municipality will contribute to the funding for this. They are however not responsible for feral animals, and therefore very often will not get involved, even if animal protection groups call for greater official engagement with the problem, because they alone cannot get the problem under control. In most cities, there are groups which feed feral cats as well as catch them for the purpose of sterilising and treating them, before releasing them again, as nobody wants to kill cats unnecessarily. Many of these groups are supported by the national charity 'Aktion Tier', which has been running a programme since 2003 which aims to reduce the number of feral cats as the same time as trying to find homes for kittens born outside, to re-domesticate them.

Any opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of JLGC or CLAIR.

The city of Paderborn (145,000, in western North-Rhine Westphalia) is one of the first cities which took action in regard to this problem. In 2008, it decreed that all owners of domestic cats have to sterilise cats over five months old and have them fitted with an electronic chip, if they allow them to go outside. Exceptions are possible for pedigree animals, but these will in most cases not be allowed to roam free anyway. This requirement has been inserted into the general public order bylaw, which also deals with the responsibility of owning and caring for pets. In Germany, owning dogs has long required registration and paying a dog tax which is a municipal tax, but keeping cats was not subject to conditions. This has now changed, and in consequence owning a cat or several cats as pets now brings with it further expense not directly related to food and care.

This approach is finding imitators in other cities as well, and introducing such a requirement is being discussed for the whole of Baden-Württemberg. Furthermore, Belgium has just embarked on an ambitious six year plan to deal with the problem of feral cats. It aims to first sterilise feral cats and then introduce sterilisation of domestic cats, in order to achieve a solution to the current problem by 2016. It is estimated that Belgium with a population of 11m people has 1.7m cats, feral and domestic cats included.

Any opinions expressed in this report are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of JLG or CLAIR.