



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 3 May 2023

Session 6



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RURAL AFFAIRS AND ISLANDS COMMITTEE

13th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

*Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

*Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)

*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)

*Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Claire Calder (Dogs Trust)

Dr Sam Gaines (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)

Gilly Mendes Ferreira (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 3 May 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:08]

Interests

The Convener (Finlay Carson): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 13th meeting in 2023 of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. I remind members who are using electronic devices to turn them to silent, please.

I welcome our new member, Rhoda Grant, who replaces Mercedes Villalba. I invite Rhoda to declare any relevant interests.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I do not think that I have any relevant interests to declare, but I refer members to my entry in the register of members' interests.

The Convener: Thank you.

Petition

Greyhound Racing (PE1758)

10:08

The Convener: Under our next agenda item, we will consider petition PE1758, which is on ending greyhound racing in Scotland. I welcome back to the committee Mark Ruskell, who has a particular interest in the topic. I also welcome Claire Calder, who is head of public affairs at the Dogs Trust; Gilly Mendes Ferreira, who is director of innovation and strategic relations at the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals; and Dr Sam Gaines, who is head of companion animals at the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Sam, if you would like to contribute, type R in the chat box. We have approximately 75 minutes for questions and discussion.

I will kick off. How have the witnesses engaged with the greyhound-racing industry? What direct experience do you have of greyhound racing and the welfare of racing dogs? Have you had any engagement with greyhound racing in Scotland, specifically?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals): I thank the committee for inviting me.

The Scottish SPCA has been looking at the greyhound industry for 20 years. In previous years, we investigated various concerns about the industry, and many tracks no longer exist in Scotland. We have not been invited to inspect the one remaining track in Scotland. We can go out only if we receive a complaint or if a concern is raised with us. The track is unregulated, and the people at the track are the owners of the dogs—no members of the public are there—so, as a result, we have not received complaints about the track. However, we have dealt with 21 reports regarding the same address, and those are linked to somebody who races their dogs at the track. We have investigated those issues, which relate to conditions in the kennels and how the animals are housed, and the bare-minimum standards that are required have been met.

The number of calls to our animal helpline about greyhound racing is quite low. From 2018 to 2022, there were only three calls per year.

However, as I said, we have carried out some investigations, which were linked to the use of drugs in the industry. Back in 2016, when the investigations took place, testing was not available to prove that the drugs that we seized were cocaine or other such drugs. We have faced a similar barrier with regard to anything that we

seize from canine fertility clinics. Over the past year, we have been working with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to develop a testing system so that we can prove whether the drugs that we seize as part of investigations are those that we suspect them to be. If we can do that, we will have the evidence for prosecution.

The industry has been a challenging one for the Scottish SPCA, but we have not changed our stance. We have always called for the unregulated greyhound-racing industry to not exist. There is now only one track left in Scotland, but we still have concerns, particularly based on the statistics that the Greyhound Board of Great Britain has released, that people are requiring animals, knowing the risks involved, to run round a track purely for the purposes of entertainment when they know that there is a high risk of collision on the first bend. We therefore have welfare concerns.

The Convener: I want to clarify a few things before we move on. When was the last time that you visited Thornton?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Thornton was visited only by the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission. We have an independent representative on the commission, but we have not been invited to visit Thornton.

The Convener: You have not had an invitation, but you have had no complaints.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: We have not had any complaints that would warrant us to go to the track. As an enforcement body, we need to receive complaints in order to take action, and we have not received specific complaints about Thornton.

The Convener: You mentioned drugs. In relation to the complaints that you received about dogs potentially using drugs, was there any evidence that those dogs were racing at Thornton, or were they racing at GBGB tracks?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: The complaints were linked to a previous GBGB track at Shawfield and to other tracks in Scotland that now do not exist.

The Convener: There is no evidence that those dogs raced at Thornton.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: There is no evidence that we have seen. The complaints relating to Thornton are linked mainly to the conditions that the dogs are living in and to those dogs being raced at Thornton. The complaints are not about Thornton itself.

The Convener: Okay. You will understand the reason for that line of questioning. We now do not have any GBGB tracks in Scotland. We are considering a potential ban on greyhound racing at

flapper tracks, so it is important that the evidence that we receive relates to what is happening in Scotland.

I will bring in Claire Calder.

Claire Calder (Dogs Trust): I, too, thank the committee for having me here to give evidence.

For many years, the Dogs Trust has worked with the greyhound industry, primarily through the Greyhound Forum, to improve the welfare of and the conditions for the animals that are involved in the industry. It is important to say that we have now resigned our membership of the Greyhound Forum because, although some progress in animal welfare has been made through our membership, we feel that sufficient progress has not been, and cannot be, made to safeguard the welfare of the greyhounds that are involved in the industry.

On Scotland-specific activities, the primary activity that is worth mentioning is that we home greyhounds from the industry. Every year, we take greyhounds into our care in Scotland and then we home them through our two rehoming centres here. We are happy to provide the committee with the Scotland-specific statistics for that if it is useful.

10:15

The Convener: Have the majority of dogs that you rehome been involved in the GBGB greyhound racing industry, or do you have any experience of rehoming from Thornton as an unlicensed, non-GBGB track?

Claire Calder: We take in greyhounds in Scotland through a combination of ways. For example, it can be through other charities or direct handovers from trainers. We took greyhounds into our care in Scotland in 2021 and 2022 and, of course, Shawfield, the GBGB track, has not operated since 2020. We saw a spike in the number of greyhounds coming into our care in 2020, which might be related to trainers not being able to keep their greyhounds during the pandemic. However, that also coincides with when the Shawfield stadium stopped activity.

The Convener: So, again, they are mostly GBGB dogs. Do you have no evidence that you have taken dogs that were raced solely at Thornton? Our understanding is that GBGB dogs do not race there. They are not allowed to race at any tracks other than GBGB-licensed ones. Do you have any evidence that dogs that might have raced at Thornton have had to be rehomed?

Claire Calder: We have not broken down to that level the information on the greyhounds that come into our care. However, I am aware that the GBGB submitted supplementary evidence to the

committee, which was published yesterday and indicated that dogs from GBGB tracks have gone on to race at independent tracks.

The Convener: Thank you. I will bring in Sam Gaines.

Dr Sam Gaines (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals): Thank you very much for inviting me to give evidence. I apologise that I am not there in person.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira has covered the enforcement issues for Scotland. The RSPCA does not operate in Scotland, so I will cover what our relationship has been with the industry. As Claire Calder has explained, the RSPCA has had a long history of working with the industry to improve the welfare of racing greyhounds. Primarily, that has been done through the Greyhound Forum, but, like the Dogs Trust, the RSPCA left the forum last Friday for the same reasons as Claire Calder described.

Through our membership of the forum, we have been actively involved in the provision of advice to aid policy. For example, we provided advice on the hot-weather policy and on fireworks. We have also contributed to the development of standards of care—for example, the GBGB's specification for greyhound trainers and its code of practice. We have made a number of contributions in that way.

We have also funded major research projects that have sought to improve the welfare of racing greyhounds. We funded an expansive programme of research with the University of Bristol several years ago. That aimed to consider different initiatives that could impact on the longevity and performance of racing greyhounds as well as welfare issues that affected them, such as dental problems. It also considered how to improve the welfare compatibility of transportation. As well as having done a series of research projects, we have commissioned a review on the thermal regulation of racing greyhounds to aid the industry in protecting their welfare during racing in hot weather.

In addition to working with the regulated industry, we have spent more than two decades seeking change in the independent sector. For the RSPCA, that involves examining independent tracks in England and Wales. We have done a lot of work in Wales trying to make proposals for regulations and a code of practice for greyhound racing there. Most recently, we developed and co-wrote a voluntary code of practice for racing greyhounds in Wales but, to the best of our knowledge, that was not adopted by the independent track there.

It is also important to say that we have worked closely with industry to seek a statutory levy. We have worked with it and have attended meetings

with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, for example, to make that case.

Despite our long history of working with the industry, we now strongly believe that it is a long way from ensuring the welfare of the dogs that are involved in racing. We do not feel that progress is being made quickly enough or on a big enough scale to protect the dogs that are affected by this sport and leisure activity. Therefore, we are now of the view that the activity has to be phased out.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Christine Grahame and Ariane Burgess have supplementary questions. Before I bring them in, will you clarify something for me? You suggested that it is only the owners of dogs that race at Thornton who attend. Are the public excluded from attending those dog races?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Not as far as I am aware—I think that they are able to attend if they choose to do so. However, as far as I am aware—again, I think that we saw this reflected in the SAWC report—the public do not tend to be there.

The Convener: Okay. Thank you.

Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP): I want to follow up an issue. I am just searching the *Official Report* for evidence that was given by Paul Brignal, who is the proprietor of Thornton. He said:

“We would more than welcome the SSPCA if it wanted to come. In fact, we have written to Mike Flynn, saying, “You’ve had every opportunity to come and visit our track.” He eventually came to the track with Professor Dwyer. I do not think he was in any way concerned about anything that went on at the track”.—[*Official Report, Rural Affairs and Islands Committee*, 26 April 2023; c 50.]

Do you know anything about that?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: I asked Mike Flynn about that comment. I can confirm that he has not received any correspondence inviting him, in his Scottish SPCA capacity, to come out. We have also checked our records and no other person in the Scottish SPCA has been invited to come out to view that track. When he went out there with Professor Cathy Dwyer, that was in his capacity as a SAWC member.

Christine Grahame: Perhaps there is confusion here rather than our being misled.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes.

Christine Grahame: However, given that that is the case, should we perhaps ask Mr Brignal to invite the Scottish SPCA to come out?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: We would be more than happy to go out.

Christine Grahame: He seems to be quite open to that.

I noticed that you said that the Scottish SPCA as an enforcement agency can only go off its own bat following a complaint. However, Mr Brignal tried to give us the impression—that wording is perhaps unkind. Mr Brignal said that the welfare of the animals at his track was much better than perhaps the welfare of those at GBGB ones, because those were amateurs racing well-looked-after animals—they were like family pets and so on. However, at the licensed tracks in England, where a lot of money is involved, the dogs are more like commodities than pets.

Mr Brignal gave us his opinion that, in fact, the animals that race at his track are well kept at home. I challenged him and said that he did not really know whether that is the case.

You said that you had to go to a home address. What did you find, given that you mentioned that the bare-minimum standards had been met?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: If we get a complaint in which there are concerns that the way in which an animal is kennelled is not to the right requirements, we will investigate. The kennelling of the dogs at that address met the basic standards that are required by legislation. Again, you would question their quality of life, and whether that is positive—

Christine Grahame: What are those? I do not know what the basic standards are.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: That is linked to how long they are kennelled for, the size of the kennels, whether they are getting their basic needs, such as food and water, and whether they are being taken out for exercise. It is all those types of things.

You would question overall welfare. If you have a dog that is spending most of its time being kennelled, but the animal is being given what it needs according to the legislative requirements—it is getting food and water, it has somewhere to sleep, it has shelter and so on—the requirements are being met. However, in our opinion, it would be better for them not to be kennelled all the time.

Christine Grahame: They are kennelled all the time.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes. That is linked to the GBGB's standards that the dogs are kennelled.

Christine Grahame: All the time? They get out for a little bit of exercise, toileting and so on and that is it?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes.

Christine Grahame: Right.

Have you had any other issues with owners of greyhounds who race them in this amateur fashion at Thornton?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: No. It has mainly been that one individual with whom we have been dealing.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): This question is for the Dogs Trust and the RSPCA. I would be interested to hear what impact GBGB's decision to remove both of your organisations from the eligible list of greyhound retirement scheme funding has had on your homing efforts? Has the industry considered the potential animal welfare impacts with homing that could be caused as a result?

Claire Calder: I will take that one. It was Dogs Trust and Blue Cross that were removed from the greyhound retirement scheme. We announced a new policy position in September last year, and that is when we were removed as an approved rehoming organisation under the scheme.

As the committee will know, the scheme gives a bond of £400 per greyhound rehomed. From our perspective, the key thing about Dogs Trust being removed from the scheme is the impression that it gives about how important greyhound welfare is to the industry rather than the impact on Dogs Trust as a charity per se, because the £400 bond does not go anywhere near the amount that it would cost us to care for and rehome a greyhound.

I will give some examples. Between November 2018 and April 2021, Dogs Trust took in 14 injured greyhounds from the independent Valley track in Wales. The external veterinary costs to treat those dogs ranged from £690 to £4,800. That does not take into account any on-going veterinary treatment or any of the care that we gave those dogs. The £400 does not therefore come close to covering the costs of treating and rehoming greyhounds, especially injured greyhounds, and we have continued to take in greyhounds and rehome them through our network of rehoming centres anyway.

Throughout our changing policy position, calling for a phased end to greyhound racing, we have been absolutely clear that we are as committed as ever to the welfare of the greyhounds that are involved in the industry. We are committed to rehoming any greyhound that needs us, whether it is currently involved in the sport, and should there be a phased end to greyhound racing, we would be committed to rehoming any greyhounds that need a home as a result.

Ariane Burgess: You have mentioned that you changed your policy position, and you also said that Dogs Trust left the Greyhound Forum. I am interested to hear whether it is your view that the industry is doing enough to protect the health and

welfare of greyhounds associated with racing greyhounds through its welfare strategy.

Claire Calder: It was mentioned in the evidence session with GBGB last week that we were invited to contribute to the strategy when it was being developed. It is important to say that we were essentially asked to complete a form about the five domains model for animal welfare. We did not have further involvement in the strategy. For example, we did not see a draft before it was published and we were not given sufficient advance notice of it being published either.

When we assessed the strategy, we found that we had concerns about it. There is currently no funding available to implement the full animal welfare strategy, but even if there was, we would be concerned about its ability to fully ensure that every greyhound can live a good life. The reason for that is that it puts much more of an emphasis on the health and veterinary needs of greyhounds compared to the behavioural and welfare side of things.

Essentially, a lot of the strategy talks about how resilient greyhounds are, including ways to make them more resilient within the industry. Within animal welfare, we would look at how we could change the environment to protect the welfare of the animals involved rather than making them more resilient.

Finally, nothing in the strategy specifically looks at the benefits of straight tracks. We know that running at speed around an oval stadium is inherently dangerous for greyhounds. In particular, the bunching together at speed to go around the bends tends to be when a lot of the injuries take place. Looking at using a straight track would mean that the collisions that happen when the dogs are going around the bends would be removed, and we are disappointed to see that that is not included within the strategy.

Ariane Burgess: I turn to Sam Gaines. Sam, can I ask for your thoughts on the welfare strategy?

Dr Gaines: Claire Calder has given a comprehensive overview of it. I simply add that there was an expectation that, in the delivery of the strategy, other stakeholders, including the welfare members of the Greyhound Forum, would contribute to it. Unfortunately, however, we were not given sight of the draft strategy pre-publication; we first became aware of it when it had been published.

10:30

There is obviously an expectation that we, as rehoming organisations and welfare organisations, are going to help the GBGB to deliver its strategy.

That is of concern, because, as well as having to potentially assist with activities of which we were not aware, there is a possibility that we could be held to account if the GBGB failed to deliver the strategy.

I emphasise our significant concern around the lack of funding to deliver the strategy. It has been said in the committee's evidence sessions, and it was said to us at a Greyhound Forum meeting in January, that, although the short-term activities had been funded, the funding for both the mid-term and long-term activities was still under discussion with bookmakers. That is a concern, because the RSPCA and other members, as part of the Greyhound Forum, have long been in discussions around funding and ensuring that there is a sustainable income, which is absolutely necessary.

For us, it remains a real of cause concern that GBGB has not got the funding that is necessary to deliver the strategy. In addition, as Claire Calder said, even if the funding was in place and the strategy was actually delivered, we do not believe that it would provide a good life for every greyhound from cradle to grave, which is critical.

The Convener: Before we move on, you may have seen that in the previous sessions, there were some concerns about the SAWC report's reliance on the report by the RSPCA, Dogs Trust and Blue Cross. The SAWC actually delayed reporting back to the committee, because it was waiting on the completion of your report. The SAWC said that it used the report for background information only but, as you will have realised, there were some concerns over the lack of data in the SAWC's report, and the inclusion of a lot of supposition rather than hard fact.

We have not seen the report that you commissioned. In fact, the organisations have refused to share that report with us, and have produced only an overview of the assessment.

Claire Calder, can I ask you why you are not prepared to publish the report in full? That obviously raises questions about transparency with regard to whether the SAWC reported to this committee on the basis of the recommendations in your report, what those recommendations were founded on and what the basis for the SAWC's decisions is. Why has that report not been made public?

Claire Calder: Absolutely. We worked with a range of consultancies and experts to review our policy position on greyhounds. That included a review, but we also did other activities. The review was never intended to be published. The RSPCA and the Dogs Trust together funded a review. That was part of a wider policy review, and it was

intended to inform our internal policies as charities, not to be published.

Nonetheless, we shared a comprehensive overview of it with the committee yesterday. The full review was also shared with the SAWC. The reason for that is that we absolutely stand by the evidence. The issue is complex, and the summary of the review that we have given provides a completely comprehensive overview—it covers all the topics in the wider review.

In addition, the committee can see a more condensed summary, which summarises all the topics that are included in the review, as an annex to the SAWC report.

The Convener: Okay. You can understand why we are wondering why elements of that report have not been made public. It is not helpful for us in relation to making a decision on potentially recommending a ban on greyhound racing.

Can you tell us whether there was any consideration of the likes of Thornton? Did you do any work to look at Thornton in particular? Again, we have to remind ourselves that the only greyhound racing that takes place in Scotland is at a non-GBGB track.

Claire Calder: Absolutely. The review itself covered greyhound racing across the United Kingdom, including all the UK nations. By default, it covered both GBGB tracks and the remaining independent tracks across Great Britain.

The SAWC report summarised very well the situation with regard to the evidence that is available for the independent tracks. Independent tracks are not required to publish their injury and retirement data. By default, that means that not much data is available, but the absence of data in itself does not suggest that the risks would be any different when racing on an independent track compared to racing on a GBGB track. Racing round an oval track at speed is inherently dangerous for greyhounds—we know that it causes injuries and that in some cases the greyhounds die or are put to sleep. As an animal charity, we cannot just stand by and watch that.

The Convener: Is there a cultural difference between the likes of Thornton and GBGB tracks? We talk about the greyhound racing industry. Would you describe the activity that is carried out at Thornton as an industry, given the evidence that we have heard?

Claire Calder: In the evidence session last week, it was interesting to hear the indication that, if a bookmaker could not attend Thornton, the meeting would not take place. That suggests that it is not purely a hobby activity. To go back to the nature of the industry, racing round an oval track is inherently dangerous to greyhounds. Regardless

of whether the activity is carried out as a hobby or as a commercial activity, it is dangerous to greyhounds.

The Convener: Are you suggesting that the people who go to race at Thornton do it as a commercial activity?

Claire Calder: The indication that the race would not take place if a bookmaker was not there certainly suggests that it is not purely a hobby activity.

The Convener: I sometimes have a flutter on the grand national, but I would not say that I undertake horse racing as a commercial activity. We have to be really careful. Do you think that people race greyhounds at Thornton on a commercial basis?

Claire Calder: In the SAWC report, there were some useful asides on the community aspects of the track. We know that the attendees at the track all tend to be involved in the industry, in one way or another. We are not suggesting that there are not wider factors at play, but the indication that the meetings do not go ahead unless there is a bookmaker suggests that a level of gambling activity happens at the track as well.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Some of the points that I was going to ask about have been covered. I want to briefly get your assessment of the SAWC report. As members have said, in questioning people at committee sessions, it was difficult to get an indication of how evidence was gathered. A lot of our questions simply drew answers such as, "Oh, we don't have any evidence on that." Are you satisfied with the report? I am not here to rubbish it, but we were surprised by how many times we heard the answer, "We didn't gather any evidence on that—sorry, we don't know."

Claire Calder: It is hugely challenging when it comes to the independent tracks, because there is no requirement to publish data, which inherently creates gaps. However, since 2018, the GBGB has published data every year on injury rates and what happens to dogs on their retirement. That is factual data that we have from the industry and it suggests that, between 2018 and 2021, more than 2,000 dogs died or were put to sleep as a result of the industry, and that there were nearly 18,000 injuries.

I can give examples of the injuries that the Dogs Trust has seen in dogs that we have taken in. To again use the example of the independent track in Wales, we have seen dogs that needed complex orthopaedic intervention. For example, that might include pinning of bones and lengthy rehabilitation for them to recover and to be able to walk again, let alone race. We are talking about really serious injuries. Although, as I mentioned, there are gaps

when it comes to independent racing, the data that we have suggests that racing itself is inherently dangerous.

Alasdair Allan: My final question is for Gilly Mendes Ferreira. Your organisation's position is that unregulated tracks should come to an end. I realise that there is only one track in Scotland and that it is unregulated, so it is difficult to make a recommendation about anything else. However, as others have mentioned, we have heard an awful lot about the differences between the commercial GBGB tracks operating in England and what seems to be a hobby activity in Thornton. I do not say that to minimise the risks, but we have heard an awful lot about some of the casualty figures for GBGB tracks. I appreciate that there is only one track in Scotland for you to come to a view on, and that it happens to be unregulated, but why did you focus on unregulated tracks and make recommendations to bring that activity to an end?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: As you say, we are left with one unregulated track. Previously, at Shawfield, for example, between 2017 and 2020, 197 injuries were recorded, with 15 deaths. The other tracks that we looked at had similar figures. It comes back to Claire Calder's point that, whether the activity is regulated or unregulated, you still have dogs racing round an oval track at speed. They are sight hounds, and they will follow that target. They will naturally clump together on the corners, because they are focused on the target, so there is an increased risk of collision. The GBGB has been producing statistics, and it has recognised and acknowledged that dogs are injured during that activity. Therefore, for us, it does not matter whether the activity is regulated or unregulated.

Further, the industry is self-regulating—there is no independence and nobody scrutinises the figures in an independent capacity. There is no one from the veterinary profession doing independent verification of the statistics. We have found it difficult to interpret the GBGB statistics, because they are focused on the number of runs—the percentages are not linked to the number of dogs that have run, which is challenging. From our perspective, to go back to the basics, you are requiring dogs to run round a track, knowing that they will get injured. That is why we have concerns.

Alasdair Allan: Thank you.

Ariane Burgess: I will go into that issue a little more. I am not sure who needs to pick this up, so you can choose between yourselves. Do you believe that the recommendations of the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission's report, including on introducing a veterinary presence on site and independent regulation for the independent track

in Scotland, will be sufficient to tackle the inherent health and welfare concerns associated with racing?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: I will start and then Claire Calder might come in.

One of our big concerns is, yes, you could have the requirement to have a vet on track. When these races are run in the evening, where is that vet coming from? Where is the resource, and where is the finance to pay for that? Getting access to out-of-hours veterinary care, that is a barrier that we sometimes struggle with. We operate in the evenings, which can be challenging. Where is the guarantee that, if you do that investment, that animal is going to get the treatment they require? We have concerns about the volume of investment that would be needed to get up to the required standard.

I again come back to the basics. In this day and age, when we say that we are a nation that cares about animal welfare, why are we saying that it is acceptable to have dogs run round a track knowing that they are going to get injured?

Claire Calder: I echo what Gilly Mendes Ferreira has said. We would of course welcome veterinary presence at tracks, but we have to acknowledge that that in itself will not resolve the issues or be a panacea. We agree with a lot of the findings in the report but, crucially, we do not agree that greyhound racing should be allowed to continue in Scotland without a path to an end. We do not believe that independent regulation by the local authority or under the auspices of the new Scottish veterinary service would be sufficient to safeguard the welfare of greyhounds.

In our independent policy review, we looked at a range of options that could be considered to be useful in protecting the welfare of greyhounds. Of those options, which included better independent regulation, for example, the only two that guaranteed the welfare of greyhounds were an outright ban on greyhound racing or a phased end. We arrived at a phased end as the preferable option, so that we can guarantee the welfare of the animals that are currently involved in the industry and so that we can ensure that, with partners across Great Britain, we can rehome the dogs that are involved in the industry.

10:45

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Claire, just for a bit of clarification, is it right that you represent the Dogs Trust?

Claire Calder: Yes.

Jim Fairlie: Have you, as the Dogs Trust, attended the Thornton greyhound track either incognito or in an official capacity? You said that

you had taken in a number of dogs and you cited the Welsh unregistered track. Do you have figures for the number of dogs that have been raced in Scotland that you have had to deal with?

Claire Calder: As the Dogs Trust, we have not attended the Thornton track in an official capacity. We have figures for the number of dogs—ex-racing greyhounds—that we take into our care in Scotland. It would be difficult for us to guarantee that dogs had come from Thornton specifically, because of the way in which we take in dogs, but we are happy to share our rehoming figures for greyhounds with the committee.

Jim Fairlie: Okay. You may have given a lot of the answers in your report, but unfortunately we only had it about 20 minutes before the meeting. We will have to digest it before we can come back to you.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): I am wondering how the Dogs Trust and the RSPCA concluded that there should be a phased end to greyhound racing and that the concerns about animal welfare cannot be resolved. I have looked very quickly at the summary of the paper, despite it being given to us only 20 minutes ago, and it does not give concrete evidence regarding the specific cases in Scotland, and nor does the SAWC report. Some of what I read in the SAWC report was anecdotal evidence. It also says that the conditions met those set out in the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006. How did you reach your conclusion regarding animal welfare? I cannot find anything to suggest that you had concrete evidence to prove that.

Claire Calder: Perhaps I can take that first and then pass over to Sam Gaines.

Within the review, there are lots of examples of welfare issues associated with greyhound racing. We are talking about issues throughout every life stage of the racing greyhound.

Rachael Hamilton: You are not to know which bit of the document I was looking at, but my question was specifically with regard to the reference to positive interaction with family members outside the kennel, the housing conditions and the way that the dogs are kept as a domestic animal would be kept.

Claire Calder: Are you referring to evidence in the SAWC report?

Rachael Hamilton: Yes.

Claire Calder: The SAWC report mentions that it was difficult to gather evidence of the way in which the greyhounds that race on the Thornton track are kept. The commission asked for evidence from owners and trainers, who submitted, for example, photos as evidence.

Within that evidence there were, of course, examples of greyhounds that seemed to be family pets and also examples of greyhounds that had been kept in kennels. SAWC mentioned that, although those animals seemed to be in good condition, some of the conditions that they were kept in were not what we would like to see. For example, the animals were not provided with any bedding—it was more often litter—and there was none of the enrichment that we would normally like to see.

When we are talking about the way in which greyhounds are kept if they are kennelled, it is important to note that the majority of greyhounds—90 per cent of them—are no longer racing by the time they are five years old. The average lifespan of greyhounds is between 10 and 14 years. Therefore, we are looking at animals that are expected to be homed into a home environment, when they might never have experienced all the normal things from a home environment if they have been kept in kennels without enrichment. That is just one example of the welfare concerns that we have.

Rachael Hamilton: I have a question for the SSPCA. Gilly, you talked earlier about the number of complaints, and I am sure that I picked up that you said there were three. Over what period was that and how does that compare with the number of complaints regarding other domestic dogs? How many complaints about animal welfare do you get per year?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: The statistic that I gave was that, between 2018 and 2022, there were only three calls per year relating to racing greyhounds. I can share with the committee more detailed statistics that break things down. That would not be a problem.

Rachael Hamilton: Roughly, on average, how many complaints do you get? You do not have to be specific.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: We go out to investigate 87,000 incidents per year. I would have to come back to the committee on how many relate to dogs, how many relate to cats and so on. Obviously, we cover every species in Scotland.

Rachael Hamilton: When you were going out to such incidents on a daily basis, how many would you get called to, on average, in a week?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: I cannot give that answer just now. We operate throughout the whole of Scotland. I would need to come back to you.

The Convener: Let us be clear. On average, there are three animal welfare complaints relating to greyhounds per year.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: There are three calls per year.

The Convener: Even though every dog is important—let me put that on the record—surely three per year is an insignificant figure compared with the number of other calls that you receive. Of those three complaints per year, how many go through a legal process? You suggested that the complaints relating to Thornton were not upheld because the conditions that the dogs were kept in met the standards that are required in legislation. I would suggest that three is an insignificant figure if we are talking about 85,000 calls per year. How many of the three calls per year resulted in legal action being taken?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: As I stated, it has proven to be challenging to get prosecutions because of the evidence base that is needed. In relation to the three calls per year, there has not been anything that has warranted us to go as far as prosecution.

The Convener: So there have been no prosecutions relating to animal welfare issues with greyhounds since 2018.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: There have been none relating to Thornton specifically.

The Convener: What about more generally?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Some time ago, a greyhound owner in Gretna was prosecuted for tying live rabbits to mechanical lures. When the Wishaw track closed, we unfortunately had to fish out dead greyhounds from a quarry the following week. We also led a multi-agency operation at the Armadale track that was linked to drugs, and that stadium subsequently closed. Therefore, some things have happened but, in relation to Thornton specifically, nothing that we have received has led to a prosecution.

The Convener: Okay. I will bring in Rachael Hamilton again. I beg your pardon for interrupting, Rachael.

Rachael Hamilton: Drugs seem to have been mentioned quite a lot in relation to greyhound racing. What percentage of the cases that you are called out to relate to drugs? What about domestic cases?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: I cannot give an accurate answer to that now. I would need to come back to the committee on that.

Rachael Hamilton: In previous committee meetings, we have heard that there is a relationship between organised crime and domestic pet ownership.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Our special investigations unit is investigating issues relating to the puppy trade and the establishment of canine

fertility clinics. That is why, particularly over the past year, we have worked closely with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to develop the tests that are required. We are, quite rightly, asked, “How can you prove that the substance in that bottle that you have seized as evidence is what you’re saying it is?”

Rachael Hamilton: That issue is not typical of greyhound owners, is it?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: The investigation that we carried out in 2016 into Shawfield related to drugs.

Rachael Hamilton: Have you ever carried out other such investigations relating to general pet ownership?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: At the moment, our investigations are linked mainly to the puppy trade.

Rachael Hamilton: I have another question, which I will direct to the RSPCA. Did you look at any alternatives to a ban?

Dr Gaines: As Claire Calder has described, the report considered a number of options, ranging from working with the industry to improve welfare standards right through to calling for an immediate ban.

As part of our internal policy review, we looked at each of the options and considered a range of factors. A key factor was the availability of funding to achieve welfare change, as well as the likely public acceptance. Our review was therefore very considered, and it also took into consideration our vast amount of experience and history of working with the industry.

It is fair to say that we do this with every single policy and welfare issue that we look to tackle. We will look at the welfare impact on the animals that are involved in a particular industry, for example, but we will also look at the potential for the animals to be safeguarded and for improvements to be made.

From going through the evidence in the report and from our internal discussions, our conclusion was that sufficient progress has not been made and there is just too much to do. There is a requirement for the industry to undergo wholesale reform if we are to be assured that each and every racing greyhound will have their welfare protected from cradle to grave. We do not have that assurance and we do not believe that it can be achieved, so we have reached the conclusion that a phased end to racing in the UK is the best option available to safeguard greyhound welfare.

Rachael Hamilton: How can the industry give that assurance from cradle to grave if part of it is regulated in Ireland?

Dr Gaines: That is an issue in itself. We want to make sure that there is that assurance on welfare from cradle to grave, and that is where we come back to the GBGB's ability to provide such assurance. In its evidence last week, it said that part of its strategy was about addressing the ability to protect the welfare of greyhounds that are bred in the Republic of Ireland, the vast majority of which come over to race here. However, we would argue around the GBGB's ability to provide for that power.

The GBGB is the regulatory body in Great Britain, but we do not know to what extent it can influence the industry in the Republic of Ireland. In its strategy, it said that it intends to reach out to the relevant bodies in Ireland, but there is no guarantee that those bodies will be able to provide that assurance and that the standard of welfare that we want to see in the Republic of Ireland will be achieved.

The Convener: Thank you. We will come back to questions about the life experience of a racing dog at the end of this meeting. I will now bring in Ariane Burgess with a supplementary question, and then Mark Ruskell.

Ariane Burgess: It is along the same lines. What are the limitations of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 when it comes to the protection of the health and welfare of greyhounds that are used for racing in Scotland? I will start with Sam Gaines.

Dr Gaines: One of our concerns about that particular piece of legislation is that it is aimed largely at companion animals. We want any new legislation to target the welfare of the animals that are being used. We therefore very much want there to be greyhound-specific regulations, if we are talking about a specific piece of legislation, in the same way that there are regulations for breeding or boarding, for example. For specific activities, we want legislation that is aimed at protecting those animals, and the 2006 act does not have that.

It is important to say about the 2006 act and other similar acts that, once we start to look at the regulatory powers, we can see that the more power a piece of legislation has, the less able it is to deliver the welfare provisions that we want. A good example in the 2006 act is that it mentions welfare provisions but not in any great detail, whereas codes of practice tend to be more rigorous on welfare provision but have far less regulatory power.

The Convener: Greyhounds are actually specifically mentioned in the legislation in Scotland that Ariane Burgess touched on.

As a follow-up to that point, I ask Gilly Mendes Ferreira why the current legislation, which includes

and names greyhounds specifically, is not sufficient when the cabinet secretary believes that it is.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: When we receive a complaint under that existing legislation, we need to prove that unnecessary suffering has been caused to the animal involved. Greyhound racing is deemed to be a lawful activity. The court might ask how the animal has suffered because the injury has taken place during a lawful activity during which you would expect the animal to be injured, because that is what the activity is.

That is a challenge that we would face. Because greyhound racing is a specific activity with specific risks, you cannot really compare it with the completely different environment of a general companion animal. That is why we say that it warrants having specific legislation attached to it.

11:00

The Convener: That is helpful.

Ariane Burgess: What changes and reforms to the greyhound racing industry have you identified as being necessary to ensure that racing greyhounds experience a sustainable and ethical way of living, and how have those points led to your updated policy position? You also identified that a code of practice is perhaps a better way to go.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: I will let Claire Calder answer that, because it was covered in quite a lot of detail in her report.

Claire Calder: In our review of our policy, we looked at what changes would be necessary to ensure a good life for racing greyhounds. Necessary changes were identified, but we are concerned that, individually, none of those changes would be sufficient and that even a combination of them would not be sufficient. That is how we arrived at the need for a phased end to greyhound racing.

I will give some examples. One is accountability for all dogs entering and exiting racing, because there is a lot of wastage and a lot of dogs are unaccounted for. Another is funding security for greyhound welfare. At the moment, there is a voluntary levy of 0.6 per cent from the bookmakers. The budget has reduced in recent years, and it does not provide the safeguard of assured welfare funding, year on year.

We would like to see action on racetrack safety to eliminate the danger of injury and death, looking at things such as the shape of the track, for example. We would also like to see one UK-wide and Republic of Ireland-compatible microchip identification system and a transparent database. There should be compulsory and independently

enforced animal welfare standards, based on the five domains model. Independent and funded regulatory oversight and enforcement would be needed as well. We have also touched on the fact that, although there are United Kingdom Accreditation Service inspections of the tracks that are GBGB licenced, those inspections are, in effect, checking against GBGB's own standards of racing.

A huge amount of change would be needed to ensure that greyhounds could live a good life. We do not think that any of those things, individually, would solve the welfare issues. Going back to the evidence, it points to greyhound racing being inherently dangerous for the greyhounds. That is why we have arrived at the conclusion that a phased end to greyhound racing is the only way that we can guarantee their welfare.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Coming back to the point that you have made several times about the inherent risk of greyhounds racing at speed around an oval track, I am interested in whether it is possible to reform that. Last week, I put it to GBGB that it could consider racing greyhounds on a straight track. Is that something that the industry has meaningfully considered? Is there a way of removing that inherent risk in greyhound racing, or is there something about the nature of the sport—how it is televised, how it has grown up or how tracks are constructed—that makes that difficult? I am just trying to understand, because it seems to me that, if you remove that inherent risk, you perhaps remove a central part of the objection to greyhound racing.

Claire Calder: One of the arguments from the industry on the need for an oval track is about the audience experience. It has previously argued that moving to a straight track would have an impact on the audience viewing of the racing. We would challenge that, because the vast majority of viewers of greyhound racing are now doing so online or on television—for example, in bookmakers' premises.

We know that audience attendance at greyhound racing is in decline, and that the number of tracks is declining. It is a declining industry so we would not consider it to be a valid argument that audience participation would be affected by a move to straight tracks, especially with the technology that is available today.

The evidence, including that which we heard in last week's session, is that the industry is looking at how to remove all the surrounding risk before looking at the shape of the track. That is certainly the impression that I got from that evidence session. If we look at the nature of the sport and where the collisions happen, the bends around the oval tracks are of huge concern, so they would

certainly warrant consideration when looking at the risks involved in racing.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Putting in straight tracks would require the industry to make significant investment. The Thornton track and its land are next to a motorway so would it be possible to construct straight tracks? Of all the measures that have already been proposed to decrease those risks, I would doubt that we could be confident that that could be done because of the significant investment that the industry would need to make to move to straight tracks.

Mark Ruskell: Does Sam Gaines want to come in on that?

Dr Gaines: I have a couple more points to make. There has been quite a bit of scientific research into what could be modified to reduce risks. We have spoken about the shape of the track, but other measures could include shortening races, looking at the position of the lure and making sure that the surface of the track is well maintained.

There are definitely measures that could be taken to reduce the risk to greyhounds, but as we have said throughout this meeting, the inherent danger that the sport puts greyhounds in is only one of the factors that we are concerned about. When we are talking about ensuring that each and every greyhound is given that assurance of a life worth living, we are talking about the wholesale reform of an industry.

Mark Ruskell: GBGB also said last week that a phase out of or a stark ban on greyhound racing would just drive it underground. Is it possible to drive greyhound racing underground? I am trying to imagine how that would work. Maybe it is—I do not know. Maybe there are examples of that happening elsewhere.

Claire Calder: I would be surprised if that was possible. A large stadium and race track are needed for greyhound racing, so I would question how it is possible to hide that and for the industry to go underground in that way.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: I agree. Given that some of the incentives around greyhound racing are linked to gambling and the fact that it is televised, I cannot see how it could be hidden. It is a physical event with multiple dogs, and I do not see how that could be underground.

The Convener: Thornton is not televised and bookmaking is incidental. We must concentrate on the fact that we are not looking at the greyhound industry in England. We are talking about Thornton, which is not televised and betting is not an important element of it. I think that we have established that.

Rhoda Grant: I am trying to get to the bottom of the difference between licensed and unlicensed racing, and I know that it is difficult to have a good look at what goes on as there is only one racetrack in Scotland. The impression that we are forming is that there is a professional licensed greyhound racing industry that attracts finance, betting and audiences, and there is also an unlicensed industry, which seems to be more for personal entertainment. What are the differences between those? If you have a dog that is trained to go at speed and win races in order to encourage betting as opposed to one that is a family pet that is taken out on a Saturday for a run, the speed of the animals at that track must be different and the way that the animals are reared is different. Have you looked at that in any way?

To continue that theme, what is the difference between that and horse racing?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: I will start, and others can come in. Certainly, the difference between licensed and unlicensed activity is that, for activities that are covered under licensing regs and so on, there are set standards, access to veterinary care, accountability for and recording of the animals that are present: for example, knowing how often they run, and keeping records of injuries.

If activity is unregulated, there is no accountability. Nobody asks for the statistics because nobody independently looks at them, so there is no transparency as to what is going on at that track.

As far as I can see, the track designs are the same: the curvature, the anticlockwise direction, the speed and so on. However, if activity is independently regulated, there should be an inspection process to check all those things, such as where the animals are housed on-site. Ideally, as has been outlined, there should be knowledge, from birth to death, of the lifestyle and lifespan of each animal that is involved in the industry.

Horse racing is a different concern, and I am not here to comment on that. Each sport that uses animals has its own challenges and welfare concerns. Greyhound racing is different to horse racing. Today's discussion is about greyhounds.

The Convener: Does anyone have anything to add? I am conscious of the time, so we will move to the next question if there are no additional comments.

Claire Calder: I agree with Gilly Mendes Ferreira's summary.

Dr Gaines: I want to make a point of clarification following Mark Ruskell's question on whether the sport might go underground if it was phased out. There is a lot of evidence from places

outside the UK in which the sport has ceased. That would give a good indication as to whether the sport goes underground if it is banned.

Jim Fairlie: I want to pick up on a couple of things. The term "inherent risk" has been used several times today. We do not regulate field trials for spaniels or Labradors, sheepdog trials, agility dog trials or pigeon racing. Do you have concerns about those? I am looking for a straight yes or no answer; I do not want you to go into any depth. Gilly Mendes Ferreira, that question is for you, because Claire Calder will not have any comment on pigeons.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: At present, we do not have concerns about those activities. Again, it is about comparing the intensity of the two industries—the two sports.

Jim Fairlie: All those things have an inherent risk. Is your problem with greyhounds the weighting of the risk?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes: it is the speed, the track design et cetera, and the injuries that are reported.

Jim Fairlie: On track design, we have established that straight tracks will not make any difference to the way that you would conclude your report. However, you said earlier that greyhounds hunt by sight—that they follow a lure. For everybody's understanding, that is an artificial hare. There are no live rabbits.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes.

Jim Fairlie: They are sight animals and they are all looking at one lure. Has any work been done on putting two lures on to the same race, to spread out the field?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: It has not, as far as I am aware. I do not know whether Claire Calder—

Claire Calder: I suggest that Sam Gaines answers that, because she and I had a conversation about lures. We know that, at Thornton, the lure runs on the inside of the track, whereas, on GBGB tracks, the lure runs on the outside. The theory is that that enables more of the greyhounds to see the lure.

Sam, do you want to jump in, because I know that you had—

Jim Fairlie: I understand why the lure is on the inside or the outside of the track. My point is that, because they are sight animals, there is bunching at particular corners at high speed, as you referenced. That bunching will happen because they are all looking at the same lure. Has any work been done on double lures?

Dr Gaines: It has not, to the best of our knowledge. However, research has looked at

positioning the lure in the middle of the track. That would prevent some of the bunching that Claire Calder has mentioned.

Jim Fairlie: Okay. You talk about the trajectory of the industry going downhill—it is beginning to decline. Are there distinct welfare risks to animals from the industry declining? That is, if the industry is declining, does that pose a welfare risk to the animals that are currently in the system?

11:15

Claire Calder: That is an interesting question. We considered what an appropriate phase-out time would be for the greyhounds that are currently involved in the industry. We felt that, if we went for too long a period, it might equally have a detrimental impact on greyhound welfare. Once the industry is on notice of the phased end, we absolutely do not want greyhound welfare to be compromised during that time. That is why we looked at the number of greyhounds involved and felt confident that, through partnership working with other charities, we would be able to rehome them within five years.

It is a valid question. However, we are aware that bookmakers' funding also comes through online viewing, so there are other aspects to the matter.

Jim Fairlie: Do I have time for another very quick question, convener?

The Convener: A very quick one.

Jim Fairlie: Gilly Mendes Ferreira, I apologise that I am coming back to you. You talked about the individual you visited whom you could not bring any prosecution against. I have a couple of questions that you might not be able to answer. First, how did you know that the dog required a visit from you to establish whether its welfare was in jeopardy?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: We received complaints about the dogs at that property, which is why we went out.

Jim Fairlie: At the property.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes, not at the track.

Jim Fairlie: Surely, then, that is the responsibility of the person who owns the dog and not the track.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes. It is against the owner of the dogs, not to do with the track.

Jim Fairlie: There is always the possibility that an individual who goes into a pastime, whether it is sheepdog trials or greyhound racing, will do a poor job of looking after the animal. Does that require the banning of the pastime?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Obviously, that is one individual and we know that the dogs are raced at Thornton. The biggest problem that we have is that, at Thornton, you do not have the public and you do not have a vet there. There is nobody there to warrant a complaint. It is the industry itself.

Jim Fairlie: However, it is public. You can go there, pay your money and walk through the door, so the public can go.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: The public do not go.

Jim Fairlie: When you say that there is no public, that gives the impression that it is a private meeting and you are not allowed in. We need clarity that it is a public event.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: It is a public event. The public choose not to go.

Jim Fairlie: The public choose not to go to it. That is a clear distinction.

I come back to the point that the issue is the individual who holds the animal as opposed to the pastime itself and to the point that Mark Ruskell made, about which he and I have spoken, about finding a method of allowing people who genuinely love their dogs and want to race them safely—they do not want anything to happen to them—to continue without completely banning the sport. Those people do love their dogs.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes, you have the owners of the dogs who love them. However, a responsibility still lies with the track to provide the environment that guarantees the dogs' welfare. If you are encouraging people who are involved in and have a love of that sport to come to a stadium and run their dogs there, the person who runs the track also has ownership, responsibility and accountability.

Jim Fairlie: Last week, the owner of the Thornton track said that the Scottish SPCA has an open invitation to go there at any time, so you can walk in the door the same as anybody else. If the track covers all the welfare conditions that would be required in that sport, which is legal at the moment, surely you cannot hold the sport responsible for an individual who does something inadequate at home.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: No, but you have to make sure that you have a sustainable guarantee that everything will be covered on that track. How the owner keeps their animals at their home environment is separate. We would still investigate that.

Jim Fairlie: That goes back to the whole-life experience of the dog, so what you are actually asking of people who have greyhounds is to be responsible for their whole-life experience.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes.

Jim Fairlie: I do not know whether we will come back to that issue. I might come back—

The Convener: Yes, we will. We will move on now.

Christine Grahame: I have been itching to get in, because there is something that we have not emphasised in our interrogation. Evidence from the Dogs Trust shows that 85 per cent of greyhounds are

“typically born and raised to a year old in the Republic of Ireland”.

Obviously, UK and Scottish legislation pertains in this jurisdiction, unless there is an arrangement with the Republic of Ireland. However, our committee papers state that, under the Irish legislation,

“A person is permitted to allow a bitch to produce 6 litters, a maximum of 2 extra is allowed with permission. Greyhound Breeding Establishments are kept on a register by the Irish Coursing Club ... and all litters must be registered. However, it states there is no independent verification of the number born in a litter, and there is little available information about levels of enforcement or monitoring.”

The Irish Council Against Blood Sports states:

“Greyhound racing is inherently cruel, based as it is on”—

I emphasise this point—

“over-breeding greyhounds, choosing the fastest and getting rid of those who don’t make the grade. Many of those too slow to win races are mercilessly killed. Most greyhounds used in the UK are bred in the Republic of Ireland.”

We have focused, quite rightly, on the track and the conditions that the dogs live in at home, but let us go right back to the beginning and consider the condition that the pups are in when they are imported. I would like the witnesses to comment on that, because we are digging deeper into the issue of the welfare of the animals. It might be appropriate to contrast the situation with greyhounds with that of horses. I do not know whether we are able to track the breeding of horses that come over from Ireland and do a comparison; that might not be relevant. In any case, I would like you to comment on what I have said, because I did not appreciate that about 80 per cent of the dogs that are raced in the UK come from Ireland.

Claire Calder: That is right—about 85 per cent of the greyhounds that race in Great Britain are from Ireland. It is an incredibly important point. We know that both Irish and British registers show that at least 10 per cent of greyhounds whelped are unaccounted for after the first year, so we have a huge concern about the wastage in the industry and the number of dogs that are simply unaccounted for.

Christine Grahame: Do you liaise with the Irish equivalents of the SSPCA and RSPCA on the issue?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: We have not spoken in depth to them in relation to greyhounds, but we have spoken to them about the puppy trade in quite a lot of detail. Partly in relation to that issue, we are focusing on dog breeding licensing in Ireland and where the dogs go.

Claire Calder: Dogs Trust Ireland also has a policy position of calling for a phased end to greyhound racing. The Dogs Trust and Dogs Trust Ireland work together very closely on the issue.

Christine Grahame: Does the RSPCA have contact with its equivalent in the Republic of Ireland?

Dr Gaines: We have spoken to colleagues at the equivalent organisation. We were also part of the international greyhound forum, particularly because we were concerned about the significant proportion of greyhounds that are born in Ireland and because we do not know a lot about what happens during that first year. There are huge issues relating to the visibility of greyhounds once they have been bred and reared. We have seen some reports and evidence about how they are reared, but it is fair to say that there is not a lot of visibility, which is of huge concern.

Christine Grahame: How do the dogs get here? Is there an organisation that does that, or do individuals just get in touch with somebody to purchase them?

Claire Calder: There is not huge visibility, but the dogs would be bought by UK trainers and then transported here to race.

Dr Gaines: Sometimes, puppies might already have been selected by trainers who are based in Great Britain, so they might well bring the dogs over. Often, puppies that have been bred for the purposes of racing will be reared and, through their first year, exposed to experiences that are conducive to racing but not to experiences that are fundamental to ensuring that dogs grow up to be confident adults and well adapted to living in a home. After they have been reared, they will be sold, so we often see auctions in which greyhounds are put up for sale. People bid on them before they are transferred to Great Britain, which typically happens by ferry and road.

Christine Grahame: Thank you very much. I will plug my proposed welfare of dogs bill, which I will introduce in June. It would help to prevent some of that.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I thank the witnesses for their evidence so far. I will ask about the post-racing life of greyhounds. Last week, we heard from the GBGB,

which noted that it contributes towards the costs of rehoming, for example. However, it is a different set-up at Thornton, where more dogs tend to come from homes that they live in, whereas, for GBGB tracks, the dogs are in kennels.

I ask the witnesses to give an overview of the post-racing life of a greyhound and the differences between those two models. Are there any huge differences and any cons?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: If a greyhound has been exposed to a home environment, that is beneficial from a rehoming and rehabilitation perspective. We have had some greyhounds, but not many, for which the rehabilitation process has been more challenging because they have not had exposure, particularly crucial early-life exposure, to things that they would generally see in a house, such as a washing machine. If they have grown up in a kennel environment and that is all that they have known, the rehabilitation process can be a bit more difficult. We and the Dogs Trust have mechanisms in place to ensure that we expose greyhounds to such experiences and get them fit for rehoming.

Claire Calder: From our perspective, the ideal scenario for a greyhound is for it to be a family pet that is kept in the family home and retained there by the owner upon retirement. It was, I think, mentioned at last week's meeting that the reason why the GBGB requires greyhounds to be in residential kennels throughout their racing careers is for integrity—to ensure that they cannot be given substances that interfere with their racing ability.

The home environment will always be beneficial to dog welfare, and the ideal scenario is for the dogs to be kept as family pets. Our concerns when greyhounds are kennelled for large parts of their lives are to do with the socialisation, habituation and enrichment that they receive during that kennel time and their ability to adapt to a home environment if they have not experienced one until they are rehomed.

Karen Adam: I will focus for a moment on how the dogs at Thornton are kept. Is there a secure way of collecting data on the post-racing life of those greyhounds when it comes to injuries, their behaviours and their quality of life?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: You would hope that anyone running a track would want to actively collect that data to ensure that the greyhounds have the best life before, during and after their racing career. It has been challenging with Thornton because data has not been collected, so we cannot see how many dogs are running, their average age spans or the injury rates. We do not have any of that information for Thornton.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):

Does the panel have any more information on the conditions in kennels? We have heard evidence that significant numbers of dogs are being kept and trained in Scotland for racing in England. Will you expand on the kennelling side?

Claire Calder: I wonder whether that might be a question for Sam Gaines in respect of the RSPCA's involvement in the publicly available specification—PAS—and code of practice for the GBGB.

11:30

Dr Gaines: If we look at the research, we see that it would be fair to say that kennel environments are challenging for many dogs. Kennels place limitations and restrictions on dogs' ability to express natural behaviour and to be in contact with their peers and people. That is a real concern. In recognition that kennelling poses challenges for dogs, the industry has put in place a specification that is intended to protect the welfare of greyhounds when they are in kennels, in which—as has been said—they spend about 95 per cent of their time.

The RSPCA and other welfare members of the Greyhound Forum were involved in developing that document. Throughout that development process, we were concerned about the ability to safeguard the welfare of dogs in kennels, to the extent that, in the final version of the document, we wrote to the GBGB and to the British Standards Institution, which was responsible for facilitating and co-ordinating the standard, to say that we thought that the standard was not welfare compatible—that it was certainly not compatible with good welfare.

As a result of that, we were told that there would be a code of practice to help owners and trainers to meet the specification within the BSI document. That was particularly important because the specification document was written in a very top-down way: for example, it required individuals to have an environmental enrichment plan in place, but did not go into any detail about what that was and how people could achieve it.

We ended up with a code of practice, to which I was a contributor, but we still have concerns about it, largely because we do not know to what extent it is being promoted to owners and trainers, how they will understand its content or how they will deliver it. We also do not know how it will be enforced. Although the industry has made efforts to protect the welfare of greyhounds while they are in kennels, we are concerned that what is in the documents is not sufficient to ensure that every greyhound will have a positive experience in kennels.

The Convener: We are running over time and three members have indicated that they want to ask supplementary questions. Those questions must be short, snappy and sharp, with no preamble. I will close you down if speak for longer than I think is acceptable. I have questions from Jim Fairlie, Rachael Hamilton and Ariane Burgess.

Jim Fairlie: I will be very quick. You have raised concerns about Irish pups being brought here and about the fact that we keep conflating the GBGB with the unregulated track that we have here in Scotland. Given that, would you be less concerned if only Scotland-bred dogs were raced at the Scottish track?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: It would be challenging to govern that.

Jim Fairlie: What about microchipping?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: That has been called for for a long time. There is a national microchipping register for dogs. Traceability is important. That also ties in with the puppy trade.

Rachael Hamilton: If there was a ban on greyhound racing, as you have proposed, how many greyhounds would have to be rehomed and how would that happen?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: We do not know the number of greyhounds in Scotland, but we envisage a small number would have to be rehomed. We would take an active role in rehoming, along with partners. For example, we might go to a puppy breeder tomorrow and have to uplift 60 dogs from that site there and then. We already work with partners to ensure that we can do that and that we can rehome dogs, so that would be part of our normal rehoming operation.

Rachael Hamilton: The report says there would be 20,000 dogs.

Claire Calder: The number of dogs leaving the GBGB-licensed industry each year can be between 6,000 and 7,000. We know that rehoming organisations home more than 5,000 dogs every year. We are able to do that. Within Scotland, we already have the example of Shawfield, which closed recently. The dogs from that track have already been homed.

Ariane Burgess: According to GBGB retirement data, more than 1,400 dogs were euthanised in a four-year period from 2018 to 2021, due to treatment-cost difficulties or to their being designated unsuitable for homing. That figure excludes dogs that died from natural causes or which were put to sleep on veterinary advice. Is it humane or in any way acceptable to euthanise greyhounds on those grounds, and have you experienced difficulties in homing greyhounds that are enough to justify that?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: We have not had difficulties in rehoming greyhounds. It is within an owner's rights to choose to have their greyhound rehomed. Whether a vet would choose to euthanise a perfectly healthy animal is where an owner would have challenges. However, the Scottish SPCA would certainly be there and would take any greyhounds that needed us.

Claire Calder: It is the same for the Dogs Trust. We would not anticipate any challenges in rehoming dogs from the industry, and we would be committed to doing so.

The Convener: Lastly and very briefly, I will indulge myself. I still have concerns about the Scottish SPCA's role. You said that you could attend the track only if there was a complaint, even though it is a public place and the public are free to enter at any time without warning. Why, then, are you able to attend auction marts? Scottish SPCA officers are often seen at those. You visit and have a walk around and a chat. Why are you able to do that at auction marts but not at Thornton?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: We are invited out to marts. We also accompany Quality Meat Scotland on some of its visits, by invitation. We have not been invited to Thornton.

The Convener: Okay, but is there anything to stop you from going there?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: As long as we have an invitation, it is fine. We cannot just turn up, unless there is a reason for us to be there. However, if we are invited, that is a different thing.

The Convener: That is a limitation on your powers.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: Yes. It also has to be seen, when we go somewhere, that we are there for a reason. Rightly, in having those powers, we should go to look at something only if a complaint has been raised with us.

The Convener: Given your concerns, would not it be reasonable to think that you might ask to visit Thornton? Have you ever done that? If not, why not?

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: My understanding from colleagues is that the offer has always been there. However, we are not the regulatory body for the industry. It would be the same if there was regulation: local authorities would be responsible.

The Convener: If you were concerned that there might be animal welfare issues at Thornton, and you were able to ask to visit there, surely that would be a reasonable step to take.

Gilly Mendes Ferreira: I do not know whether such a request has been made. As far as I am

aware, it has not. We would be more than happy to visit.

11:38

Meeting continued in private until 12:24.

The Convener: Okay—that's grand.

Thank you for your evidence. It has been hugely helpful, and I much appreciate your staying a wee bit longer than was scheduled. Your evidence will certainly help us in our deliberations.

That concludes our meeting in public.

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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