

MEETING OF FEBRUARY COUNCIL 2016

This report begins with a tale of two presentations since undoubtedly they were the highlights of the afternoon. Congratulations to both Sally Rainbow-Ockwell and Kate Kaye for putting together the relevant data and giving very precise summaries on their respective projects.

The new computer system

Sally believed it would be the final time she would be standing in front of Council giving an update on Project Phoenix. She couldn't give an exact date yet when the system would go live, but hopefully in April. She had hoped to be telling delegates of a more imminent launch, but unfortunately the development company had been bedevilled by staff problems, so that at the end of the previous year and on into early 2016 progress had slowed to almost a standstill.

At the January Board meeting approval had been given for extra funding for the volunteers to push things along. GCCF was indeed indebted to Ian Macro who was devoting as much time to Phoenix as he was to his day job. Thankfully he had the technical expertise, as well as a thorough understanding of the special requirements for GCCF, so the impetus towards project completion had been regained.

The first screen shots Sally showed us were of the computer screens the registrars and show support staff in the GCCF Office look at daily. It was an instant flashback to around 30 years, for those around then, a period when print showed yellow or white on an all black background screen. It was a window into the current i-Series computer, repository of all our records since the late 1980s. It's quite a contrast to our light, bright applications of today with their dropdown menus, multi-page accessibility and guided entry prompts.

The format of the current on-line system will change, screens will look different and it will be possible to access more information on individual cats than is possible at the present, such an analysis of their genetic makeup. However, for owners and breeders not a tremendous difference to cope with. The emphasis now is on staff training as at the GCCF Office they have a much bigger transition to make. It's not just a question of input change. They are being supported to becoming interactive, to assist those who phone in with registration queries and problems. The answer, 'because the computer says so', should be a thing of the past.

'Male torties?' queried one delegate, and assurance was given that Phoenix would allow overrides to take care of oddities, and correct errors from the past. Work was still ongoing to input registration policies onto the system, particularly in respect of variants. There was a fair amount of inconsistency between what BACs allowed as acceptable, and these individual preferences and definitions made programming difficult.

The final plea was to spread the word. There will be a period of a few days when existing online services are lost to enable the new to be got up and running. It will be a time of intense activity and pressure in the Office to ensure downtime is as short as possible. Though there may be frustration to lose what we are now very used to having, take a deep breath and remember, Phoenix will be rising, at last!

The show survey results

Kate's report gave Council the outcome to the show survey that took place at the end of last year. An analysis had been made to find out exactly what was liked and disliked about the GCCF show experience. This had proved relatively easy for the first five questions, as information was drawn down from multiple choice questions, but the final two had generated 300 pages of varied comments, all of which had been read and eventually allocated to construct six themes. As with Phoenix there was grateful thanks to those who worked long and hard behind the scenes turning random remarks into structured reports. Take a bow Peter Collin, and please pass thanks on to your partner, Gavin.

There were almost 1500 respondents and the good news was that the majority were showing with GCCF and over half were at least content with their show experience, some more so. A few went to shows run by other organisations as well, but in addition, rather than instead of. It was also a pleasant outcome as well to find that many valued their day out for the social experience, meeting up with friends and seeing new cats.

From listening to Kate, rather than having studied the report, it would seem there was probably at least one complaint about almost everything. However, the length of the show day was one thing that stood out, and judges and stewards came in for a fair amount criticism, though perhaps for a suspicion of a lack of objectivity rather than an actuality. The four-week period for the publication of show reports was thought about right, though the content of reports, those that didn't include reasons for placing or withholding, attracted some criticism.

Delegates were not too impressed by some of the remarks reported, as it was clear the complainants had little understanding of the work involved in putting on a show. The show manager who said she would like to round up the bored and idle and give them a job to do was roundly applauded. It was noticeable too that many who had a wish list did not consider consequences. For example, all would probably agree it would be great to have smarter venues in plusher complexes with more activities on offer, but few would be willing to pay the hike in entry fees that would result.

The trigger that fired off the great show review was the Siamese Cat Club's proposal that titled cats should have an entry option in either the class that would gain them a higher award, or keep them at the level already obtained. The overwhelming majority who mentioned this were in favour of it, though it wasn't a large number. It also came as no surprise that the majority of respondents came from the large multi-breed sections, the Foreign and Semi Longhair, and it was these exhibitors who commented that it was time for restructure to make the sections more balanced, but again only a small proportion of the whole. It was thought there was more work to do investigating changes that would be widely welcomed, now that were some pointers.

The full survey results will be published on the website shortly for all to read, with paper copies made available (for the cost of postage and packing) for those unable to access it from there. The Show Review Group's next work will be to bring proposals to Council from June based on the results, considering the easy fixes first. However, do watch your mailbox because another survey, this time based solely on the Supreme, will be with you next month. All contributions very welcome!

Breed & show news

a) Registration

There was one major change today, and it affects only those involved with white cats - all breeds. It is the intention that all white cats used for breeding should have normal hearing, so from 1st June those registered active, and to be registered active in future, will need a certificate to prove they hear normally in both ears to have progeny registered.

It was explained there is no DNA test and no likelihood of one in the near future as it's doubted the problem is the caused by a single gene. However, it is known that if the parents hear normally the chances that kittens they have will not be deaf either is considerably better than if deaf cats are used in breeding. A Russian White breeder present supported this with evidence from her own breeding experience. There was no known problem in GCCF Russian Whites that had followed exactly the testing policy proposed to include all for the past five years, but this wasn't the case in Europe where there was no testing scheme in place.

There was a query on whether Foreign Whites should be exempt, but stated that they would not be. The Genetics Committee had considered the evidence available, but not found it proven that these cats were immune from the affects of the gene for overall white. As it happened a delegate could confirm a deaf Foreign White was a possibility from her own experience.

Testing will not be required for all white kittens. Breeders can register them non-active until such time they feel they are of an age to be tested and have decided which are suitable for breeding. However, some could want to take up the offer from the Animal Health Trust that is currently testing all kittens in a litter where at least one is white free of charge. Further advice and a list of test centres is available from the GCCF website and at least one club has leaflets on testing for deafness.

The Ragdoll BAC's revisions to its registration policy included a stringent testing policy for Ragdoll HCM for all breeding Ragdolls and instituted additional tests for imported Ragdolls. Microchipping was part of the required testing procedure and the representative believed that this made them the first BAC ensuring all their active registered cats would be chipped. She was obviously pleased to be announcing this, and there were some acknowledging murmurs of approval.

b) New colour of an existing breed

It's official - there are caramel Australian Mists! The breed clubs had applied to have the colour included in the range accepted for the breed and it was unanimously agreed, as was the new Standard of Points accompanying the application. Caramels will go into the existing A-M class, so no changes are required for shows.

c) Standards

The revised standards for Nebelungs and Oriental SHs and LHs also received unanimous approval.

The SOP for the new breed Suffolk was thought to need to some change. It was agreed that it should be approved so that the cats could be shown at preliminary level, but referred back for alteration to return to Council as soon as possible. There was concern that the Standard should reference another breed in what some considered a rather disparaging manner, and this was to be removed. However, the chocolate and lilac Suffolks will have their assessment classes at shows as soon as these can be included in schedules, another breed to join the Foreign Section.

d) *The Supreme*

The main show business concerned the Supreme. Delegates learned that the 2015 show had lost £9,700, but that the Ruby Anniversary show in 2016 would go ahead with some additions. With exception of UK Grand all certificates would be worth double, even though awarded only by a single judge. Therefore cats that came needing two for their next title could gain it on the day. Rubies are red, so along with the special kitten class enjoyed by many, there would be a special class for all red breeds.

The final innovation was being planned to attract the visiting public. There was liaison to complete a deal with Tenth Planet to get well known sci-fi characters in costume there that families liked to meet. It was hoped this be another reason people would pay to enter, and take in the cats as an added extra. Care would be taken to prevent cats being disturbed or frightened by this sideshow.

The Gala Dinner would take place at the Metropole Hotel on the Friday evening before and tickets would be available at £54 per person. This was thought by some to be expensive, but it was stressed that it was the only hotel in the complex that would accept cats. The Cat Of The Year Awards would be presented on the same evening and scoring for these was well underway.

e) *Royal Canin young people's awards*

Another new award, one to be run over the coming year, was to encourage youngsters. The class would be sponsored by Royal Canin, with the only condition to be that the cat was owned, or part owned, by someone 16 or under. It could be a pedigree, pedigree pet or household pet, but would be judged as if in the pet section (on temperament and condition on the day) not to any SOP. It would not be compulsory for shows to put on a class, but thought those that did could do it very much on the same lines as the YES classes.

f) *Judges*

Judges were approved with one exception. The Sokoke Breed Club had put forward a judge for the Sokoke list who was not a Full Judge in the Foreign Section, and therefore was not eligible.

NB Those on a list for an assessment breed are not qualified Full Judges of the breed until confirmed when the breed is approved for Championship Status.

Finance

The Chairman reported that some queries relating to the presentation of the accounts had been sent to the accountants O'Hara Wood as they acted for the GCCF professionally.

Office Manager, Mark Goadby, then took delegates through the management accounts and volume figure graphs prepared to indicate how the business was doing.

Once again he had a very positive picture to present. Income had risen and some effective savings made were now paying off so that expenditure had fallen. There would be a very satisfactory end of year surplus, and the examiner was now preparing the draft 2015 accounts from all the records provided. The only query on the figures concerned the substantial increase in spending on computing to that predicted, and it was explained that this was because professional support had to be bought in for maintenance on the old system as the volunteer who had given his time freely to do this was now devoting it entirely to getting the new system live.

The volume figures confirmed the business growth. For the first time in many years there had been a very modest increase in prefix registrations, though for an unknown reason those for non-prefixes had improved dramatically. Import figures had achieved a record high and transfers are almost at the 2010 level when far more cats were being registered. The proportion of kittens registered that were transferred was another best ever.

There was some dissatisfaction expressed that no draft accounts from the Supreme had been provided, as it was felt they had been promised. However, assurance was given that the relevant paperwork was now also with the examiner, and the Chairman had not yet seen the provisional figures. The bottom line for the show's loss in 2015 was supplied though. After a generous anonymous donation there was a loss of £9,700 as 2015 cat numbers were substantially down on those of the previous year.

Business

The reports from the partnerships were also upbeat. The number of conversions on Agria kitten policies by the new owners continued to show steady growth. In all GCCF had earned a total of £45,000 from this business arrangement in the past year that went towards holding prices for registrations and transfers steady as well as into new services. There would be a new member of staff to join the Bridgwater team later in the year, an administrator to focus on marketing, communications and improved customer liaison.

Royal Canin's assessment of the transfer incentive was that it was one of the best promotions the company had run based on take up figures. For GCCF it had brought about the increase in transfer numbers reported which contributed to the improvement shown in income. It was hoped that a regular complaint received from owners that they could not find a local RC outlet would be dealt with as the food company had successfully brought Pets At Home into the scheme.

Mrs Rainbow-Ockwell had completed the 2016 Business Plan and copies were available. She apologised for lateness, but it had been somewhat of an effort to find the time with Project Phoenix needing so much extra attention. It will be on the web site shortly for download and paper copies should be available on request. Delegates were expected to ratify the document in June as there had not been the opportunity for them to study it in advance for it to happen at this Council meeting.

Welfare

The Chairman gave an update from his continued liaison with the Canine & Feline Sector Group, and its sub-committee whose remit was the breeding and welfare of cats, and from the Cat Group. He felt he was successfully getting the message across that GCCF was concerned with promoting best practice, the proposal to reduce the risk of deafness in white cats was one example. He was able to bring the news that the incidence of FeLV had dramatically plummeted amongst all cats, including ferals, and the incidence of FIV was also reduced.

A representative of Cat Protection would be attending the next Board meeting. She was the principle author and promoter of 12 recommendations on the breeding and sale of cats that it was intended would eventually be sent to DEFRA for action. As these had not yet been ratified by the C&FSG detail could not be given. However, the focus was on internet selling, much deemed irresponsible and inaccurate which would be supported by GCCF breeders. However, methods to control this could affect those of us aiming for best practice as well as the back yard easy money brigade who hi-jacked pedigree names for the sake of the pounds. No doubt much more will be written on this in the months to come once the detail is published.

Club news

The Devon Rex Owners Club was introduced as a new provisional breed club member.

All member clubs will have to get their return sheets in for May 1st this year or face a £50 administrative charge. If there are extenuating circumstances the GCCF Office has to be informed of these so that assistance can be offered, again by the date rather than leaving it to drift.

However, the idea of the accounts being published on the GCCF website once approved did not find favour. It was thought members should be provided with the necessary information directly from their clubs, although it was known some clubs did not distribute paperwork for AGMs in the manner regularly practiced in the past.

Unfortunately, there was time not to discuss the suggestion from the Surrey and Sussex Club of delegate representation with reduced club membership. The Chairman asked delegates to have some club committee discussion on this. While it might seem to be a help for clubs whose membership was falling, should there be fixed limits on what actually constituted and defined a club? Should a club with 90 members have the same representation and voting rights as those with only 20 or 30?

Finale

The day ended on something of a sour note with the presentation of the Codes of Conduct for the Board and Disciplinary Committees. These had been approved by the Board and would be published so that those standing for election knew what was expected of them, though they varied very little from other codes of ethics standard in business and the public sector with the same aim of securing good governance.

The contention was over whether a member of the Board should speak in Council against a proposal agreed by a Board majority. It was acknowledged that his/her club had the right to representation to express its committee view and options were provided by which this could be achieved, allowing for the usual delegate to speak, having notified the Chairman in advance, or provision made for a substitute to attend.

So in spite of concerns, no one is prevented from attending any meeting, and all retain the right to speak, indeed to dissent if club and director are agreed this is the view to be put forward. All that was introduced was an element of courtesy, a nod towards a Board member's responsibility to colleague support and company unity that goes in tandem with a directorship.

Once a stand is taken on a perceived right to freedom of speech, responsibilities to committees, colleagues and the company tend to seem less important. Perhaps the old adage of judging by actions rather than by words is the bottom line. The next meeting will be the Electoral one once again. Someone who is prepared to work hard and get things done, without consideration of personal gain or glory, would surely be the ideal, but everyone to his or her own vote.