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No more culling of cats in Chong Pang

By Melissa Lin

Chong Pang has become the first constituency where stray cats will not be culled, after Nee Soon GRC MP K. Shanmugam launched an animal welfare programme there yesterday.

Instead of culling, grassroots workers and volunteers from animal welfare organisations will work together to sterilise the cats.

These plans were outlined yesterday at the first forum on animal welfare policies held at Chong Pang Community Club.

The public forum was organised by Singapore-based charity Animal Concerns Research and Education Society (Acres) in collaboration with the constituency's grassroots organisation.

Mr Shanmugam chaired the discussion with the executive director of Acres, Mr Louis Ng.

Emotions during some moments ran high as more than 400 people, mostly animal lovers, filled the hall and gave their views on the state of animal welfare in Singapore.

At one point, the crowd erupted in jeers when a dog breeder's name was mentioned by one participant, prompting Mr Shanmugam to appeal to those present to keep the dialogue 'civilised'.

The two-hour-long forum was split into three main topics of discussion - domestic animals, wildlife, and animals in the entertainment industry.

A hotly debated issue was about animal abuse and what was being done about it.

A forum participant said the Agri-Food and Veterinary Authority, which investigates complaints of animal abuse, was not doing enough, and called for an independent policing unit to ensure that abusers are prosecuted.

Mr Shanmugam, who is Minister for Law and Foreign Affairs, pointed out that it is not easy to convict someone of animal abuse given that in these cases, the animal victims are unable to testify.

In the legal system, it has to be proven beyond reasonable doubt that a person did commit a crime before he can be convicted.

Nonetheless, he said there was a lot of merit in the suggestion and that it was feasible to consider more active enforcement of rules against animal abuse.

A suggestion for mandatory caning of animal abusers was also floated, but Mr Shanmugam said that implementing this would be to swim against the tide of international opinion in this area, given that the general trend is against caning.

Others called for greater transparency by government agencies and for flat owners to be allowed to

keep cats in Housing Board flats.

In a suggestion that drew a few laughs, an advocate for shark conservation said government-organised banquets should stop serving shark's fin soup.

Mr Shanmugam said that, overall, the forum was 'extremely constructive' and that he would pass on the several ideas to the relevant government agencies.

But printer Roger Chow, 33, who attended the event, felt that the experience was 'underwhelming'.

The owner of a cat had gone to the forum dissatisfied with the way animal abuse cases were handled, and had hoped to see a change in sight.

'There was no indication that anything constructive will be done,' he said.

'There was only an indication that the authorities were willing to listen. I think it will take a longer time than expected for changes to take place.'

Still, polytechnic lecturer Hamidah Zam Zam, 49, who was also at the forum, felt that it was a great step forward for animal welfare supporters in Singapore.

'The fact that people are coming forward and that the place was full today makes me feel very positive that it will only get better from here,' she said.