

# **LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE**

Tuesday 3 April 2001  
(*Afternoon*)

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# CONTENTS

Tuesday 3 April 2001

Col.

DOG IDENTIFICATION GROUP RECOMMENDATIONS.....	1774
SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION.....	1809

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## LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

11<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2001, Session 1

### CONVENER

\*Trish Godman (West Renfrew shire) (Lab)

### DEPUTY CONVENER

\*Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab)

### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

\*Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP)

\*Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

\*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

\*Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

\*Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD)

\*attended

### WITNESSES

Libby Anderson (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)

John Arthur (Society of Chief Officers of Environmental Health in Scotland)

Tom Bell (Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland)

Kathleen Bunyan (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)

David Ewing (Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home)

Assistant Chief Constable Colin McKerracher (Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland)

Heather McLean (Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home)

Alan Sim (Scottish Kennel Club)

### CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Eugene Windsor

### SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Irene Fleming

### ASSISTANT CLERKS

Craig Harper

Neil Stewart

### LOCATION

Committee Room 1



## Scottish Parliament

### Local Government Committee

*Tuesday 3 April 2001*

*(Afternoon)*

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 14:01*]

**The Convener (Trish Godman):** Right comrades, it is 2 o'clock and we are quorate so we can begin. This is Neil Stewart's last day with us, which is why he has been allowed to sit at the top table.

**Mr Kenneth Gibson (Glasgow) (SNP):** Where is he off to?

**The Convener:** I do not know, but I hope that it is somewhere better than this. Irene Fleming will be with us full-time until the summer. That is good, but we are sorry to lose you, Neil. We will be welcoming Irene after the break.

Kenny Gibson will love this, but I have to ask members if we can take item 7 in private. The reason for that is that it concerns a paper from the conveners liaison group, which has asked that all committees hear the paper in private. Sylvia Jackson and I were not in attendance when that decision was made, so we were not party to it. When members have read the paper, they will appreciate that we should discuss it in private. Do members agree? Do not say anything to upset us all, Kenny.

**Iain Smith (North-East Fife) (LD):** I am not sure that we would want to inflict our discussion on the public in any case.

**Mr Gibson:** I do not know—we had to watch you at the Liberal conference last week.

**The Convener:** Can I have agreement on that?

**Members indicated agreement.**

## Dog Identification Group

### Recommendations

**The Convener:** We have with us Alan Sim, who is the secretary general of the Scottish Kennel Club. The procedure is that you speak for a few minutes, then I open it up to the committee for questions. Thank you for coming—it is over to you.

**Alan Sim (Scottish Kennel Club):** Thank you. The Scottish Kennel Club is well over 100 years old. I have been doing this job for slightly less time than that—24 years, to be precise. I have been concerned with dog legislation and proposed dog legislation for some years.

The Scottish Kennel Club is a non-profit organisation, not a charity. It is an open club, with about 2,500 members throughout Britain. The objects are to promote and encourage the improvement and well-being of dogs, to hold dog shows and other canine events and to promote education, study and research into canine matters generally.

We also have an important function of exercising in Scotland the powers and duties of the UK Kennel Club. That entails licensing all dog shows in Scotland and providing an advisory service on all canine matters. The relationship between Westminster and the Scottish Parliament is similar to that of the UK Kennel Club to the Scottish Kennel Club.

We hold two major championship shows each year at Ingliston and, most important, we operate a breeders register, which is regarded as the pre-eminent source of puppies, stud dogs and adult dogs in Scotland. We maintain the integrity of that register by insisting that anyone on it signs a declaration.

With regard to the recommendations, I will say three things before commenting briefly on each item.

First, the Scottish Kennel Club works closely with the Kennel Club. Since it was heavily involved in the DIG report, we have been kept in touch with developments and broadly support the recommendations in the report.

Secondly, we can see no reason why the recommendations should not be adopted for Scotland, although our perception is that the stray problem in Scotland is not as great as it is in some parts of England and Wales. The dog warden scheme has been quite effective up north and has reduced the problem in many areas.

Thirdly, we think that there would be considerable merit in adopting a UK approach to the matter. While we understand the devolved

nature of legislation, it makes sense from all points of view for a UK-wide approach to be taken.

We support permanent identification and have promoted it for years through the provision of microchipping clinics at our championship dog shows. We support both microchipping and tattooing and think that DNA profiling may become a feasible option in a few years.

We believe that having an industry-standard database system is essential to the operation of an efficient system in this country. Of course, we are familiar with the pet log system that is used by the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and other bodies in Scotland in combination with microchipping. If, for any reason, a separate system were required for Scotland, we think that a version of the pet log system could be put in place quite quickly.

On the issue of whether the system should be voluntary or compulsory, our view has always been that some responsibility should be placed on dog owners. Therefore, our strong view is that a compulsory system is unlikely to be any more successful than the collar-and-tag requirement at present. That is why we strongly support a voluntary system. However, we believe that the success or failure of the system should be reviewed after a set time.

We think that the 75 per cent target is a little ambitious but that a lower level would indicate a lack of confidence in the voluntary system. If we are to introduce a voluntary system, we should aim for 75 per cent or above. We agree with the report's conclusion that the impact on enforcement bodies would be minimal. Perhaps the police and the dog wardens would be affected but we envisage no major effect other than that.

We have strong views on the educational aspect. Whether the system is voluntary or compulsory, it will not work without a related education programme, which is strongly emphasised in the report. We are willing to use our wide channels of communication and our close working relationship with all bodies connected with dogs in Scotland to assist in that effort and to encourage those with whom we come into contact to microchip or tattoo their dogs.

On the proposal to extend the group that exists down south, it may be considered that it might be appropriate to have some form of advisory body in Scotland to deal with the matter. If such a body were set up, we would wish to be involved in the body and would be happy to offer any administrative or secretarial back-up that might be required to assist such a body in the same way as the Kennel Club has done south of the border.

It is important that the cost of microchipping is kept to a reasonable level, not only for the benefit

of the disadvantaged but to ensure the success of the system. Those of you who own dogs will know that dog ownership is not an inexpensive matter and will be aware that an element of resistance to identification will be on the basis of price. It is important that we identify means of keeping the cost to reasonable levels.

Secondly, it is absolutely vital that readers are widely available, and that as many sources as possible have them, if the system is to be effective.

Finally, on a related point about dog legislation generally, if a compulsory scheme is considered, the Parliament should be aware of the many different pieces of legislation, existing and proposed, which impact on dog ownership in Scotland. Further, apart from one small piece of legislation—the Animal (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986—responsibility for all animal welfare and specific canine-related legislation is devolved, including the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991. All through my 24 years with the Scottish Kennel Club, I have observed complications creeping in because of one piece of legislation after another being introduced without fully considering how the existing legislation overlaps or impacts on it.

**The Convener:** I want to ask a brief question, because I know that other members are interested in the wider issue. You support a voluntary scheme, which would be in place for a proposed five years. That seems to me to be rather a long time. Why should it be five years before we move to a compulsory scheme?

**Alan Sim:** In the nature of things, it takes quite a long time to change people's views on such matters. It would probably take a year for the information from the education scheme to filter through, and you would need two or three years at least to assess its impact, so you will need four years anyway, with perhaps a further year to assess the proposals. What they had in mind south of the border was that by the end of five years they would have made a decision on whether to introduce a compulsory system.

**The Convener:** So you think that five years is fair enough?

**Alan Sim:** Yes.

**Mr Gibson:** First, I am pleased to see that the Scottish Kennel Club now has more members than the Liberal Democrats.

**The Convener:** Kenny.

**Mr Gibson:** You said that the target of 75 per cent is ambitious but, in the long run, do you expect that that figure will steadily increase once it has been reached, or is the target of 75 per cent the final figure?

**Alan Sim:** It would be perfectly possible to increase that value. It will depend on a number of factors, another of which, as I have said, is the cost of microchips, but another of which is the extent of the education programme, which will depend on the resources that are placed at the disposal of those who will introduce it.

**Mr Gibson:** You propose that the identification scheme should be voluntary. Given that the least responsible dog owners are more likely to have animals that will pose a threat to other beasts, do you think that a voluntary scheme will militate against responsible dog owners?

**Alan Sim:** It will militate against them even more if you introduce a compulsory system, because you will place a burden—which does not have to be borne by less responsible owners—on responsible owners. All along it has been proved that far and away the best way to proceed is to have a voluntary system and encourage people through education. In addition, how on earth is a compulsory system to be made effective in practice? If a stray is taken off the street and it is not microchipped or tattooed, how on earth will you identify its owner? The voluntary system is clearly the answer.

**Mr Gibson:** One last question, convener. How would you like the Scottish Executive and Scottish Parliament to promote this scheme?

**Alan Sim:** They should use all the means at their disposal. First, they should consult those of us who have wide experience of our own education programmes and of how they can be effective. After that, it would be a matter of whatever resources were available, and a decision on what would be a suitable campaign.

**Mr Gil Paterson (Central Scotland) (SNP):** You will have to forgive me if I slip and call this a voluntary tie-up scheme. I might do that.

**The Convener:** May I stop you for a minute, Gil? Will SNP members please stop doing that? If you continue to do that, I will not allow you to ask questions.

**Mr Paterson:** Well—

**The Convener:** Gil, will you please ask your question.

**Mr Paterson:** Yes, I will certainly ask my question. It is just a bit strange, but never mind.

I want to pursue Kenny Gibson's line of questioning. Is the problem not dogs, but dog owners? With any voluntary scheme, the current problems with tagging or otherwise will still persist; similarly, responsible owners will do the right thing by their dogs, because they love them as companions. I assume that you are saying that, if the voluntary scheme is not working after five

years, you would want to kick it up to a compulsory scheme. If that is the case and the real problem lies with owners instead of the animals, do you think that it is inherently wrong not to legislate so that at long last we can look after animals properly?

14:15

**Alan Sim:** There is no proof that imposing things on people will make them change their minds in the way you have described, which is why the education programme is the obvious answer. Unless they are encouraged, people will not do something that they do not want to do, and that would be the case even if any compulsory measures were accompanied by an education programme. That argument has been raised time and again in relation to dog registration and I think that sense has now prevailed.

**Mr Paterson:** Are you sufficiently confident that, if the resources were available, the introduction of an education programme would have the desired effect?

**Alan Sim:** I believe so. Other areas of dog ownership have shown that, by encouraging people through education programmes, they will see the sense of what is being proposed and will comply. For example, the fact that there are fewer strays in Scotland is not just down to the dog warden scheme, but to the wider education programme surrounding it. The dog wardens are—dare I say it—very educated people, and do a lot of good through educating the public about dog ownership.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson (Stirling) (Lab):** I want to ask you about microchipping.

**Alan Sim:** Nothing technical, I hope.

**Dr Jackson:** You mentioned microchipping and tattooing. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the two practices? Why would a microchip be used in one case and a tattoo in another?

Furthermore, Simon Swift has written an article about the adverse reactions to microchipping, pointing out that the research does not identify whether a vet has implanted the microchip. As vets will obviously need to be involved in any microchipping system, when do you think the microchip will be implanted and who will have to bear the cost?

**Alan Sim:** You have raised a number of questions there. As I said, I am not technically minded, and I cannot comment too much on the microchip and its possible migration. Although I am not aware of this particular gentleman's research, all the research to date of which I am aware indicates that microchipping is a very safe

form of identification. There have been one or two alleged cases of migration of chips, but the number of such cases is very small indeed. The practice has the general support of the veterinary profession and dog owners. Dog owners are usually very careful with their dogs, and if they were unhappy about implanting something such as microchips into them, there would have been a move against the practice long before now.

As for the differences between microchipping and tattooing, I think that it is simply a matter of choice for people. Neither practice is better than the other, nor is one more dangerous than the other.

**Dr Jackson:** When would be the best time to implant the microchip? The SSPCA recommends that the best time is when the dog is sold.

**Alan Sim:** It should possibly be even earlier than that. The Scottish Kennel Club's dogs are registered by the breeder, who must register the litter. The best way would be for the breeders to microchip their puppies. Although there would be resistance—for example, if a breeder had 10 rottweilers and was unable to pass on the charge, a fair cost would be involved—that would be the best way of registering the dogs. Generally, breeders are responsible and would be less likely simply to pass the dog on in the hope that the new owner would arrange for the microchip to be implanted.

**Dr Jackson:** Who should pay the cost?

**Alan Sim:** I would like the dog owner not to have to pay, but I see no other way round it. Paying for the implantation of the microchip would become part of the cost of owning a dog. In fact, £20 or £25 is a small part of the total cost of owning a dog. I guess that the measure would be accepted.

**The Convener:** Some charities help people on benefits with the cost of dog identification. If we went down the road that is being suggested, would charities still be able to do that? The cost seems reasonable, but should we look at the issue?

**Alan Sim:** The cost will have to be looked at. A few companies make microchips and encouraging competition among them would, I hope, drive down the cost. The SSPCA and other bodies do excellent work but, like all charities, they have finite resources. Some form of subsidy would need to be introduced somewhere along the line. Although one might say that people who cannot afford it should not have a dog—broadly, that is correct—there are widely known benefits of owning a dog. It would be wrong to deny people a dog, which might for different reasons be of benefit to them, simply because they could not afford a microchip.

**Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab):** My question may go back to the earlier question about the membership of the Scottish Kennel Club. I do not know whether it is accurate to say that your organisation has more members than some political parties, but I am sure that your members probably have more maturity—in fact, the dogs might have more maturity—than some political parties.

**The Convener:** Excuse me.

**Mr McMahon:** The dog identification group's report referred to the make-up of dog ownership and how people in social classes 1, 2 and 3 are more likely be able to afford to look after their dogs. Do you have any evidence that stray dogs are prone to come from families or owners who are in the lower socioeconomic groups?

**Alan Sim:** The Scottish Kennel Club does not have any evidence of that, but it is generally accepted that that is the case. If one looks at the pattern of where strays are collected by the dog wardens, one generally finds that the strays come from the housing scheme areas, such as the well-known housing schemes in Edinburgh. Apart from that, people who live in flats in the centres of cities and towns are perhaps more likely not to look after their dogs. The dogs might be chucked out in the morning and, with a bit of luck, brought back in at night. There is quite a lot of information on that.

**Mr McMahon:** Would a registration scheme help to deal with that kind of animal welfare issue?

**Alan Sim:** No. A compulsory scheme would not help at all.

**The Convener:** Does the Scottish Kennel Club permanently identify dogs that are rehomed?

**Alan Sim:** We have no involvement in identifying stray dogs. The welfare body, the SSPCA, and the dog and cat homes such as the one in Edinburgh are the organisations that take in strays. However, we fully support what those organisations do in that respect. It makes sense for stray dogs to be microchipped when they are taken in by those organisations, and certainly before the animals leave their premises.

**Dr Jackson:** You talked about taking an holistic approach to legislation. Could you elaborate on those remarks, making reference to the DIG report? What do you see as the difficulties with existing legislation?

**Alan Sim:** Owing to the vagueness of current legislation, the average dog owner is confused about his or her rights. I am aware that other pieces of legislation may be introduced but, before we go too much further, it would be sensible to sit down and look at what is already available and whether that can be brought together in some way.



**The Convener:** You commented on the fact that there is a lot of animal welfare legislation. Certainly, we are well aware of that. As much of the matter is devolved, your comment leads me to think that we need joined-up legislation as well as joined-up government. On your suggestion about consultation, I am sure that members of the Local Government Committee agree with me that, when the time comes, people such as you should be consulted.

You said that most dog owners are responsible people. Does that not depend on the occupation of the person who is making that comment? As a social worker who has worked in the east end of Glasgow, I would take you up on that statement and argue to the end of the day that most people do not look after their dogs.

Thank you for your time. As I said, when the Local Government Committee starts to consider legislation, we will consult and we will get back to you.

**Alan Sim:** I thank the committee for inviting me to give evidence. I will leave members two copies of our annual report.

**The Convener:** Comrades, we now have with us representatives from the Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home: David Ewing, who is its general manager, and Heather McLean, who is an assistant manager. As they have been sitting in the public gallery, they will know the format, which is for them to speak for a few minutes before I open up the meeting for questions.

**David Ewing (Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home):** For those who do not know the Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home, let me say that we are the oldest animal charity in Edinburgh. We have been in existence since 1873. Our main remit is to try to reunite lost dogs and cats with their owners. We also take in unwanted pets from owners who, for one reason or another, no longer want them. Our function is to try to rehome those animals. We also board animals when people go on holiday.

Our main function is to assist with the problem of stray dogs. In an average year, we would expect to take in between 1,300 and 1,500 stray dogs and puppies. Of that number, we would expect around 60 to 70 per cent to be reclaimed and reunited with their owners. A sad statistic is that less than 10 per cent of the animals that come our way are microchipped. We feel that, if the scheme was encouraged and that percentage increased, the animals could be reunited with their owners much more quickly than they are at the moment. The average stay for a stray dog is up to 48 hours before it is reunited with its owner.

Those are the genuine strays—the dogs that are genuinely lost. Unfortunately, a large minority of the dogs that are classified as strays are

deliberately abandoned by their owners. We are required by law to keep stray dogs for seven days, during which time an owner can claim their pet. After that period, the animal becomes the property of the dog and cat home, of the SSPCA centre or of whoever is involved, and we are left with the task of trying to find a new home for it.

14:30

I am not sure that I can add much more to what I have said. At the moment, we are microchipping around 61 per cent of all the dogs that pass through our hands during the year. We microchip animals at the point of rehoming; we see no advantage in microchipping an animal when it first comes in, as it may be reunited with its owner and some owners are resistant to the idea that we have interfered with their pet. However, we would like every stray animal to be microchipped as it is claimed. If that happened, in two to three years, the number of animals that came to us would be better controlled. Even if the number did not decline, at least the animals would be reunited with their owners much more quickly.

**Heather McLean (Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home):** We offer a microchipping service to dog owners at a reduced rate: we charge £12.50. We regard that as extending our work and making it easier to reunite people with their pets. The drawback with the microchip system is that people sometimes do not inform us when they have moved house or changed their phone number, for example. The only situations in which we have found it difficult to return a microchipped dog to its owner are when we have not had the owner's phone number or current address.

One of the other operations that the home is involved in is education. At the moment, that is conducted informally, on an ad hoc basis. We visit schools, but we do not have the resources to produce educational materials to fit in with the curriculum; we have to play it by ear. We would like to do more in that line, but we are constrained from doing so.

**The Convener:** Given what you have said about microchipping and the education that you provide, do you think that there is a need for an advisory group to link with the Scottish Executive, which is about to consider legislation? Would that be useful in ensuring consultation?

**David Ewing:** It would be very useful. Much more feedback could be passed on to the Parliament, which would help you to formulate legislation. So many organisations are now involved with animal welfare—they all have a part to play—that that could be constructive.

**The Convener:** I open up the discussion for members' questions.

**Iain Smith:** I shall get in before all my questions have been asked. Do you think that microchipping should be compulsory or voluntary?

**David Ewing:** My view is that it should be compulsory. Anything that is organised on a voluntary basis will not work, as there is a hard core element of people out there who will not comply voluntarily. The ways in which people can adopt a pet should be tightened up. The question is whether people should have to get a licence or have their animal microchipped. I believe that some form of registration should be required before people can adopt a pet.

**Heather McLean:** It would be useful if people had to acquire a dog licence that could be endorsable or could be removed in cases of animal cruelty. That could provide an extra layer of protection for the animals and it might offer opportunities for requiring people to gain more education and training to retain their licence.

**Iain Smith:** The DIG report recommends the voluntary route, but how can we follow that given that we have to progress from one in 10 dogs being microchipped to 75 per cent of dogs being microchipped within five years?

**David Ewing:** We need to educate people—not just at the classroom level, but the grown-ups. We need to be able to publicise the matter, through reaching different user groups. We need to encourage people and explain the benefits of having their dogs chipped.

I will cite one example. A little Staffordshire bull terrier was handed in two weeks ago. We discovered that it had a microchip, which we scanned. The identification showed that the owner lived in Croydon, in Surrey. We contacted the owner, who nearly crashed his car. The dog had been stolen in January and had ended up in East Lothian. The odds against us reuniting that dog with its owner in Croydon would have been impossibly high had it not been for the microchip. That is an extreme case, but it illustrates one of the reasons why people should have their dogs chipped.

**The Convener:** It is also a reason for not answering the phone when driving.

**Mr Gibson:** For seven years, I was councillor for the ward in which the Glasgow Dog and Cat Home is located. In 1994, I came to an arrangement with the home. Its staff agreed that anyone living in that ward could, if they wished, have their dog microchipped free of charge. On the date that was set for that, more than 200 people showed up. The idea was very popular. That suggests that one of the problems is that many dog owners simply do not know that microchipping schemes exist, which is why the educational aspect is important. How do you manage to get across to people the

importance of microchipping?

**David Ewing:** We make the suggestion mostly to people who come to claim their pets. We will say to them that they have not had their dog microchipped and tell them that we can provide that service for a reduced cost. We will explain the benefits, pointing out that, if the dog had been microchipped, it would have been scanned and identified and we would probably have contacted the owner within 10 minutes of its arriving at the centre—it would not have had to sit in the kennels and the expense would probably have been less. The sooner that people can come and claim their pet, the less they have to pay, as we have a boarding fee.

Part of the problem is that the dog warden services and the police authorities, which are responsible for picking up and delivering stray dogs to us, do not carry scanning equipment. The animal, instead of being scanned when picked up and possibly reunited with its owner, ends up coming to the dog home. That makes people disgruntled—they might ask what they have had their dog microchipped for. We will say that we are sorry, but point out that we have the facilities to scan and identify the dog so that we can contact the owner. We are not responsible for the other bodies that pick up the strays.

**Mr Gibson:** You would obviously like the police and local authorities to do the scanning themselves.

**David Ewing:** I think that they should. If they are picking the animals up, I think that they are responsible for doing that. It takes only seconds to scan an animal.

**Mr Gibson:** You have limited resources. Do you think that the local authorities or the Scottish Executive should be responsible for educating the general public about microchipping? If so, how should they go about it?

**David Ewing:** We could do that as a joint venture. I am certain that we would be able to make some funds available; the council could make even more money available. It should not be difficult to get the message across to people—there are many different user groups and we could use the libraries, posters and leaflets, and press coverage.

People should be encouraged; we should not make them feel that they are nasty because they have not had their dogs microchipped. If we come down too heavily, people might rebel a wee bittie. However, we have to point out the benefits of having a dog microchipped. They are not just that the dog can be reunited; a microchip may prevent road accidents.

**Mr Gibson:** What impact would microchipping

have on what are big issues in all urban areas of Scotland, about which councillors and MSPs get numerous complaints—dog fouling and the number of strays around the towns and villages of Scotland?

**David Ewing:** I am not convinced that simply microchipping a dog will prevent those problems. In such cases, the problem is not so much with the dog, but with the owner. It is rare to find a bad dog. Usually, there are bad dog owners. Those are the people who need to be educated. In a nutshell, we need to get to the owners and point out the rights and wrongs, which they should know anyway. On a number of occasions, I have stopped people and said, "Your dog's just poed on the road. Do you have something to pick it up?" "What's it got to do with you, pal?" is the sort of attitude you get. Unless we can educate people that that is wrong and unacceptable, we will not get very far. Education is definitely the way forward.

**Mr Gibson:** If the scheme reduced the number of strays, would not that per se reduce dog fouling, even if some of it is caused by people taking their dogs on to someone else's patch or on to public grass?

**David Ewing:** I think that it would reduce it, but I do not think that it would rule it out completely.

**Dr Jackson:** Do the 61 per cent of dogs that you microchip go into the pet log database?

**David Ewing:** Yes.

**Dr Jackson:** Do you see the pet log database as an important element that could be built up into a national database?

**David Ewing:** Yes. At the moment it can be rather restrictive, as not everybody can get the information. More bodies need to be involved and it has to become very much a national organisation. However, there is no question but that that is the way to go. We can contact the database 24 hours a day, if necessary, and it does make a difference.

**Dr Jackson:** Obviously, you prefer the microchip to tattooing. Why?

I was interested in what Heather McLean said about changes of address, which seems to be a big issue. How can we get over that problem, if there is no licensing scheme? Do you see education as the answer, or notices in post offices, or perhaps some sort of tag for the owners to remind them?

**Heather McLean:** Leaflets could be made available in solicitors' offices or property centres where people are looking at or buying property, and in rental offices. That would jog people's memories and remind them that they should

change the address when they are flitting. Some of the problems are caused by sheer forgetfulness. The dog is chipped and the owners are not thinking about it all the time because the chip is inside the dog. When they move house, that is a fairly low priority for them. It is just a matter of reminding people that it is necessary. If there were a compulsory scheme, there would be more checks. If someone had to reregister their details every year, we would catch changes of address within 12 months of a move taking place.

**Dr Jackson:** When I suggested a tag for the owners, I was being a bit flippant. I was thinking of something the size of a blood donor card or a Visa card that people would keep in a safe place.

**Heather McLean:** When the registration documents are sent to the owners from the pet log database, a change-of-address slip is enclosed. It is really just a matter of jogging people's memories, but a card with the dog's details on it could also be quite useful.

**Dr Jackson:** I also wanted to know why you prefer microchips to tattooing.

**David Ewing:** The reason is quite simple. Microchipping a dog is instantaneous and relatively painless—it just involves a subcutaneous syringe in the back of the neck. On the other hand, tattooing involves an element of discomfort for the dog. It takes longer and the dog may have to be sedated to have it done. The tattoo is placed on the inside of the ear, so pigmentation of the skin also has to be taken into account. If the dog has very dark pigmentation in its ear, it might not be possible to pick up the tattooing very readily. Once a microchip has been implanted, it can be picked up.

I disagree with the claim that microchips do not migrate. They do. We probably have more experience of that than the witness from the Scottish Kennel Club, because we deal with up to 2,000 dogs a year. Microchips can migrate. The furthest migration that we have found is from the back of the neck to the elbow joint, which is quite extreme. For the most part, however, microchipping is the safest way of identifying dogs.

To date, we have had no real information to say that there are any problems with microchipping. There has been a notion going around that the microchips may cause tumours in dogs, but that has yet to be fully investigated. Until we hear otherwise, I think that microchipping is the safest way to go.

**Heather McLean:** To get round the problem of chips moving, we scan the whole dog, usually more than once, just to ensure that we catch the chip. We have all had our own dogs microchipped, because we believe that that is the best way to identify them.

Dogs with tattoos have come into the Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home in the past. The tattoos are either difficult to read or, in the case of greyhounds, it can be difficult to use the tattoo to get information because there may be fears that we are trying to trace an owner who has abandoned the animal, with a view to prosecution. It is best not to try to trace greyhounds in that way, because it could lead to animals being harmed to remove the tattoos.

14:45

**David Ewing:** That is something that is peculiar to the National Greyhound Association. It is reluctant to give us information, partly because the dogs tend to change hands many times over. There is a financial aspect to that, and we find that, as a result, tattooing is not very successful for tracing greyhounds.

**Mr Paterson:** If there were a scheme, compulsory or otherwise, do you think that the general welfare of animals would increase? If there were a compulsory scheme, do you envisage there being a lot of stray animals at the outset of the scheme rather than in the long term?

**David Ewing:** There is always a possibility that there will be a knee-jerk reaction to anything that is made compulsory. People might refuse to comply with the scheme and may dispose of their pets. The same debate has been going on about hunting, with people asking what will happen to all the dogs. To date, we have had no experience of that at all. We were bracing ourselves for receiving large numbers of unwanted foxhounds and were wondering what we would do with them, but that has not happened.

As for the welfare aspects and whether there is any added benefit for the dog, I think that pet-owning members of the public are likely to have their dogs microchipped because they have the animals' best interests at heart. Most pets are registered with a vet and are inoculated.

I agree that most of the strays that come our way come from the socially deprived areas, but I would not condemn those people. Some of them care passionately about their dogs. For some of them, that is their very special thing. They cannot always afford to do the things that they would like to do for their dogs, but that is why the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals is around. Organisations such as ours quite regularly have to bend the rules for people who come to claim an animal and cannot afford the fee. Our policy is quite definite; we will not see anyone refused their dog because they do not have sufficient funds to pay our boarding fees. We have to survive, but we also realise that pets are an emotional subject. It is important that we do not lose sight of that.

**Heather McLean:** It is certainly in the animal's best interests to be reunited with its owner as soon as possible. The dog is much better off going home than it is sitting in our kennels. From a welfare point of view, if a chip gets it home quicker, that is a good thing.

**David Ewing:** We consider our kennels to be a showpiece but, at the same time, we would rather that they were not there.

**The Convener:** The proposed scheme will be voluntary. Do you think that that will make any impact, either immediately or in the long term, on stray dogs?

**David Ewing:** If we are able to publicise it enough, and publicise the reasons for doing it, it will have an impact. Our organisation has been careful about promoting to the general public the fact that we offer a reduced-cost neutering scheme, because members of the veterinary profession would be upset if they thought that they were losing a lot of business. At the moment, we can provide that service for about £12.50, whereas the average price charged by a veterinary practice is about £25. We have promoted that service only to those who are claiming their animals, but I think that we would have a greater take-up if we made it more widely available. That would prove that there are people who are willing to have it done but for whom cost is a factor.

**Heather McLean:** In the past, we have offered chipping days at Portobello town hall. People have come along to take advantage of our chipping scheme; that has proved quite successful and could be repeated.

**The Convener:** That sounds like a good idea.

I will stick with finances for a minute. You said that local authorities and the police do not have the facilities to scan and yet they are the ones who often pick up stray dogs in the first place. Is a scanner expensive?

**David Ewing:** Scanners cost about £100. The cost is something to consider, because several scanners would be needed. Police stations are dotted all over Edinburgh and each station would need at least one and possibly two scanners. That depends on their budget.

**The Convener:** Thank you for your evidence. I noticed that you said immediately that the scheme should be compulsory—I have taken note of that—and that education is important. You have pointed out a couple of things that you are doing that seem to be successful, such as the chipping scheme. We will have to consider that.

Sylvia Jackson said, somewhat flippantly, that she would tag the owners, but then changed her mind. I would tag the owners if the dogs were making dirt in the street. We will be considering

that because, if Keith Harding's member's bill on dog fouling is introduced, we will be the lead committee. We might end up tagging owners in the long run.

Thank you for coming along. Your evidence has been informative and helpful. If we need to get in touch with you again, we will do so.

**Mr Gibson:** Perhaps we should have tagged Keith Harding, as we seem to have lost him.

**The Convener:** We now have before us representatives from the Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

I welcome Libby Anderson, who is the SSPCA's parliamentary officer and Kathleen Bunyan, who is the director of support services. You have been sitting at the back, so you know the format. One or both of you may speak for a few minutes and then I will open up the discussion for questions.

**Libby Anderson (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals):** Thank you, convener. We are from the SSPCA. So that we are not here all day, I will call it "the society" from now on. Kathleen Bunyan, our support services director, deals with many of the issues to do with the rehoming of unwanted dogs from our shelters around Scotland. She is particularly well placed to discuss our experience with strays. I mention also that we are both owners of microchipped dogs—pet owning is an occupational hazard for those who work where we do.

We heard the previous witnesses, with whom we have a great deal in common. We agree on many things, so I am sorry if I cover areas that the committee has already discussed.

I have provided the committee with notes that contain figures for the stray dogs that the society deals with. The figures do not vary greatly from year to year. Other witnesses who will appear later today may be able to tell the committee the exact number of strays in Scotland. We have never been sure about that, so over the past fortnight, we have been telephoning local authorities and asking them for figures for the strays that they deal with. As the committee can imagine, those figures have varied enormously from area to area and we are not certain of the total. However, we have come up with a figure of well over 10,000 stray dogs in a 12-month period in Scotland. Our own organisation took 4,537 stray dogs into the four centres that have contracts with local authorities to handle strays. Of those dogs, around a third were reclaimed by their owners. As far as I can tell, that proportion is broadly in line with the figures that were gleaned by our telephone survey.

We also found that it is hard to establish the cost of the services that are necessary to deal with stray dogs in Scotland, because those services

are integrated with other environmental and pest control services. Clearly, we all agree that dealing with strays places a significant burden on local authorities and on charities. The animal welfare charities agree that there are benefits for animals and owners in providing permanent identification for dogs. As the committee has heard, many charities—including us, the National Canine Defence League, the Edinburgh Dog and Cat Home and our counterpart south of the border, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—have subsidised schemes for microchipping animals. We microchip all dogs free of charge when we rehome them to new owners. We also microchip cats, but that is another matter.

Obviously, it is much easier for dog wardens, the police or their agents to return dogs to their owners if the dogs carry permanent identification. From our point of view, there is another dimension to permanent identification: it would help in the investigation of offences. Our inspectors often find a dead or injured dog that, to have reached that state, has clearly been abused or neglected. It would help to identify the abuser if the inspectors could identify in the first place where the dog came from. For that reason, we support the view, expressed in the DIG report, that permanent identification is primarily concerned with the welfare of the individual dog.

Those are the areas of agreement. When we start to talk about making voluntary identification into a compulsory registration scheme, the options become far more complex and there is, as the committee has heard, some resistance. Registration is seen as dog licensing by another name. The dog licence had lost credibility by the time that it was abolished—it cost more to collect than it raised in revenue.

All that changed with the advent of the microchip. If an owner microchips their dog, the dog is entered into a register. That is a voluntary, private and commercial transaction, which registration would convert into a national system. We must ask whether voluntary or compulsory systems are to be preferred. That is where the current debate lies. The SSPCA supports registration and is prepared for there to be an element of compulsion—that is not a problem for the society. However, we support the DIG report as it stands now, because it gives time for the animal welfare organisations to reach consensus on the matter. It would be better to advance together.

Obligatory microchipping already exists in some circumstances. For example, Aberdeen City Council requires its council tenants to join the dog registration scheme, which includes microchipping. Kathleen Bunyan will be able to tell the committee about another local authority that is

using microchipping, with an element of compulsion, to reduce straying. It is also a requirement of the pet travel scheme that animals that are returning from abroad be microchipped. Those schemes require registration and use the commercial databases.

As I said, there is no full consensus yet. That is why we feel that we should take dog identification one step at a time. Educating the public about welfare and the environmental benefits of identifying dogs should definitely improve the uptake of the voluntary schemes. We would like the Executive to follow that recommendation and to put resources into publicity and promotion.

I hope that that was a useful introduction. We are happy to answer questions.

**Kathleen Bunyan (Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals):** Perhaps I should throw in something that would not be mentioned otherwise. Glasgow City Council has given us permission just this year to microchip all dogs that have been reclaimed. Previously, we offered microchipping at £10 per head to people who were reclaiming their dogs, but as they had already had to pay a fine to the council for the dog warden picking up the dog and had had to pay our boarding fees for a few days, many of them would just not pay the extra £10 to have their dog microchipped. In one of our meetings with the council, we agreed to provide microchipping at its cost to us. The dogs will now be microchipped compulsorily before they are returned. The council hopes that that will help it to keep track of the repeat offenders—the latchkey dogs that are put out every day. That will be a worthwhile experiment and is certainly something that other councils should copy.

**The Convener:** That is interesting. You say that you support the DIG report because everyone should work together. Is five years too long before a decision is made on whether the voluntary scheme is working? Five years seems a long time. Could a decision be made sooner than that?

15:00

**Libby Anderson:** Even over five years, a 75 per cent target is ambitious. We are prepared to be advised by the report. The report was produced for England, but since the work has been done, why start all over again? Evidence was taken over two years and animal charities with similar policies to ours—including our counterpart, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals—were involved, so we believe that the calculation has been made carefully. A table in the DIG report shows a year-on-year improvement. I think that the plan is to monitor that improvement and to ensure that the levels are maintained. If the

scheme were slipping, there would be a case for re-examining it quickly and moving on faster to compulsory registration.

**Mr Gibson:** You said that in the society's animal welfare centres, all dogs are microchipped free before they are rehomed. Do any owners refuse microchipping for their dogs?

**Libby Anderson:** Kathleen Bunyan is the expert on that.

**Kathleen Bunyan:** No, they do not refuse. They are not allowed to refuse. Our policy of microchipping all dogs is straightforward; nobody has ever refused or queried it.

**Mr Gibson:** In some of the documents that the committee received, concern was expressed that some owners were worried, for whatever reason, about the health of their dogs and did not therefore want them to be microchipped.

**Kathleen Bunyan:** The matter is simple: microchipping is part of our rehoming package and we would not home a dog with a person who refused to have it microchipped. However, the system is not foolproof. People take dogs from us and they come back in as strays. If we telephone around to say that we have a stray dog, people will reply, "I passed it on to Joe Bloggs who passed it on to someone else." We discover that the register has never been updated and so we have to continue to search for the owner.

**Mr Gibson:** Is the fact that there is no real opposition to microchipping one of the reasons, in addition to those you have given, why you think a compulsory system would be better?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** We do not know whether a compulsory system would be better. We support a compulsory system—that is the society's policy—but equally we are happy to try the five-year voluntary scheme. It is probably easier if people act voluntarily rather than being compelled to do something.

**Mr Gibson:** Besides microchipping, what other methods could be implemented to reduce the number of stray dogs?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** The method that we have employed perhaps most is neutering. For a few years, we have neutered dogs under a variety of schemes. The society neuters dogs for free. We have our own in-house vets in three of our largest centres. We also ran two other schemes whereby people who did not live close enough to one of our centres could take a voucher to their vet and have their dog neutered for free. We also had a joint scheme with the British Small Animal Veterinary Association whereby people on benefits could have their dogs neutered, not for free but at a reduced cost.

A lot of neutering has taken place over the past few years, not just by the Scottish SPCA but by the National Canine Defence League and other organisations. I think that neutering is beginning to take effect, although that is difficult to prove.

**Mr Gibson:** Can the impact of microchipping be measured? Libby Anderson said that it is difficult to assess the number of stray dogs in Scotland. The figure of around 10,000 was quoted. Is that a significant reduction compared with previous years?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** There is a reduction in the number of stray dogs that come in to the society, but the reduction is very small each year. A higher number of stray cats are coming to the society. The society wonders whether we now own fewer dogs and more cats, which would indicate a better lifestyle. As unemployment falls, fewer people want dogs because they are at work. The whole family can be out at work, so more people want cats.

The reason for the reduction will never be straightforward. Many issues are involved.

**Dr Sylvia Jackson:** I thank the witnesses for their informative paper.

I want to take up a question that I asked earlier about when microchipping should be done. The paper says:

"the ideal time for permanent identification and registration of dogs will be at the point of sale."

It goes on to say:

"It would be particularly valuable to ensure that breeders have their vets microchip puppies before sale."

How can both things be done? Two different times seem to be involved: either microchipping should be done in the pet shop or it should be done in the kennels.

**Kathleen Bunyan:** Timing does not have anything to do with it. The SSPCA microchips at the point of sale because there is no point in our microchipping dogs until we have an owner. Equally, puppies are microchipped once we have a new owner for them. However, if breeders sell their puppies and leave it to owners to microchip them, it may never be done. If breeders were to microchip puppies before sale, microchipping would be done. We are trying to get as many dogs as possible microchipped. There is no real difference in timing—the age of the dog does not matter.

**Dr Jackson:** You are saying that it is an evolving process. If the dog has not been microchipped earlier, it should be done at the point of sale.

**Kathleen Bunyan:** We are acknowledging that stray dogs that go through our kennels are not the

only dogs. It would be valuable if breeders of pedigree dogs were involved. We get as many stray pedigree dogs as mongrels. It would help us in the long term if pedigree dogs were microchipped before they were sold.

**Dr Jackson:** Were you microchipping for free for Glasgow City Council? Were you paying for the chipping?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** No, Glasgow City Council pays us for chipping. We supply the microchips and the registration fee at cost to the council. The person who reclaims the dog has the dog microchipped for free.

**Dr Jackson:** I thought that the SSPCA footed the bill. I wanted to clarify that.

**Kathleen Bunyan:** No, we do not.

**Dr Jackson:** That raises the important question of cost. If the scheme were to be introduced, who would pay for it?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** The process can be easy or difficult. If people have to get their dogs microchipped at their local vets, the vets will make their normal charges. To be fair to veterinary practices, if they microchip only a very small number of dogs, as at present, they will pay much more for their chips than we do.

The SSPCA is a member of the Association of British Dogs Homes. The association has negotiated a price for microchips through the suppliers. Because of the quantities involved, prices are much lower than the average vet will pay. We might microchip 4,000 dogs in a year, which is far more than a local vet would. The vet will charge for his time as well as for the cost of the chips. Obviously, we can do things much more cheaply.

If councils were to say that they would do what Glasgow City Council is doing and pay for microchips—for people on benefits, for example—the SSPCA could still supply microchips to councils at a lower price than local vets would. A question therefore arises as to how to go about things. I do not know whether the vets' body would complain about that way of doing things, but as the committee will see, we can currently supply microchips much more cheaply than local vets can.

**Dr Jackson:** Do you agree that the DIG report leaves the question of funding and says that it will return to it? We ought to consider the critical question of how the scheme would be funded.

**Kathleen Bunyan:** The question needs to be considered. If a blanket approach is taken and people have to get their dogs microchipped, some will be able to afford it and some will not. People who could well afford to pay their vets should not

be given the service at a reduced cost. The questions of how to pay for the scheme and what it will cost are big.

**The Convener:** You have talked a lot about microchipping. Have you any experience of dog owners having problems or difficulties with that? If so, what are they?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** The possibility of the migration of the chip is the only factor that causes dog owners to have concerns about microchipping, and only a small number of them are concerned. We have no evidence of microchips that have migrated causing problems other than those arising from the fact that the chip is not where the person who is scanning the animal expects to find it. Other bodies might have come across problems, but we have not.

**The Convener:** Would it be helpful if bodies such as local authorities and the police had scanners?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** We are examining the cost of providing our inspectors with scanners for their vans. The cost is £100 for each of the 60 inspectors, so we are talking about a lot of money. The biggest drawback to people having scanners in their vans is that, once the number has been scanned, the database must still be contacted. Because there are many dogs on the database and the database is not constantly cleaned—often, when people move house or their dogs die, they do not bother to tell the database—it takes quite a long time to get through to the database to get the required information. However, I do not mean to suggest that the police or local authorities should not have scanners.

**Iain Smith:** Libby Anderson mentioned that the database is a commercial concern. At the moment, it deals with less than 10 per cent of the animal population. Will the existing structure of the database be able to cope in five years' time when it has to deal with 75 per cent of the animal population?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** If we are to have such a system, and certainly if the system is to be compulsory, the database should be re-examined, as it is also part of the pet passport scheme. The database would need an element of security. Already, a breakaway group has created another database. Should there be a breakaway group from the breakaway group, we could end up with an assortment of databases, which would all have to be used every time a dog was microchipped. A national database might be the best solution, but keeping it clean would be another question.

**Libby Anderson:** That might be why the DIG report recommends phasing in the uptake of microchipping. The database could not cope with an increase to 75 per cent in the first year.

**Iain Smith:** Who commissions the database? Who says what the requirements are?

**Libby Anderson:** It was set up by the Kennel Club in conjunction with the RSPCA and the SSPCA about six years ago.

**Kathleen Bunyan:** Perhaps "in conjunction" is not quite right. The SSPCA supported its establishment but we have no control over it or any say in how it is run. Like the RSPCA, we simply register our dogs with it.

**Mr Keith Harding (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con):** At the moment, the microchip contains only a number. This is probably a layman's question, but why can it not contain a name and address? That would mean that the person who scanned the dog would not have to go to the database.

**Kathleen Bunyan:** I am afraid that I will have to give a layman's answer, as I honestly do not know why not. I understand that the information on a microchip is pretty much like the bar code on a can of beans, which also gives a scanner a number. I do not think that the microchip would be big enough to hold a name, address and all the rest of the information that is held.

**Libby Anderson:** That is not to say that microchip technology might not improve in future to make such information more accessible. DNA profiling techniques have also been recommended. The DIG report says that we should keep an open mind about which technical method we use.

**Mr Gibson:** I am a layperson, in the sense that I have been a cat owner all my life. What advantage does microchipping have over a collar with the name and address on it?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** I also have a cat, and it is microchipped. From personal experience, I know that cats get their collars snapped off in bushes or trees. The big advantage of microchipping for a cat owner is that, if a cat is run over and a person takes it to a vet, the owner will find out what happened to it. Otherwise, people can spend months and months looking for their cat and wondering what happened to it. The same applies to dogs. Some people lose their dogs quite inadvertently—not all the dogs that come into the centre are strays; there are some quite tragic cases. If a dog has been run over, the owner might never know what happened to it. If the dog is microchipped, the owner will find out. Collars are not foolproof; they come off for many reasons.

15:15

**Mr Gibson:** What is the maximum age to which a dog can survive?

**Kathleen Bunyan:** It depends on the breed. Some large breeds, such as the Great Dane, live



for only about six years. However, it is not unusual for smaller breeds, such as the Border collie, to live for 17 to 20 years.

**Mr Gibson:** I ask because of what you said about cleaning the database. Would it be possible to delete automatically a dog's details once it had reached the life expectancy for its breed plus one year?

**Libby Anderson:** That would be a bit chancy. We ran a competition in the SSPCA newsletter to try to find Scotland's oldest dog and came across a few 24-year-olds. It would be unfortunate if a 23-year-old went missing after its details had been wiped off the database.

**Mr Gibson:** But dogs that are currently registered might still be on the database in 30 years' time.

**Libby Anderson:** I have a bad conscience, because I have not arranged for the details of my dog that died last year to be removed from the database. Our welfare centre manager will put that right for me soon.

Would you like to talk about tattooing as opposed to microchipping? You asked previous witnesses about that.

**The Convener:** Yes.

**Libby Anderson:** As Kathleen Bunyan said, a collar and tag can get lost or can be removed by someone who has stolen a dog. Tattoos can also be tampered with by someone who wants to cover up their actions. There was a case of some greyhounds that were found dead that had had their ears removed to prevent the tattoos from being seen. However, tattooing would help welfare work and investigations.

**Mr Gibson:** Can a microchip be removed? If someone was going to steal dogs for a profit, they could spend £100 on a scanner and howk the microchip out almost as easily as they could take a collar off.

**Libby Anderson:** That would take place only in relation to the niche activity of stealing expensive dogs, with which I am unfamiliar. Theoretically, what you suggest is possible, but it would involve a surgical process.

The other day, I had a letter from a vet who sits on the cross-party animal welfare group. He does a lot of microchipping, but he is not 100 per cent persuaded by the arguments for it. He said that:

"Tattoos in the groin (as recommended for Pit Bulls during the implementation of the DDA) are a waste of time. Tattoos on the ear flap are better but I have one experience of infection of an ear following tattooing, and ear tattoos are hard to read in dogs with hairy ears, small nervous breeds and dogs with chronic ear changes due to recurrent otitis."

Such evidence persuades us that microchips are

the way ahead for the moment.

**The Convener:** Your comments about who controls the database and what information it contains have broadened the committee's knowledge. I take your comment about the possibility that, in time, the microchip could have on it the information that Keith Harding mentioned. As I have said to other witnesses, a bit of education is needed for the general public and us to ensure that people alert the database when they move house and so on. We will certainly consider that in our report. Thank you very much for coming.

We now have in front of us witnesses from three different groups: the Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland is represented by Tom Bell, who is the director of professional development; the Society of Chief Officers of Environmental Health in Scotland is represented by John Arthur, who is a member of the executive committee and is also head of environmental services at Inverclyde Council—I should declare an interest, as that is one of the councils that I represent; and the Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland is represented by Colin McKerracher, who is a member of the general policing standing committee and assistant chief constable of Strathclyde police.

I believe that Colin McKerracher will kick off, then the other witnesses will say something.

**Assistant Chief Constable Colin McKerracher (Association of Chief Police Officers in Scotland):** There is obviously police interest in dog identification. Our involvement with stray dogs is something that we have lived with for many years. The legislation that we work under goes back to the Dogs Act 1906, which obliged the police to accept and retain any stray dog taken to a police station by a member of the public. We still do that.

The other main function that we have exercised is the rounding up of stray dogs. That has changed over time. Various pieces of legislation have given different responsibilities to local authorities and the police. Currently, local arrangements on stray dogs are in place throughout Scotland. In some areas, the local authority continues to round up stray dogs, kennel them and take on board the expense. In other local authorities, when a member of the public takes a dog to a police station, the police contact the local authority. The dog warden takes the dog away and it is kennelled for seven days at the police's expense. The procedures vary.

Dog identification would be of interest to us because sometimes when dogs are brought into police offices, we do not know whom they belong to. If we could establish quickly whom they

belonged to, the dogs would be united with their owners. That would be the best possible solution. We are interested in both aspects of identification of dogs.

I do not have much more information to offer, unless members of the committee have specific questions.

**John Arthur (Society of Chief Officers of Environmental Health in Scotland):** As members are probably aware, local authorities have several responsibilities for dog control, specifically for providing the dog warden service. We are involved in animal health in general and local authorities also license breeding establishments and pet shops. As a cleansing service, we must also sweep up dog fouling. We are probably the main recipients of complaints about that from the public. I speak for local authorities, from the enforcement perspective.

We support the recommendations of the dog identification group for a voluntary system of dog identification as a positive move in encouraging responsible dog ownership. In offering that support, we urge the adoption of the group's recommendation for Government-led education and information campaigns on responsible dog ownership and for the creation of a single, robust database. That would be a prerequisite for a successful system.

I will highlight a few concerns about the broader aims of the report. The most common dog-related complaint that local authorities receive is about dog fouling. Identifying dogs per se would not significantly change the number of complaints. It would not make any difference to how we approach the matter, although a properly focused education campaign would make a contribution.

As the report recognises, only responsible owners would take up a purely voluntary system. Analysis of the figures by the National Dog Wardens Association and MORI suggests that, of the approximately 24,000 dogs taken by local authorities in Scotland in 1999—the most recent year for which figures are available—it was possible to identify and return to their owners on the day of capture only 14 per cent. A further 34 per cent were reclaimed by owners from kennels, but by no means all of those would have been identifiable—local authorities are often contacted by owners whose dogs are missing and asked where they are. We cannot necessarily identify the dogs that are in kennels. More than 50 per cent of dogs taken by local authorities are either rehomed—the bulk of them—or destroyed. About 10 per cent per year are destroyed.

Responsible dog ownership—on the basis of dogs that are allowed to stray by design or inadvertently—applies to less than 50 per cent of

the population. There is a problem with the extent to which we can change the statistics by identifying dogs. Promotion of the scheme, together with the proposed education programme, would inevitably lead to higher public expectations of the performance of the dog control system. Those could not be met within the current regulatory system, which is relatively fragmented. As Colin McKerracher said, the legislation dates from 1906.

There is a lot of confusion in the public's mind about who is responsible for prosecuting people for dog fouling. In most cases, it is the police, but because councils provide the dog warden system, it is reasonable to expect that they should be able to prosecute. We have limited powers to do that under existing legislation. I note that the group's recommendation is for the voluntary system to be in place for five years. During that period, the efficacy of the existing regulatory control system could be reviewed. Control of the system could perhaps be put with one statutory body rather than several and the resource implications could be examined.

Some of the expected outcomes that the report identifies would probably mean that a significant number of 24-hour call-out services would have to be available from one source. Currently, those services tend to be shared between the local authority during office hours and the police service out of hours. Expectations of the system would mean that we would have to invest more in providing a dog warden service with one point of access.

**Tom Bell (Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland):** The Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland is not involved directly in dog control; it is involved in the promotion of public health and environmental health. We ensure proper training and education of environmental health officers, who are often the front-line troops when it comes to dog control in local authorities. The institute's view is that the dog identification proposal would be a useful part of a much wider review of dog control and dog control legislation in Scotland. We would certainly welcome a review of dangerous dogs licensing, boarding, breeding establishments, enforcement responsibilities and the education of owners.

**The Convener:** I will pick up on that last comment. This question is to all three witnesses. How should we educate the public about the scheme, to get over to them the advantages of registering their dog?

**John Arthur:** I will speak first from the local authority perspective. A number of local authorities have successfully taken on their own education initiatives. City of Edinburgh Council has information on its website and runs a lot of

initiatives within the council. From a personal perspective, when I worked with Renfrew District Council, as it then was, there was a health promotion campaign that concentrated on direct access to the public and to the curriculum in schools.

Whatever the approach, it must be broad based. We can achieve a certain amount by approaching owners when they are with their dogs in places such as public parks, but a long-term strategy would be to take the education process into schools. The quality of the information in the training packs will have to be fairly high. The training material that has been developed so far by some councils in conjunction with the teaching profession has generally been of good quality, but we would have to raise the quality of the service as a whole, as not everyone can deliver an education message. The presumption that dog wardens could do that effectively might need further examination.

The message is one of public health, so it is difficult to put across. Most such messages take a long time to get through. There would have to be a balance between enforcement action at the point that an offence is committed, constant awareness raising, work in schools, and using the good offices of the various charities involved—the SSPCA and others—to keep the subject in the forefront of the public's mind.

15:30

**Assistant Chief Constable McKerracher:** It is down to responsible and irresponsible dog owners. Responsible dog owners will see registration as a step forward and as protection for them and their animals, and they will be happy to be part of a voluntary scheme. Those who are not responsible will not want to be part of the scheme and we will be in the same situation that we are in now. That sounds a bit pessimistic, but this is about changing attitudes and it will be a long, hard job.

**Tom Bell:** I agree with what John Arthur said. Education is fine. To use food safety as an example, the education of food handlers was quite popular until it became a legislative requirement, at which point it became very popular. I suggest that any education be backed up with a degree of enforcement. There should be a proper balance.

**Dr Jackson:** First, I thought Colin McKerracher's point about the existing local arrangements was important. Am I correct in saying that the three of you believe that we need a national scheme, so that, although there would be some local variation in the voluntary scheme, all the education packages would contain a central message?

Secondly, it struck me—again, tell me whether I am correct—that we must be clear at the beginning of the five-year period about what structures are in place. I think it was John Arthur who argued about the resource implications—we must sort out who is paying.

Thirdly—perhaps flippantly—I am confused about how microchipping will help to deter dog fouling. Are we assuming that stray dogs do the fouling or that eventually everyone will have a scanner in their hand? How do we link the fouling dog with the owner?

**The Convener:** Tag them, you said.

**Assistant Chief Constable McKerracher:** On your first point, a consistent message would be helpful for everyone, not only the public but the authorities that have to put in place the procedures and processes. In the Strathclyde police area there are 12 local authorities, so it is likely that a number of different procedures will be in place. If the procedure is consistent throughout Scotland, we will have a better base to build on.

It would not be incorrect to say that stray dogs are responsible for a fair amount of dog fouling. Many responsible dog owners now use the appropriate methods to remove their dog's fouling—that is improving. However, dogs over which there is no control foul all over the place. There is a correlation between the nuisance of dog fouling and whether there is an owner with a dog. There is an issue of stray dogs and dog fouling.

**John Arthur:** I have had a different experience. It is local authorities that get the complaints about dog fouling. We may pass on cases to our colleagues in the police to prosecute them, but we are the ones that deal with the complaints. The 24,000 dogs that were picked up by local authorities in 1999 is not a significant number when we consider the total dog population. In the majority of dog fouling complaints that we receive, a responsible dog owner is involved. Stray dogs have the advantage of wandering all over the place. Dogs with owners tend to go to the same spots. We get complaints about parks, favourite walks and waste ground where owners take their dogs.

I said in my introduction that I did not think that identification would have any effect on the number of complaints about dog fouling. The identification problems are to do with identifying the owner, not the dog, then making a report to the fiscal that we can corroborate. I do not want to go into the details of that at the moment.

**Assistant Chief Constable McKerracher:** In some areas, people are concerned about dog fouling and complain about it. The problem exists in other areas but we do not get complaints. It is worth bearing that in mind.

**Mr Harding:** I declare an interest, as I have lodged a member's bill on this subject. You say that identification is not important, but if my proposals are passed, dog fouling will become a civil offence and local authorities will impose on-the-spot fines. It would be essential that the dog could be identified.

**John Arthur:** If the present legislative position changes, yes. I am talking about the current context. At the moment, we would have to identify the dog and get its owner to admit that the dog was his. We would have to corroborate the offence and the admission of ownership, and present a petition to the procurator. You can understand that that is not exactly top of the procurator's priorities. If there were an on-the-spot fine, an identification chip in the dog that was registered to the owner would be good corroborative evidence. However, I think that there are a lot of suppositions in there.

**Iain Smith:** You indicated support for the recommendations in the DIG report, but even though you say that you accept the voluntary scheme as proposed would you prefer a compulsory scheme to a voluntary one? Are the targets in the DIG report—to get to 75 per cent in a voluntary scheme within five years—reasonable and achievable?

If we have a voluntary scheme, are there areas where some element of compulsion could be brought in? For example, if a stray dog is brought in, should it be compulsory that it is chipped? Should it be compulsory for registered breeders to have pups chipped before selling them?

**Assistant Chief Constable McKerracher:** Voluntary schemes are fine, but a limited number of people will take part in them. Where there is compulsion more people will take part, but not everyone. The five-year targets seem reasonable, but they would be more achievable if the scheme was compulsory. If we are trying to increase the number of dogs that are identified through chipping or tattooing, compulsory chipping for dogs in breeding situations is eminently sensible.

**John Arthur:** Similarly, I feel that voluntary schemes have much to commend them. My concern is that the existing legislation needs fundamental review and that it would probably be better to do that before we introduce an element of compulsion. The targets are strict, given the amount of registration that is done at the moment. It would be a matter of seeing how successful the education and information campaign was. The targets might be more achievable if, by the end of the five years, there was a better legislative framework that meant that you were more likely to be caught if you were acting irresponsibly and allowing your dog to do so.

Introducing compulsion by various other

means—through local authorities' not releasing stray dogs until they are chipped, through breeding licences or through chipping in pet shops—would increase the identified animal population much more effectively than simply waiting for owners to take part in a voluntary scheme.

**Tom Bell:** A compulsory scheme would be ideal, but some agency would have to enforce it. As John Arthur suggested, some groundwork must be undertaken before any decision is taken on that.

**Mr Gibson:** I take it that you all want new, comprehensive legislation to be introduced to replace the existing regulatory system. What would be the impact on the resources of the police and local authorities of the introduction of compulsory registration?

**Assistant Chief Constable McKerracher:** That is hard to say. Over the past 25 years, the police have been involved in rounding up dogs, but we have moved away from that and dog wardens now undertake that task. That was the right decision for the Scottish police service, in terms of court costs, value for money and various other factors.

We provide a 24-hour service and would be available out of office hours to contribute to a regulatory scheme. We still kennel dogs at police stations until the dog warden takes them away to the next part of the process. I imagine that we would still be part of the 24-hour service, but I have strong reservations about police officers bringing in dogs or being involved in the system other than by providing a holding point for a specific period.

**John Arthur:** The answer to the question is that it would depend on where the responsibility for the registration scheme would lie. I suspect that the responsibility would lie with local authorities rather than with police forces.

It is difficult to put a figure on the resources that would be needed. Inverclyde Council is one of the smaller authorities in Scotland and it spends around £27,000 a year on the dog warden service and the kennelling costs that are involved. That is a relatively low amount, as we use a dog and cat home at Cardonald that is proving cost-effective. One of the case studies in the report shows that a similar-sized authority in England, which has a much more proactive service—our service is office-hours only and employs a single dog warden—employs two dog wardens on a 24-hour call-out basis, with all sorts of added bells and whistles, at a cost of £85,000 a year. That is a reasonable rule-of-thumb amount.

The scheme would definitely have resource implications for local authorities, especially if the activities of the dog wardens were extended

beyond normal office hours. Registration and chipping are relatively inexpensive and work, as long as there is a secure and robust database that we can access. However, local authorities would also probably be responsible for regulating other factors, such as animal health, pet licensing and breeding.

**Mr Gibson:** If additional resources were needed, would you want the Scottish Executive to pick up the tab by providing additional funding to the police forces or the local authorities, or to both?

**John Arthur:** Yes, depending on where the final responsibility lay. There would have to be at least some transfer of resources. The five-year lead-in period may give us the opportunity to examine what resources would be necessary for the scheme.

The report identifies a lot of social costs, arising from animal worrying, accidents and various other things, but it does not identify how those costs are met presently. Local authorities do not always benefit from taking on additional responsibilities; they do not gain anything from saving those social costs. The scheme would have to be properly costed. I recommend that we consider a single point of access for all dog control legislation, supported by the police, who have an important role to play. Local authorities are considering further aspects of dog control, so perhaps responsibility for the scheme should lie with them, but it depends on who has the resources.

**Mr Gibson:** You have talked about the need for education and raising public awareness. The same could be said about the need to educate people about racism, drugs, smoking or obesity. Is there a danger of an education overload? Given the fact that education is often, quite rightly, regarded as an answer to everyday problems, do you think that it would be possible to get the message across on this issue without spending large sums of money on promoting the issue over a long period?

**John Arthur:** The oft-cited example is education against smoking. A lot of money has been spent on that campaign, and everyone is aware of the dangers of smoking, yet the habit persists. It is extremely difficult to make such educational campaigns work.

So long as a consistent approach was taken—if, for example, the campaign produced a resource pack for teachers, which local authorities and the voluntary sector could include in their promotional information—an educational campaign might work. However, as we have said before, there must be a strong enforcement arm to the scheme. That might include the compulsory chipping of animals in pet shops before they are sold and before they are

released after being collected as strays, to ensure that there is an on-going, incremental approach to chipping animals. The habit must be built in, so that people just have to comply with the system that is in operation.

There are people who are much better qualified than I am to talk about public health education. I am sure that there are real difficulties in getting the message across, which the committee will recognise.

15:45

**Assistant Chief Constable McKerracher:** Strathclyde police spend £25,000 a year on kennelling stray dogs that are brought into the police offices and, in some areas, taken to the SSPCA kennels. In two council areas, the councils pay for that kennelling; however, in other council areas, we pay the costs. If the dogs are held for seven days, we still have to pay their kennelling bill. Dog identification has the potential to reduce that cost for us, as owners may be contacted earlier to collect their dogs. The cost implications of that would be of interest to all Scottish police forces.

Drink-driving is another issue on which progress has been made, over time, through education and enforcement. However, it has required that dual approach of education and enforcement and I think that dog identification would require the same. That seems to be the most effective way in which to change attitudes.

**Tom Bell:** Yes. Education and enforcement go hand in hand. Any education programme would have to be consistent throughout the country, focused and relevant to different groups. If 32 local authorities tried to develop their own education programmes, that would cause confusion. The education programme would have to be operated nationally and would have to focus on and be relevant to the group at which it was aimed.

**Mr McMahon:** Kenny Gibson and Iain Smith have asked many of the questions that I wanted to ask. Your answers have confirmed to me the need for the scheme to include elements of compulsion and education. Do you believe that the research from a five-year period of study into the impact of the existing voluntary system will be adequate to convince people that we should introduce compulsion? Given the resource implications, should we not just make identification compulsory from the outset?

**Assistant Chief Constable McKerracher:** Yes. Compulsion would be the way in which to make progress quickly. The voluntary scheme has a long lead-in. Certain people will pick up on it straight away because they are responsible and recognise the benefits of it; others will let it pass

them by until someone tells them that they must participate.

**John Arthur:** Targets would be hit more quickly through compulsion. The five-year period and 75 per cent target take the scheme close to other licensing schemes that are already compulsory. It would be unusual to be able to achieve that target without some form of compulsion.

If we introduce a compulsory scheme, a robust system must be in place to enable its delivery. As we have all said, some review of the current system is needed, so a lead-in period will still be required—whether of five, three or two years—during which there should be an element of volunteering to take part in the scheme while the compulsory framework is established. A fair amount of work needs to be done and there would be no point in introducing a compulsory scheme if the enforcement agencies could not deliver it. I have some concern that the fragmentation of the legislation means that we cannot deliver on that at present.

**Mr McMahon:** This question may be unfair, but from a police or local government perspective, do you believe that priority should be given to finding resources to tackle stray dogs rather than child safety, or dog fouling rather than anti-social behaviour?

**Assistant Chief Constable McKerracher:** The public have genuine concerns about dog fouling and stray dogs. When the public are asked about what worries them, they do not always mention headline crime figures. Often, they talk about what concerns them on their doorsteps, which is public nuisance offences and problems such as dog fouling. There is support in the public domain for some procedures to be put in place.

From a policing perspective, the issue is difficult. We tend to deal with issues that local communities raise with us. If we have the legislative capability to deal with those issues, we will deal with them. Not much legislation exists on stray dogs. Local authorities tend to deal with them. We play our part in the system.

**John Arthur:** I support that, because at most of the citizens juries or focus groups—whatever you want to call them—that local authorities have established, and in most questionnaires, dog fouling is at the top of most people's agendas of locality concerns. In some areas, it is placed above neighbourhood crime.

The issue is at the forefront of the public's perception, for whatever reason. However, the argument and the problems that are associated with responsible dog ownership go much wider, and there may be justification for considering that. If the figures in the DIG report that relate to accidents, worrying of stock, road accidents and

personal injury are accurate, there is some empirical evidence that the issue causes considerable cost to society. However, I pass to members the decision whether stray dogs should take precedence over other issues that the Executive and the Parliament are considering.

**Mr Gibson:** I have much sympathy with what Michael McMahon said, but are not more than 300 children in the UK blinded through toxocariasis caused by dog fouling? Numerous other people also suffer ill-health effects.

When I was a councillor, a survey was conducted in my ward to find out the 20 issues of greatest concern to the public, and dog fouling came third—well ahead of drugs or youth disorder, which one would have expected to be placed higher. I understand what Michael McMahon says, but the issue is bigger than may sometimes be realised. That is undoubtedly one of the reasons why Keith Harding has a member's bill on the issue.

**The Convener:** In summing up, I had planned to say some of what Kenny Gibson said. The committee contains five ex-councillors and one current councillor. We are all aware of the number of times that dog fouling is talked about. Even when councils have tried projects, they have not addressed the issue.

We have heard some of what the witnesses said before. John Arthur said that the legislation needs a fundamental review. The witnesses also said that we need some joined-up legislation. I was interested in the comment about the curriculum in schools and the need to start educating children about the issue. I take Kenny Gibson's point about being in overdrive on education on this and other subjects. However, if we had a national education programme—Tom Bell mentioned the idea—that was linked with joined-up legislation, we might be on the way. The problem is mentioned often. The public may not bend the police's ears about the issue too much, but councillors hear about it morning, noon and night.

I thank the witnesses for coming along. The committee will write a report on the issue and if we need to contact you again, individually or as a group, we will do that.

## Subordinate Legislation

**The Convener:** We have a negative instrument to consider—the Non-Domestic Rates (Leying) (Scotland) Regulations 2001 (SSI 2001/71). The instrument rolls forward the non-domestic rates transitional relief scheme from 2001 to 2002 and was sent to members on 12 March. As of today, no comments had been received. The Subordinate Legislation Committee considered the instrument and an extract of its report was included in members' papers. That committee did not consider that Parliament's attention needed to be drawn to the instrument. No motion to annul has been lodged, so no other action can be taken on the instrument. Does anyone have any comments?

**Mr Gibson:** Once again, some beautiful mathematical formulae have been presented to us. Other than that, I have no difficulties with the instrument.

**Iain Smith:** I have not seen anything like it since I did higher maths.

**The Convener:** Do members agree that the committee has no recommendation to make on the regulations?

**Members indicated agreement.**

15:55

*Meeting adjourned.*

16:00

*Meeting continued in public until 16:15 and in private thereafter until 17:36.*





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