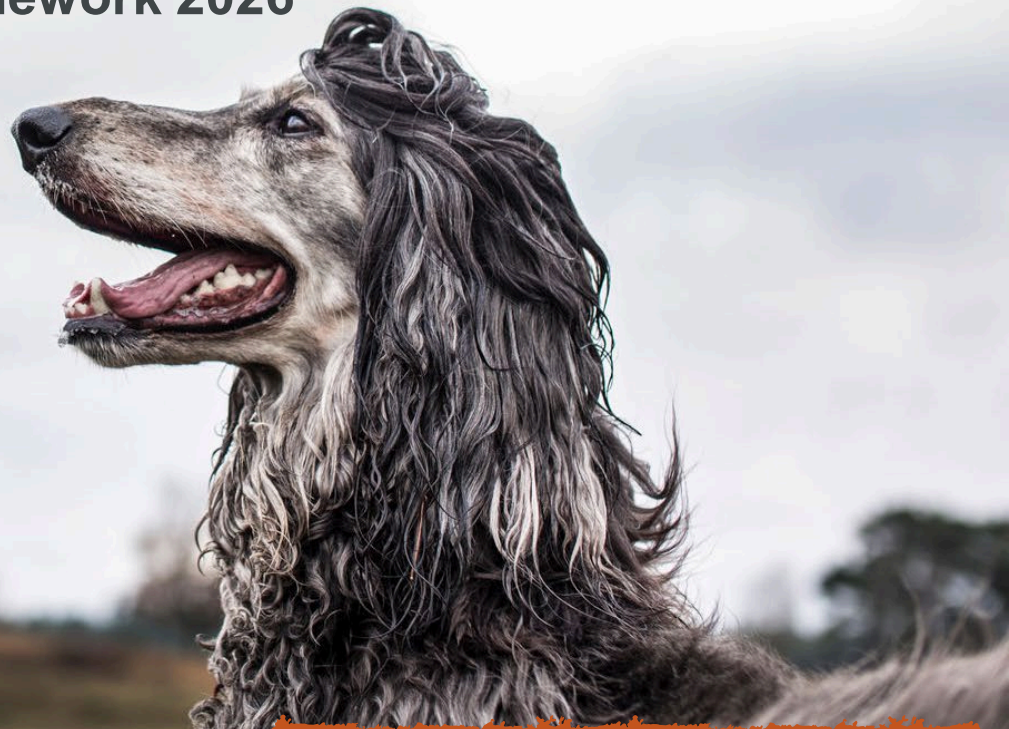


A New Future for Dog Breeding & the RKC Breeding for Health Framework 2026

Dr Alison Skipper

Veterinary and Research Advisor

IPFD April 2026





Royal Kennel Club

1. “A New Future for Dog Breeding”





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**A New Future for
Dog Breeding**

Major RKC report “A New Future for Dog Breeding”

Published 15 January 2026

https://www.royalkennelclub.com/media/cbsnewyj/rkc_report_2026_full-version.pdf



Horizon Topic

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A new future for dog breeding

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Abstract

The modern idea of purebred dogs has come under increasing critical scrutiny over recent decades. In light of this critical focus and other developments in society, some new trends in how companion dogs are bred and acquired have emerged. This means a diminishing influence from traditional kennel clubs with more dogs being sold without a pedigree, stricter legal restrictions on dog breeding, growing popularity of deliberate crosses of established breeds (i.e. so-called designer breeds) and growing hype around the benefits of mixed-breed dogs. We give an overview of these trends and discuss to what extent they will serve to promote dogs that are innately healthy, have good welfare and function well in their various roles in today's world. We argue that newly invented designer breeds and mixed breeds also have worrying health and behavioural problems, and that the predictability of purebred dogs with respect to body size, basic behaviours, known need for grooming, disorder profiles and other attributes may well offer some benefits for a satisfying human-dog relationship seen from both sides. The optimal future seems to lie in the middle ground, where the future organised dog world (i.e. kennel and breed clubs or their successor organisations) will need to re-open the breed registries, remove wording from breed standards that currently promotes extreme conformation, support selection against disease-predisposing genotypes and phenotypes and refocus dog showing and breeding to promote health and appropriate behaviour.

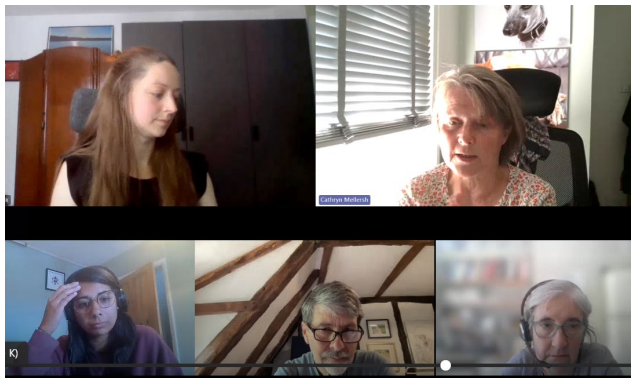
Review structure: Proschowsky categories

- **Inbreeding/reduced genetic diversity**
- **Extreme conformation**
- **Breed-related diseases (various)**



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The review process: who did we speak to?



- Three parallel breeder focus groups
- Breeder feedback from population analysis workshops
- Three group sessions with external experts
- 1:1s with pedigree dog health campaigners

Genetic diversity – where did stakeholders agree?

- Inbreeding/loss of genetic diversity was generally considered a priority problem across many breeds
- Popular sires highlighted as major concern
- Widespread views that the RKC should provide more leadership, education and engagement



Image copyright Lisa Croft-Elliott/Royal Kennel Club



Genetic diversity: where did stakeholders differ?

- Breeders had various specific issues with RKC provision and regulation (e.g. shallow pedigrees on database)
- Experts and campaigners were **STRONGLY** in favour of outcrossing where needed
- Most breeders were neutral about this overall: some were pro/anti for their own breeds
- Customised solutions important!



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Extreme conformation: the definition we used



Image copyright Nick Ridley/Royal Kennel Club

“Extreme conformation in dogs describes a physical appearance that is so exaggerated that affected dogs suffer from poor health and welfare, with negative impacts on their quality and/or quantity of life”

Brachycephalic Working Group (2024)

Extreme conformation – where did stakeholders agree?

- All agreed this is a difficult issue!
- Breeders generally satisfied with Breed Watch and vet check process, with some specific caveats
- Wide agreement that more subtle issues (conformational ‘creep’) may be overlooked



Image copyright Nick Ridley/Royal Kennel Club

Extreme conformation: where did stakeholders differ?

- Most breeders didn't comment much on extreme conformation
- For external experts and campaigners, it was a major issue for canine welfare and for the RKC's reputation
- These stakeholders thought we should do far more to address extreme conformation



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Breed-related disease: where did stakeholders agree?

- RKC health provision generally considered comprehensive but inaccessible to novices/public
- Health Standard now generally well regarded (following teething problems)
- More incentivisation for health testing
- Better leadership on health prioritisation and outreach



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Breed-related disease: where did stakeholders differ?

- Broad range of views on mandatory health testing
- Need to cater differently to breeders with different knowledge levels
- Need to engage breeders who don't care about health



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Top insights!

- The RKC needs to outreach to stakeholder groups much more (including listening!)
- The RKC needs to be much more proactive about leadership and implementing new solutions



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Breeding for Health Framework

Supporting responsible breeding in a changing dog world

Why?

Dog breeding is **changing** – new scientific knowledge about canine health & social trends means we must rethink & review how we support pedigree dog breeding for health.

So, we asked...

60+ experts, including:



Breeders



Breed Health Co-ordinators



Geneticists



Academic researchers



Vets



Pedigree health campaigners

for honest, **critical** feedback to help shape the new framework – they identified problems with



genetic diversity & inbreeding



extreme conformation



breed-related disease & wellbeing



outreach & communication

...and we *listened*

The Royal Kennel Club's new **Breeding for Health Framework** covers all aspects of health and welfare that influence breeding decisions for **any and all** dogs - with focus on 3 key areas: genetic diversity, conformation, and breed-related disease.

Breeds will be grouped by **shared issues**, not treated in isolation.

This means we can provide **targeted support**, and communities can **share experiences** and expertise.

Genetic diversity	Conformation	Breed-related disease and wellbeing
Population size	Visible conformation	Testable conditions
Harmful breeding practices/ popular sires	Distinctive breed features of potential concern	Untestable conditions
Limited pedigree data	Shifting conformation over time (conformational 'creep')	Temperament/mental wellbeing

What's next?

During 2026, we will be prioritising work that addresses the **top row** of the Breeding for Health Framework:



Genetic diversity in small populations



RKC Nose-to-Tail Assessment for visible conformation



Improving our approach to testable conditions

Main report outcome: the Breeding for Health Framework



- Covers the various aspects of health and welfare that should influence breeding choices for any breed or type of dog
- Where appropriate, deployed through a 'grouping' concept

The Royal Kennel Club Breeding for Health Framework

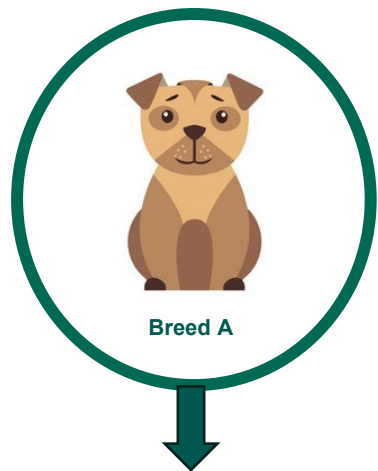
2026



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The grouping concept



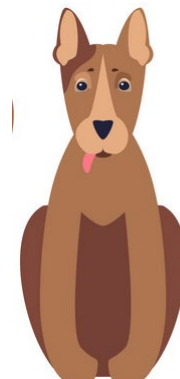
Breed A



Breed B



Breed C

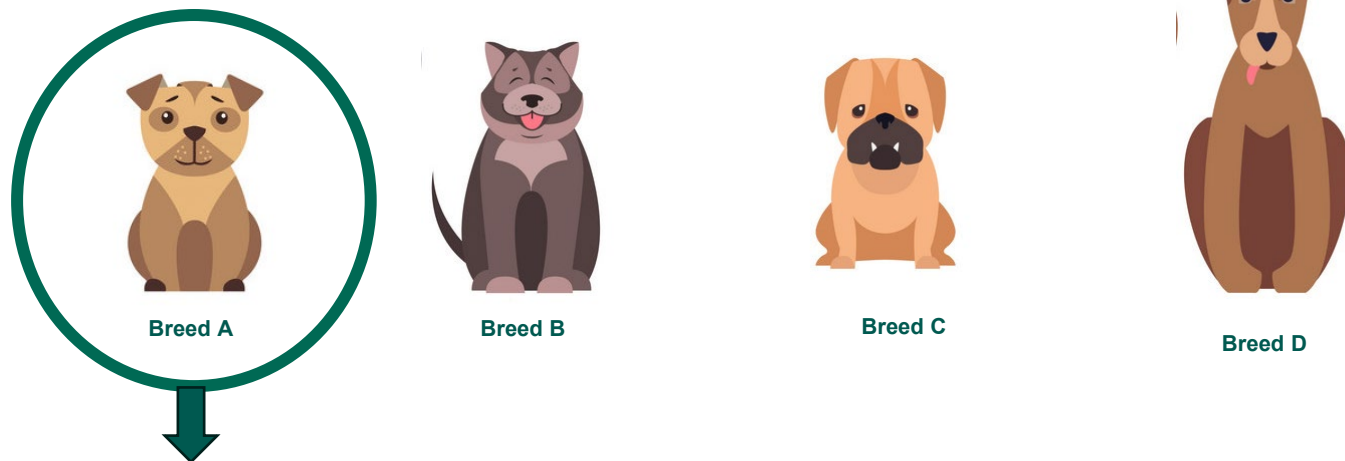


Breed D

(Fictitious!) breed A:

- Small global population with very high levels of inbreeding
- Brachycephalic conformation
- High prevalence of specific inherited disease

The grouping concept



(Fictitious!) breed A:

- **Small population issues:** group with breed B and other affected breeds
- **Brachycephalic issues:** group with breed C and other affected breeds
- **Specific inherited disease** – group with breed D and other affected breeds



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Breeding for Health Framework: 2026 workstreams



Our 2026 Breeding for Health Framework workstreams

- Genetic diversity: support for small populations
- Visible conformation: the RKC Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment
- Breed related disease: starting to develop a Mandatory Health Testing Process, building on the existing Health Standard (a breed-by breed guide to health testing priorities)





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Supporting genetic diversity in
numerically small populations:
see Dr Joanna Ilska's presentation!





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Addressing extreme conformation: the RKC Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment



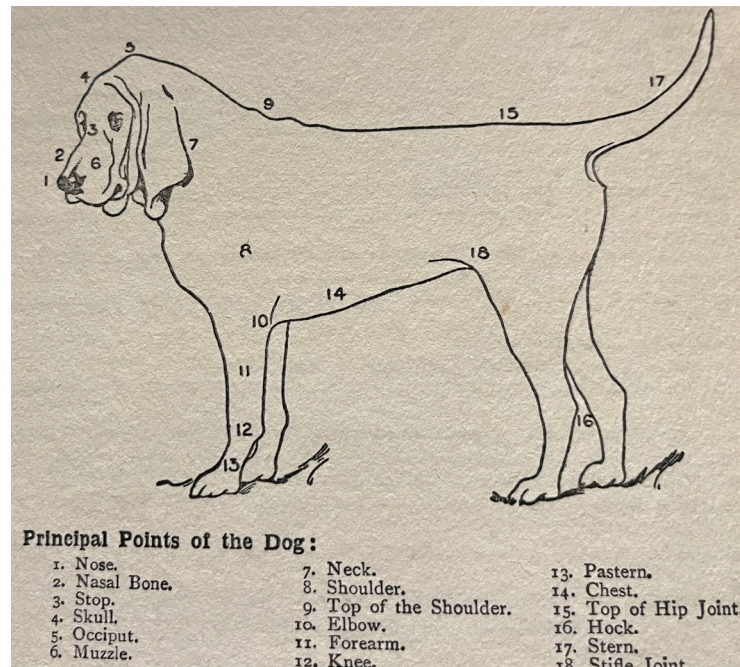
RKC Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment



- Veterinary assessment
- Visible conformation of the whole dog
- Applicable to any breed
- Evidence based to consider exaggerations of **body shape** that have a welfare impact
- Standardised, nuanced and repeatable
- Allows collection of data to monitor progress

RKC Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment

- > 20 vets and approx. 200 breeders have contributed to focus group phases
- Now wording draft criteria boundaries
- Pilot phase this summer at dog shows
- Further feedback before and after this
- To launch in November 2026
- “Bedding in” phase thereafter



What the Nose-to-Tail Assessment ISN'T



Image copyright RKC/James Robertson

- Body shape/movement ONLY – colour, etc will be addressed later
- Visual/manual assessment ONLY – other aspects of examination (e.g. cardiac auscultation) not included
- Does not include or substitute for other health screening tests (e.g. hip scoring, DNA tests)
- Intended to assess conformation, not varying clinical signs of disease (different from a Breed Watch show vet check)
- Not a pass/fail system – but can be used to compare dogs to others of that breed

How will it work?

- A number of criteria (currently 15 – may change)
- Evidence base for inclusion of all
- Some assessed visually, some measured
- All or most will be graded 0-3
- 0 = totally normal, 3 = most extreme
- Score can be added to create a total for each dog (potentially 0-45 if 15 criteria, for example)
- This allows comparison of breed averages to monitor change
- Could potentially monitor certain criteria separately if needed

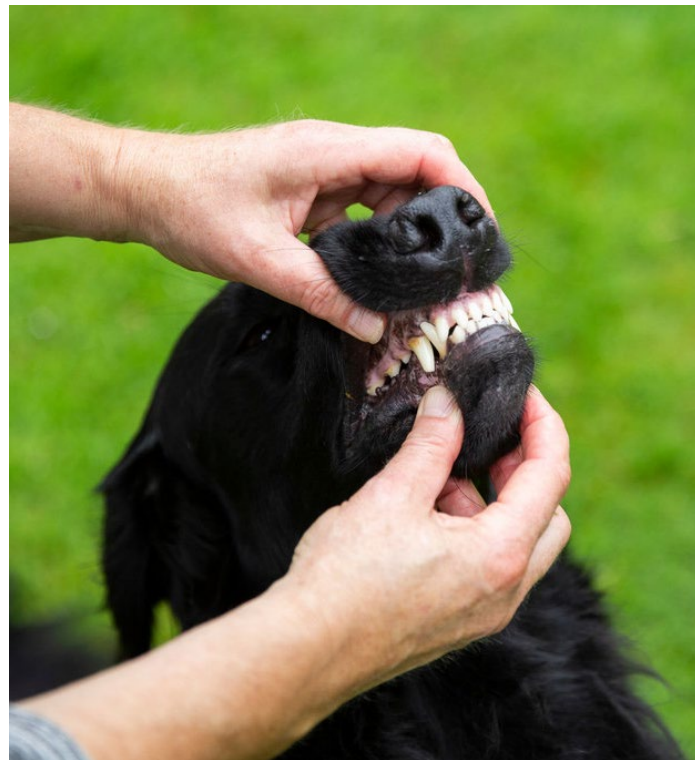
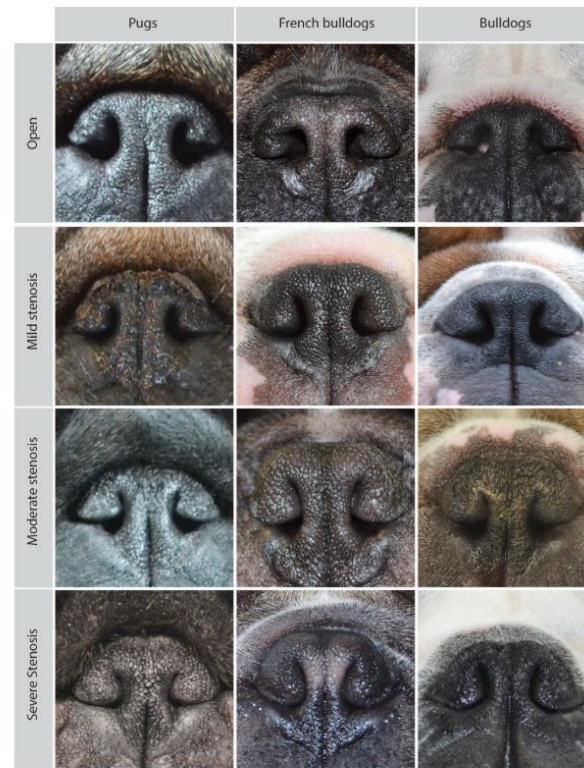


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What will it look like?

- Graded criteria will have clearly defined descriptions for each grade – as with RFGS nostril grading
- Measured criteria will have numerical grade boundaries
- Assessment of any dog can follow the same standardised process – no reference to breed standards
- Not intended that every dog of every breed “should” score 0 – e.g. some 1s will indicate acceptable breed variation



Rough fictitious examples



Image RKC/Andy Biggar

Total score = 0 /42



Image Wikimedia Commons

Total score = 6 /42



Image New Hope Animal Rescue

Total score = 28 /42



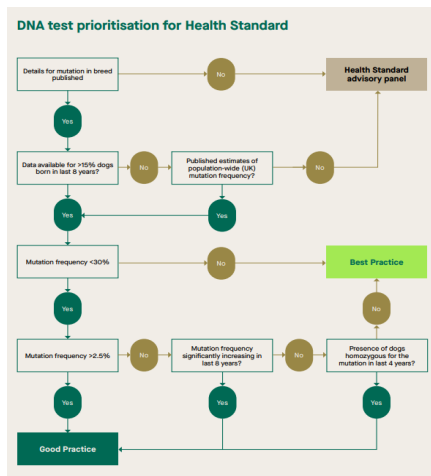
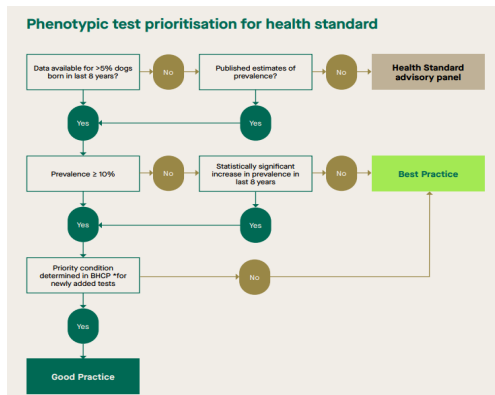
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Addressing breed related disease:
improving our approach to testable conditions



RKC Health Standard (launched January 2025)

- Evidence-based guide to important testable conditions for each breed
- Divided into good and best practice levels



Top 10 Kennel Club registered breeds

	Good Practice	Best Practice (will have completed all tests in Good Practice, and the below column to achieve Best Practice status)
Bulldog	Breathing testing (for brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome (BOAS)) using the KC Respiratory Function Grading scheme Hip testing using the BVA/KC/ISDS Eye Scheme	DNA test for hyperuricaemia (HUA) Elbow testing (for elbow dysplasia) using the BVA/KC Elbow Dysplasia Scheme Hip testing (for hip dysplasia) using the BVA/KC Hip Dysplasia Scheme This breed also has a breed club health scheme, with further information on pages 24-25. This breed can be affected by conformational concerns, see page 26 for more information.
Dachshund (Miniature Smooth Haired)	Spine screening using the KC Intervertebral disc disease (IVDD) screening scheme (supported by Dachshund Health UK)	DNA test for progressive retinal atrophy (PRA/cord) This breed can be affected by conformational concerns, see page 26 for more information.
French Bulldog	Breathing testing (for brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome (BOAS)) using the KC Respiratory Function Grading scheme	DNA test for hereditary cataracts (HC-HSF4-2) Elbow testing (for elbow dysplasia) using the BVA/KC Elbow Dysplasia Scheme Hip testing (for hip dysplasia) using the BVA/KC Hip Dysplasia Scheme This breed also has a breed club health scheme, with further information on pages 24-25. This breed can be affected by conformational concerns, see page 26 for more information.
German Shepherd Dog	Elbow testing (for elbow dysplasia) using the BVA/KC Elbow Dysplasia Scheme Hip testing (for hip dysplasia) using the BVA/KC Hip Dysplasia Scheme	DNA test for degenerative myelopathy (DM) Eye testing using the BVA/KC/ISDS Eye Scheme This breed also has a breed club health scheme, with further information on pages 24-25. This breed can be affected by conformational concerns, see page 26 for more information.

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Dachshund (Miniature Smooth Haired)	Spine screening using the KC intervertebral disc disease (IVDD) screening scheme (supported by Dachshund Health UK)	DNA test for progressive retinal atrophy (PRA(cord1)) <i>This breed can be affected by conformational concerns, see page 26 for more information.</i>
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Miniature Schnauzer		DNA test for mycobacterium avium (MAC) Eye testing using the BVA/KC/ISDS Eye Scheme
Retriever (Golden)	DNA test for progressive retinal atrophy (GR_PRA2) Elbow testing (for elbow dysplasia) using the BVA/KC Elbow Dysplasia Scheme Eye testing (and gonioscopy for PLA) using the BVA/KC/ISDS Eye Scheme Hip testing (for hip dysplasia) using the BVA/KC Hip Dysplasia Scheme	DNA test for: • Ichthyosis (ICT-A) • Progressive retinal atrophy (GR_PRA1) <i>This breed can be affected by conformational concerns, see page 26 for more information.</i>
	DNA test for:	DNA test for hereditary nasal parakeratosis (HNPK)



Tests listed in the Health Standard

- BVA/RKC Hip and Elbow Dysplasia Schemes
- British Veterinary Association/Royal Kennel Club/International Sheepdog Society (BVA/RKC/ISDS) Eye Scheme
- RKC/University of Cambridge Respiratory Function Grading Scheme
- RKC/Dachshund Health UK IVDD Scheme
- RKC/VCS Heart Scheme
- Brainstem auditory evoked response (BAER) testing
- DNA tests that meet evidence threshold for each breed



Lisa Croft-Elliott

Current issues with health testing provision

- Uptake is low for most clinical schemes
- Some clinical schemes need revision
- Need more sophisticated way to assess evidence for disease patterns by breed
- Health Standard doesn't yet consider disease severity
- Need to work towards algorithm for mandatory disease testing decisions



2026 work (and on to 2027!)

- Developing a more inclusive way to assess evidence for disease patterns by breed
- Developing a disease severity index
- These will then support the development of an algorithm for mandatory disease testing decisions



Image RKC/Georgia Eason



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Image RKC/Andy Biggar

Thank you!

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