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Diana is a greyhound behaviour assessor at the Greyhound Adoption Program in Victoria and a companion animal welfare scientist completing her PhD research on canine personality assessments. Diana has more than a decade of experience working with dogs in shelter, training and research settings, as well as teaching about companion animal behaviour and welfare at both university and TAFE level. She has a passion for dogs and the people that love them (or might love them given the opportunity). Diana's other interests include compassion fatigue and work-related stress in animal welfare workers, and shelter staff and volunteer training and education.

Abstract

In-shelter/pound behaviour assessments: If temperament tests are out, what do we do now?

The growing body of literature concerning shelter/pound-based behaviour assessments for dogs, otherwise known as temperament tests, is increasingly calling in to question the accuracy and reliability of these tests (Rayment et al., 2015, Patronek et al., 2016). The current consensus of experts in the field is that simple one-time, one-context tests for shelter dogs are an unhelpful drain on limited resources at best, and that this situation is not going to change while the current approach to assessing behaviour in shelters remains.

In this presentation, we will briefly discuss the theory behind canine personality and behaviour assessments with a view to understanding the limitations of test-based approaches to assessing behaviour. We will then focus on practical solutions for shelters/pounds to use when learning about the dogs we know the least about – our strays.

Full Paper

The animal welfare world is full of roles that challenge staff and volunteers mentally, physically, and emotionally. Assessing the behaviour of dogs in pounds and shelters ranks right up there in the 'tough job' stakes, particularly when assessment outcomes are used to make adoptability, placement, and euthanasia decisions. The toll this takes on assessors, who often have little or no formal education or training in assessment, is notable, with those involved in euthanasia decisions experiencing some of the highest levels of compassion fatigue in our sector. In addition, the conditions in which behavioural assessments take place are highly varied; some organisations have huge kennel complexes, multi-person behaviour teams on staff, and large foster care programs, while others are entirely home-based and run by volunteers.



These are just two of many reasons that after more than 20 years of research, we still do not have a validated, accurate temperament test for assessing sheltered dogs. This paper and the accompanying presentation will briefly discuss some of the pitfalls of the common approach of using battery-style tests to assess behaviour, and provide some advice on what to do instead to gain a better understanding of the dogs in our care.

Background on shelter assessments and canine personality

Shelter-based behaviour assessments for dogs serve two main functions: first, to assess the potential risk that an individual dog may pose if rehomed in to the community, and second, to gain information about the dog to facilitate a good match with the adoptive owner. Typically, behaviour is assessed in shelters using a “battery-style” test. That is, a test made up of a series of short interactions intended to elicit a (sometimes aggressive) response from the dog. These tests are believed to provide information about how a dog would react outside of the shelter environment, once adopted and living as a pet in the community. This basic premise that test behaviour accurately predicts future behaviour is called ‘predictive validity’, and is based on the idea that personality traits are consistent across time and different situations, so behaviour in the pound should reflect behaviour in the home. For a test to achieve satisfactory predictive validity, the results must be replicable (i.e. the same outcome is achieved when a dog is tested multiple times, regardless of who the assessor is and where it was conducted) and they must give us accurate, reliable information about how the dog will react in a context different to that in which the behaviour was seen. Tests used in the welfare environment must also be easy to learn and conduct, require few resources, be quick, and most importantly, safe for everyone involved. Despite more than two decades of research into these assessments, not only do we not have a test that even partially meets these criteria, the growing body of evidence is that it is simply not possible to achieve our two main goals using battery style tests alone. To appreciate the limitations of battery style tests, it is crucial to first understand the concepts of personality and personality traits. ‘Personality traits’ are not directly observable, but are concepts that describe the behavioural variation we see across a population of animals. For example, a shy dog will typically not be interested in engaging with new people or dogs, relative to other dogs, even if on occasion he is outgoing. Conversely, an extraverted dog who is usually outgoing and gregarious, may be withdrawn and disengaged when he is tired and stressed. ‘Personality’ is an abstract description of how these traits fit together, so is best visualised as a hierarchy of personality traits with behavioural traits at the bottom, and ‘super traits’ which describe consistencies between behaviour traits at the top (Figure 1).

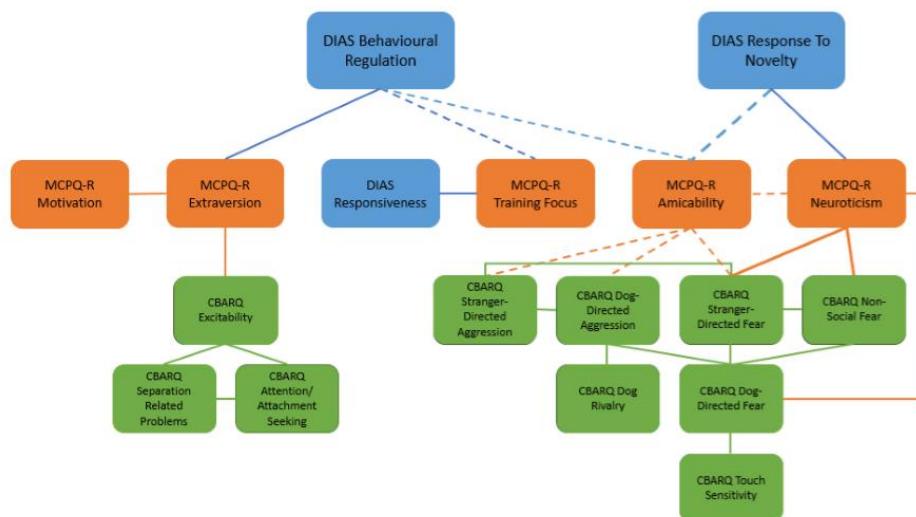


Figure 1. Suggested structure of canine personality, taken from Rayment et al. (2016)



The behaviour we observe at any given time is influenced by many factors including innate temperament, learning history, physical health and wellbeing (e.g. illness), internal motivations (e.g. hunger), and the environmental and social context. You can think of each snapshot of behaviour a bit like a tapestry picture, with each of the different coloured threads in the tapestry representing a different factor which affects how the animal responds. When woven together, these threads create a complex picture that we can appreciate as a stand-alone item (i.e. behaviour), but the plot (i.e. personality) only emerges once we see many pictures in sequence to create a story. Making many observations over a long period is rarely practical, even outside of the animal welfare world, so personality is usually assessed using questionnaires filled out by people who know the animal (or person) in question well. Published personality questionnaires are extremely useful when gathering information about relinquished animals from surrendering owners. However, it is simply not possible to collect info from previous owners for stray dogs, and so we must rely on direct observations of behaviour to help us understand each individual dog.

Beyond an understanding of the concept of personality, it's also important for assessors to appreciate how the pound and shelter environment affects dog behaviour. Pounds and shelter are stressful for dogs; living conditions often involve strict confinement, a lack of consistent attachment figures, social isolation coupled with high-density housing, lack of quality rest, abnormal interactions with people and other dogs, altered or insufficient exercise routines, and regular exposure to novelty (among a host of other factors), all of which will affect how an individual animal will react at any given time from the point of intake onwards. For dogs that find one of more of these factors stressful, especially those who have poor resiliency and/or are slow to adapt, being housed within a shelter presents significant challenges to both their welfare and their ability to behave 'normally'. There is still discussion happening in the research community about whether stress makes dogs more or less likely to show problematic or aggressive behaviours (it likely depends on the individual dog!). However, it is generally accepted that the overall effect of chronic or extreme stress on an animal is to amplify those responses rooted in 'negative affect' (i.e. negative emotions, like fear and anger) and suppress those rooted in 'positive affect' (i.e. positive emotions like happiness and friendliness). Put simply, when you are tired and stressed in a new place, you are more likely to have a 'shorter fuse' and less likely to be open and sociable, than when you are fully rested, with your family, in your own home.

Remembering the principle that observed behaviour patterns are most likely to be reliable across similar contexts, this means that the behaviours observed in a pound or shelter are most likely to be predictive of behaviours you might observe in similar situations, such as long stays in a veterinary hospital or boarding kennel. Conversely, behaviours observed in a pounds or shelters are far less likely to be predictive of how a dog will respond to known people and animals during normal social interactions, or when investigating new situations while with a trusted person. As you can see, simply relying on how a dog responds to being handled by a stranger while chronically stressed is going to give you limited information at best about how they will behave around family members, even if they are being presented with food, toys, or games in both situations.

Understanding the effects of stress and coping behaviours on behaviour assessments

Due to the nature of the pound/shelter environment, dogs are exposed to a lot of stressors during their stay. Those personality traits that determine how an animal typically responds to a perceived threat, or stressor, are known collectively as an animal's 'coping strategy'. Coping strategies are made up of at least three separate traits, being vocalisations (how loud an animal is when stressed), coping style (whether the animal typically runs, fights, or shuts down and hides), and 'emotionality' (how quickly an animal becomes physiologically aroused when it perceives a threat). Based on research conducted on several species including dogs, it is thought that animals with a proactive coping style and a low susceptibility to arousal (sometimes called 'bold') are more likely to display aggressive behaviour across a variety of situations than those with a passive coping response or that are easily stressed. Bold individuals are also more likely to display competitive aggression and to require routine in their daily lives – this is helpful information to know about a dog! Determining an individual's natural coping preference is not straightforward, and there are practical limitations to achieving this in a shelter environment.

When assessing coping strategies in animals, there are a few 'rules of thumb' to keep in mind. The first of these is that the traits are independent of each other. This means that you cannot determine how aroused (i.e. stressed or fearful) an animal is by how 'big' their behavioural response is, or by how much noise they are making relative to their peers.



Variations in an animal's coping response must always be assessed relative to what is 'normal' for them, or at very least the baseline for the situation they are in. In a practical sense, this means that before administering any tests or doing any handling of a dog, you should take some time first to observe a dog within its kennel run, and then for a period within the testing space while allowing the dog to get used to the space.

The second rule is that the context and environment (e.g. your behaviour, the availability or lack of space to retreat, ambient noise, the behaviour of other dogs or people during the test, etc.) will affect the behaviour of the dog. All dogs will choose the most effective response for a given situation, so it is important to ensure that the dog has options other than escalating to aggression. If you approach and loom over a tethered dog who is standing in a corner and has no ability to retreat, and then ignore subtle behavioural signs that you are making the animal uncomfortable, you are creating a situation in which the dog's best option is to respond aggressively to drive you away. In this situation, you are significantly increasing the chances that the dog will growl, snap or bite, even if it would prefer not to. This is both unsafe and not a valid way of assessing the default coping strategy of an animal, so just don't do it!

Lastly, it is important to remember that you are constantly training any dog that you are handling, and that 'one trial learning' is particularly strong (and likely) in high stress situations. If you continue to push an animal who is communicating that they are uncomfortable, to the point that they snap or bite, you have taught them that more subtle, appropriate communications are ineffective, potentially making them more likely to bite in the future. It can be tempting to 'push the animal to see how far they will go', but any information you gather during this kind of interaction has very limited application in the real world (if any at all), as it is unlikely that the animal will be in a comparative situation (chronically stressed, cornered, and handled by strangers while being threatened) when living as a pet. The aim of tests which assess a dog's coping strategy in response to different potential stressors (e.g. food guarding tests, 'scary man approach' tests, child-like doll tests, isolation tests, and exposure to loud noises) is not to see how much harassment an animal will endure before it bites, but rather to determine which types of stimuli cause the animal to become stressed or aroused, and whether the animal defaults to extreme or dangerous behaviour. This information can then be combined with that from other sources and used to determine the degree and type of behaviour modification or training required (if any at all), whether the dog requires specific management moving forward, and indeed, if the dog may present an unreasonable risk if placed in an adoptive home.

Affective state, canine emotions and behavioural tests

Discussions can become heated when it is suggested that concessions be made for undesirable behaviour displayed by a dog, due to the animal's emotional and mental state.

We tend to inherently empathise with people who are stressed and 'cut them some slack' for over-reacting when they are having a string of particularly bad days. Yet, there is still a broad expectation that a dog will always behave reliably and sociably towards all people and other dogs, regardless of how they are feeling at the time. Therefore, I'm going to touch on the idea of affective state in dogs and our current understanding of how this affects dog behaviour in pounds and shelters.

When we talk about stress, we are usually referring to arousal (i.e. physiological 'readiness' which prepares us to react to something in our environment) combined with negative emotions, or valence (i.e. how the animal 'feels' about the situation). This interaction between arousal and valence is termed the 'affective state' and gives us some idea of the degree and nature of stress being experienced by an animal at a given time (Figure 2.).

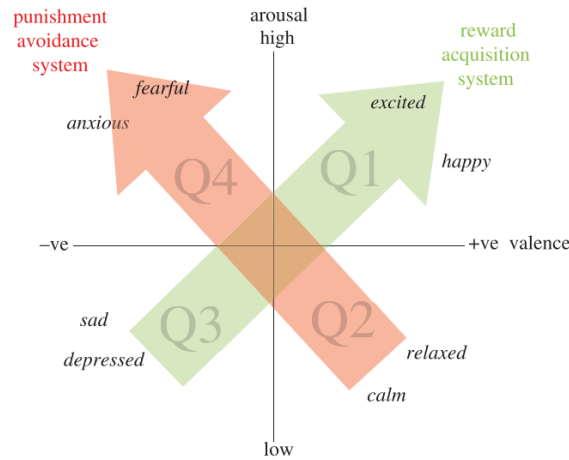


Figure 1. Core affect represented in two-dimensional space. Words in italics indicate possible locations of specific reported affective states (including discrete/basic emotions). Positive affective states are in quadrants Q1 and Q2, and negative states in quadrants Q3 and Q4. Arrows indicate putative biobehavioural systems associated with reward acquisition and the Q3–Q1 axis of core affect (green), and punishment avoidance and the Q2–Q4 axis of core affect (red). Adapted from Russell (e.g. Russell & Barrett 1999) and Panksepp (e.g. Burgdorf & Panksepp 2006).

Figure 2. Graphical representation of the most common model of affective state, taken from Mendl, Burman and Paul, (2010)

While arousal is a physiological phenomenon and therefore essentially the same regardless of valence, it is thought that each of our primary emotions are controlled by separate systems within the brain, with some of these systems (and the emotional states and motivations that they control) being considered positive, and some being considered negative. Positive affective systems include 'play', 'seeking' (curiosity and motivation to 'seek out' interactions or knowledge), 'lust' (sexual attraction), and 'care' (the motivation to nurture other beings). Negative affective systems include 'rage' (anger), 'fear' (anxiety), and 'panic' (motivation for social support) (see Panksepp, 2011 for more information on emotion in animals). It is the activity of these systems which determines whether the arousal experienced by an animal is pleasant (positive valence) or unpleasant (negative valence).

At lower levels of arousal, animals can express behaviours that indicate conflicting emotional states. For example, a dog that is fearful of a novel item being held by its owner may remain near the owner, while showing subtle avoidance behaviours towards the item (e.g. purposefully avoiding looking at the item, or shifting their body weight away from the item). At higher arousal levels, this conflict is expressed as flipping between emotional states in quick succession. For example, a dog that is fearful of a novel item placed in the middle of the floor of a large room may show repeated retreat (fear-based) and approach (seeking-based) behaviours. This 'flipping' occurs more quickly as arousal increases, and is often demonstrated within groups of domestic dogs who switch from high-energy play to fighting with very little warning (Note: This is why it is important to actively manage arousal levels during play and behaviour modification!).

Affective state can also vary over longer periods and is closely linked with the welfare of an animal. Animals exposed to long term stressors that they cannot resolve, display changes in their behaviour and cognition which indicate that they are experiencing chronic negative emotional states (e.g. depression and anxiety). When this is the case, an animal's negative behavioural responses (commonly fear and aggression) are exaggerated and their positive responses (e.g. friendliness, play) are suppressed.



This means that an animal is more likely to show aggressive or anxious behaviour in a shelter than they are when in a more normal environment. It is important to understand this interaction between welfare, stress and behaviour when you are assessing dog behaviour in a shelter environment; animals that are displaying signs of poor welfare should not be assessed in their current environment, but rather should be moved from the shelter into foster care and assessed once their welfare has improved (this may be through your organisation, or by transferring the animal to an external organisation or private group that has the resources and expertise to provide the care required). Common signs of compromised welfare in pounds and shelters include (but are not limited to):

- Hypervigilance, hyperactivity, restlessness and poor sleeping or resting habits
- Increasing reactivity to handling, other dogs and/or environmental stimuli
- Dull or withdrawn behaviour, failure to engage with the environment or handlers
- Changes in appetite or water consumption (notable increases or decreases)
- Changes to faecal consistency
- Changes to vocalisation patterns (excessive barking or suppression of normal vocalisations)

Conversely, dogs who clearly display behaviours indicating positive motivations and emotions (despite potentially being stressed by the shelter environment) are highly likely to also display those behaviours when in a more comfortable environment. These behaviours include socially affiliative behaviour towards people (e.g. friendliness), play interest towards other dogs, engagement with enrichment toys, interest in ball-chasing, and predatory behaviour towards other animals. While the presence of these behaviours is a reliable sign that the animal is coping well and is going to continue to show these behaviours outside of the shelter, the absence of these behaviours is not indicative of the animal lacking those traits. This is important to remember when assessing social behaviours, play behaviours and predatory behaviours, as they may be suppressed simply by the environment that the animal is in, from the moment of intake, without any obvious signs that the animal is experiencing stress.

This 'mutual exclusivity' of emotional states can also be used to manage animal welfare within the shelter, through a process called 'stress inoculation'. Stress inoculation is basically using activities which encourage a positive emotional state, such as doggy play groups, massage sessions, or training sessions, to help offset the effects of chronic stress. For animals subject to a long length of stay, regular activities which encourage a positive affective state are an important tool to manage their mental health, and should be a part of every long-term behavioural modification plan.

In essence, the presence of behaviours that indicate 'positive affect' is a good sign, both in regards to the animal's welfare and as an indicator that those behaviours are reflective of the dog's typical behaviour. The absence of these same types of behaviours should be taken as a sign that welfare is not optimal (even when an animal is showing little overt distress), and that an animal's behaviour may be suppressed in the current environment.

Assessing risk in shelter dogs

Risk assessment is perhaps the most important aim of in-shelter behaviour assessments. It is also one of the areas which causes the greatest level of disagreement between people in the sector, because perceived risk posed by a dog is a common reason for euthanasia. Before I discuss the nuts and bolts of risk assessment, I want to make clear that there are no black and white answers when it comes to shelter assessments. Even the most skilled, educated and experienced assessors will sometimes get it wrong; this is simply the nature of assessing behaviour within a highly restricted environment, with varying (often limited) resources, to place dogs into an environment over which you have little to no control. The very best that anyone can do is try to tailor the assessment systems they have in place to the resources and environment they have available, then monitor the outcomes for dogs they have assessed and placed in homes, and use that information to do regular 'tune ups' for their systems. It is also important to monitor your own wellbeing and judgement; it is a natural human tendency to become more risk-averse when we are stressed or have experienced trauma, and oftentimes our own chronic stress goes unnoticed unless actively managed. Self-care is as much a part of running a best-practice behaviour program as making sure you gather information from multiple sources, keeping great notes, regularly consulting others for outside input to your programs and providing post-adoptive follow up for new owners. As such, I strongly encourage anyone involved in conducting assessments to undertake training in compassion fatigue and resiliency.



Now for the nuts and bolts. When we are assessing the risk that a shelter dog might present in an adoptive home, we need to consider not only the behaviour of the dog that is in front of us (which we already know will give us a general indication of his responses outside of the shelter at best), but also the environment in which he will be living. We can advise and support owners in how to manage potential hazards presented by their dog, but as illustrated by a basic risk assessment matrix, severe consequences can present a high risk, even if they occur rarely and are controlled through appropriate management. When we are making decisions about the future of a shelter dog in our care, it is our responsibility as assessors to recognise and act upon 'red flags' which indicate that the dog we are assessing may present an unreasonably high risk if rehomed.

The bulk of the discussion until this point has been devoted to understanding who the dog is 'as a dog' with a view to facilitating good adopter-dog matches. In addition to this, you should also be noting any behaviours that stand out as obviously different from the animal's typical behaviour and may indicate previous learning or a gap in socialisation. For instance, a dog that displays friendly, affiliative behaviour with everyone it meets, then responds by barking and lunging at people in broad-brimmed hats with sunglasses on, probably has a gap in their socialisation history – the person simply looks weird and the dog doesn't have enough experience to be able to recognise that they are not a threat. If the dog responds to multiple novel encounters by barking and lunging, then they are likely neophobic (afraid of new things) and cope by attempting to drive away the threat (bearing in mind that they are likely on lead and cannot escape during these encounters). Even when a behaviour pattern emerges which indicates that a dog is fearful of a stimulus (like people in strange headwear) which is likely to carry over outside of the shelter environment, the actual behaviours seen may have little to no resemblance to the behaviour seen in a stable home, where the dog is relaxed and has the social support of a familiar person. Where the behaviours observed are primarily communication (e.g. barking, lunging, growling, snapping, snarling or mouthing) they may be intimidating, but not indicative of an increased risk of aggression outside of the shelter environment. As discussed in the National Canine Research Council's article '*Growling, Snarling, Snapping, and Biting Behavior: Incidence and Correlates; A Literature Review*', communicative behaviours such as growling and snapping are not strongly correlated to actual bites. Animals who bite will often growl, snap or lunge first, but the inverse is not often the case. Where a dog is displaying warning behaviours, particularly when these warnings are protracted or followed by inhibited bites, the ideal approach is to gather information about how the dog responds in less stressful environment (i.e. does the behaviour resolve spontaneously once the animal leaves the shelter, as is often the case with food guarding and barrier aggression), and then assess further and undertake behaviour modification if necessary. Animals who show low level or protracted aggressive warnings in the shelter can often be rehomed safely if matched well and rehomed with full disclosure.

To the contrary, dogs who escalate quickly to high level threats or damaging behaviours such as uninhibited bites, or display predatory behaviours towards inappropriate targets (such as people or other dogs) present a safety concern, even if the behaviour is rarely observed. Except for extreme situations in which the bite could be considered a reasonable response in extenuating circumstances (e.g. bites inflicted while waking up from anaesthetic or accidental bites on people breaking up a dog fight, which should be assessed individually), all bites in which there is significant tissue damage to a person should be considered high risk. In these cases, it is necessary to objectively consider the risk posed by the dog's behaviour, to determine whether they are safe to place in the community, or even for staff to work with for behaviour modification purposes. Animals with a bite history combined with poor impulse control, consistently high arousal and poor recovery, poor social skills, those who respond slowly to behaviour modification, or those who have bitten children or the elderly, should be considered a high risk, even if the damage caused by the bites was moderate. In short, some behaviours we never want to see, and if we do, we need to heed the warning and accept that the dog may simply not be adoptable.

For a myriad of reasons, it can be tempting to rehome dangerous or potentially dangerous dogs with full disclosure to rescue groups or homes that are willing to take them on. In some cases, this may be an option if the risk posed by the dog can be made low enough through behaviour modification and management to ensure that both dog and adopter are safe and have good welfare in the future (e.g. a dog who displays inhibited biting during specific procedures such as veterinary procedures or grooming). However, it is always pertinent to remember that owning and managing a dangerous or potentially dangerous dog has a cost to adopters; they need to change their lifestyle to suit the ongoing training and management requirements of their pet, and they need to be prepared to deal with all outcomes that could eventuate from owning a high-risk dog, including potential liability issues.



When making decisions about the future of a dog, consider what your advice would be, as a behaviour professional, if a private owner enlisted your help for the behaviour that you are observing. If that advice would include euthanasia as a valid option, or involved a very high level of management from the owner to keep people, the dog itself, or other animals safe (or healthy, when considering anxiety-based behaviours), then you should consider euthanasia as an outcome for the dog in your care. Dogs who exhibit uninhibited aggression (i.e. those dogs that bite hard with little warning), and those that display high level predatory behaviours towards other dogs or people should not be rehomed, as even with extensive and ongoing management these dogs present an unacceptably high level of risk to the community.

For 'grey area' dogs, the point at which you decide that euthanasia is appropriate will vary between organisations, based on many factors: the resources available to perform behavioural modification, the in-shelter living conditions and availability of appropriate foster-care or rescue for dogs that require long-term rehabilitation, and the systems in place to find and match adopters with dogs and provide quality post-adoption support. For a dog with potentially problematic behaviour that requires extensive follow-up and rehabilitation, the 'right' decision for a large facility with well-designed kennels, an extensive foster-care system, a comprehensive behavioural enrichment and modification, and great post-adoption support, may well be the wrong decision for a small facility with limited resources and ability to provide follow-up support for adopters. Note that both facilities may be operating under 'best practice' principles despite the outcome for the dog being different, as the limitations they are working under are different. (Of course, in cases where limited resources restrict the options for potentially adoptable dogs, every effort should be made to recruit suitable rescue-partners to which animals can be transferred). It is always important to balance compromises to welfare against the situation or plan you have in place for a dog, bearing in mind that long-term kennelling is very rarely a suitable option from a welfare perspective, particularly in a shelter environment.

Practical guidelines for assessing behaviour in shelter dogs

Bearing all of this in mind, it is vital that shelter assessors collect as much information as they can about sheltered dogs from the moment they are admitted, to make as accurate assessment of personality as possible. The exact details of how behaviour will be assessed will vary in each facility, according to how the animals are housed and what resources are available. Ideally, behaviour programs should be designed to address the following points:

- Assessors (and ideally all staff handling dogs) should have training in low-stress animal handling, observation of canine body language and communication, and the system and language used by your facility to collect and record behavioural information. This training should include input from outside sources and be regularly reviewed and updated through continuing education opportunities. Video recording assessments for review as a team is extremely helpful to reduce the downward 'slide' in skills that is common over longer periods.
- Animals should be housed in an environment which meets their physical, mental and emotional needs. The minimum requirements for humane care of animals in shelter environments are detailed in the Association for Shelter Veterinarians document '[Guidelines for Standards of Care in Animal Shelters](#)'. If your facility does not meet these standards, then you should develop a foster care system which allows you to move animals out of your kennels as soon as possible. No animal should be assessed for adoption matching purposes while displaying behaviours which indicate severely compromised welfare.
- All animals should benefit from a comprehensive enrichment program for dogs within your shelter, which includes daily one-on-one time with familiar people, regular play time with other dogs, training, in-kennel enrichment, and off-site walks.
- Build working relationships with rescue groups and other shelters in your area, to allow you to share resources and knowledge and provide mutual support. These relationships are particularly important for special-needs dogs and individuals of niche breeds who do not cope well in the welfare environment, like livestock guardian dogs and other working breeds. NOTE: The behaviour of niche-breed dogs is particularly challenging to assess appropriately in the shelter; you should seek help from breed experts, such as breed-specific rescue groups, and be guided by the decisions they make.



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- As early as possible in a pet's stay in the shelter, a plan should be made for what is going to happen to that animal. For those dogs that may need some extra help prior to placement, or those that may need to be transferred to an external group, start planning as soon as they arrive in the shelter and discuss your plans with your foster manager and/or rescue partners as soon as possible (even before the dog is available for transfer or foster – people work best with time to plan!).
- Behavioural information should be collected at all possible points during the animals stay in the shelter system. This includes:
- Surrender information collected from a previous owner (where available). Surrender appointments should be made with a member of the behaviour team who can conduct an intake interview with the relinquishing owner. Ideally, this would include information about how the animal previously lived, and information on it's typical behaviour collected through conversations with the surrendering owner and formal questionnaire-based assessments like C-BARQ and MCPQ-R.
- Information from 'finders' of stray animals. This information should include anything they can tell you about the animal's behaviour while in their care (leash skills, social skills, potential problem behaviours etc.). This is best gathered through conversations with the finder, rather than forms.
- Input from staff and volunteers who care for and interact with the animal in your facility. This should be routinely collected in written form (e.g. kennel sheets designed for this purpose, behavioural reports to be filled out by volunteers who walk the dog) and if necessary, followed up for clarification.
- Input from veterinary staff about how the animal responds to handling and treatment. Again, this should be routinely collected in written form and followed up where necessary.
- Information collected during formal behavioural assessments. These assessments should take place across as wide an array of environments as possible (i.e. not simply be a one-time assessment that occurs in a small room within the shelter), and if possible should include a walk off the shelter grounds, handling by familiar and unfamiliar people, and play-time behaviour (with both people and other dogs). Traditional battery-style tests (like SAFER, Match-Up II or Assess-a-pet) can be used as part of this information collection process, but should NOT be the sole basis of decisions, or make up the majority of information collected about a dog.
- Information collected during playgroup sessions between dogs. It is extremely difficult to assess normal social behaviours during abnormal interactions (e.g. behaviour displayed in kennel towards dogs walking past). Dogs Playing For Life is the most well-known formal system for running playgroups in-house, however many trainers run socialisation classes and play group sessions for private dogs and already have the skills to implement an in-house playgroup system.
- In-depth information from foster carers about how the dog behaved while in a home environment, for those dogs who require foster care. Like surrender information, this should include both a formal (typically questionnaire-based) report and some open-ended questions aimed to gather as much information to aid matching decisions as possible. NOTE: If an animal presents well in the shelter and has no concerning or problematic behaviours, get them in to a permanent home environment ASAP. Reserve your foster places for those animals who need them!
- Information collected about an animal must be collected in an easily-accessible way, reviewed regularly, and used! It is not useful to have a lot of information that never is never included in the animal's adoption profile or passed on to adoptive owners. Ideally, those doing behaviour assessments will work closely with all other people caring for the animal throughout it's time in the shelter, within feedback flowing in both directions.
- Develop a set of adoptability criteria collaboratively with your team, to determine which animals can be 'fast tracked' through your facility, need further work in-house, would benefit from foster or transfer, or will not be made available for adoption. Keep the focus on what you and your rescue partners CAN do, and consider factors such acceptable length of stay, resources available for behaviour modification and foster care, capacity and expertise of rescue partners, a system for tracking in-shelter welfare of dogs, and how often adoptability decisions will be reviewed for long-stay dogs. Dogs who are safe but otherwise seem like poor candidates for adoption should still be made available and marketed to the public; it is up to the public to decide what a 'nice pet' is, and oftentimes an unlikely candidate will find a stable, loving home with appropriate marketing.
- Develop a protocol for making euthanasia decisions for clearly unadoptable dogs. Euthanasia decisions should not be the sole responsibility of an individual if possible; ideally a review team would work together to discuss individual cases and decide on an outcome for the animal in question, even if the case seems clear-cut.



- Develop a workable system for raising complaints and concerns about the care and assessment of dogs, accessible for all staff and volunteers (ideally, concerns should be able to be raised anonymously if preferred). Where an assessor has concerns about an animal, there must be a system in place to discuss these concerns with appropriate people (i.e. other assessors or an outside consultant experienced in assessing dog behaviour).
- Have a system in place to seek more information when in doubt, before making decisions about a dog's future. Your aim is to make the most educated guess possible about how a dog will respond outside of the shelter environment, and you can only do this with a broad information base. With very few exceptions (i.e. dogs that present a clear danger to people, other pets or themselves), there are no certainties in shelter behaviour and you will inevitably have to make decisions on 'grey area' dogs (and will get it wrong sometimes!).
- Have a system for gathering feedback about dogs during post-adoption follow up, and record this information along with the rest of the info you have about each individual. Ideally, this information would be stored in a way which is easy to review later, so that you can regularly reassess the strengths and weaknesses of your assessment and matching system (and tweak where necessary). Review of post-adoptive outcomes for dogs should take place alongside the review of your other shelter statistics (e.g. length of stay, live release rate, intake, intake alternatives/surrender prevention, in-kennel welfare measures etc.).

References and further reading:

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