



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE FOR
AGRICULTURE AND
RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Welfare of Animals Bill:
British Association for Shooting
and Conservation**

21 September 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Stephen Moutray (Chairperson)

Mr P J Bradley

Mr Trevor Clarke

Mr Willie Clarke

Mr Pat Doherty

Mr Simpson Gibson

Mr William Irwin

Mr Kieran McCarthy

Mr Francie Molloy

Witnesses:

Mr Tom Blades)

Mr Tommy Mayne)

Mr Tony Patterson)

Mr Jim Shannon)

British Association for Shooting and Conservation

The Chairperson (Mr Moutray):

The next item is an oral evidence session with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) on the Welfare of Animals Bill. I call to the table Tommy Mayne, Tom Blades, Tony Patterson and Jim Shannon. You are very welcome. I am aware that two of you were here this morning. We ask you to make a brief presentation, after which we will open for

members' questions.

Mr Tommy Mayne (British Association for Shooting and Conservation):

Good afternoon. I am country officer for BASC Northern Ireland. I am accompanied by Jim Shannon MP, who is here in his capacity as a BASC member, Tom Blades, who is head of BASC's gamekeeping department, and veterinarian Tony Patterson. Between Tom, Tony and I, we own a total of nine working gun dogs. I thank the Chairman and the Committee for extending the invitation to BASC to give evidence on the Welfare of Animals Bill. We are grateful for the opportunity to represent our members' interests.

The Public and Corporate Economic Consultants (PACEC) study that was carried out in 2006 found that shooting sports contribute £45 million annually to the Northern Ireland economy and provide more than 2,100 full-time jobs. BASC is the representative body for sporting shooting in the UK and has a membership in excess of 130,000. Our aims are to protect and promote all aspects of sporting shooting and the well-being of the countryside. We actively promote good practice, training, education, scientific research and habitat conservation. Working gun dogs play a vital part in recreational shooting, given that they are used to find, flush and recover shot quarry.

BASC is concerned that the Welfare of Animals Bill does not provide an exemption that will allow the prophylactic docking of working dogs' tails. Before we address the issue of tail docking, we must clarify the use of the term "working dog" when used in the context of live quarry shooting. Many different breeds of working dog assist their owners in the shooting field, such as Labradors, setters and pointers. However, the three classes of breeds that are normally associated with tail docking are: spaniels, which are used to hunt dense cover and to find, flush and retrieve shot quarry; hunt point retrievers (HPRs), which are used to locate and recover shot game but can also be used to track deer; and terriers, which are used for vermin control above and below ground and on some of the Province's many farms.

The reasons for docking the tails of working dogs are well documented and are contained in the various studies that we have provided as evidence. Given the nature of the environment in which they work, those dogs often sustain unnecessary, painful and reoccurring tail damage that

causes suffering to the dog and distress to the owner. Those injuries, which are usually sustained while hunting in dense cover, can often become difficult to treat, given that bandages and dressings that are designed to keep the wounds clean and prevent infection can become dirty and dislodged.

As part of our portfolio of evidence, we have provided a photograph of a working springer spaniel called Sasha. That dog is well known to me as she belongs to a personal friend, and I have kept her in my kennels many times. The photograph clearly shows that Sasha has sustained a tail injury, which occurred during a single day in November 2009. The photograph does not truly reflect the full extent of the injury, which caused considerable pain and, because the injury kept reoccurring, prevented the dog from working again for the remaining two months of the season. Although that is just one case, it is wholly typical of the injuries sustained by undocked working gun dogs.

Prophylactic docking is a preventative measure that is carried out by a qualified veterinary surgeon. It involves the surgical removal of the tail, or part of the tail, from litters of puppies less than five days old to avoid tail damage during their working lives. Although the procedure causes some pain, BASC believes that it is a necessary procedure for working breeds in order to prevent severely painful and reoccurring tail damage during adulthood, which, in many cases, will require therapeutic docking. After being docked, the pup is placed back with its litter mates and, normally, quickly falls asleep or starts to feed from its mother.

Prophylactic docking should not be confused with cosmetic docking, which is carried out to maintain long-established breed standards, such as is the case with Rottweilers, boxers and Dobermanns. Studies that we have provided as evidence confirm that some adult dogs undergo tail amputation out of necessity when the tail has been damaged, as a result of complete tail paralysis, tail tumours, or for some other medical reason. That is known as therapeutic docking and is carried out under general anaesthetic. The older the animal, the larger the tail and, therefore, the more traumatic the procedure becomes. Having considered carefully the long-term welfare and management benefits, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) recognised the need for an exemption for working dogs in the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which bans tail docking in England and Wales. The exemption allows certain types of

working dog to have their tails docked by a veterinary surgeon, provided that they are no older than five days and providing that they comply with other stated criteria as shown on the docking certificate.

In Scotland, the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 included a total ban on all non-therapeutic tail docking of dogs. The regulations do not allow for prophylactic tail docking of any dog, and, therefore, it is currently an offence for anyone, including veterinary surgeons, to dock the tails of puppies. Given recently published research that supports the argument that prophylactic docking is essential to the long-term welfare of working dogs, BASC Scotland and other organisations have submitted a petition to the Scottish Parliament's Public Petitions Committee to seek an exemption for working dogs. There are no restrictions on tail docking in the South of Ireland.

Although BASC is not aware of any veterinary statistics on the number of tail injuries sustained by working dogs in Northern Ireland, it is highly likely that that figure is small. That is not due to the fact that the injuries go unrecorded but is more likely because the Province's working dogs are docked, and, therefore, the risk of tail injury is low. In Northern Ireland, prophylactic docking is currently carried out on farm animals such as lambs and piglets. Lambs undergo the procedure to prevent faecal soiling, and piglets have their tails shortened to prevent the animals from biting each other's tails, which can result in wounds becoming infected.

In recent years, a number of very different surveys and studies have been carried out in relation to tail injuries. One of those studies, which is entitled 'Risk factors for tail injuries in dogs in Great Britain', was carried out by Diesel et al and appeared in 'Veterinary Record' in 2010. It covered 52 veterinary practices across the UK, and a copy of that survey has been provided as evidence. The study contained what has become somewhat of a headline-grabbing statement:

“approximately 500 dogs would need to be docked in order to prevent one tail injury.”

That study surveyed a very broad spectrum of dogs, totalling 138,212, but only 24 of those were working dogs. The chances of any of the other non-working dogs having sustained a tail

injury were greatly reduced. Therefore, the survey does not truly reflect the number of tail injuries that were sustained by working dogs during the survey period. Despite that approach, the conclusion was made that:

“Dogs with docked tails were significantly less likely to sustain a tail injury”.

The survey also concluded that English springer spaniels and cocker spaniels were among the breeds of dogs most at risk.

To get a much more realistic idea of the scale of the problem, we need to look at a Scottish-based survey entitled ‘Working Dog Injury Survey Analysis’ by McKendrick in 2010. Again, a copy of that study has been provided as evidence. The Scottish Government banned tail docking for all dogs in 2007 and, consequently, the remit of the Scottish-based survey was to discover what tail injuries, if any, may have occurred to working gun dogs from August 2008 to July 2009, when dogs born after the tail docking ban started to work with full tails. The survey found that 76% of full-tailed cocker spaniels and 86% of full-tailed springer spaniels sustained injuries. Of the dogs that were injured, 52% required tail amputation. The McKendrick study clearly shows that prophylactic docking is beneficial to the welfare of the working dog.

A separate survey by Houlton in 2008 entitled ‘A survey of gundog lameness and injuries in Great Britain in the shooting seasons 2005/2006 and 2006/2007’ concluded that there were 10 tail injuries in 245 docked springer spaniels: a proportion of 4%. It concluded that there were three injuries, including one fracture, in 12 undocked dogs of that breed, a proportion of 25%.

I will repeat that: there were just 10 tail injuries in 245 docked springer spaniels; that is 4%, and three injuries, including one fracture, in 12 undocked dogs of that breed; that is 25%. The corresponding figure for cocker spaniels was five tail injuries in 164 dogs, which is 3%; and three tail injuries in 10 undocked dogs, which is 30%. The survey found that both breeds have a highly significant association between tail injuries and whether the dog is docked.

The three studies that I have cited provide to varying degrees clear evidence that supports the prophylactic docking of working dogs. BASC supports and defends the prophylactic docking of

working dogs, and our position is supported by the Ulster Farmers' Union. BASC believes that it is in the best interests of the welfare of the working dog to allow a qualified vet to carry out a short simple procedure in order to avoid unnecessary suffering later in life.

The procedure should be carried out only by a qualified veterinary surgeon who is satisfied that the puppy is intended for use as a working dog. Evidence is required to prove that the puppy is from a working litter and that it is likely to be used as a working dog should be set out in a code of practice to provide guidance for vets who are asked to decide on individual cases. Such evidence could include whether a puppy's parents are working dogs or whether the owner can demonstrate by means of a firearms certificate or shooting lease that he or she is an active participant in shooting sports or pest control.

I understand that the Department may have some concerns as to how a working-dog breeder can be confident that a litter of puppies in his or her care are destined for working homes prior to their having their tails docked. I can go some way to reassure the Department by saying that under the terms of any exemption granted by the Department in Northern Ireland, as per the DEFRA model currently in place in England, the veterinary surgeon asked to dock the tails of puppies would certify that the breed is one covered by the exemption and that the puppies are likely to be used for work in connection with a specified activity.

Any docking carried out by a veterinary surgeon outside the boundaries of the exemption is considered by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons to constitute an act of disgraceful professional conduct and could result in the vet in question being struck off.

Research statistics show that a working dog that has sustained a tail injury usually suffers from repeat injuries requiring extended treatment, resulting in reduced working time. Recurring injuries mean that a partial tail amputation can become a necessity for those dogs that are required to carry out work on a regular basis. Tail amputations carried out by qualified vets under general anaesthetic usually involve a degree of risk.

BASC appeals to the Committee to consider an exemption for working dogs in respect of tail docking in the Welfare of Animals Bill. BASC believes that to ban the prophylactic docking of

working dogs tails would, as in Scotland, result in unnecessary suffering for large numbers of the Province's working dogs.

The Chairperson:

Thank you. I will call for questions from members in a moment. Veterinary opinion starts from the premise that docking tails causes pain to dogs. Have you scientific evidence to the contrary?

Mr Tony Patterson (British Association for Shooting and Conservation):

No, and I agree with that veterinary opinion that the docking of pups' tails causes pain. The old argument is that neonates of any breed, including humanity, do not have a fully-formed central nervous system, which is true. However, all the scientific evidence proves that it is sufficient for them to feel pain. The argument is not that docking at two days is not a painful procedure.

The Chairperson:

A number of respondents who are opposed to the ban on tail docking have referred to a report entitled 'Tail Injuries of Shorthaired German Pointer Dogs Born in Sweden 1989'. The Department claimed that that paper was not peer-reviewed, had significant methodological shortcomings and that, therefore, its findings are not valid. How do you respond?

Mr Patterson:

That paper is not a part of our submission. I am not aware of the paper and it bears no relation to our submission.

The Chairperson:

Do you agree with the Department's conclusion in relation to it?

Mr Patterson:

I have not read that paper and so cannot comment on it.

Mr Molloy:

Thank you for your presentation. The Department spoke about other animals such as lambs and pigs having their tails docked because it is necessary. Is there any difference between docking

the tails of those animals and docking the tails of dogs?

Mr Patterson:

No. It is unfair to suggest that lambs or piglets have different pain sensations from dogs. They effectively have the same nervous system and physiology and undergo the same process when docked. Therefore, the argument would have to be that they suffer the same level of pain.

Mr Molloy:

It was suggested that for every 500 dogs that have their tails docked, only a small proportion are working dogs. Do you have any idea how many lambs would get infections or pigs would get injured if their tails were not docked?

Mr Patterson:

There are a number of issues. First, the ratio of 500:1 was a slightly bizarre headline figure, which the science cannot justify. That paper included all breeds of dogs, whether they were traditionally docked or not. Therefore, it compared the entire population of dogs, and included breeds that have never been docked and tend not to be prone to tail injuries.

The welfare codes are quite strict for sheep and pigs, and the recommendation is that their tails should not be docked unless it is necessary. In respect of sheep, in many farming systems, particularly those involving low-ground intensive sheep production, lambs are not docked as they are ready to go off as fat lambs before any period of risk. However, hill breeds of sheep present a danger because, when they are diarrhoeic, the diarrhoea stains their tails. Flies then lay their eggs on the tails and maggot production ensues in a condition known as fly-strike. The numbers of lambs that can be affected by the condition are variable in flocks, and management techniques involving fly control and other measures can ameliorate it. However, the figures that I have seen suggest that the percentage of lambs that undergo fly-strike is less than the percentage of working dogs that suffer tail damage as detailed in the Biomathematics and Statistics Scotland (BioSS) paper. That paper shows that 86 out of 100 springer spaniel working pups suffer tail damage, and, of those, 52% require surgical amputation as adults. As for pigs, the welfare code strongly recommends that pigs are not docked unless management techniques to reduce tail biting have failed.

Tail docking is not recommended as a first step for any animal and I agree totally with the Chairperson that putting an animal through pain should be undertaken only if the consequences later will be worse if it is not done. That is our argument in the case of working spaniels, for example. I totally support the view expressed by the majority of my profession that there is no need to put most breeds of dogs through the pain and suffering involved in docking for purely cosmetic purposes.

Mr Molloy:

I know that working dogs get injured when they are caught in bramble and dense cover. However, I have also seen dogs that have been injured when they are being transported. Is that normal, and are there ways of preventing injuries when dogs are being transported?

Mr Patterson:

In my experience, such injuries are rarer events. The Diesel et al paper commented on injuries sustained in that way and suggested that the higher risk breeds were greyhounds, whippets and lurchers. Those breeds have thin tails, which are more prone to the physical damage that you described. However, their tails are also more likely to heal with rest.

Mr Mayne:

Whippets, lurchers and greyhounds have what we call a wide angle of wag, because they are tall and their tails are long. Their tails are prone to damage in trailers, and so on.

Mr W Clarke:

Thank you for your presentation. To follow on from what Francie touched on, you certainly present a reasonable argument with regard to the Scottish study on the number of injuries to spaniels. What type of injuries were they? Were they all the result of hunting in dense undergrowth or were some caused by the way in which the dogs were housed? Have you any figures on that?

Mr Mayne:

Off the top of my head, I believe that there were various injuries to legs, paws, chests and underbellies. However, the figures that we quoted were specific to tail injuries.

Mr W Clarke:

You presented the case for spaniels. Was there any evidence on injuries to terriers and retrievers?

Mr Patterson:

The BioSS study covered only working spaniels. It did not cover the hunt point retriever breeds or terriers.

Mr W Clarke:

Therefore, we do not really have any evidence on terriers and retrievers.

Mr Patterson:

Diesel et al covered hunt point retriever breeds. They found that there was a slight increase in risk, but that it was not statistically significant in their study.

Mr W Clarke:

I am trying to get at whether spaniels are the main type of working dogs for which your organisation is calling for exemption.

Mr Tom Blades (British Association for Shooting and Conservation):

I previously owned a terrier and used it for hunting in a similar way to how one would use a spaniel. My experience is that the potential for damage is exactly the same. The science that we present does not offer the same figures as it does for spaniels. However, there is enough anecdotal evidence that working terriers in the same type of cover could, potentially, sustain similar injuries.

Mr Jim Shannon (British Association for Shooting and Conservation):

As someone who previously owned several Jack Russell terriers — perhaps I should say that they owned me, because they are the sort of wee dogs that take you over — my knowledge from using them for hunting and flushing in dense cover, and not necessarily for hunting foxes, although my terriers were able to deal with almost anything, is that the damage to their tails was just the same as that caused to springer spaniels. My knowledge as an owner of springer spaniels and terriers over a great many years is, clearly, that the damage to a terrier's tail is the very same as that done

to a springer spaniel or, indeed, to an HPR breed.

Mr W Clarke:

The Committee needs to see evidence of that. Have you any evidence of the damage that is caused to terriers?

Mr Shannon:

There certainly is evidence from members of shooting organisations. Information is available from owners of terriers and similar breeds. Perhaps it is not all put down on paper but, certainly, knowledge has been gathered over the years. I have to say that my personal experience is clear in my mind. I docked all of my terriers' tails when they were pups. I have also bought terriers whose tails were not docked. They were every bit as enthusiastic as a springer spaniel when it came to chasing through cover. Unfortunately, I regularly had to take the Jack Russell terriers with the longer tails to the vet to have damage to their tails addressed. Therefore, over the years, when I kept terriers and bred them, I always docked their tails. That prevented damage being caused to their tails when hunting.

Mr W Clarke:

Thank you.

Mr Doherty:

Thank you for your submission. To summarise all of your evidence: you are arguing exclusively for exemptions for working dogs, and you are against what happened in Scotland and in favour of what has been introduced in England and Wales.

Mr Mayne:

That is correct.

Mr Doherty:

Who is responsible for drawing up and supervising the code of practice for vets' determinations on a working dog or making a judgement on that code? How do you envisage all of that?

Mr Mayne:

We would be quite happy to discuss all of that with the Department and take it further.

Mr Doherty:

Would the Department supervise that?

Mr Mayne:

Yes, if that would be possible.

Mr Doherty:

Is that what happens in England and Wales?

Mr Patterson:

In England, the certificate is issued by DEFRA. The practice vet who carries out the docking completes the form, but the certification comes from DEFRA.

Mr Blades:

The certificate lists the exemptions.

Mr Doherty:

Is that what you propose? Would you like to see that happen here?

Mr Blades:

Yes; we would like to see a similar model.

Mr Mayne:

There are two very slightly different models in England and in Wales, but we would be content with either.

Mr Blades:

The key is to have the exemption for working dogs.

Mr Doherty:

Excuse me, I do not quite understand: the statistics included in one report state that 4% of tail injuries occur in docked springer spaniels. This is an area on which I may be ignorant, but how can they have tail injuries if they do not have tails?

Mr Patterson:

Traditionally, a range of docking has been carried out. To compare and contrast show spaniels with working spaniels: show spaniels have traditionally had two thirds of their tails taken off and one third left, so they have been left with short tails. It is the other way around with working spaniels: one third of their tail is docked and two thirds is left. That will normally leave the dog with around eight inches of tail so that it can carry out its normal behaviour of wagging its tail or using it as a rudder in water. The short docking of springers' tails was mainly for cosmetic purposes.

The BioSS study has shown a real and direct correlation between the length of docked tail and whether those tails are still likely to be prone to injury. Dogs with tails less than six inches long, which is probably too short, had no injuries at all. Tails that were 10 inches long or more were still prone to some injuries. Some working dogs that have their tails docked have only had the very tips taken off, and they are still liable to sustain some injury from working in dense cover. From my experience, it is really only the last three or four inches, the final tip of the dog's tail, that gets damaged. That is mainly because of dragging brambles. As the skin is thin there, it has a poorer blood supply because it is right at the end of the dog. Those lacerations quickly damage the blood supply, so the dog may end up with a stump that heals very poorly. That can still be the case if a pup's tails is docked and a small fraction is taken off, rather than a third. In my experience, if one third of the tail is taken off, the dog is still left with a tail of around eight inches, but it is very rare for those docked tails to be damaged in normal work.

Mr Gibson:

Some breeds of hunting dogs do not have their tails docked, such as Labradors, for example. Am I right in saying that Labradors and perhaps setters do not have their tails docked? Are there particular breeds of dog for which you think it is required?

Mr Patterson:

Yes; very much so. There is a combination of factors: the breed of the dog, the environment in which it works, and the way in which it carries out its work. I have talked about spaniels because that is where my personal experience lies. A spaniel's mode of action is quite distinct. When a spaniel is working, its tail wags non-stop, so it is more likely to get caught. Spaniels are known to be bolder in cover; they will force themselves through dense brambles or suchlike, whereas Labradors tend not to do that. They are more likely to damage themselves from the way in which they work. The dog's tail, because of the hair on it, is more likely to snag and catch those brambles in the first place, so it is a combination of factors.

Labradors are not generally prone to cover damage. They can sustain normal trauma, such as having their tails shut in a door — that sort of damage. Other dogs, such as setters and pointers, are used in different areas of work. I was living in the Highlands of Scotland until the end of 2004, where I worked one of my undocked spaniels with no issues at all, primarily because there was mountain cover and no brambles. However, within a few weeks of the first season at the end of 2004, her tail was damaged badly enough to require partial amputation. That was due to a combination of factors, but particularly the dense bramble cover that one will see in most areas of the Province. The dense bramble cover in Northern Ireland means that any spaniels working here will be at risk.

The Chairperson:

Does the same apply to undocked foxhounds and sheepdogs?

Mr Patterson:

No. Foxhounds and Border collies work in different cover. They do not push themselves through dense areas of bramble. That is different work and a different mode of action. Foxhounds are built for running in open ground; they do not force themselves through dense cover.

Mr Gibson:

Perhaps this will sound foolish, but nature designed a dog, and nature reckoned that a dog required a tail. Perhaps the vet will comment on the purpose of the tail. Presumably it has a purpose.

Mr Patterson:

Absolutely. That goes back to my earlier remark, when I said that I disapprove of short docking, as do most of my colleagues. The tail provides an important behavioural response in a dog's approach to another dog. What it does with its tail is important in its behaviour. Dogs can use their tails as rudders when they are swimming. Tails have a range of functions. There are dangers with short docking, as we are seeing with Rottweilers and Dobermanns. Not only can it lead to behavioural problems, but to physiological problems, because it has the potential to damage the nerve supply to the anus. If a dog is docked, it is important that it has enough of a tail to ameliorate the possibility of such damage, but retain the advantage that a tail can bring in causing it to behave normally and for other purposes.

Mr Gibson:

People are concerned that if the derogation that you seek is agreed and tail docking is permitted, abuse of the system may occur and a bit of private enterprise might be employed in the removal of tails. Do you believe that the system that applies in England and Wales would be sufficient in preventing such abuse, if it were applied here?

Mr Patterson:

There are two responses to that. It is very helpful that the Kennel Club is not accepting docked dogs for showing. That puts pressure on owners to cosmetically dock out of the system. That is one side of it.

As a vet, I am constrained by the law. I am also keenly aware of the power of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. With regard to the DEFRA certificate, there is an onus on vets to certify a number of facts. They need to certify that the breed is exempt from the ban, and they need to be satisfied that the dam and the pups from that dam are likely to be used for working. A number of things are required for certification by way of evidence. They need full details of the person, and evidence such as HM Revenue and Customs certificates; a shotgun certificate; and letters from a gamekeeper to confirm that the bitch has worked. Only when vets are satisfied with all of that can they certify and dock the pups. That is the legal aspect, but as far as the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons is concerned, cosmetic docking or docking of any breed that does not have an exemption, is regarded as an act of disgraceful professional conduct, and could result

in that vet being struck off. If we go along the line that only veterinary surgeons carry out docking, controls are already in place, in law and through the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, so a vet would be extremely unwise not to follow those rules to the letter.

Mr Gibson:

Does the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons take a view on tail docking?

Mr Patterson:

Yes. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons is totally opposed to cosmetic tail docking, although we mentioned the exemption for certain working dogs that exists in England and Wales. It regards cosmetic docking carried out by a vet as an act of disgraceful professional conduct, with potentially very severe consequences, including being struck off.

Mr T Clarke:

This time, I am on the BASC's side. After the previous session, you might find that unusual. Earlier, you were asked about the evidence on damage. It is very hard to prove damage because, in the past, more often than not, tail docking was routinely associated with certain breeds, so instances of damage are less likely to be able to be demonstrated. If we are really concerned about animal welfare, it is surprising that we are considering bringing forward this measure. As the BASC said, most — although not all — dog owners keep their animals responsibly for the very reason that they are concerned for their welfare. Therefore, I support BASC.

In reply to questions — I had better be careful because I do not know what my colleague beside me will say — various breeds, such as Labradors and Jack Russells, were mentioned. It should come down to the purpose for which a dog is used, as opposed to its breed, because dogs of a particular breed will not always be used for the same purpose. Some people may have a Labrador for a different reason than others. This is more of an observation than a question, but if we really want to consider animal welfare, and removing a dog's tail would give it a better quality of life and mean that it is less likely to be harmed, that is what should be done. We should avoid introducing a ban on tail docking in Northern Ireland.

Mr Shannon:

On the UK mainland, in England, the system was obviously driven by organisations and sportsmen. DEFRA, the equivalent to DARD here, accepted that it was right to have an exemption. Before coming up with the system, it held extensive discussions with various bodies to gauge opinion. That system is working; it has been tested and shown to be effective, so I humbly suggest that Northern Ireland does likewise.

In the 37 years that I have been a shooting man, I have had various types of dogs, particularly terriers and springer spaniels. Both of those breeds are hard-working and want to get into cover; the thicker the cover, the more energetic they are. There is a clear need to dock the tails of those dogs. If an exemption would reduce the suffering of working dogs in Northern Ireland, we should have it. Northern Ireland should follow the example of how things have been done in England.

The Chairperson:

A DEFRA paper, 'Information on Dog Tail Docking Provided for the Animal Welfare Division', concludes:

“The arguments put forward by those who wish docking to be continued are unsound from a scientific viewpoint, are contrary to accepted standards for the welfare of dog(s) and serve only to contribute to artificial physical breed standards.”

How would you respond to that?

Mr Shannon:

DEFRA is involved in the system in England and, as such, it had input to the process. Men and women who are involved in sports such as game shooting, rough shooting and wildfowling recognise that working dogs have to be protected. Tail docking is a way to prevent them from injury. With respect, the Committee should take that on board and keep an open mind when deciding what is best, which is that there should be an exemption for working dogs.

Mr T Clarke:

I would go further than that. Although some people keep dogs for working purposes, other people keep them for leisure. Dogs have natural instincts. For example, even if it is kept as a pet,

a Jack Russell's natural instinct is to hunt. If it goes into bramble, it could still be damaged. An exemption should not be extended to one group. It should be common practice that a person who has a particular breed of dog should be allowed to dock it. It should not matter whether I have a Jack Russell that I take out through whin, but do not use for hunting. Someone asked a question about the natural purpose of the tail; we need to also consider the natural purpose and characteristics of a dog, and what it has been bred for in the past. If a dog's natural characteristic is to hunt, regardless of whether it is kept for working or leisure, it will still hunt. Therefore, we should not just look at exemptions for working dogs; we should look at exemptions based on breed.

The Chairperson:

Thank you for coming before the Committee. This is the first of a number of oral hearings on the Bill, and the Committee has to hear from a lot of people before it concludes its deliberations.