



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 20 March 2024

Session 6



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Wednesday 20 March 2024

CONTENTS

	Col.
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION	1
Plant Health (Import Inspection Fees) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2024 [Draft].....	1
PETITION	6
Greyhound Racing (PE1758)	6

RURAL AFFAIRS AND ISLANDS COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

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

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

- *Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
- *Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
- *Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP)
- *Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
- *Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)
- *Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)
- *Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Daniel Alcorn
Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)
Lorna Slater (Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity)
John Speirs (Scottish Government)
George Stark

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

Wednesday 20 March 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:07]

Subordinate Legislation

Plant Health (Import Inspection Fees) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2024 [Draft]

The Convener (Finlay Carson): Good morning, and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2024 of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. I ask everyone to switch their electronic devices to silent.

We begin with consideration of an affirmative Scottish statutory instrument. I welcome Lorna Slater, the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, and her officials: John Speirs, senior policy adviser, and Emily Williams Boylston, a solicitor from the Scottish Government.

I invite the minister to make an opening statement.

The Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity (Lorna Slater): Thank you, convener, for making time today to consider the draft Plant Health (Import Inspection Fees) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2024. The regulations are being made to amend Scottish legislation on plant health to legislate for fees for new checks on medium-risk plants and plant products that are imported to Scotland, as set out in “The Border Target Operating Model”, which was published by the United Kingdom Government in August 2023. Of course, the model is required only as a result of Brexit. The Scottish Government continues to believe that the best trading relationships for Scotland will be found as a European Union member state.

The Scottish Government has been frustrated by how the UK Government is developing the border target operating model in relation to devolved issues. I appreciate that last-minute decisions by the UK Government have meant that the committee has not had the agreed notice period in which to consider some UK statutory instruments, including the one related to the Scottish statutory instrument that is before you today. When it is within our control, we will always endeavour to ensure that the committee has sufficient consideration time, as we have done with the Scottish statutory instrument.

The draft SSI is linked to a UK statutory instrument: the Plant Health (Fees) (England) and Official Controls (Frequency of Checks) (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which the committee considered at its meeting on 28 February. The committee agreed with the Scottish Government’s decision to consent to the provisions being included in UK subordinate legislation, which was welcome. The UK SI makes changes to the official controls regulations to reflect the introduction of plant health checks on certain medium-risk goods, along with similar amendments to the Official Controls (Plant Health) (Frequency of Checks) Regulations 2022, which introduced the current risk-targeted inspection regime.

The 2024 regulations now introduce the Scottish import inspection fees that correspond to the fees for England that are set out in the UK SI. They provide that for a period—currently up to 30 October 2024—no fees are payable for checks relating to medium-risk fruit and vegetables from EU member states and Switzerland and, similarly, for any goods from those countries and Liechtenstein that enter via a west-coast port. That is in line with the UK SI and the border target operating model. The fees in the 2024 regulations are in line with the Scottish Government’s approach to achieving full-cost recovery of service delivery from businesses that use relevant services.

The regulations are, therefore, necessary and appropriate. My officials and I are happy to take any questions from the committee.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): Thank you for your opening remarks, minister. I have a question about the consultation. Two Scottish businesses gave some feedback and only three businesses in total responded. I cannot find the link to the consultation responses. Will you talk us through the two Scottish businesses that expressed no objection to the proposals and what they set out, if you have that information?

Lorna Slater: I will hand over to John Speirs for a bit more detail on that.

John Speirs (Scottish Government): The two businesses were horticultural businesses. I do not have the details to hand, but I can certainly provide them for you.

Rachael Hamilton: That would be helpful. Thank you. From the comments that Ms Slater made, it seems that those businesses have no objection to the proposals. I am trying to balance the argument that was just given to the committee.

The Convener: The consultation was undertaken by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the comment period

was 10 weeks. Three responses were received. Was that three responses in total across the whole of the United Kingdom, two of which were Scottish, or were there three Scottish responses, two of which raised no concerns? I am a bit confused.

John Speirs: There were three responses and two were Scottish. The two Scottish businesses had no concerns. The third response was unrelated to the consultation.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I do not know how many responses to the consultation you would have expected. However, businesses will have to comply with certain requirements. How will they be made aware of the changes with which they will have to comply?

Lorna Slater: I will give a summary and then hand over to John Speirs. Putting the border controls in place is all part of the progress of Brexit. There have been controls for high-risk goods, and now the controls for medium-risk goods are being put in place at the borders.

I ask John to give us some detail about how the businesses find out.

John Speirs: There has been on-going engagement with all the horticultural and plant-based businesses to keep them informed of the development of the border target operating model and the requirements. There has also been engagement as each new phase has been introduced. For example, in the first phase of the border target operating model, which was introduced on 31 January, phytosanitary certificates and plant health certification are required for medium-risk goods that come in from the EU, and there was engagement prior to that to make sure that businesses were aware. Likewise, there is engagement for the changes that will come in at the end of April.

The Convener: The committee has dealt with numerous transitional SSIs on import restrictions. Am I correct in thinking that that is all part of the Windsor framework—the new deal that was agreed at the end of last year—and that no new instruments should come in, because the regulations replace the interim measures?

Lorna Slater: The border target operating model and the Windsor framework are two different things, but I will hand over to John Speirs to get into the weeds of it.

John Speirs: The border target operating model is separate from the Windsor framework. The model is for trade with the EU and the rest of the world, whereas the framework is for trade with Northern Ireland.

09:15

Rachael Hamilton: Ms Slater, you may know that I am convener of the cross-party group on gardening and horticulture, for which the secretariat is the Horticultural Trades Association. An issue that came up at our meeting last week was the need to have tight biosecurity to protect our country from non-native species. That might be slightly different from what we are looking at, but it is related. It would be great if we could have some reassurance that that will be protected, that there will be a seamless and efficient transition and that we will have something that is like-for-like, so that we do not bring species that are not welcome into Scotland.

Lorna Slater: I absolutely share that concern. That is exactly the transition that the border target operating model represents. When we were a full member of the EU, we were able to trade goods without border checks. Trading with the EU has been relatively low risk in the interim period since Brexit because our regulations and requirements were in line. We will inevitably diverge over time, however much we would like to stay in alignment, so we must have border controls now that we are outside the EU. That is why the border controls are being brought in. Trade has been relatively low risk, but the risk could increase over time.

We are taking a risk-based approach. High-risk goods are already being checked, by both documentary means and physical inspections. That is being done at the place of destination, not at the border. Those high-risk goods are already being tracked and managed, and we are now bringing medium-risk goods into the regime, albeit with various exemptions that I would be happy to go into. Essentially, there is a phased roll-out of border controls.

John Speirs may wish to add more detail.

John Speirs: The minister has summarised that well.

The Convener: As there are no further questions, we move on to formal consideration of the motion.

Motion moved,

That the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee recommends that the Plant Health (Import Inspection Fees) (Scotland) Amendment Regulations 2024 [draft] be approved.—[*Lorna Slater*]

The Convener: As no member wishes to debate the motion, is the committee content to recommend approval of the instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Finally, is the committee content to delegate to me authority to sign off our report on the instrument?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: That completes our consideration of the instrument. I thank the minister and her officials for attending. I will suspend the meeting briefly to allow a changeover of witnesses.

09:18

Meeting suspended.

09:22

On resuming—

Petition

Greyhound Racing (PE1758)

The Convener: Our third item of business is consideration of petition PE1758, which calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to end greyhound racing in Scotland.

Before we proceed, I make members and all those with an interest in the petition aware that the evidence session that was scheduled for next week with the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity has been rescheduled for 22 May at the minister's request.

I welcome Daniel Alcorn and George Stark, who will give evidence as greyhound owners and trainers who are registered with the Greyhound Board of Great Britain. Thank you for joining us, gentlemen. The committee has a number of questions for you. As usual, I will kick off. Will you talk us through the scale and the nature of your involvement in greyhound racing? For example, how many dogs do you have, where do you train and kennel your dogs, and where and how often do you race them?

George Stark: I have about 40 dogs in my kennels, ranging from pups to race dogs and retired dogs, the oldest being 13. They are in my kennels in Forth, near Lanark, and we race at Newcastle. The dogs run, on average, about four times a month, and we exercise them at home in between times.

Daniel Alcorn: I, too, have 40 greyhounds at home, four of which are in the house, and I race at Newcastle twice weekly, with the greyhounds running once a week, on average. My dogs range from pups to a 12-year-old, which is the oldest dog that I have.

The Convener: Did you previously race your dogs at Shawfield? When that track closed, did that have an impact on what you did? Did you start to travel more? What was the overall impact of the Shawfield track closing?

George Stark: I raced at Shawfield until 2016, I think. I then moved to Sunderland to race my dogs. On the whole, the closing of Shawfield did not have an impact on my business. However, we would attract dogs that ran at Shawfield into my kennels to race at Sunderland. In 2021, I moved from Sunderland to Newcastle because it is a bit closer to home—it is 20 minutes each way.

The Convener: On your business, do you train and kennel dogs for other people, or do you own all the dogs yourself?

George Stark: I own a lot of the dogs, but I kennel for a few owners I have had dogs with for years. I own the majority of the dogs, and I also breed a lot of them myself.

The Convener: Is that how things normally work? Daniel, you have your own dogs, which you told us about, but do other people come to you and ask you to kennel their dogs and train and race them on their behalf?

Daniel Alcorn: Some people come to me, but I tend not to go down that route. I mostly have my own dogs in the kennel. Some are my father's and some are my father-in-law's. My wife owns a couple of greyhounds in the kennel as well. Our kennel is a close-knit family kennel, really. We do not have any other owners' dogs in it.

The Convener: You did not have any involvement with Shawfield. Did you say that you have raced at the Newcastle and Sunderland tracks?

George Stark: Yes. I was previously at Sunderland, and I moved to Newcastle in 2021.

The Convener: Do you think that there is any demand, need or support for another GBGB track in Scotland? Can you see that ever happening in the future?

George Stark: To be honest, I think that, with the cost of setting up greyhound kennels and starting from scratch, people would need to have a lot of money in the bank or somebody to back them. I am quite lucky that I had family behind me to build the kennels. However, I do not think that a person would ever get rich from greyhound racing. It is very much a labour of love. Obviously, I would love to see another GBGB track open in Scotland, but, to be honest, there would need to be loads of people with loads of money to make it a success. I do not see that happening, unfortunately.

The Convener: Does your business make its earnings from your dogs winning races? You said that you kennel for other people. How do you make a living from your business?

George Stark: At Newcastle, we are paid per runner. We are paid for every dog that we race, and we get a little bit extra when they win the race. On average, I would maybe have between 100 and 120 runners a month. That adds up. However, we are not going to become millionaires from racing greyhounds, that is for sure.

The Convener: Okay. Will you give us an idea of what your kennels are like? It is quite difficult to think how you keep 40 dogs. Can you explain to us how the kennels are set out physically and what sort of regulations you need to abide by to be able to race on GBGB tracks?

Daniel Alcorn: My kennels are all 2.4m by 2.4m. Each kennel houses two greyhounds and has a bedding area of 5 feet by 5 feet. The dogs also have 24-hour access. They have a run outside, and they can go into a concrete paddock, which is 3m long by 2.5m wide. Each kennel has that. I have a kitchen area and a workroom in which the dogs get worked on. They get their grooming, their nails clipped and a bath there. I also have two grass paddocks and three sand paddocks at home that the greyhounds can go into to exercise.

The Convener: Is it fairly well regulated? Does GBGB come in and check that you are abiding by its standards and conditions—that the kennels are kept in a certain way, the dogs are given enough exercise and whatever?

09:30

Daniel Alcorn: Yes. We have a stipendiary steward, Simon Storey, who comes to kennels twice a year. He could come every week if he wanted to. We also now have a vet, Barry Sangster, who comes to the kennels twice a year and can come more frequently if he likes, plus we have the new United Kingdom Accreditation Service accreditation for all the kennels, so they are checked quite regularly.

The Convener: When you go and race, how many dogs do you normally take, and how do you transport them?

George Stark: The dogs are transported in travelling cages that meet specific guidelines that are, I believe, set by DEFRA. They are transported in a van to the track. Daniel's van and my van probably hold pretty much the same; they can hold about 15 dogs in cages. Some days we will go with two or three, and some days we will go with 15—there is no set amount for how many dogs we will travel with.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Thank you for being here. One of the reasons behind the petition that the committee has been asked to look at, or certainly something that is relevant to it, is the "Report on the welfare of greyhounds used for racing in Scotland", which was produced by the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission. It says:

"a dog bred for racing in Scotland currently has poorer welfare than the average of other dogs in the population."

Will you respond to that? What do you think of it?

George Stark: I would debate that, to be honest. Both Daniel and I breed our own dogs. They are well socialised and they are allowed to display behaviour that any pup would. They mingle with kids and adults and they play with toys. We probably feed our pups a better diet than a lot of

pet pups would be fed. They are not fed tinned meat, for example, which, in my opinion, does not have the same nutrients as what we feed them. They are well socialised as they are growing up. There will only be three or four areas breeding in Scotland, but we do it for the love—we would not do it if we did not love having the pups or were not willing to show them love and attention.

Daniel Alcorn: My view is much the same as George's. My dogs get attention every single day, as often as we can be in with them. They go into the paddock to exercise, and they have toys in their paddocks, and a bed. They have their food in there with them, and they have plenty of access to drinking water. In all honesty, I think that greyhounds that are kept in our care are probably treated better than a lot of dogs in the home environment.

Alasdair Allan: Okay. Thanks. I have one other question. The SAWC also specified what it thought were the risks of racing at independent tracks. I appreciate that you are in a strange situation, as you are not here to represent the independent track. I know that your association is with GBGB. Nevertheless, do you have any experience of the track at Thornton or any views about the standards there?

Daniel Alcorn: Before I joined the GBGB—which will be 12 years ago in July; I got my licence when I was 18—I had, for most of my life, been going to the independent tracks such as Armadale, when that was there, and to Thornton with my father, because he raced at that time. The tracks were always kept in great condition, especially Thornton, which is still going. My dad still races there to this day, and the running surface is kept pristine. The boy who owns the track could not do any more to keep the track surface the way that it is—it is second to none.

George Stark: Like Daniel, I grew up going to independent racing before we went under the rules. I have not been to Thornton as much as Daniel has, but I did go to Armadale. Those tracks do not expect dogs to run on a track that is in substandard condition. The dogs that are running there are kept by people who keep one or two dogs in their garden or in their house, so there is no reason to believe that they would be kept in any worse conditions than dogs that are kept by those of us who are regulated and have our kennels inspected. A lot of the dogs that are run at Thornton are family pets.

The Convener: On the back of Alasdair Allan's question, I note that, although the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission has highlighted "specific risks" of racing on independent tracks where there is no regulation, it has also said that

"the ... impact of racing on dogs racing on independent tracks is unknown."

Is there any more risk to dogs running at an unlicensed track such as Thornton than there would be at a GBGB track?

George Stark: Absolutely not. I do not think that there is a vet on site at Thornton these days, but, no matter where you are in the country, you have to be within five or 10 minutes of a vet. There has to be a vet a reasonable distance from our kennels, for instance, just in case anything goes wrong. I know that there are vets very close to Thornton, so I do not see why things should be any different or why there should be any more risk to dogs running there than there would be at the likes of Newcastle, where there is a vet on site.

Daniel Alcorn: At Thornton, we have a vet called Bill, who I know stays local to Thornton and is on call. If somebody needs him, they can go to him as soon as possible.

Kate Forbes (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (SNP): I hear what you say about the welfare of dogs under your care and your view that they are likely to be treated better than pets. Last year, however, we heard from the GBGB about its new welfare strategy, which it said was starting to be implemented at the time. Do you have experience of it, and do you have any views on it? Do you think that it will lead to any change in practice?

George Stark: You are talking about "A Good Life for Every Greyhound", but other things have come in alongside that. On the rehoming side of things, for example, there is the GBGB bond, under which, at the start of a dog's racing career, we pay £200. When it retires, the dog will be sent to an approved rehoming centre—personally, I will only use those centres—which will get a £400 payment for taking the dog in, and we get the dog spayed or castrated before it goes there.

The GBGB is also running some training courses in line with "A Good Life for Every Greyhound", and every trainer is invited to attend them either remotely or, in a couple of cases, in person. There are courses on welfare, feeding and nutrition, and so on. Progress is definitely being made. Anything that can be done to improve conditions is good—and conditions have improved. For a start, we are now being independently inspected by SCI to ensure that our kennels are up to standard, and those inspections take place alongside random inspections. Whenever the GBGB visits, we do not know that it is coming until it is basically at our kennels.

The Convener: What is SCI?

George Stark: Supply Chain In-Sites—it is an independent company with accreditation from the United Kingdom Accreditation Service that has

been appointed to carry out independent audits of our kennels on a yearly basis.

Progress is definitely being made, and, as I have said, I believe that anything that can be done to improve standards as a whole is good. As far as Daniel Alcorn and I—and everybody else—are concerned, I do not think that we would be in the game if we wanted to keep dogs in substandard conditions.

Kate Forbes: That was the strategy that I was referring to. Thank you for that. Did you want to add anything, Daniel?

Daniel Alcorn: No. I think that George Stark has covered everything.

Rachael Hamilton: There will always be some bad eggs who operate in a way or keep their dogs in a certain state that George and Daniel would not be happy with.

The committee has been looking at this issue for a while now, and the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission's report said that it

"did not observe any negative contacts between handlers and greyhounds at the racetrack"

and

"saw no aggression between dogs or other outcomes indicative of poor welfare."

You have said that that is your experience, but, for various groups to be concerned about this issue, something must need to be improved. That is what I want to explore. The experience that you are sharing with us is positive, and I am so pleased to hear it, as I am a dog lover, too, but can you explain why the public and some welfare organisations might think otherwise?

George Stark: I keep an eye on one of the Facebook pages that are pushing for a ban on racing, and it is sharing information from abroad on dogs' welfare and stuff. To be honest, I do not know why anyone would have greyhounds if they did not want to show them love and affection, because they are a lovely breed.

You hit the nail on the head when you said that there was cruelty in all walks of life. I cannot say that I am not aware of any cruelty in greyhound racing, but I am also aware of cruelty to children, for example. There can be cruelty in every walk of life and to everyone. We are responsible for keeping our dogs to a certain standard, but people just keep pushing the bar a bit higher. That is not a bad thing, but with kennel standards, for example, previously you could have wooden kennels where the wood was exposed, and, if the wood was being chewed, a blind eye might have been turned to it. Now, people are straight on to things such as that, because the dog might need more stimulation—or the dog might just want to chew

the wood. Obviously, we need to look into things like that.

Rachael Hamilton: Daniel, what would be the outcome if the welfare of your greyhounds was not good?

Daniel Alcorn: You will know yourself that, if you are not in a good condition, you are not happy. When you walk into my kennels, every dog is up and jumping at you. Their tails are wagging, they are happy to see you and they are licking you. If you did not keep them in a good condition, you would not get that off them. As I have said, if you are not happy in what you are doing, you are not going to show it—you are going to be down. You need to keep the dogs in the best possible conditions.

Although the GBGB sets a standard, I definitely like to go above it—and I know that George is the same. My dogs are actually kept in better conditions than I sleep in—the kennels are warmer than my house is. A main priority for every trainer has to be to go above and beyond every single stage that the GBGB sets out. Even though, as George has said, it keeps adding in other bits every year, saying, "You've got to do this and this," the fact is that, if what it is saying is not already in practice at our kennels, we will look at it and ask what we can do that is better than that. That is what every trainer has to get behind. Although these are the minimum requirements, we need to go above and beyond to ensure that welfare is our number 1 priority.

Rachael Hamilton: My final question is on the public perception that there is bad practice or that people such as yourselves are not keeping your animals in good condition. What more needs to be done to ensure that the general public are aware that the conditions are good and the dogs are happy?

George Stark: To be honest, I do not think that we, as an industry, promote ourselves enough. I have pretty much an open door at my kennels, and anybody—anyone in this room, even—could come any time and we would welcome them in for a look about. That sort of transparency shows that we have nothing to hide at our place.

I just think that we should be promoting ourselves more. Bad news travels faster than good news. That is the case with everything, to be honest, but I think, with the Greyhound Board, we are perhaps trying to promote ourselves more. Obviously, though, there are people out there who are looking to shoot us down at every step of the way.

The Convener: You said that you go above and beyond the GBGB's requirements on animal welfare. The Scottish Animal Welfare Commission has suggested that Scotland should have a

scheme that would be independent of the GBGB, and the Scottish Government has recently consulted on licensing. What are your views on having such an additional licensing scheme in Scotland, for tracks and, in your cases, for kennels?

09:45

George Stark: To be honest, given that we already comply with everything that the GBGB puts in place, I do not see what difference it would make to require us to have an additional licence if it allowed us to carry on doing what we love doing and have known our whole lives—Daniel Alcorn and I have both been involved with it since we were kids. We are open to that. We would rather have additional measures in place in Scotland than see the game totally abolished. I think that everybody in greyhound racing would be in the same situation.

The Convener: So, you would be quite happy if the Government were to consider licensing all aspects of greyhound racing in Scotland. You would consider that and accept it.

Daniel Alcorn: Yes. We would do anything necessary to make sure that the animal that we love most does not disappear.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): Good morning, George and Daniel. Thanks for being here today. I am interested in hearing where dogs are sourced from. You said that you often breed your own, but how do you source your other dogs? For example, I know that Ireland is considered one of the best performance places for greyhounds. I know, too, that the turnaround period for racing is about four years. By that I mean that dogs will only race for that long, so there has to be a turnaround period to keep up with the demand for racing. I am interested in hearing where you source your dogs from.

George Stark: Most of my dogs, other than my home-bred ones, are sourced from Ireland. They have sales auctions there. I have bought dogs off some people for years. If somebody sells you a good dog, you are going to go back to them. At least you know what you are receiving. You know that the dog is coming from a decent person and you have nothing to worry about. I do not think that there are many—if any—bad people in greyhound racing, although, as I said, there are bad people in all walks of life.

Daniel Alcorn: I have 40 dogs, and the vast majority of them are home bred. Out of a kennel of 40 dogs, I have four greyhounds that were purchased from Ireland. Most of my dogs are the same: they are home bred. I have two home-bred dogs that are from other trainers—one in Scotland

and one in England; sorry, that should be two in Scotland—but all my dogs were born at home.

Emma Harper: George, do you have to travel to Ireland to auctions, or is it done online?

George Stark: There are online auctions. I sometimes travel over to the sales, and we use a licensed transporter to get the dogs over here. There are many ways of doing it. I take some dogs in for owners who source them from other trainers in the UK or elsewhere. There are not many of those in Scotland, but I did receive one from a trainer in Scotland last week.

Emma Harper: One of our questions is about having a compatible microchip system whereby dogs that are microchipped in Ireland would be transferable, so that we would be able to trace them more easily. Should that idea be pursued?

George Stark: When we get dogs from Ireland, they are already microchipped. When we register them with the GBGB, that aligns them to us.

Emma Harper: So, it is all compatible, then.

George Stark: Yes, it is.

Daniel Alcorn: Yes.

Rachael Hamilton: Would you mind if I asked a question on that?

Emma Harper: No, I do not mind.

Rachael Hamilton: Is it the Great Britain assured breeders scheme that you work with?

George Stark: It is the Greyhound Board of Great Britain.

Rachael Hamilton: Yes, but is it the GBGB's assured breeders scheme that you work with on getting stock that is approved or assured?

George Stark: No.

Rachael Hamilton: I do not really understand it.

George Stark: When we talk about the Greyhound Board of Great Britain, we are referring to the GBGB.

Daniel Alcorn: The GBGB is the regulatory board, so it is—

Rachael Hamilton: Yes, but is there an assured breeders scheme?

George Stark: No.

Daniel Alcorn: I know that there are microchips just now. All greyhounds currently have a microchip and an ear tattoo, and the GBGB is currently trying to do something different to do away with the ear tattoo, so the dogs do not have to be put through the tattooing any more. That is only in a trial period just now, though.

Rachael Hamilton: Okay. To develop the point, I suppose the question is, what conditions are set? You mentioned the other board—I am sorry; I am getting confused with my acronyms. Are there criteria? For example, horse racing is regulated, so there will be certain conditions or whatever it might be. You go to a person who is an assured breeder, let us say—they might not be; I do not know. That is the question that I am trying to ask. You know that the dogs are coming from good stock. If you did not buy them from good stock, they would not be what you were looking for. When you are buying these pups, are you looking for good welfare standards?

George Stark: You are just looking for good all round. We have dogs of all abilities, but, when we buy dogs in, we want dogs that can run good, because we do not know what we are breeding ourselves, and we do not know how good they will be as runners. I like to buy from the same people we have been going to continually for years.

Rachael Hamilton: Even if you are buying online, you have a relationship with those people, and you know that the dogs are coming from a good home. How do you know?

George Stark: It is not guaranteed, but you hope that they are, if you are buying them online.

Emma Harper: I have a question. You talk about getting a good dog. What does “a good dog” mean? Does it mean a dog that is feisty? You do not want them to be fighting other dogs when they are at a track. How do you know that a dog is going to be a good dog?

George Stark: When I say “a good dog”, I mean a fast runner. I do not mean a well-behaved dog. There are not many bad greyhounds, to be honest; they have a really placid nature. Sorry—I should have said that I meant a fast runner.

We do not know how fast or slow the ones that we breed ourselves are going to be. We are always looking to better how fast our dogs are, but, at my kennel, it does not make any difference whether they are fast or slow—they are all kennelled together and fed the same, and they are all socialised.

The Convener: Rachael Hamilton referred to the Greyhound Board of Great Britain and its plans to set up an assured breeders scheme. It sounds as though you are probably doing most of the things that an assured breeders scheme would do—you try to find out that the dogs are from a good home, and whatever. Would you welcome such a scheme? You guys are doing the right thing, but you have always said that there are some bad actors who might not be following the rules. Would you welcome an assured breeders scheme that would allow people to be part of the GBGB racing circuit, if you like?

Daniel Alcorn: I would say so, yes. Anything that the GBGB wants to put in place that will better the dogs should come in. Any good ideas that it has should be brought forward and implemented as soon as the organisation thinks it is right to do so.

The Convener: We will move to questions about welfare at tracks, with a question from Elena Whitham.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I thank George and Daniel for joining us this morning. I am sorry that I am joining you remotely.

I have some questions on welfare. A key welfare concern that has been raised with the committee is about the risk of injury and fatalities when dogs are racing. How often are the dogs that you train injured during racing, what kind of injuries do they sustain and what are the risk factors?

Daniel Alcorn: Most of the injuries that my dogs sustain are slight muscle pulls, the same as an athlete or a footballer would get. They get same things that humans would get, such as small tendon niggles or muscle injuries, but they can also get the odd bone injury. However, tracks are getting better. New surfaces are put on them all the time, and that should bring down the number of injuries. Over the years, my dogs’ injuries have slightly reduced every year, which might be because I am putting in better paddocks at home or because the tracks are better, or a combination of both. The injuries are mostly just muscle pulls or wee tendon strains.

George Stark: As Daniel said, most are just small muscle injuries. I think very carefully about those. For example, if an older dog gets a muscle injury, we would start the process of finding it a new home. Bone injuries also happen, but usually in run-free fields. At least a track has a surface that has been prepared to a standard that is fit for a dog to run on at 40mph. As Daniel said, most of the injuries that our dogs get are small niggles, at which point we would take the dog off the card to preserve its racing strength and treat the injury.

Elena Whitham: Thanks very much for those answers. I ask for just a wee bit more clarification on what you mean by improvements to the track surface. Am I to understand that tracks are moving away from loose, gravelly surfaces to more compacted ones? We hear about many issues relating to animals going into a bend on an oval track, which is where injuries can occur. Will you say a little about the proposals for straight tracks? How could those work in practice?

George Stark: Straight tracks could have an adverse effect, because a dog has to run faster in a straight line over 500m than it does when there is a bend. They do not keep up the speed on the

bend, although they might get up to a good speed, but, if they were to run flat out for 500m, there would be more chance of injury.

As for track preparation being better, the GBGB now has people in place who visit each track at least once every quarter and test the sand on the surface. Most tracks just have silica sand, which is the easiest way to maintain the surfaces, because there is no gravel on them.

Elena Whitham: Okay. My final—*[Interruption.]*—Please come in, Daniel. I am sorry.

Daniel Alcorn: That is fine. Please carry on.

Elena Whitham: Thank you. This is my final question. You have already touched on the availability of vets at tracks. The GBGB tracks have a vet on site, and you have mentioned the informal arrangements at the Thornton independent track. Have you had to avail yourselves of vet services when your dogs have been racing? You say that most injuries are muscle strains, but catastrophic injuries could happen to dogs. If vets were on hand, those dogs could be treated much more quickly. Could you say a bit more about vets being on hand at tracks and whether you have had to use them?

Daniel Alcorn: Every GBGB track has a vet on site, and Arena Racing Company—ARC—tracks have emergency vets. If a dog broke its hock, for example, the vet at the track would do their best to treat it and get the dog transported to the emergency vet, where it would go straight in for X-rays and, if necessary, pins and plates to correct its leg.

In the times that that has happened at Newcastle, a few vets have been in place. River Vets are 30 minutes from the track. The track vet will bandage or strap your dog up so that it is safe to travel. We have to have a cage made to a specific size so that dogs can lie down in them to be transported to the vet. The dogs will always be operated on within 24 to 48 hours. It just depends on the time that the dog happened to break its leg and whether the vet needs to order in specific plates to do the work, so it also depends on the vet's supplies. Two vet practices—Moorview Vets and River Vets—are within 30 minutes of Newcastle. If a dog sustains an injury like that, the stadium operator, ARC, sends us there straight away to get the correct fix done.

Elena Whitham: Okay. Thank you.

10:00

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Thanks very much for coming in to talk to us today. The evidence so far has been very interesting.

I would like to understand a bit more about what happens during a day at the track. When you go there, how many races take place?

George Stark: Each race meeting has 12 races on the card, with six dogs in each—at Newcastle, anyway. Thornton would run only four or five races just now, with maybe five dogs in each race.

On a typical race day, we will leave the kennels and set off for the track. When we arrive there, the dogs will be weighed to make sure that their weight is correct to within a kilo of their previous racing weight. They will then be inspected by the on-course vet. If there are any issues at that point, we will trot them up and down. The vet will give each dog a physical examination, just to make sure there are no issues with them. They will have their teeth checked and the vet will make sure that they are generally in good health. We will then kennel them. Special racecourse kennels are much bigger than, say, the extra-large dog crates that people might have at home.

When we get the dogs out to race, they are again trotted for the vet, just to make sure that there are no new issues such as a dog having cut its foot because it has been clawing the bars in the kennel, for example. I do not know whether anyone here has ever seen dogs at a racetrack. They are sometimes quite uncontrollable because they are excited to be there and they want to get out and race. That is why they are trotted again for the vet. As Daniel said, if, unfortunately, something does go wrong during the race, the vet is there to help.

I will add something on the back of Daniel's answer to Elena Whitham's question about injuries that we have had to use a vet for. The last time that a dog of mine acquired a serious injury, the race had finished and I was about to put the lead on it. It was having a carry-on with another dog when, unfortunately, it just toppled over and broke its leg. It had to have quite an extensive operation. I still have her at home, but she will be rehomed in due course. I mention that to show that it is not only during a race that a dog could be injured.

Ariane Burgess: Thanks for that. You said that there could be 12 races at Newcastle and fewer at Thornton. I will pick up on Elena Whitham's question and your replies about experiences with the vet. In the course of a race day, how many injuries might you see? Have you ever seen a fatality in a race?

George Stark: We see no injuries at the majority of race meetings. However, I think that everybody who is involved in racing will have seen a fatality. Unfortunately, it does happen. Over the years, I have had a couple of fatalities through dogs having heart attacks. One time, I said to the track vet, "I wish I hadn't brought the dog." She

said, "George, it could have run across the field at home and done the same. It's not any different. In life, dogs can have a heart attack at any time, just as people can." It is true that there are fatalities, but they are at a minimum. We do not go to the track and see multiple injuries every single day that we are there. It would not be a pleasant place for anybody to go if that was the case.

Ariane Burgess: I hear your passion for what you do, but do you feel satisfied with the dogs under your care, which you clearly love, being exposed to fatalities and injuries?

George Stark: Over the years, I have rehomed dogs through a certain charity in Scotland that I no longer use. More dogs that I have rehomed that way have been killed through, for example, being hit by trains or breaking their necks while running in free fields than have been killed on race tracks. The new owners of rehomed dogs have let them run across uneven fields and jump into ditches, breaking their necks. More dogs that have left my care have been killed in that way, so I feel that we safeguard them when they are with us. We run them only on prepared surfaces.

Daniel Alcorn: The tracks are prepared well. If they were not, I probably would not race my dogs on them, because, for me, the dogs come first. If the track was not prepared properly, I would not take my dog to that track. If the tracks were not right at Newcastle or at Thornton—when I was on the independent scene—I would not have gone to them, and I dare say that I can speak for George Stark on that as well. That is the main thing—if we did not think it was safe, we would not be there.

Alasdair Allan: You mentioned how it works with vets, in your experience, at Newcastle. We are also keen to know how it works at Thornton, where there is no resident vet. Daniel, have you raced dogs at Thornton? How has it worked with vets? Have you needed vets in a hurry?

Daniel Alcorn: Before I went to the GBGB, I raced at Thornton. At the time, a vet was at the track for every race meeting and trial session. Over the years, Bill has been too busy to be at the track, but, if need be, he is a phone call away. I cannot remember where he is now, but he comes straight up. It does not matter whether it is 10 or 11 o'clock at night. He meets you there and he will give the dog the appropriate treatment that it needs.

Emma Harper: We have had debates in the chamber about greyhound racing, and one of the accusations made is about the use of cocaine, amphetamines and steroids, which are banned substances for greyhounds. What are your thoughts on the publication of that kind of information?

Daniel Alcorn: In respect of somebody giving those substances to a dog?

Emma Harper: In respect of whether banned substances are given in greyhound racing.

George Stark: Some doping cases have been reported in the Greyhound Board calendar and in some newspapers. I have certainly never had any such cases to answer. I would not give a dog something that I would not take myself. You do not know what effect it would have on a dog, so I do not see why you would give it to her anyway.

Daniel Alcorn: I am like George—I have been in the GBGB for nearly 12 years and I have never had a positive sample for any sort of substance.

The Convener: Do you think that it is an issue, though? I know that you guys are saying that you are not involved, but do you think that it is an issue in GBGB greyhound racing?

Daniel Alcorn: I do not think so—no. There seem to be very limited positive samples. When a sample is positive, the person is reprimanded by the GBGB. That information is all published, so the public can see that the person has given a positive sample, what the dog has had, and the punishment that has been given, such as a fine, a suspension, or whatever has been necessary according to the GBGB.

Kate Forbes: Alasdair Allan mentioned a report from the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission, and I will go back to that with a question about kennelling. The report says that evidence showed that greyhound kennels in Scotland are providing satisfactory levels of care, but it also says that there is a question about the proportion of their life that racing greyhounds are normally kennelled for and what impact that has on their welfare and care. I wonder what you would say about that.

You talked about the socialising that your dogs have access to. Do you think that that is the norm across the board? How would you respond to the SAWC's suggestion that the fact that greyhounds are kept in kennels for so much of their lives does

"not appear compatible with giving dogs a good quality of life"?

George Stark: If you have a dog and you work, the chances are that that dog will be left in the house on its own for much of the day. I have staff at home and they are there when I am at the track. Someone is in our kennels pretty much from 7 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock at night, every day, seven days a week. It is not as if the dogs are just thrown into a kennel, taken out to race and then put back in until the next week. They are getting plenty of exercise and plenty of care.

In addition, anybody who has one of my retired dogs would agree that they settle pretty quickly into the home environment—so much so that a lot of people who have had my retired dogs will take another that has come specifically from me.

That is the case industry wide, I think. Things used to be done in an old-fashioned way: the kennels might be open from early in the morning until 12 o'clock, then the greyhounds were in them until the next day. Now, trainers are at the kennels all day, every day, so it is not as though the dogs are not being prepared for life outside the kennel.

Kate Forbes: The SAWC report talks about giving greyhounds access to paddocks or open areas in order to roam. How do you facilitate that?

Daniel Alcorn: Each of my individual kennels for two dogs has its own outside paddock, where the dogs can go 24/7, and a window. They get direct sunlight. The hatch that they can go out of is never closed. They can go in and out as they please. They can lie outside in the sun, they can stay inside in the cool, or they can go out into the cool if they want, if it is a wee bit warmer in the kennel. Certainly, they also get a lead walk every day, plus they have rest days. For example, if they get a lead walk today, they could be in the paddock tomorrow, if they are not racing this week—if the traps give them a week off, or if I feel that they need a week off just to boost themselves. Sometimes, they are in the paddock with just a toy. My dogs certainly get a lot of free roaming in their paddocks every day.

George Stark: We have paddocks, just as Daniel Alcorn does, and we have a 220m fenced-in run that is scattered all over with toys such as teddies and balls. We take the dogs in there, let them off the lead and let them do what they want, really. There is no vigorous hard training for them in there. We just let them enjoy themselves. I always say to the boys who work at my kennels, “Just keep the dogs happy and they will perform for you.” Letting them play with toys and stuff is part of that.

Rachael Hamilton: In Scotland, a licence is needed for a boarding kennel, and I believe that the local authority looks at the welfare standards for that. What would be your view if the Scottish Government was minded to extend that boarding kennel legislation to greyhound kennels? How would the extension of that regulation for kennel management and standards affect anything that relates to the rest of the United Kingdom? Do you think, as the GBGB does, that welfare standards for kennelling should apply across the United Kingdom, so that there is a seamless approach? Would there be any disadvantage to Scotland bringing in its own regulation?

George Stark: There is no disadvantage to anything that will improve welfare, but it would probably increase our costs. However, like everything else, we would just have to do it. Any time that we are put on another charge, we just need to do it, because racing is what we love doing. If it did happen, we would need to do it. I do not see why it is necessary, but, if it had to happen, we would need to go with it.

10:15

Rachael Hamilton: Your friends probably have dogs, and some people that you know may have boarding kennels. Obviously, we are not at this stage yet, but, if the Government suggests that regulation might happen and there is a consultation on it, what would you say you are doing that is different from what boarding kennels do? Is what you do better or worse than what some boarding kennels provide for the welfare of the dogs?

Daniel Alcorn: I have been in a few boarding kennels, and the standards of welfare in my kennels are on a par with them. I want to be a bit biased and say that mine are better, but the boarding kennels would probably say the opposite. They are on par with each other.

If legislation were to come in, it would be of benefit, as George Stark said. It is just another tick to say that, as well as the GBGB, the GBGB vet and the UKAS, somebody else has checked a greyhound kennel and said that welfare is the number 1 priority. That can only be a good thing for the sport.

The Convener: I am going to move on to questions from Rhoda Grant on retirement—but not her retirement.

Rhoda Grant: After last night, you never know. [*Laughter.*] We were here until late last night, which is the explanation for that comment.

We have talked about dogs retiring and being rehomed. Do all retired dogs go to a rehoming charity? George Stark, you mentioned that you used to work with a charity in Scotland, and you seemed concerned about that charity.

George Stark: Well, I do not use it any more. I use greyhound board-approved rehoming centres, and I can speak for the three centres in Scotland that I use. None of them would support a ban on greyhound racing in Scotland, because they would be worried that the breed that they love would die out. I used to use different rehoming places, but now we just streamline it.

The main one that I use in Scotland does fortnightly walks, and I like to go and see the dogs on those walks. I have been stood watching a walk at Strathclyde park or Drumpellier country park,

and the next thing a dog will drag its new owner off their feet to bounce up on me. We cannot be treating the dogs that badly when they are in the kennel if they are excited to see us once they are retired and in a home.

Rhoda Grant: Can you talk me through the process a wee bit more? You talked earlier about having a 12-year-old dog at home. Which dogs do you decide to keep and which do you decide to rehome? What is the process, and what does the rehoming centre do?

George Stark: I have a 13-year-old dog, and Daniel Alcorn has a 12-year-old—oh, he was 13 on Saturday. My dog went to a rehoming centre and went to a lovely home in Northern Ireland, but he ran away and I had to go and get him. When I went and caught him, the next day, I brought him home and he is still there today. He is quite old now. I do not like seeing any of the dogs go for rehoming, to be honest, but we cannot keep them all, because, at the end of the day, the racing is what we make our money from, and it is what keeps the ball rolling.

The dogs go to a rehoming centre, which will match them up to a suitable home. I would rather do it that way than rehome them privately. I would rehome to friends, but I have friends who run rehoming centres, so I prefer the dogs to be rehomed by them. They will do home checks and whatever else and will match the dog up to the home rather than someone coming along and saying, for example, “I want that one because it has fallen.” They know what they are doing.

I have three retired dogs of my own.

Rhoda Grant: Is it the same for you, Daniel Alcorn?

Daniel Alcorn: Yes. I have four in the house. Like George Stark, we recently took one back from a rehoming centre. The Greyhound Awareness League rehomed a dog from my father that raced on the independent scene. When the dog came over from Ireland, he was quite nervous. My dad wanted to take him in the house at the end of his career, but he had a Labrador in the house at the time and they just did not get on, so he said that it was only fair that he should go to be on somebody else’s couch. He went to the place in October last year. Only three weeks ago, I was phoned to see whether we would take him back. He could not be rehomed because of his nerves. My dad went to pick him up the next day, and he is now in my dad’s house and jumping over everybody. So, we have also taken one back.

Two of the ones in the house are ex-brood bitches that reared pups for us at one stage. I have another one in the house that broke his leg. Unfortunately, he had to get his leg removed

because of where the break was. He now spends his days on our couch and puts us on the floor.

Ours all go to the same places that George Stark uses. We use exactly the same centres that he uses.

Rhoda Grant: Earlier, you talked about a bond. Was it £200? Given that the dogs are, I suppose, like athletes, they will probably have more complex issues when they retire—with muscles and bones, for example. Does that put people off taking them and rehoming them? Are they more expensive to keep than a dog that would be just a pet all its life?

George Stark: I do not think that it is any more expensive to keep a retired greyhound than it is to keep any other dog. They might have arthritis, for example, which would incur a minimal cost. There are also breeds out there that have difficulties breathing because of the way that they are bred. I do not see why a greyhound that has raced would be any different.

I know that most people who have retired greyhounds would rather have a greyhound that has raced, because they have had their daft puppy years while they have been with us and they are starting to wind down when they are being rehomed. I have one that has basically refused to race, so we are in the process of looking for a home for it. It is 14 months old. There is nothing that we can do to make a dog chase a hare—it is not even a hare; it is a bit of material. We cannot force a dog to chase that. She will be looking for a home.

I do not see why keeping a retired greyhound would be more expensive.

Rhoda Grant: Do they adapt quite easily? Does the rehoming centre have to do things to help them to adapt from coming in from kennels to going out to a home?

Daniel Alcorn: We have to do things in our kennels to help with that. The GBGB looks for us to introduce radios 24/7. It asks us whether we can take in a Hoover and Hoover around the kennel once or twice a week so that, when it comes to the transition into a home, the dog is used to such noises and different things that, maybe years ago, it was not used to. People who have rehomed dogs through a centre that both of us use have said that the transitions have been effortless and easy.

George Stark: In September last year, I think, I went to one of the greyhound walks, and a family fell in love with a dog that was still at my kennel. I will be honest: I was a bit nervous because it was a multiple-dog household. The dog just went into the house, went straight up on the sofa and lay down. I was in the house for an hour, and you

would have thought that he had been there his whole life. The dog was straight out of a racing kennel in the morning and straight into someone's house in the afternoon.

Emma Harper: I have a quick question. When a greyhound has a litter of puppies, how many puppies are normally in a litter and how many of those puppies become racing greyhounds that are good enough to race? I am thinking about whether there are too many that need to be rehomed after racing.

Daniel Alcorn: Last year, one dog had a litter of eight. One of them never made the track; he is the same as George Stark's pup and is not interested. If he sees a mechanical, he just wags his tail and wants to play with you rather than chase. Out of that litter of eight, one has not made the track and is waiting for a rehome just now. There was also a litter of two, both of which got to the track and are racing fine. I have two off a boy who stays in Laurieston and they both hit the track as well. I think that his litter had six or seven, and they are all racing. Out of my 10, only one never hit the track out of that many, so the number of greyhounds that are not interested in racing when they get to the track is quite minimal.

George Stark: When we breed a litter, I do not sell them—and Daniel Alcorn does not sell them—when they are pups. It would be like selling a child, to be honest. You are hoping that you will be able to see them all race. You bring them up, school them for racing, race them and then see them off to a rehoming centre. I let some of the volunteers from the rehoming centre come to my kennel and meet the dogs as puppies—Daniel may do the same—to create a bond with them, so that they can follow them through their racing career and potentially provide a home at the end of it.

The Convener: I will bring in Mark Ruskell to ask some questions.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Thanks, convener, and thanks to the witnesses for coming along this morning. It is good to hear about your high standards of kennelling, your love for the sport and your love for the dogs. I do not deny that, but do you accept that there are still inherent risks to greyhound racing that you put the dogs through? Perhaps I could use an example. Daniel Alcorn, one of the dogs that you owned and trained, Bluesy Watermill, which you passed on to another owner, has in recent years developed quite a chronic heart and lung condition.

Daniel Alcorn: It is Watermill Bluesy.

Mark Ruskell: The dog has been taken to a number of vets, including cardiovascular specialists, who believe that the reason why the dog is suffering from that condition is because of

the racing. It was raced 67 times under your care, which is, I think, seen to be quite excessive.

I do not deny that your kennelling, which you have described this morning, appears to be exemplary, but do you acknowledge that racing the dogs causes an inherent risk and that dogs such as Bluesy can, in some cases, go on to develop quite debilitating conditions as a result of that?

Daniel Alcorn: The woman who rehomed Bluesy got in touch with me recently to ask if any others in the litter had had the same problem. There has been nothing else in that litter of pups, and I see one of them every month at the greyhound box that me and George both attend. I was talking to her about that but saying that it was worth checking it out, just in case.

In terms of the 67 races, there are greyhounds that can run 250 races over a five-year period and are then rehomed and live the rest of their days without having any issues. I have never heard of anything like that happening before, so I think that Bluesy is just a rare case. I would not put it down to the racing. I would definitely say that it has nothing to do with that, because many greyhounds go to 250 races and never have any of those issues—67 races is just a fraction of what they have had.

Mark Ruskell: Your opinion differs from that of the vets and cardiovascular specialists.

The GBGB figures show that there are also injuries and deaths at the track. Would you consider that level of injuries and deaths to be acceptable? Is that an acceptable risk for the dogs?

10:30

George Stark: In the past few days, I had a look at the injury statistics and saw that 0.03 per cent—I think—of injuries on the track are fatalities. The statistics have been published. As I said earlier, there are also fatalities on run-free fields. I am on greyhound rehoming web pages and so on, and I see that all the time on those.

The injury and fatality stats have definitely come down over the past 10 or 15 years, and we are making things better. Anything that can be done to make things better would be welcomed by us. It would be great if we could have zero injuries and zero fatalities, but it happens in dogs the same as it happens in people.

Mark Ruskell: The only way to get zero injuries and fatalities would be if we did not race the dogs on a curved track at 40mph.

Daniel Alcorn: But that is you saying, in effect, that the only way that we would get no injuries is

by not allowing a dog off a lead. If you go to a run-free park, a dog can break its leg or pull a muscle. Does that mean that every dog should be restricted to being on a lead and should never once be allowed to be a dog?

Mark Ruskell: Okay. I have a final set of questions about the number of dogs that are involved. George said earlier that he currently kennels 40 dogs. What is the throughput of dogs? How long would you normally keep a greyhound for? You mentioned that some dogs have become your family pets and are now living on the sofa. How many dogs come through the kennels from year to year? How many have come through your kennels in the past five years?

George Stark: We are probably both in a similar position. We do not have a massive turnover of dogs. I do not sell dogs on once I have them. If I buy a dog or breed a dog, I do not sell it on. I like to see them through until they go to the rehoming centre. I do not have stats handy on what the turnover of dogs has been. I know that, during lockdown, we were rehoming dogs with no injuries, because rehoming centres were wanting dogs to rehome due to the demand for them. If a dog had cut its foot or something, we would just let a rehoming centre have it.

Mark Ruskell: You must surely know how many dogs have gone through your kennels in recent years. You have 40 now, so how many were there two years ago? How many dogs have been moved on over that time? We need to get a sense of the throughput of dogs.

George Stark: We would have figures in our books at home on how many have moved through. We tend to keep about 40 at one time. There would have been 40 two years ago, and there are 40 now. I retire about 10 or 12 dogs a year, and they are replaced by pups coming through that we have bred.

Daniel Alcorn: It is much the same for me. I probably rehome one dog a month or, in the odd month, perhaps two dogs. It depends on whether they have sustained an injury. Although some injuries are not classed as career-ending injuries, I am a wee bit soft. If I think that an injury might come back, I will not take the dog racing again.

The dogs' age is a big factor in it. Like George, during lockdown I had dogs that had just turned four or were turning four in two or three months' time, and the rehoming centres that we use got in touch with us and asked whether we had any dogs that would fit their criteria. We did not know how long the lockdown would last, so, rather than having those dogs in a kennel environment for a long period when they could be in a home environment, I decided that it was best for them to go for homing.

After three months off, any athlete is prone to doing damage to themselves when they come back to it. As the dogs were perhaps going to have that length of lay-off, I decided to rehome the older ones to prevent them from sustaining any injuries through coming back to racing.

Mark Ruskell: What is the length of a racing greyhound's career? Is it a couple of years? Is it three to four years?

Daniel Alcorn: [*Inaudible.*]—when they are allowed to race at the track and they will race until they are anything up to five years old. The odd dog will want to keep going. Some dogs will go to six years old, but most people would say that the time to retire is between the ages of four and five.

Mark Ruskell: Of the dogs that you pass on—you say that that is about 10 a year—how many have injuries? Do they all have injuries, or are some of them just too old and not fast enough?

Daniel Alcorn: None of them has an injury when they leave us. If they did have an injury, that will all be sorted before they leave. If a dog has broken a toe or pulled or torn a muscle, that will all be taken back to the standard at which a dog should be, with the torn muscle or broken toe healed, before the dog leaves the kennel. The local vet that I use checks the dogs over, and he will tell me whether a dog is fine for homing. When dogs go for homing in Newcastle, the vet checks them again and either gives me a certificate to say that the dog can pass for homing or says, for example, that the dog is still feeling that sore muscle a wee touch, so we need to keep ultrasounding it to get the soreness out in order that the dog can go for homing.

Mark Ruskell: So, the dog is fit for rehoming but not fit for racing.

George Stark: Yes. We take the dogs to the track and the vet has to sign them off as fit for rehoming, checking that their teeth are at a reasonable standard and that any injuries are healed sufficiently. We would not send a dog that was injured and still limping to a rehoming centre. That would only have a negative impact on us, to be honest.

The Convener: Alasdair Allan has some questions to wind up.

Alasdair Allan: One of the things that we are interested in, following the evidence that we have heard previously, is what the future of this pastime looks like. The only places in the world where greyhound racing is still legal are—please keep me right—the UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, three or four states in the US, Mexico and Vietnam. As we have talked about, there is now only one place in Scotland where it happens. We heard in previous evidence that the attendance at

Thornton has been declining. I do not know whether that is true or whether you can offer any insight into that. Is there a decline in the number of people who are involved in this activity?

George Stark: I do not go to Thornton, so I do not know what the attendance is like there. I can speak for Newcastle, though. The attendance at a Tuesday morning meeting when we are racing is completely different from that of a Saturday or Friday afternoon, because it is still a popular sport for stag events, hen nights and family parties. You can expect a crowd on Thursday nights, Friday afternoons and Saturday afternoons at Newcastle. The races on a Tuesday morning or a Wednesday afternoon are pretty much being run to be broadcast around the world.

Daniel Alcorn: Most of the attendees on those days are people who own greyhounds that are racing that day. They go to see their dogs race as a hobby.

The Convener: As there are no further questions, I thank George Stark and Daniel Alcorn. We have kept you longer than we intended, but that reflects our interest. Thank you very much for your comprehensive answers, which have been most helpful. As I said, we will return to the issue with the minister in May.

That concludes our business in public.

10:38

Meeting continued in private until 11:36.

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