



Royal Kennel Club

RKC Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment Development FAQs **July 2026**

Why is the Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment being developed?

As part of the new [Breeding for Health Framework](#), which groups breeds that share certain issues so targeted support can be provided and breed communities can share relevant experience and expertise, the Royal Kennel Club has committed to deliver, in close collaboration with both vets and breeders, key projects to help tackle each of the following areas: genetic diversity, conformation and breed-related disease.

One of these projects is the development of a Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment for visible conformation. Dogs require healthy body shapes to support their welfare, and breeders need practical tools to help them make informed and responsible breeding decisions. This new evidence-based and veterinary-led assessment will be suitable for all dogs but particularly intended to assess and monitor conformational traits that may be associated with health and/or welfare concerns.

The aim is to create a standardised assessment (applicable to any breed, although we do not expect it to be used for every breed) to support breeders in making informed and responsible breeding decisions. The Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment is not intended to unnecessarily alter breed type. It's not about losing individuality, we value and celebrate acceptable unique characteristics of each breed that are not detrimental to health and/or welfare, and the aim is to support healthy breeding, encouraging consideration of less extreme features and positively moving towards more moderate conformation.

What is the Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment?

The Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment is a quick, non-invasive assessment carried out by a trained veterinary surgeon. Using a standardised protocol and grading criteria, it assesses a dog's conformation (body shape) and assigns a grade for each characteristic, as well as an overall assessment score. The results help owners and breeders understand how their dog's conformation compares against the assessment criteria and identify any features that may have the potential to negatively affect health or welfare.

What is included in the RKC Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment?

The RKC Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment focuses exclusively on a dog's conformation (body shape) but does not include coat type or colour. Those can be

addressed later in future workstreams if appropriate. Similarly, it's simply a visual and manual assessment of body shape. Therefore, it does not include or replace other recommended pre-breeding health screening (e.g. DNA testing, hip scoring, elbow grading, eye testing, BOAS testing etc.). Different breeds have different health priorities, and these established health tests remain an essential part of responsible breeding.

For relevant breeds, it will eventually form an additional component of the RKC Health Standard, alongside existing health testing recommendations, all of which remain equally important in supporting healthier breeding decisions.

What is the grading system?

The assessment will include a set of criteria, some assessed visually and others measured, and where possible, each will be graded from 0 to 3 (0 being normal and 3 being the most extreme). All measured criteria will be expressed as ratios to ensure comparability across different-sized dogs. The system is designed so that most dogs should fall into grade 0 or 1 for each criterion, with grade 1 generally indicating no evidence of a welfare problem. Grades will be added together to create a total score for each dog. For example, if there were 14 criteria and they were all graded 0-3, the minimum score that a dog could achieve would be 0 and the maximum would be 42. This allows comparison between dogs, monitoring of breed averages over time, and supports future efforts to reduce extreme conformation associated with health and/or welfare concerns.

Whilst subject to change, the current criteria are as follows:

Visually assessed and graded criteria:

- Nostrils
- Dentition
- Facial skin
- Eyelids
- Eye socket and globe size
- Wrinkles on body and legs
- Outward or inward turning of the front feet
- Outward or inward turning of the hind feet and hocks
- Patella scoring
- Tail length and mobility

Measured and graded criteria:

- Craniofacial ratio

Measured criteria:

- Neck girth to chest girth ratio
- Ground clearance ratio
- Back length ratio

Additional information noted during assessment includes:

- Movement (acceptable/unsatisfactory)
- Body condition score
- Presence of testicles in scrotum
- General and advisory comments (general comments are positive or temporary findings, advisory comments are possible breeding concerns)

Please note that the assessment introduced at launch is the current format and will continue to evolve over time. Some criteria will be measured but not graded initially, and will only contribute to grading once sufficient data is available to establish robust and evidence-based grade boundaries. As the assessment develops, any measurements that do not ultimately contribute to grading or provide meaningful value will be reviewed and removed. Similarly, criteria could also be introduced in the future if supported by sufficient evidence.

There is absolutely no expectation that all dogs of all breeds should score 0 for all criteria. Grade 1 generally indicates acceptable variation that's not a health or welfare problem but describes normal breed conformation characteristics that make individual breeds unique.

We have deliberately designed the assessment without a pass-fail format, because we want it to be something that can shift over time and compare dogs within a breed and between breeds, rather than being a rigid one-size-fits-all result.

What additional information will be collected during the assessment and why?

Movement

The vets and breeders involved in this project have all agreed that movement is an important factor to assess conformation. However, there is a difference between temporary lameness and permanent unsoundness that's an inherent consequence of the dog's conformation. The other challenge is that the assessing vets won't all have breed specific knowledge. For these reasons, it was agreed that it would be sensible to include movement in the assessment, but that grading it would be too challenging to include in a consistent way. Therefore, following considerable consultation, it was decided that the movement criterion would be recorded as “acceptable” or “unsatisfactory”. Please note, minor lameness can still be rated “acceptable” even if the dog is not completely sound. “Unsatisfactory” describes severe movement issues that are clearly related to conformation, such as the “bunny-hopping” seen with severely luxated patellas.

Some measured criteria, such as back length/height ratio, will be measured but not graded until sufficient evidence is available to determine appropriate grade boundaries.

Body condition score will be included, but weight recording will be optional to accommodate situations where scales are unavailable. The presence of testicles will be noted in males. While the assessment is primarily intended as a pre-breeding

examination, neutered dogs can be examined under the scheme if desired, and this will be noted on the form.

General and advisory comments

There will be two comments sections on the form. The general comments section is intended for use if the assessor wants to record any positive or temporary findings, such as complimentary remarks or a note that the dog is overweight or has a skin infection. The advisory comments section is intended for use where the assessor wants to record a finding that may be a possible breeding concern. Such findings might include: breed-specific issues not covered by the main criteria (e.g. open fontanelle, fused toes); findings that warrant evaluation under another clinical health scheme (e.g. noisy breathing in a brachycephalic dog (University of Cambridge/RKC RFGS), possible cataract (BVA/RKC/ISDS Eye Scheme)); the reason for any Grade 3s recorded or an “unsatisfactory” movement rating; and any other concerns that the assessor considers potentially relevant to breeding. For example, while this is not an assessment of temperament, the assessor could make a note here if the dog was so reactive and difficult to examine that they considered this relevant to future breeding decisions.

Will the vets assess temperament?

Temperament is not included, and if a dog cannot be adequately examined due to its temperament, the test will be abandoned. However, as noted above, the assessor can note any particular difficulty in examining the dog in the “advisory comments” section if desired. We recognise that temperament is a fundamental aspect of responsible breeding and we will be exploring ways to support breeders in breeding for sound temperament through future workstreams.

Which breeds is it applicable to?

The RKC Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Assessment is intended to be suitable for all dogs regardless of breed. However, we expect that the assessment will be particularly relevant for breeds that have previously been identified as potentially having conformational traits that may be associated with health and welfare concerns.

At what age are dogs expected to have an assessment, and will this need to be repeated as the dog matures?

In principle, we are intending this to be a one-time assessment that's done pre-breeding in adult dogs. However, given that different breeds mature at different rates, at least two assessment pathways are likely to be needed: one for giant breeds with later maturity (e.g., Mastiffs) with a preliminary assessment available at 2 years and final at 4 years, and one for smaller breeds with one assessment possibly starting at 15-18 months. This is a proposal at this stage and has yet to be finalised. Another point that remains to be decided is what the minimum ages for assessment should be. Feedback and suggestions on this are very welcome.

What is our approach to its development? Where are we in terms of the assessment development process and what are the next steps?

The development of the RKC Nose-to-Tail Visual Assessment builds on many years of prior work and is being shaped through consultation with both veterinary and breeder stakeholder groups. To date, 23 vets have contributed to the development of the provisional Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Assessment criteria, and 246 individuals representing 129 breeds attended breeder workshops. Additional breed-specific sessions and targeted discussions with external experts have also taken place.

The veterinary advisory group completed the initial selection of assessment criteria, drafting formal descriptions and grade boundaries, which were then reviewed by the breeder focus groups. Following this, we held an evaluation day on 17th June, where five vets took part to test and refine the assessment process and draft criteria by examining a range of dogs from different breeds, provided by volunteers. We are incredibly grateful to everyone who volunteered their time, expertise, and feedback. With 33 dogs representing 17 breeds, the event provided valuable insights across a range of body types. The assessment will now be trialled over the summer, at dogs shows and hopefully rescue centres too, and refined in response to feedback from these pilots. Following the pilot phase, we will develop a final version for implementation, which we plan to launch in November 2026.

Who is included in the veterinary focus group?

Overall, 23 vets contributed to the initial development of the provisional Nose-to-Tail assessment criteria, all volunteering their time to support the project. Most of them are in general practice, but some work in referral practice and/or universities, including three professors. Three-quarters of the vets involved in the main focus group have shown dogs themselves, and two-thirds of them have bred dogs, with personal experience between them of breeding dogs across all seven show groups. Many are also judges, show vets, and/or involved in other canine activities.

How were breed representatives selected for the breeder workshops?

All communications relating to the development of the Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Assessment were initially shared with all Breed Health Coordinators (BHCs), who are responsible for communicating with their wider breed community and coordinating representation at relevant meetings, such as these workshops. BHCs were advised that once attendance was confirmed, breed club secretaries would be informed of those attending these initial, focused sessions on behalf of their breed. For those breeds where we did not receive a nomination from the BHC, the opportunity to nominate a representative(s) was extended directly to the relevant breed clubs.

Although these workshops were of particular interest to breeds with body shape features sometimes considered extreme (for example, those that may be highlighted through the All-Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare's Innate Health Assessment), the assessment is intended to be suitable for all dogs, therefore it was important that a wide range of breeds were represented.

How will the Royal Kennel Club address issues of consistency & subjectivity between assessors?

As with the Respiratory Function Grading (RFG) scheme, we will maintain a list of approved veterinary assessors. These vets will have received training to ensure consistency between assessors, which will provide them with clear guidelines and breed-specific infographics. There will also be an appeals process for disputed assessments.

How can we find a suitable assessor?

Breed communities and individual breeders will be able to choose a veterinary assessor from our list. They are therefore able to select a vet who is geographically convenient and who is familiar with their breed.

How much will the assessment cost?

Assessment costs will be set by the assessor, typically around the cost of a standard consultation, with an additional £10 RKC administration fee, like the Respiratory Function Grading (RFG) scheme, which would be collected by the assessor within the overall fee.

Will the Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment be added to the Royal Kennel Club's Health Standard?

There will be an introductory period, followed by integration into the Health Standard as good or best practice for relevant breeds.

Will the results be published?

Yes, the results will be published, but we are gathering feedback on how much information to display. It is likely that only the overall score and possibly the number of grade 3s will be publicly displayed, with detailed breakdowns available upon request, similar to hip scoring. This approach aims to balance transparency with practicality and avoid overwhelming readers with data.

Will the Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment affect dog showing?

We will need to look at breed standards where there's obvious incompatibilities and this will need to feed into our guidance for judges.

How can the breed communities support the project?

Help shape the future health and welfare of dogs by contributing to the development of our Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Assessment. As we move into the next stages of development, your feedback is an essential part of shaping the assessment. Take part in our short online feedback survey here: [Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Assessment Feedback Survey – Fill out form](#)

Breed communities are encouraged to develop their own supporting materials, such as diagrams, to accompany the Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment, provided they align with its framework.

Breed communities are encouraged to send in clear photos of their dog's nostrils/ nasal folds/ eyes etc to help the RKC create visual guides for the assessors to support testing. Photos can be sent to health@royalkennelclub.com.

How will we reach breeders who do not currently register litters with the Royal Kennel Club?

The RKC cannot directly reach breeders who do not register their dogs and often relies on others to promote and demonstrate the value of health testing. However, the RKC Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Visual Assessment is intended to provide evidence of improved health and welfare in all dogs, helping to influence the broader dog breeding community.

What is the Innate Health Assessment and was the RKC involved in its development?

The Innate Health Assessment (IHA), launched in November 2025, was developed by members of the All-Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare. It is currently intended as a self-assessment for breeders and puppy buyers, using 10 criteria with 8/10 being required for a pass.

We, at the RKC, share the IHA's principle that every dog should have a healthy body shape that allows a good quality of life. While we were involved in the consultation, we were not involved in its final development. RKC did not choose the individual criteria or the pass-fail format and therefore, although we think that the IHA has clear value as a tool to raise awareness and reach the dogs that are not RKC registered, we think that our communities need a more structured tool to support breeding away from extreme conformation. That's why we're developing the Nose-to-Tail Veterinary Assessment, which will complement the independent IHA while supporting ongoing improvement through data collection. It's being designed as a single, standard assessment for all breeds, although we do not expect or recommend its use for every dog, as many breeds have no visual conformation concerns.