



Registered Scottish Charity SC039701

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Findlay Carson
Convener
Rural Affairs and Islands Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Dear Mr Carson

RE: RAI Committee meeting on 20 March 2024

I write in reference to the above hearing at which evidence was taken from 2 GBGB registered trainers. We believe they gave an inaccurate and biased account of the injuries ex racing dogs frequently suffer from after 'retirement'. They also minimised the resultant difficulties in rehoming dogs with such injuries. Furthermore, they both made serious and concerning allegations regarding practice within independent greyhound rescues. As a Scottish Registered Charity accountable to our members, the Scottish Greyhound Sanctuary (SGS) feels a duty to address these concerns.

Established in 2008, SGS has rehomed over 1500 ex racing greyhounds throughout Scotland. The charity is completely run by volunteers, with a management committee elected annually by members at the AGM. SGS does not receive any funds from GBGB or any other organisation. Until recently SGS was reticent in openly declaring an 'anti racing' stance as it is our experience trainers are less likely to surrender dogs to such rescues. Indeed, GBGB's CEO Mark Bird recently stated that rehoming organisations who openly take an anti-racing stance are not eligible for the Greyhound Retirement Scheme, effectively silencing organisations from speaking out against the industry with the threat of funding being withdrawn. Following the committee hearing last week the SGS team feels it is now necessary to share our experience as this differs greatly from what the committee heard.

Please understand that each of the 11 volunteers on the SGS management team has rescued, fostered and adopted greyhounds over many years. We have a fully qualified dog behaviourist and a canine massage therapist on the team and several others have undertaken further education in related studies. Out with the charity, many of us have had long careers in public service. This decision to come forward has not been taken lightly.

Rehoming ex racing greyhounds is far from the straightforward picture painted by Mr Stark and Mr Alcorn. They spoke of most injuries being "small muscle injuries" and "small niggles", insignificant and treatable. They described the transition into a home being smooth and trouble free and most ridiculously of all greyhounds being at more risk running off lead in a field than on a racetrack. We found it very troubling that the committee appeared to accept this verbatim.

There are three main points I wish to raise in this submission which challenges the information the committee was given; Injuries/health, behaviour and the rehoming crisis.

Injuries

It is the overwhelming experience of the SGS team, past and present members, that the injuries greyhounds sustain in racing severely impact on their quality of life after 'retirement'. These injuries and the ongoing need for medical treatment can be a barrier to rehoming some greyhounds as the cost is prohibitive. Some examples of these common injuries are:

Orthopaedic injuries

Toes and feet. Torn collateral ligaments; dislocation and fractures of metacarpals/metatarsals; injured superficial digital flexor tendons, toe amputation.

The carpal (wrist) joint. Injury to the wrist is the most common cause of early 'retirement'. The most common fracture is that of the right accessory carpal bone. Arthritis is a common sequel to wrist injuries.

The hock. The hock is made up of 7 bones and fracture of the central tarsal (usually in the right hock) is often accompanied by fracture of one or more of the other bones.

Muscle injuries

Neck and forelimb. Brachiocephalicus (action – to advance the limb, extend the shoulder joint and draw the neck and head to the side), Supraspinatus (extends shoulder), Infraspinatus (to extend or flex the shoulder, abduct and rotate the shoulder laterally), Deltoid (flexes and abducts the shoulder), Triceps (extends elbow), Biceps brachii (flexes elbow).

Hind limb. Biceps femoris (extends the hip), Semitendinosus (extends the hip), Middle Gluteal (extends the hip and abducts the hip), Pectineus (adducts the hip), Gracilis (adducts the hip and extends the hock – the '0 to 60 mph muscle'), Tensor Fascia Lata (flexes and stabilizes the hip and extends the stifle), Quadriceps femoris (extends the stifle), Gastrocnemius (extends the tarsus and flexes the stifle).

Fascia injuries. Fascia can 'pop'. When a dog is static, fascia takes on the shape of that position; when there is a sudden explosive action, the fascia hasn't time to change with the sudden movement.

(K9 Massage Guild website)

As pre-existing conditions are generally not covered by insurance policies, the cost of treating old injuries and resultant problems falls to rehoming charities and adopters. Many people simply can't afford this, particularly in today's economy. We strongly contest the information given by the 2 trainers that greyhounds' injuries are fully treated prior to rehoming as this is, in actual fact, an impossibility. And we can't forget, according to GBGB statistics many dogs don't make it into a forever home as the injuries are too severe or the decision made that treating them is not "financially viable".

Mr Stark and Mr Alcorn claimed that dogs are at no greater risk running on a flapping track such as Thornton than on a regulated track. Again, it is our overwhelming experience that this is untrue. For years SGS regularly took in greyhounds that had been abandoned at the vet near Armadale track. The vet knew of our charity and would convince owners to surrender their dogs rather than euthanise. The vet told us that all the dogs were all registered with the name 'Billy' and that there was a long list of dead 'Billys'. He saved the ones he could but some trainers would rather put their dog to sleep, for a treatable injury, than rehome it. The vet was powerless in these situations.

The cost of treating these dogs' injuries, many of whom had broken legs, almost wiped out the charity's entire funds and it took years of hard work and fundraising to build this back up. Thankfully that track closed some years ago, however Thornton practices in the same manner, with no scrutiny so it stands to reason there will be injuries, but these go unreported. Mr Alcorn and Mr Stark spoke of the dogs running at Thornton as living in family homes or gardens. We know that at least 2 of the trainers who race their dogs at Thornton keep them outside in substandard conditions, photographic evidence of which is available.

There were allegations made by Mr Stark and Mr Alcorn that more injuries happen at 'run free' fields. He based this on reading "facebook groups". Mr Stark advised he has had more dogs killed after rehoming than on the track, insinuating that independent rescues or adopters are responsible for this. Of the 1500 dogs we have rehomed there have been a couple of tragic accidents in which lives have been lost due to injury, but the number of greyhounds who have met a premature end as a result of their experiences racing far outweighs this as GBGB data shows.

Besides the injuries sustained through racing there are other health implications. Greyhounds teeth are often in bad condition requiring numerous extractions, again at a cost to the adopter. They suffer digestive problems, skin problems and bald patches, heart problems, rashes from dirty bedding, corns on their pads, high rates of osteosarcoma, the list goes on.

Behaviour

The GBGB trainers described a greyhound's 'retirement' as being an easy and smooth transition. That can certainly be the case, but is the minority, in our experience. SGS dogs spend weeks or months in foster learning to live as a pet. Once they are assessed as being ready a permanent home is sought. Some dogs are rehomed fairly quickly, either because they are considered 'easy' or because an experienced home comes up at the right time. Other dogs can spend over a significant period of time in a foster home, meaning no other dogs can be helped during that time.

The type of behaviours commonly seen in ex racing greyhounds are generalised anxiety, separation anxiety, sleep startle, reactivity (to various stimuli), 'freezing', fear of anything new or different or they can be boisterous and overpowering which given their size is scary for anyone new to the breed. Although we do all we can to address these behaviours in foster homes, they can recur when the dog moves to a permanent home. No matter how hard we work to prepare the dog and the new home some dogs are returned to our care as their behaviour is too challenging for the new owner. Some dogs struggle so much with the outside world they are returned to kennels for a brief period of familiarity to decompress before trying again in a foster home.

Rehoming crisis

The committee heard that Mr Alcott and Mr Stark 'retire' about 10 – 12 greyhounds a year. That may not sound a lot but when multiplied across all the trainers in the UK and Ireland, where most greyhounds are bred, it adds up. There are also the dogs that aren't "good" enough to race, the puppies surplus to requirements. The trainers claim these dogs are also rehomed. That's a significant number to be feeding into the homeless dog population.

The constant throughput of greyhounds means we always have a waiting list, as do all other rescues. Over the past few years in particular it has become increasingly difficult working in dog rescue generally. However, trying to rehome a greyhound with 'issues' that require time, money and attention in among a tsunami of surrendered "lockdown puppies" who had been well cared for in family homes, is near impossible. Some dogs on our waiting list don't make it- they are euthanised before we have space to take them in. Although we work closely with other rescues up and down the country, the number of dogs being given up far outweighs the collective rescue

spaces available. The racing industry takes little if any responsibility for the dogs it discards so charities such as SGS who rely on public donations pick up the cost.

As mentioned above, some re-homings aren't successful, the dogs 'bounce' back to our care. Prior to rehoming any dog, we carry out a home check and arrange meet ups between adopter and foster dog/carer. Regular contact is maintained throughout the process and we have a lifelong follow up service for all dogs, potentially up to 15 years. We proactively seek to ensure our dogs are settled and happy in their new homes. Despite all of this, we have had dogs come back to us, several times in some cases before we find someone who is able and willing to put money and work into the adoption. Each time these dogs are adopted then returned they can exhibit different, increasingly challenging behaviours which in turn makes it more difficult to find a home. We struggle to fit them in because our foster homes are always full. SGS Team members regularly take additional dogs into their home as the alternative is euthanasia, either on the trainer's instruction or because they've reached the top of the list in the Irish 'kill shelter' they're in. Either way the clock is always ticking for the dogs on our waiting list. Prior to the pandemic we started a "Helping Hand" scheme to prevent greyhounds being returned to our care where avoidable. We support owners keep their dog rather than give them up, whether this be related to behaviour, health, finance or anything else. If it's a good home and the dog is happy we want it to stay there. This helps keep foster homes free for the dogs on the waiting list.

Whatever we do though, we can't save them all, no-one can while racing is allowed to continue. We are all volunteers who juggle life to fit rescue work in because we love dogs and have our own at home. We see the long list of dogs waiting for a rescue space, we score their names off our list when the kill shelter does the same after euthanising them. The year on year churn of greyhounds makes it feel futile. Compassion fatigue is rife. The rehoming crisis isn't going to be solved any time soon so how can feeding more and more dogs into this be morally or ethically correct?

To conclude, we can give many examples demonstrating the above from people who have fostered and adopted greyhounds for many years. Examples of crippling arthritis not covered by insurance, psychological damage; immeasurable by any means other than observation, the human cost; not only on volunteers but their families and workplaces. We believe this information is crucial to establishing a balanced view of greyhound racing in Scotland. We are therefore requesting an opportunity to give testimony to the committee prior to any final decision being made in relation to PE 1758.

Yours sincerely

The Scottish Greyhound Sanctuary Management Committee