



Sheila Harper Limited  
The Winding House, Walkers Rise,  
Hednesford, Staffs WS12 0QU UK  
Tel: +44(0)1543 878989  
Email: [info@sheilaharper.co.uk](mailto:info@sheilaharper.co.uk)  
[www.sheilaharper.co.uk](http://www.sheilaharper.co.uk)

## International Academy for Applied Canine Studies

### ISPACS: International Shelter Programme for Applied Canine Studies

The ISPACS is best known for its unique practical approach to handling and canine behaviour specifically designed for rescue shelters. It is a multi-disciplinary course where theoretical aspects of behaviour and psychology provide the foundation of the course with practical work is undertaken once staff have covered basic groundwork.

Sheila Harper and Winny Boerman wrote and designed the course for rescue shelters in general, initially commissioned by, and with specific reference to, Tierheim St. Poelten, Austria.

The aim of the course is to help staff understand dog behaviour, identify dogs' needs, and learn tools to enable them to be able to meet not only the needs of the dogs but the many demands placed upon shelter staff in their daily work.

#### Key outcomes

**Stress reduction** to help improve living conditions, to reduce barking, to improve health of dogs.

- Screening between dogs living areas to reduce reactivity
- Kennel management and "traffic flow" put into place to eliminate dogs needing to walk past others
- Members of the general public excluded from kennels
- Dog walking and shelter opening times changed to avoid high excitement levels and to allow for better rest

#### Improving dogs' skills and well-being

- Introduction of enrichment in various environments
- Housing and pairing, and grouping for social learning. Input on social walks
- Information and coaching for staff and volunteer dog walkers on reading dogs' body language and understanding the key contributors to stress

#### Improving staff / volunteers' skills

- Coaching of innovative handling techniques for staff and volunteer dog walkers
- Conflict avoidance
- Input on planning and implementing remedial behaviour programmes
- In-depth teaching and coaching including ethology, behaviour, training, health and kennel practice

#### Further outcomes:

- Lower stress levels, reduced barking, less diarrhoea leading to better health & lower vet bills
- Large number of long term dogs rehabilitated and rehomed
- Staff: greater awareness; safer practices, with individuals less likely to be bitten
- Transformation of several areas of the shelter in order to meet dogs' needs
- More quality time for dogs; better awareness of giving good experiences to build life skills
- Not associated to the programme: opportunities to allow specific highly needy dogs to benefit greatly from opportunities for self-medication and Bowen therapy



## **Personal comment** from Sheila Harper & Winny Boerman

### **1st Stage:** Tierheim St. Pölten

For us, teaching an entire programme based solely around the needs of a rescue shelter was a new project. Over a period of many years we have been influencing other shelters in such areas as their approach towards dog behaviour, ethology, handling and enrichment but had never had the opportunity to influence so areas of a shelter in such a concentrated effort.

Our expectations were fairly realistic. We were anticipating that the staff in general would be keen to progress, but we were unsure if the management would fully support our work. We were not expecting that the management would be so supportive. However, on excluding dog walkers and members of the public from the dogs' living areas in order to minimise stress and fear, we experienced some resistance from those concerned.

We anticipated that many key areas would change as a result of our input, but that several of our concepts would be dismissed. We were unprepared for some of our early words to be acted upon so soon, with screening of kennels taking place almost as soon as we had drawn breath! We realised that we would have to be more careful with our suggestions until we had time to help staff understand them fully and to implement them in the best way possible.

Upon completion of the programme, management, staff and dog walkers alike were extremely pleased with the outcomes. So many changes had been implemented that would impact on the well-being of staff and dogs alike, both for the short and the longer-term.

### **Final stage:** Programme for all shelters within Lower Austria

Our main aim was to give ongoing input to staff representatives from each of the nine shelters within the area of Lower Austria. We also offered each shelter a two-day consultancy, visiting the shelter concerned and targeting specific concerns. All participating shelters have been overjoyed with the benefits, although everyone recognises that improving standards will always be a work in progress.

It was important not to tell the shelter staff what to do, but to give them the tools to work towards the best possible practice for their shelter. In targeting the environment, we were determined to ensure that all dogs had comfortable living environments suitable to their individual needs.

In addition, we paid attention to the enrichment of unused outside areas around the grounds of each shelter. The staff were creative and supportive, and all have been amazed at just how much could be achieved with limited space and resources. Benefits have been huge especially for furthering the possibilities for rehabilitation.

We believe that those who have had contact with us understand our genuine concern for the well-being of every individual in each shelter, dog, cat, reptile, small animal and human alike. Our goal has always been to try to make things better, and we are thrilled to have been a part of the process of making a difference to the lives of so many.

Sheila Harper & Winny Boerman, March 2017