



The shape of suffering

Join the movement to protect our companion animals from breeding for harmful physical traits

RSPCA.

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01 Introduction and aims	4
1.1. What is extreme conformation?	5
1.2. How many animals are affected?	12
1.3. How does extreme conformation impact animal welfare?	14
02 How do we achieve change?	16
2.1. Key stakeholder groups	16
2.2. Strategic goals	16
2.3. Theory of change	18
03 What impact will be created?	20
3.1. Impact for animals	20
3.2. Impact for people	20
3.3. Impact for society	24
04 Collaboration for impact	25
4.1. Stakeholder: Owners	26
4.2. Stakeholder: Suppliers	28
4.3. Stakeholder: Service providers	30
4.4. Stakeholder: Advisors	32
4.5. Stakeholder: Public	34
4.6. Stakeholder: Policy-makers and governance	36
05 Next steps	38

01 Introduction and aims

Companion animals are suffering on account of intentional breeding for exaggerated unnatural physical features, such as flattened faces, shortened limbs, taillessness, excessive skin and hairlessness. This is known as ‘extreme conformation’ and has been widely recognised throughout the veterinary and animal charity sector as a priority welfare issue¹⁻⁷. Sadly, however, this problem persists.

Dogs and cats are the species most commonly affected at present⁸⁻⁶⁴, but exaggerated physical features are also intentionally bred into rabbits⁶⁵⁻⁷⁰, fish⁷¹⁻⁸⁰, horses⁸¹⁻⁸⁸, reptiles⁸⁹⁻⁹¹, rodents⁹²⁻⁹⁴ and birds⁹⁵, thus spanning an array of species kept as pets and affecting millions of animals.

Research has demonstrated many harmful physical health consequences in dogs and cats, as well as negative impacts on their mental state, for example by: thwarting the performance of important behaviours such as play, sleep and exercise; disrupting communication with other animals; or causing chronic discomfort or pain. Suffering is currently less well documented in other species, likely due to a lack of scientific research and empirical evidence, coupled with poorer recognition of suffering.

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) exists to protect animals of

every kind from harm, and to ensure all animals live happy, healthy lives. Accordingly, we are concerned that many pets bred with extreme physical traits are suffering from entirely preventable health and welfare issues that can severely impact their everyday lives. Preventing this avoidable harm is a moral responsibility – one that the RSPCA and wider society must take action to address. We are, therefore, calling for a collaborative and concerted effort to address this robustly, and protect animals from this needless suffering.

This report seeks to:

- highlight extreme conformation as a serious and growing **welfare problem** for companion animals;
- define the vital role of six **key stakeholder groups** in driving meaningful, positive and lasting change on this issue;
- outline the **RSPCA's commitment** to addressing breeding for exaggerated characteristics, including the theory of change underpinning this work, and actions the RSPCA will take to protect animals from harm; and
- issue a clear **call to action**, urging key stakeholders to take meaningful steps towards ending this welfare problem.



▲ A mini lionhead rabbit, bred to have brachycephalic skull shape, lop-ears, dwarfism and an unnaturally long hair coat.



▲ A royal python bred with albinism, resulting in extreme light sensitivity affecting both his skin and eyes.

1.1. What is extreme conformation?

Examples of potentially harmful physical traits that are intentionally bred into companion animals are provided in Tables 1–11, along with examples of breeds/types who are commonly affected^{8–96}. These examples are not exhaustive, and new traits may emerge over time, or existing traits may become more or less severe in future generations of animals. Not all animals of the listed breeds or types will show severe abnormalities, as these traits exist on a spectrum and can impair individual animals' welfare to varying degrees.

While there is clear evidence that certain extreme traits cause direct harm, other trends – particularly in lesser-studied species or new breeds/types – have not yet been subject to extensive scientific research. In these instances, a lack of documented evidence does not necessarily equate to an absence of harm. Accordingly, some examples are included to illustrate animals bred with significant deviations

from the species norm, recognising that this may disrupt normal functioning and increase welfare risks. As some of these features remain under-researched at present, further study will be important to strengthen the evidence base and gain a fuller understanding of the welfare impacts associated with traits that are unnatural for the species.

“Extreme conformation is a welfare crisis, sadly affecting many species, from dogs and cats to rabbits, fish and reptiles. By breeding animals for exaggerated physical traits, and thereby prioritising looks over welfare, we are creating animals who struggle to breathe, move and exist without chronic pain. We must move beyond commodifying animals for human preference and prioritise their quality of life above all else.”

Dr Rebecca Ashman, RSPCA head vet – operations, partnerships and prevention

Table 1. Examples of skull deformity.

Skull deformity	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Brachycephaly (flattened faces), domed skulls.
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: affenpinscher, Boston terrier, boxer, Brussels griffon, bullmastiff, Cavalier King Charles spaniel, Chihuahua, chow chow, dogue de Bordeaux, English bulldog, French bulldog, Japanese chin, King Charles spaniel, Lhasa apso, mastiff, Pekingese, pug, shih tzu, Tibetan spaniel. Cats: British shorthair, exotic shorthair, Himalayan Persian, Scottish fold. Rabbits: Czech, English angora, Jersey wooly, lionhead, Polish, smoke pearl, Thrianta, teddywiddler, lop-eared breeds, dwarf and mini breeds.	

Table 2. Examples of skin abnormality.

Skin abnormality	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Excessive skin, facial skin folds, body skin folds, scalelessness, thickened scales, abnormal scale tissue, abnormal fins.
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: dogue de Bordeaux, English bulldog, French bulldog, pug, shar pei. Cats: Persian, exotic shorthair. Goldfish: lionhead, veiltail, pearlscale, eggfish, lionchu, pom pom, ranchu, tosa kin. Reptiles: silkback (scaleless) bearded dragon, silkback (scaleless) corn snake.	

Table 3. Examples of tail abnormality.

Spinal or tail abnormality	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Taillessness, 'cork-screw' tails, sloping backs, chondrodystrophy (abnormal cartilage growth).
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: Australian shepherd, Australian stumpy tail cattle dog, Boston terrier, Brittany spaniel, dachshund, English bulldog, French bulldog, German shepherd, pug, Welsh corgi Pembroke. Cats: Highlander, Japanese bobtail, Manx, pixie bob. Rodents: Manx rat.	

Table 4. Examples of eye deformity.

Eye deformity	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Abnormal size and position of eyeballs, abnormal eyelid shape and position (e.g. entropion: eyelids turning inwards, and ectropion: eyelids turning outwards).
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: Australian shepherd, basset hound, bloodhound, bullmastiff, Chihuahua, chow chow, Clumber spaniel, cocker spaniel, collie – border, rough and smooth varieties, English bulldog, great Dane, great Pyrenees, Neapolitan mastiff, Newfoundland, pug, St Bernard. Cats: Persian. Rodents: rex rat. Goldfish: bubble eye, celestial eye.	

Table 5. Examples of dental abnormality.

Dental malocclusion and prognathism	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Undershot jaw, overshot jaw, misaligned teeth.
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: boxer, dogue de Bordeaux, English bulldog, French bulldog, Japanese chin, Lhasa apso, pug, shih tzu. Cats: Persian. Rabbits: Netherland dwarf, lionhead.	



► Sphynx cats are bred to have an abnormal hair coat. This individual also shows exaggerated ear size (and eye problems). The natural hair coat has important protective functions for cats, including: shielding the skin from physical injury and ultraviolet light damage; body temperature regulation; and absorption and distribution of natural oils produced by the skin.

Table 6. Examples of coat or plumage abnormality.

Coat or plumage abnormalities*	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Excessive hair volume, excessive hair length, intentional matting, abnormal hair direction, hereditary alopecia, absent whiskers, absent guard/awn hairs, excessive feather number or size, unnatural feather position.
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality)	
Dogs: Chinese crested, Hungarian puli, Rhodesian ridgeback.	
Cats: bambino, Cornish rex, Devon rex, Donskoy, dweil, Persian, Peterbald, sphynx, Ukrainian levkoy.	
Rabbits: Angora, Cashmere lop, lionhead, rex.	
Rodents: hairless hamster, hairless mouse, hairless rat, Peruvian guinea pig, 'skinny' guinea pig.	
Birds: English trumpeter pigeon, fantail pigeon, holle cropper pigeon, Jacobin pigeon, Gloster canary.	

*To such an extent that the coat/plumage ceases to be functional and adaptive. Instead, it is ornamental, uncomfortable or potentially disruptive to normal functioning.

Table 7. Examples of colouration abnormality.

Colouration abnormalities	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Recessive-gene colouration, colour morphs linked with other genetic problems, colour dilution.
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: Australian shepherd, Chihuahua, collie – border, rough and smooth varieties, dachshund, French bulldog, great Dane, Shetland sheepdog, Staffordshire bull terrier, whippet. Reptiles: enigma leopard gecko, jaguar carpet python snake, lemon frost leopard gecko, spider morph royal python snake, super champagne royal python snake, super jungle boa snake, super motley boa snake.	

Table 8. Examples of ear abnormality.

Ear abnormalities	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Excessive ear size, folded ears, curled ears.
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: Afghan hound, bloodhound, basset hound. Cats: American curl, Scottish fold, dwelf, elf, kinkalow, Peterbald, Ukrainian levkoy. Rabbits: lop-eared varieties. Rodents: dumbo mouse, dumbo rat.	

Table 9. Examples of limb deformity.

Limb deformities	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Angular limb deformities, 'toadline' conformation.
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: basset hound, Brussels griffon, English bulldog, dachshund, shih tzu, Lhaso apso, 'toadline' bully, Welsh corgi Pembroke. Cats: bambino, dwelf, munchkin.	

Table 10. Examples of dwarfism.

Dwarfism	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Abnormally small size for the species.
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: teacup varieties. Cats: dwele, munchkin, teacup and mini varieties. Rabbits: dwarf and mini varieties. Horses: miniature varieties, Shetland pony.	

Table 11. Examples of muscle abnormality.

Muscular hypertrophy	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Excessive muscle for the species (from selective breeding or myostatin mutation).
Examples of commonly affected animals (non-exhaustive; not all individuals of these breeds will show severe abnormality) Dogs: American bully, bully whippet. Cats: XL bully.	



❏ Dumbo rats are bred with a genetic mutation causing the ears to be unnaturally low, on the side of their heads, along with abnormal skull and jaw shape.

Many extreme conformations are linked with serious secondary health complications. Here are some common examples.

Abnormal skull shape

This can cause a range of chronic health and behavioural abnormalities for pets.

■ **Brachycephaly** is the shortened skull shape that gives pets a flat-faced appearance. It is often perceived as aesthetically desirable but is associated with numerous serious health problems, particularly severe respiratory impairment, known as BOAS (brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome)^{14, 16, 32, 33, 41–44, 47, 97}. Dogs and cats can experience persistent increased respiratory effort, which may feel like suffocation, as well as sleep disturbance, an inability to perform natural behaviours, chronic exhaustion, and difficulty eating and drinking normally. Brachycephalic rabbits are three times more likely to have tear duct abnormalities, which can lead to painful eye conditions, impairing their vision⁶⁵.

■ **Domed skull shapes** can lead to chiari-like malformation, syringomyelia and hydrocephalus because the skull has become too small to accommodate the brain correctly^{61, 62, 98}. Chiari-like malformation is a heritable skull defect in which the brain is pushed into the spinal cord, obstructing

the flow of cerebro-spinal fluid. Syringomyelia is the term used to describe this obstruction of cerebro-spinal fluid, which can occur for a variety of reasons but is frequently associated with chiari-like malformation. Hydrocephalus is the abnormal accumulation of cerebro-spinal fluid within the brain, which occurs with abnormal fluid production or due to a blockage that prevents fluid flow. All of these disorders cause significant neurological abnormalities, which can be fatal. Affected animals often have uncontrollable pain, are unable to perform natural behaviours and have behavioural changes such as increased anxiety and aggression.

Taillessness or short, twisted tail stumps ('cork-screw' tails)

This is a cause of hemivertebra, when the bones of the spine are deformed, misaligned and in some cases fused, which can cause spinal pain, paralysis and incontinence⁵⁷. Deformed or missing tails are also associated with chronic skin infection and faecal impaction in dogs^{99, 100, 101} and with incontinence, incoordination and spinal lesions in cats¹⁰².



▲ King Charles spaniels are at high risk of chiari-like malformation and syringomyelia due to an abnormal domed skull shape.



▲ Dachshunds commonly experience spinal problems and limb deformities due to being bred with chondrodystrophy.



▲ British bulldog puppies in RSPCA care, all born with tail deformities.

Chondrodystrophy

This abnormal degeneration of spinal discs and the short-limbed appearance evident in dachshunds, corgis and Clumber spaniels, among others – exacerbated by their elongated backs – is a cause of intervertebral disc disease (IVDD). IVDD causes significant pain, paralysis, incontinence and an inability to perform natural behaviours^{48, 49, 51, 59}. In some dachshund varieties, as many as one in every four dogs are affected by IVDD¹⁰³.

Dermoid sinus

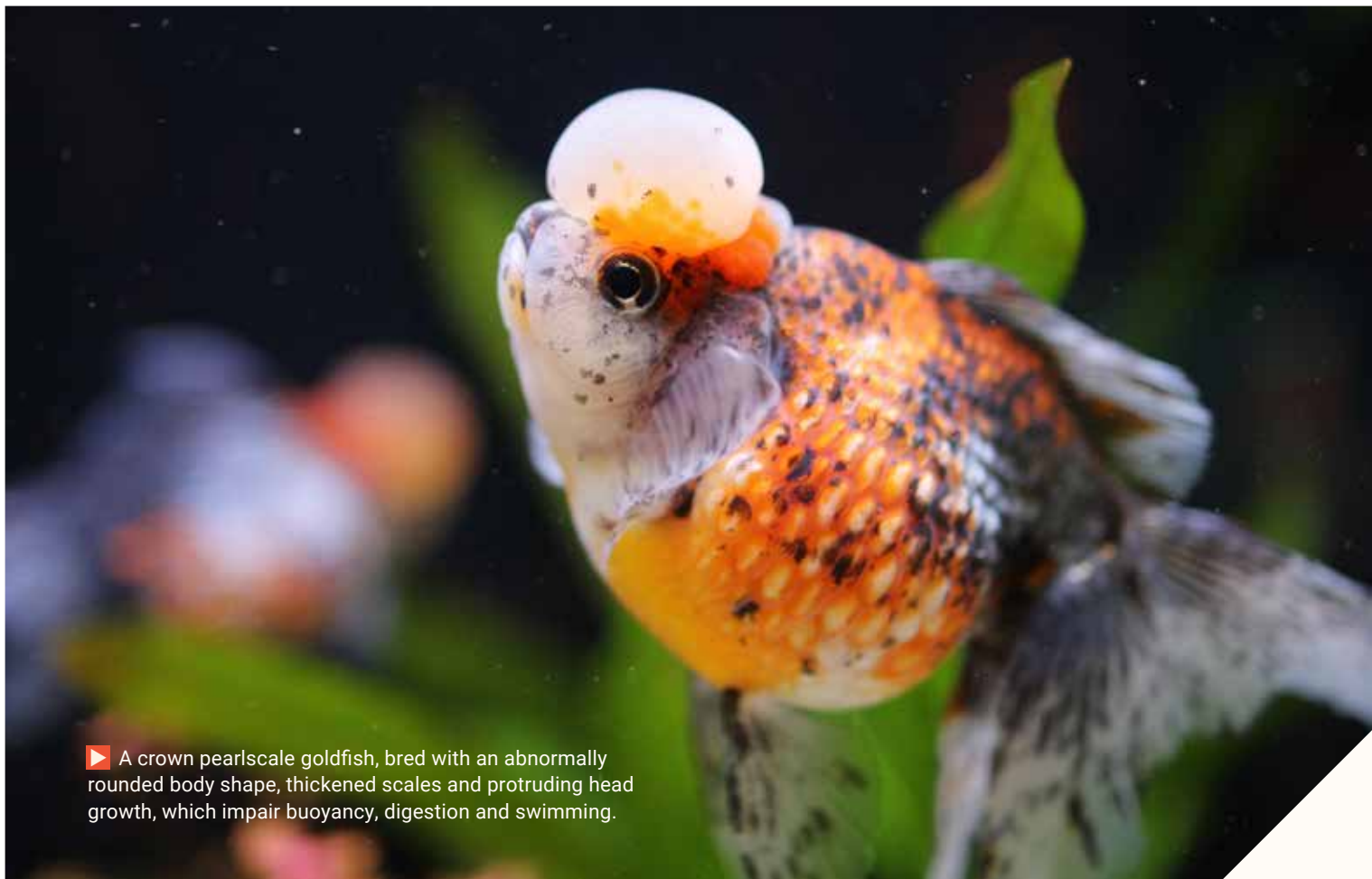
This is a hereditary problem in which the skin is not separated from the spine in the normal way, causing complications including abscess, meningitis, neurological damage and death¹⁰⁴. This often arises as a result of breeding for abnormal coat direction in Rhodesian ridgebacks, and can be related to spinal abnormalities in dachshunds. It has also been reported among Burmese cats^{105–107}.

Specific coat colours or colour dilution

Some colourations can result in associated heritable health problems. For example: breeding for merle colouration can cause microphthalmia (significantly reduced eyeball size and visual impairment) in dogs^{108, 109}; breeding for colour dilution can cause alopecia (hair loss) and hair follicle infections in dogs and cats^{63, 110–113}; white or piebald (black-and-white) colouration is associated with deafness in dogs (e.g. Dalmations)^{114, 115} and in cats, with deafness occurring in 60–80% of white cats with two blue eyes¹¹⁶.

Colour morphs in reptiles

Some colour morphs can lead to neurological disorders, metabolic problems affecting digestion and a high likelihood of tumours. For example, royal pythons with the spider morph are affected by a 'wobble' syndrome due to dysfunction of their central nervous system, causing uncontrollable shaking and uncoordinated movement⁹⁰. More than 80% of geckos with the lemon frost colour morph suffer from skin cancers^{91, 117}.



▶ A crown pearlscale goldfish, bred with an abnormally rounded body shape, thickened scales and protruding head growth, which impair buoyancy, digestion and swimming.

Scale and fin abnormalities

These can significantly disrupt the normal functioning of affected reptiles and fish. Scaleless reptiles – such as the silkback bearded dragon or silkback corn snake – suffer lifelong, serious complications, including a high risk of skin lesions, burns, dehydration, and an inability to effectively regulate body temperature or undertake normal skin shedding^{89, 102, 103}.

- **Pearlscale goldfish** are bred to have abnormally thickened scales and rounded body shapes, which impair swimming ability and create balance and buoyancy problems, in some cases preventing them from being able to float upright and causing them to sink¹¹⁸.
- **Bubble eye goldfish** lack a dorsal fin – which impairs swimming and the ability to sustain a normal body position in the water – and have a reduced lifespan^{71, 119}. Additionally, as they are bred to have large, fluid-filled sacs directly beneath their eyes, they suffer from partial blindness, and are at risk of injury and related infection as their eyes are easily damaged from collisions, meaning they are often not provided with any enrichment within the aquarium.

These traits have been purposely selected by humans, making this an entirely human-driven problem – and one that is therefore within our power to rectify.

1.2. How many animals are affected?

Across Europe, there are an estimated 18 million dogs, 22 million cats and four million small companion mammals who are of breeds that typically exhibit harmful extremes of conformation¹²⁰. In the UK, it is estimated that over 20% of the dog population are breeds with at least one extreme conformation²³ (data are not currently available for other species). As these figures do not reflect animals of crossed or mixed breeds who may also have these features, this is likely a vast underestimation of the scale.

The prevalence of affected animals has direct repercussions for rescue and rehoming organisations. In illustration, in the 10 years from 2016 to 2025, a 3,800% increase in the numbers of French bulldog types coming into the RSPCA's care was recorded, alongside a 192% increase in pug types¹²¹ (Figure 1). Both of these dog breeds typically have multiple extreme conformations, including absent or cork-screw tails, excessive skin folds, flat faces and protruding eyes.

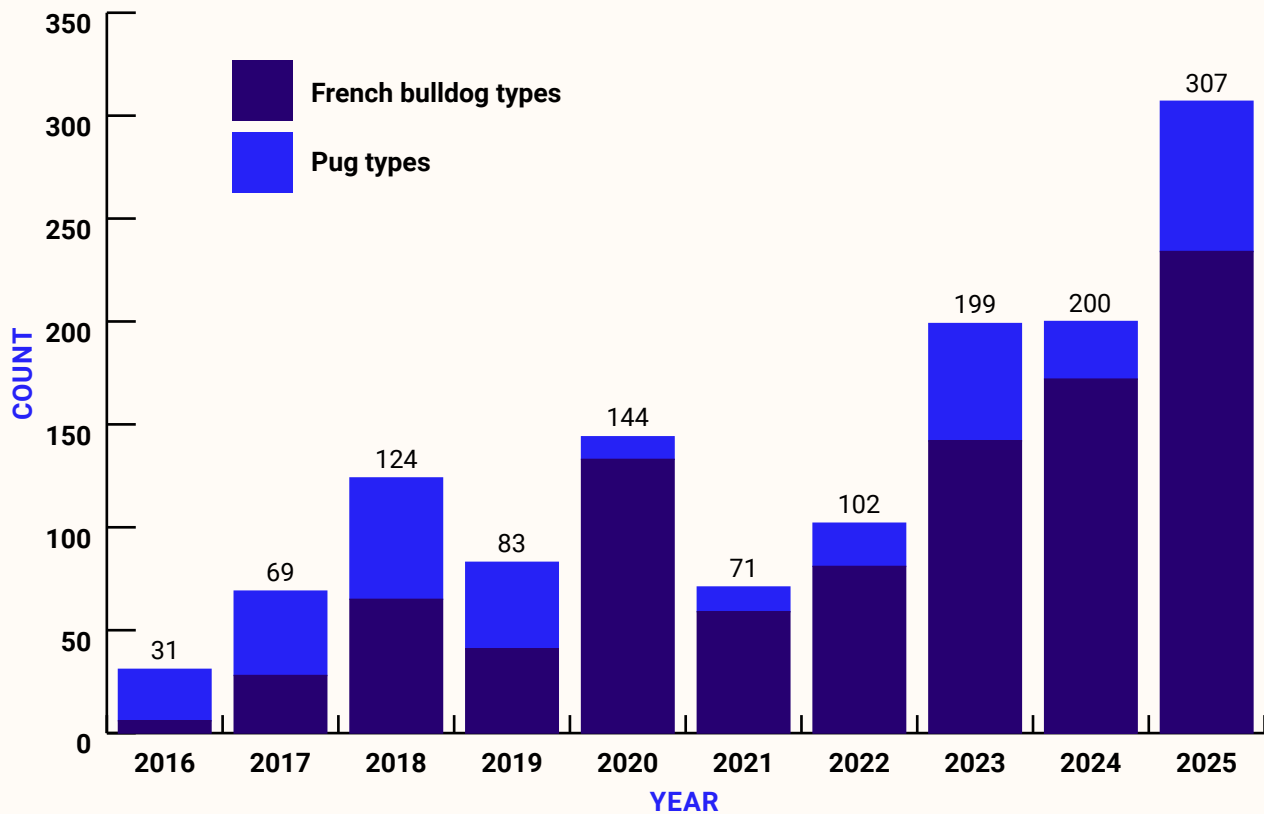


Figure 1. RSPCA intake of French bulldog types and pug types of dogs from 2016 to 2025.

During the same 10-year period, there were 200% and 180% increases in British shorthair cat types and Persian cat types, respectively, coming into RSPCA care¹²². Both of these cat breeds are often brachycephalic (flat-faced) with large, protruding eyes. Persians are also bred with an unnaturally long hair coat.

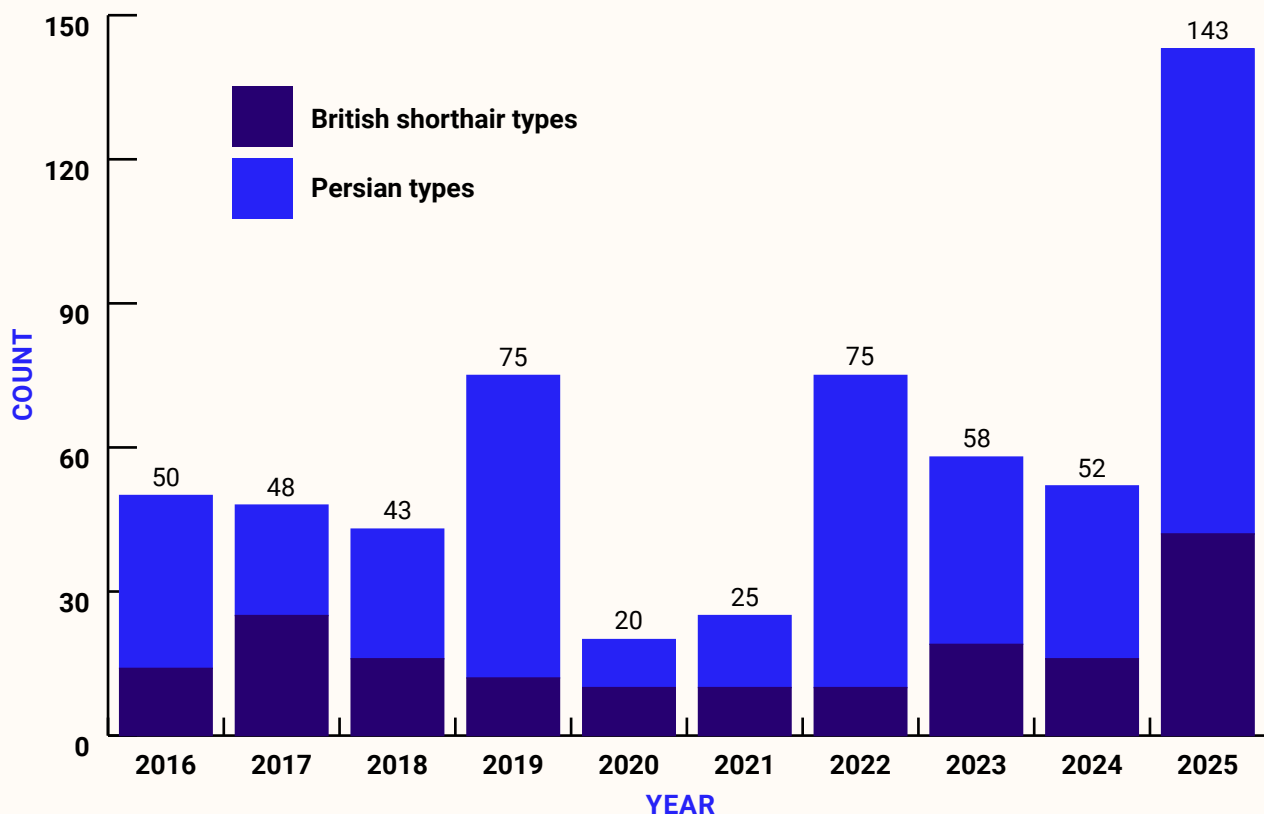


Figure 2. RSPCA intake of British shorthair types and Persian types of cats from 2016 to 2025.



▲ This Persian cat, rescued by the RSPCA, had such an extreme flat face he was unable to eat normally. Instead, he had learned to use his paw.

1.3. How does extreme conformation impair animal welfare?

Animal welfare can be considered in terms of physical, emotional and natural components^{123–127}, all of which can be impaired when animals are bred with exaggerated physical traits (Table 12).

For pets to experience a genuinely good quality of life, their welfare needs must be consistently met and their positive experiences must outweigh any negative ones. Good welfare extends far beyond physical health; it includes the ability to enjoy their living environment and diet; engage in and express natural, rewarding behaviours for their species; and experience comfort, security and choice. But when animals are afflicted by extreme, unnatural features, it can have a considerable negative impact on their quality of life, both through direct suffering, such as chronic pain or distress, and indirectly, through inability to engage in and enjoy positive experiences that are essential for their well-being.

Extreme conformation reflects a growing trend towards pets being treated as products, status symbols or aesthetic accessories, instead of being respected primarily as sentient beings.

This instrumental view – valuing animals only for their benefit to humans – at times prevents the prioritisation of animals' own needs, preferences and agency^{123–127}, diminishing their quality of life.

Table 12. Examples of physical, emotional and natural components of animal welfare that can be impacted by extreme conformation. Specific impacts vary according to the species and conformational abnormality.

Welfare component	Impacts of extreme conformation
Physical	■ Inhibition of respiratory function ■ Impaired mobility and flexion ■ Disrupted thermoregulation ■ Inability to give birth ■ Inability to sleep ■ Reduction and loss of vision ■ Increased risk of skin disease ■ Increased risk of chronic illness ■ Increased risk of physical conditions causing chronic pain
Emotional	■ Pain (acute, chronic) ■ Distress ■ Fear ■ Physical discomfort ■ Thermal discomfort ■ Frustration
Natural	■ Behavioural inhibition e.g. mobility, play, exercise ■ Sleep deprivation ■ Disrupted communication (inter- and intra-species) ■ Inability to eat normally ■ Inability to mate and conceive naturally ■ Environmental and physical modifications required to live

“ At a time when our knowledge of animal welfare is greater than ever, the situation for pets could not be worse. Breeding and selection for extreme features have severely compromised welfare – not only are animals experiencing chronic suffering, but they are denied opportunities to experience physical comfort, good health and the ability to engage in normal behaviour. ”

Dr Samantha Gaines, RSPCA head of companion animals department

The RSPCA's work is informed by the recognition of animal sentience, and underpinned by the belief that:

- all animals deserve a good life;
- animals' lives are important in themselves;
- animals have emotions, feelings and needs;
- animals enrich and improve our lives; and
- all of us can and should help to make animals' lives better.

The concept of **positive welfare** is important when considering animals' experiences. This means recognising that animal welfare is not simply about preventing suffering or minimising harm, but also about enabling animals to experience comfort, pleasure, security, choice and enjoyment in their daily lives. Positive welfare is shaped by many interconnected factors, including environment, nutrition, physical health, social and behavioural interactions and, crucially, in the case of extreme conformation, the body the animal is born into.

Over the past two decades, the RSPCA and many other animal welfare organisations have tried to address the growing problem of breeding for harmful, exaggerated traits. But despite these efforts, the prevalence and normalisation of extreme conformations have continued to worsen. It is recognised that this is a deeply entrenched, multi-factorial issue involving numerous sectors of society, from breeders and veterinary professionals to the media, industry and consumers. Accordingly, addressing it effectively and making meaningful progress demands a more holistic, concentrated and sustained strategic response, to deliver change at scale and **create a future in which animal welfare is no longer compromised for appearance.**

- ✔ An innately healthy, natural body allows animals to conduct important species-specific physical activities and behaviours that are vital to ensure they can experience opportunities for positive welfare throughout their lives.



02 How do we achieve change?

2.1. Key stakeholder groups

Companion animals are both the central stakeholder and key beneficiary of efforts to address extreme conformation. They are influenced by six key stakeholder groups: **owners; suppliers; service providers; advisors; public; policy-makers and governance**. These stakeholder groups are not mutually exclusive, and collectively form a web of interconnections and influence (Figure 3).

For example, while owners have the greatest capacity to influence their pets' daily welfare and quality of life, they can also influence the suppliers from whom they buy their animals, and practitioners who provide supportive services. Likewise, service providers may be well-positioned to influence owners through regular direct contact, and can also exert influence on the advisory bodies of which they are members. In turn, such advisory organisations may have leverage to influence those with the power to develop policy or enact legislative changes.

Different stakeholders' level or direction of influence may change over time and in response to a fluctuating external environment, and may also vary according

to animal species, breed or owner demographic. For example: some breeds or owner demographics are more likely to frequently attend veterinary appointments than others; some sections of the public are more likely to have an interest in, and exposure to the influence of, animal-related advisory bodies than others; and particular breeds are more likely to visit professional groomers than others.

Effecting meaningful change will require action by each of these stakeholder groups in a manner tailored to their ability to influence the problem, yet coordinated and aligned through a suite of complementary activities that collectively drive change towards the overall goal of animal welfare improvement.

2.2. Strategic goals

A strategic goal for addressing extreme conformation has been identified for each stakeholder group (Table 13). This reflects recognition that, **as an animal welfare problem which is wholly caused by human action, impact on this issue will be driven by human behaviour change**.

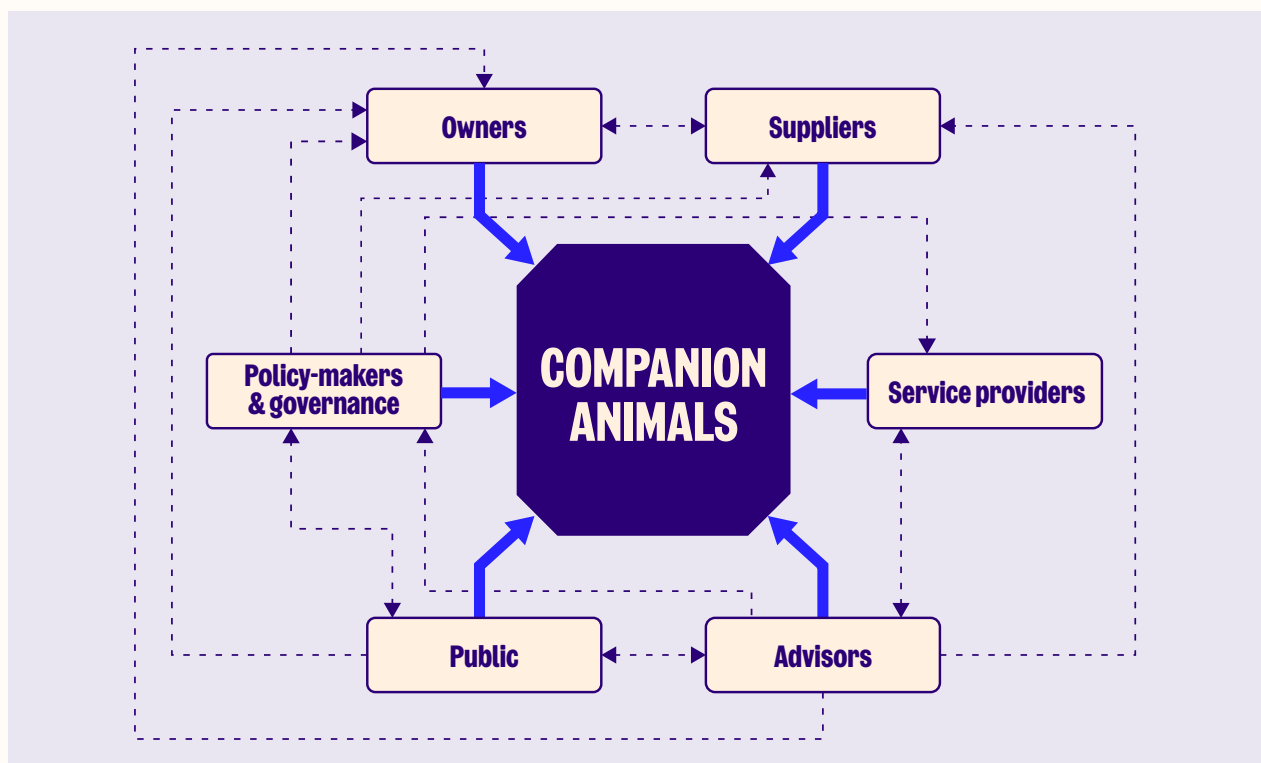


Figure 3. Interconnections between stakeholders influencing extreme conformation in companion animals.

Table 13. Descriptions of each stakeholder group and associated strategic goals.

Stakeholder group	Description	Strategic goal
Beneficiary: companion animals	Species and breeds commonly kept as companion animals or pets, who are currently or potentially subject to breeding for extreme conformation. Includes dogs, cats, rabbits, horses, fish, reptiles, rodents, and other affected species. Extends to those same species/breeds used for entertainment purposes also, e.g. in advertising, commercial pursuits and media activities.	Welfare of companion animals is not impaired due to extreme conformation.
Owners	Current and prospective owners. Includes care-givers, guardians and families with responsibilities for companion animals.	Demand for and acquisition of companion animals with extreme conformation is reduced.
Suppliers	Suppliers of companion animals. Includes breeders (e.g. commercial, hobby, illegal, accidental), importers, re-homers (private, charity) and sellers (in-person and online sites).	Supply and breeding of companion animals with extreme conformation is reduced.
Service providers	Practitioners providing animal-focused services, who are in direct contact with companion animals. Includes animal health practitioners (e.g. vets, vet nurses, allied professionals), groomers, trainers, behaviourists, rescue officers, rehoming advisors, dog walkers, pet sitters and handlers/suppliers of animals for media purposes.	Advocacy for prioritisation of welfare over aesthetics in companion animals is enacted through dissemination of consistent advice to clients.
Advisors	Organisations or individuals in positions of influence to advise on companion animal issues. Includes charities, non-governmental organisations, professional bodies, breed societies, academia, governmental agencies, advisory panels, educators and individual experts.	Education using welfare-focused, evidence-based messaging about the impact of extreme conformation upon companion animals is championed widely.
Public	General public. Includes lay persons who may or may not be engaged in companion animal welfare issues, local communities, schools, faith groups, lay influencers and public figures.	Awareness that extreme conformation impairs companion animal welfare is high among the general public, and considered socially unacceptable.
Policy-makers and governance	Legislators, policy-makers, enforcers and governors. Includes national government, local government, police, local authority inspectors, RSPCA Inspectorate and legal professionals, as well as policy-makers within industry, corporate, civil society and public sectors.	Protection for companion animals from extreme conformation is provided through effective legislation, enforcement and practice.

2.3. Theory of change

A theory of change illustrates how planned activities and interventions lead to desired goals, providing a visual framework that articulates how proposed actions will create the expected changes¹²⁸.

The RSPCA's theory of change (Figure 4) for tackling extreme conformation sets out a strategic route towards ending the harmful breeding of companion animals with exaggerated physical traits. Central to this approach is collaboration across all key stakeholder groups, using targeted activities to collectively create the **enablers for lasting change**.

Three key enablers underpin this: generating an **evidence base**; identifying feasible **alternatives** to current practice; and delivering **education**, advice and engagement.

These enablers are intended to drive two main outputs: achieving **greater public awareness** of harmful physical traits in pets; and **more robust protection** for animals at risk.

Ultimately, the aim is to **change human behaviour** around demand for, and associated supply of, pets intentionally bred with extreme traits, which is fundamental to achieving the outcome of **reducing prevalence and severity of animal suffering**.



▼ A Jacobin pigeon, bred with an exaggerated 'hood' of feathers behind the head, which can impair vision, flight, mating and feeding chicks.

Theory of change

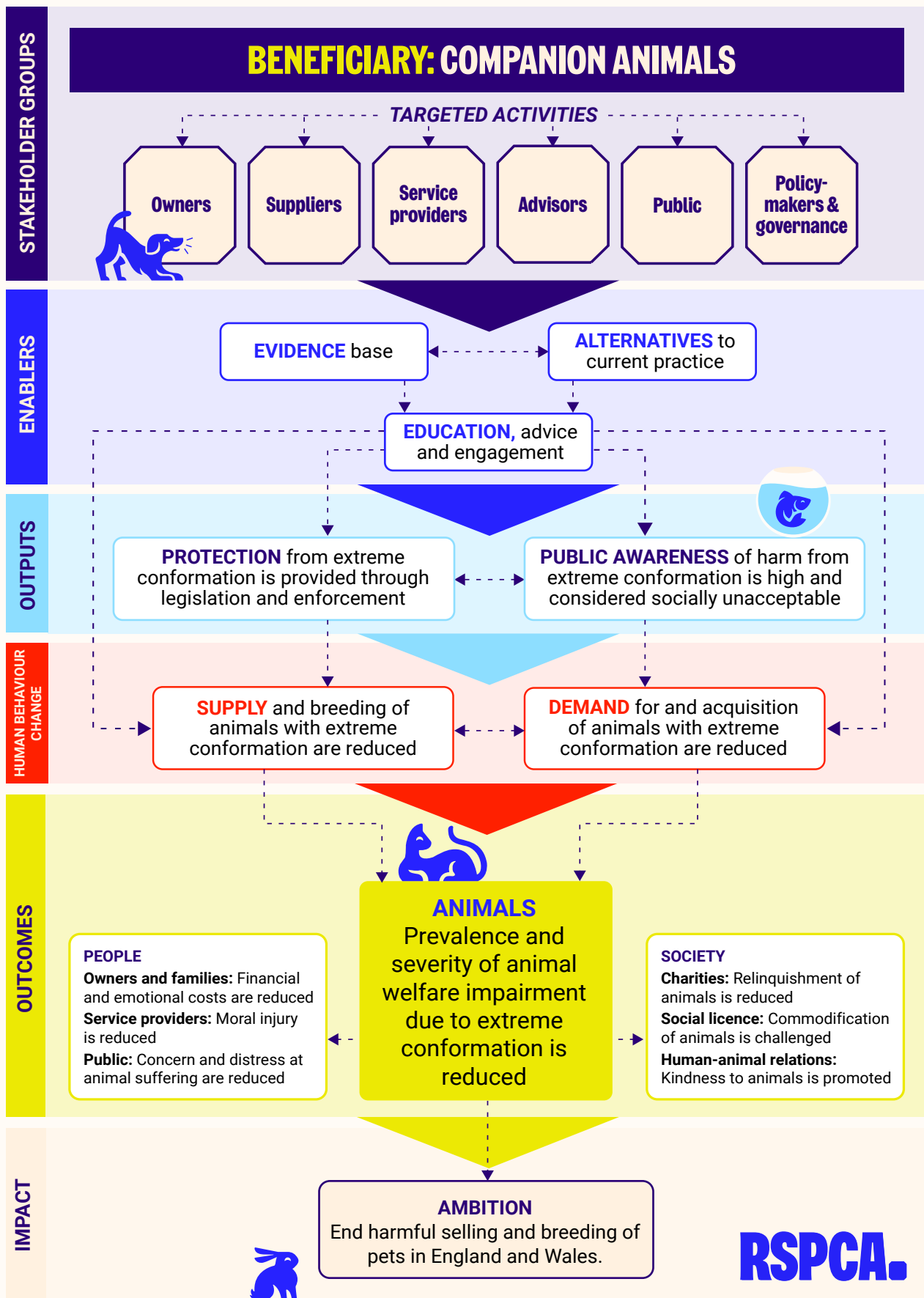


Figure 4. The RSPCA's theory of change for reducing extreme conformation in companion animals.

03 What impact will be created?

3.1. Impact for animals

Prevalence and severity of animal welfare impairment due to extreme conformation is reduced.

- Achieving a reduction in demand and supply should decrease the numbers of companion animals subjected to extreme conformation. Evidently, the lifespan of affected animals will determine the time period over which a reduction in prevalence of existing affected animals is measurable, but changes in the rate of acquisition would be feasible to monitor over the shorter term.
- In addition to addressing the scale at a population level, efforts to encourage more moderate versions of animals who currently suffer from extreme traits (for example, through selective breeding practices or judicial out-crossing) are important for mitigating the extent of suffering at the individual animal level. This needs to be informed by evidence on the extent to which exaggerated features correlate with health and welfare measures in affected species^{98, 129–132}.
- The need for veterinary interventions that attempt to redress in-bred deformity or treat recurrent conditions also compromises welfare in the short term (e.g. handling stress, anaesthetic risks, post-surgery recovery). A reduction in the severity of conformational abnormalities should also reduce the prevalence of such veterinary interventions and associated short-term welfare compromise.

3.2. Impact for people

Owners and families: Financial and emotional costs are reduced.

- Pets afflicted by harmful physical traits are likely to incur much higher financial costs than their healthier, multi-breed counterparts, both in terms of initial purchase cost and subsequent veterinary expenses for interventions attempting to remedy the abnormalities bred into them^{133–137}.
- Often, these pets cannot conduct much of their normal behavioural repertoire, including behaviours that also often give humans enjoyment^{8–10, 12, 15–19,}

31, 34–39, 40, 46, 67–77, 80, 83–85, 93, 95. Some may show increased aggression as a consequence of thwarted behavioural motivation, frustration or pain; and the distortion of physical features that are important for communication (e.g. facial muscles, ear position, tails) may affect the way in which their behaviour is interpreted by other animals or people. These occurrences have the potential to negatively impact the human-animal relationship.

- There are likely to be considerable emotional costs for empathetic owners observing their animals suffering, e.g. in respiratory distress, pain, thermal discomfort, a perpetual state of exhaustion or fatigue, or being unable to participate fully in exercise or play. Furthermore, the shortened lifespan and premature death, or need for challenging decision-making around euthanasia, can take an emotional toll on owners and families^{138–140}. Reducing these financial and emotional costs has scope to improve the extent of life satisfaction gained from pet companionship^{141–144}.

Service providers: Moral injury is reduced.

- Moral injury, in a context of animal service providers, refers to the distress that practitioners can suffer when witnessing or undertaking activities that counteract their personal ethical standards and violate their moral beliefs^{145–147}. This includes observing unethical practices towards animals, such as humans intentionally breeding pets with traits that cause them direct harm. It also arises due to: being in a position of moral conflict when faced with repeated 'corrective' surgeries; requests to facilitate breeding of animals affected by extreme conformation, which is likely to perpetuate suffering; requests to address behavioural concerns caused by pets' distress or discomfort related to their conformation.
- Animal health and welfare practitioners dealing with pets affected by extreme conformation frequently report significant negative impacts from exposure to this level of preventable suffering^{148–150}. Veterinarians may also be subject to the additional expectation of being able to provide a better quality of life through increasingly advanced surgical procedures, which pose risks and fail to provide a panacea for these complex, human-driven health problems^{97, 151, 152}.



CASE STUDY

Scottish folds

In 2026, the RSPCA rescued 25 Scottish fold cats from one overcrowded caravan. Tragically, eight of them were suffering so severely with health complications related to their breed that all eight were euthanased on welfare grounds.

Scottish folds are intentionally bred with a genetic mutation that causes the folded ears and impairs cartilage and skeletal development throughout their whole bodies (osteochondrodysplasia). They often suffer from chronic pain, severe arthritis, lameness and behavioural inhibition.

With this inherently unhealthy breed, unfortunately the prognosis is always guarded; however, the veterinary team carefully examined each cat on

an individual basis to determine best treatment options. Sadly, the cats had many health issues: they all showed stiff and uncomfortable movement, and on palpation many had reduced elbow extension; four had eye abnormalities; and one had a significant heart murmur. They were also very anxious and fearful initially. The treating veterinarian, Dr Caroline Loach, stated: "Highlighting the welfare concerns of breeding Scottish fold cats will be very helpful – as many cat owners are unaware of these and simply like the aesthetic appeal without understanding the chronic pain most of these cats have to endure."

- The impacts of this moral injury can ripple throughout the affected professions, with consequences including burnout, stress, depression and professional attrition^{145, 146, 153, 154}.
- Personnel shortages and challenges with the recruitment and retention of veterinary and animal welfare professionals have secondary impacts on the standards of service available to animals throughout the UK^{155, 156}, affecting health and welfare beyond animals with extreme conformation.

Public: Concern and distress at animal suffering are reduced.

- Data from the *2026 Animal Kindness Index* – an annual, national survey conducted by the RSPCA – showed that a strong majority (79%) of the UK public opposed breeding practices that result in exaggerated physical features in animals, such as short noses, disproportionately long backs, short legs or excessive skin folds. With regards to dogs specifically, 38% of respondents considered ending harmful dog breeding practices to be one of the three most important animal welfare issues¹⁵⁷.
- The proliferation of animals with extreme features makes it difficult for the public to avoid exposure to these pets, either physically – particularly dogs, as they are often brought into public spaces – or virtually, due to these animals featuring on social media or in advertising. Witnessing animal suffering, such as ill animals, cruelty incidents or animals in research, has been found to cause negative psychological repercussions^{158–161}. Therefore, it is possible, although not researched at present, that witnessing animals suffering from the impacts of harmful traits has the potential to impair the well-being of people observing them in public spaces, neighbourhoods or work-places, who recognise the harms they have been subjected to.
- Members of the public who are sensitive to these animals' suffering may feel distress or frustration at being unable to intervene or assist them directly, negatively affecting their emotional well-being and ability to enjoy shared public spaces where these animals are often present. Conversely, anecdotal evidence suggests that in some cases concern over animal suffering can lead to direct intervention by concerned bystanders, creating confrontational situations and risk of escalation to abusive interactions directed either towards the animal owner or the concerned intervener. Research indicates that people have stronger emotional reactions – including self-reported likelihood of personal intervention – to abuse of domestic animals than other protected species, suggesting their empathy for companion animals is greater, leading to a higher motivation to intervene¹⁶².
- Some people may also be distressed by knowledge of the abandonment of unwanted animals with extreme traits, as publicised by the charity sector in its efforts to encourage rehoming or fundraising. Indeed, it has previously been reported in the lay media that distress or compassion fatigue resulting from so-called 'sadvertising' in the charity sector can be so significant it leads some viewers to disengage^{163, 164}.



- ▲ This chow chow required extensive surgery to his facial skin, eyes, soft palate and nostrils due to being bred with extreme features. The public has shown strong opposition to breeding practices that create tragic scenarios like these.



- ▲ Ponies with dwarfism can be at risk of secondary conditions that disrupt metabolic, digestive or skeletal functioning. Some are also prone to obesity.



CASE STUDY

English bulldog

Poppy, an English bulldog, was only three years old when she came into RSPCA care with significant health complications as a result of her extreme features. Because of her flat face, excessive facial skin folds and large, protruding eyes – all bred to look more ‘appealing’ to humans – her ability to breathe, regulate her body temperature, exercise and lubricate her eyes were all impaired.

She was diagnosed with BOAS (brachycephalic obstructive airway syndrome) due to her unnaturally flat face shape, which was inhibiting her breathing to such a severe degree that she required invasive surgery to attempt to alleviate her suffering. Additionally, she had significant eye abnormalities (medial lower lid entropion), which required corrective surgery, too. These procedures, which were only needed because Poppy had been

intentionally bred with physical characteristics that harm her, cost approximately £3,000. Similar, and in many cases even greater, expenses are routinely incurred when pets require veterinary interventions as a result of extreme conformation, creating heart-wrenchingly difficult decisions for owners faced with huge bills.

After carefully assessing the likelihood of Poppy being able to experience a good quality of life after medical intervention, RSPCA vet, Dr Eleanor Myerscough, first performed surgery aimed at helping her breathe. Tragically, despite the best efforts of RSPCA teams, Poppy ultimately had to be euthanased on welfare grounds, due to poor recovery and prognosis post-surgery. Even the best surgical and treatment options were not enough to undo the harm caused to her by breeding for extreme conformation.



▲ Reducing the numbers of pets who are abandoned or neglected due to problems stemming from extreme conformation would allow charities to help even more animals in need.

3.3. Impact for society

Charities: Relinquishment of animals is reduced.

- At present, large numbers of animals with extreme conformation are abandoned or relinquished to charities, as owners are no longer willing or able to meet their high care needs and costs^{165–167}. A reduction in numbers of such animals coming into charity care would enable the diversion of limited charitable resources to others in need, benefiting many more animals and species beyond those impacted directly by extreme conformation.

Social licence: Commodification of animals is challenged.

- Breeding and acquisition of animals for aesthetic reasons, and prioritisation of appearance over health and welfare, can be considered as a manifestation of people perceiving pets as commodities – that is, treating these pets more like objects, products or designer merchandise than sentient beings with complex physical and emotional needs. In some cases, this can be seen in the way pets are marketed for sale, with language that focuses exclusively on physical appearance, ‘rarity’ or novelty value, rather than their health, temperament or abilities. This instrumental view not only underpins the desire to use animals as an

extension of one’s ‘personal brand’ and desired aesthetic, but is also implicit in many other harmful activities directed towards animals by humans that the RSPCA and other animal welfare organisations seek to reform – including their use in entertainment, cruel sports or intensive farming systems^{168–170}.

- Accordingly, challenging this aspect of animal commodification is in alignment with other animal welfare improvement efforts in society, and such projects could be leveraged for mutual reinforcement, projecting a consistent messaging thread throughout the animal welfare sector’s differentiated work-streams.

Human-animal relations: Kindness to animals is promoted.

- Encouraging compassion to animals is integral to the RSPCA’s work, and commensurate with efforts from allied organisations. In addition to benefiting animals of all species, this also has broader societal benefits in generating kindness in attitudes and behaviours more generally.
- Exposure to animal abuse and suffering has been found to lessen compassion for animals, particularly when occurring in childhood^{171, 172}. Thus, the prevalence and normalisation of animal abuse and suffering from breeding for extreme traits could potentially have long-lasting impacts upon societal attitudes to animals.
- The *2025 Animal Kindness Index* strongly indicated respondents’ support for redressing breeding practices that harm animals. For example, 45% identified ‘ending harmful breeding’ as their most important animal welfare issue; only 5% considered it acceptable to breed animals with genetic health problems; and 48% agreed that ‘humans should never use animals in ways that cause them harm for any reason’¹⁷³.

▶ A healthy leachiano gecko in RSPCA care, showing natural colouration and features for his species. The RSPCA exists to provide protection and care for every kind of animal, and is actively working to address breeding for harmful traits across all affected species of pets.

04 Collaboration for impact

Join us to create meaningful change for pets

As a nation of animal lovers, we all want our animal companions to live healthy, happy lives – to **thrive within their bodies, not just survive despite them**. That requires taking meaningful, collective action to prevent the breeding of animals with harmful physical characteristics. **This will need all of us, together.**

Collaboration is key. Situational analysis indicated that addressing the complex, multi-factorial problem of extreme conformation requires a concerted and aligned effort from all six stakeholder groups to succeed. We recognise the intertwined, synergistic roles each group has to play, and their ability to leverage their unique power and influence to drive change.

This section outlines the RSPCA's commitment to action, alongside the role of each stakeholder in achieving the strategic goals collectively, and how others can support these efforts, too. It summarises aspects the RSPCA has the agency and control to contribute to directly, while also advocating for important actions by others in areas beyond our direct influence. We value every stakeholder as an essential ally in addressing extreme conformation, and recognise that each of you is best placed to determine how to contribute most effectively to this joint effort.

We believe that you, as stakeholders, are:

- **power-holders**
- **influence-holders**
- **opportunity-holders**
- **and, ultimately, change-makers!**



Stakeholder considerations

Why does your voice matter? What influence, expertise or platform can you bring to help protect animals from this avoidable harm?

How can you make the greatest impact? Consider how your role, organisation or community could support this movement most effectively.

Which strategic goals align with your work? Identify the areas where your knowledge, resources or influence could contribute to meaningful progress.

What opportunities exist to raise the profile of this issue within your networks? How can you be a champion for change?

Where does/could this issue fit into your future plans? Reflect on how these animal welfare considerations could be embedded within your policies, practices, decision-making or long-term strategy.

Who could you engage, support or amplify? Consider the individuals, organisations and communities you can collaborate with to increase awareness of the welfare impacts of exaggerated traits and bolster efforts for collective action.

Every stakeholder has a role to play.

What role will you take in helping create a future where animals are no longer bred to suffer?

4.1. Stakeholder: OWNERS

What is the strategic goal for owners?

Demand for and acquisition of companion animals with extreme conformation is reduced

How can the [RSPCA](#) contribute to achieving this goal?

■ Promote healthy pets.

Disseminate engaging, evidence-based messaging on the importance of prioritising animal welfare over aesthetics when choosing a pet. Encourage consideration of healthy mixed-breed and rescue pets as a welfare-positive option.

■ Create guidance resources.

Produce guidance for prospective owners on: choosing pets based on suitability for lifestyle and finances (not solely on breed), reflecting realistic costs of lifelong ownership and likely care needs; selecting a healthy pet;

and identifying reputable breeders. Help shift attitudes by challenging existing ideas and incorrect information about pets with extreme features with friendly, suitable content.

■ Support current owners.

Provide advice and practical, compassionate support to existing owners of pets with extreme traits. Offer expert guidance on how to optimise welfare and reduce relinquishment, aimed at keeping pets in their homes and as healthy as possible.

■ Facilitate experience-sharing.

Encourage existing or previous owners of pets whose welfare is impaired by extreme conformation to share honest reflections to help prospective owners understand the consequences of owning these pets, and encourage others to make healthier choices.

■ Maintain sensitive messaging.

Utilise language and messaging carefully when discussing extreme conformation to avoid demonisation or unfair judgement of existing owners. Remain approachable, and act as a trusted voice for evidence-based, welfare-focused advice – without judgement – for current and prospective pet owners.

How can owners contribute to achieving this goal?

Current owners/care-givers of pets with extreme traits

■ Be vigilant.

Ensure a thorough understanding of the increased risks and the ability to recognise welfare impairment in pets with extreme traits. Monitor and be alert to any changes in behaviour – such as posture, breathing, ingestion, play, sleep, energy – that could indicate suffering.

■ Seek veterinary advice.

Advocate for pets by seeking veterinary or animal welfare advice, without delay, for any possible health problems.

■ Commit to conformationally-healthy pets.

Pledge to acquire pets with innately healthy conformation in future – and encourage others to do the same.

■ Consider neutering.

Practise responsible ownership by neutering pets who have extreme traits (if advisable and physically possible for the species) to avoid inadvertently becoming a 'supplier' as a result of unintended breeding. When neutering is not possible for the species (e.g. reptiles, birds, fish),

or is inadvisable for an individual animal on welfare grounds, alternative methods of preventing reproduction should be implemented.

Prospective pet owners

- **Commit to responsible pet acquisition.**

Understand the ways in which extreme conformation harms companion animals, and how this is exacerbated by a continued demand for these pets. Pledge not to fuel this problem – by prioritising the animal's welfare over trends and looks when acquiring a pet.

- **Consider alternatives.**

Actively explore alternatives to pets with extreme traits, such as rehoming animals from charities or individuals, or seeking healthy mixed breeds.

- **Utilise available resources.**

Access guidance from reputable animal welfare and veterinary sources to help assess whether prospective pets have healthy traits (e.g. species-specific welfare codes of practice, innate health assessment tools). In the case of young and growing animals, the parents' conformation needs to be considered.

- **Avoid imported animals with extreme traits.**

Do not purchase pets imported from abroad who have extreme conformation as this only encourages harmful breeding elsewhere. Welfare, health and genetic standards, as well as traceability and customer rights, may be very different to those in the UK.

How can others contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Acknowledge the problem.**

Do not ignore, glamourise or laugh at animals with exaggerated, harmful traits online as this normalises their suffering and contributes to the problem. Instead, advocate for these animals by acknowledging the health problems they face, and the need for change.

- **Share reputable guidance.**

Direct owners of pets with extreme traits in your network to reputable sources of animal welfare advice. Share resources from trustworthy sources (such as reputable animal welfare charities and veterinary organisations) and encourage prospective owners to conduct their own research or seek professional advice.

- **Offer non-judgmental advice.**

Avoid vilifying owners of pets with extreme traits – remember, they may not have been aware of the harms before acquiring their pet,

or their pet may have been rescued or rehomed. However, speak out about the risks these animals face, and advise friends and family who are considering pet acquisition to make healthy, welfare-focused choices.

- **Do not engage with social media content promoting pets with extreme traits.**

Liking, sharing or commenting on social media posts that feature pets with unhealthy traits can contribute to encouraging their popularity and desirability.



Mr Fred Bark, long-term owner of rescued reptiles, reflecting on exaggerated physical features in these species.



The aesthetic of the animal is something that people massively focus on when producing these morphed and differently coloured animals. Just as with lots of other species that we see – French bulldogs for example – their aesthetic has overtaken their health. Now we're seeing, en masse, people struggling with the health of these animals, and it's just the same with reptiles. It's really important that an animal's welfare is considered rather than just the way they look.

My partner and I rehomed a royal python who was heavily morphed. He had a really bad struggle just being able to do his day-to-day activities such as thermoregulating properly, basking properly, and even getting hold of his food. **We've directly seen the effects of these neurological issues caused by in-breeding and over-breeding: serious pain and distress for these animals in their day-to-day lives.** But we also have a wild-type royal python who has never missed a feed. She's grown and developed very well and doesn't have many issues and struggles. Her life seems to be a lot more comfortable and easy to get through than that of some of these other reptiles who have been morphed.

I think it's important for influential people to take steps to raise awareness of these problems, because until these animals stop being produced, the issues are only going to get worse over time. So, to have such a large, influential charity like the RSPCA addressing these issues, that's great – it's a really good step in the right direction.



4.2. Stakeholder: SUPPLIERS

What is the strategic goal for suppliers?

Supply and breeding of companion animals with extreme conformation is reduced.

How can the RSPCA contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Rehome with integrity.**

As a supplier of pets via rehoming, ensure responsible advertising of any animals with extreme conformation seeking adoption, through being transparent about the impact their features have on welfare and any additional care needs, and focusing on their character and abilities rather than appearance.

- **Encourage responsible pet acquisition.**

Promote rehoming as a positive choice for prospective pet owners, and encourage those intending to buy, to only purchase healthy animals from welfare-focused breeders and suppliers.

- **Support positive supply initiatives.**

Actively support initiatives that contribute to responsible pet breeding, such as conformational health assessment tools, breed-specific health testing and puppy/kitten contracts.

- **Advocate on importation.**

Work towards closing legal loopholes that enable animals with extreme conformation to be imported into the UK.

How can suppliers contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Breed for moderation.**

Transition breeding practices to produce animals with moderate physical features that do not impair their welfare. Implement conformation assessments (e.g. innate health assessment for dogs) to ensure only conformationally-sound individuals are bred from, along with any recommended health testing for the species and breed.

- **Breed in moderation.**

Many pets with extreme traits – including pure-bred and ‘designer’ cross-bred animals – end up in charity rescue centres, such as the RSPCA’s. Help address this over-supply problem by limiting the numbers of litters produced, and offering lifetime support and a ‘take-back’ policy to pet buyers.

- **Pivot to healthier breeds.**

Consider changing to breeding healthier types of pets, who are unaffected by extreme



▲ A cat with healthy conformation, rehomed by the RSPCA, able to express natural feline behaviours and enjoy another chance at a happier life.

conformation. Be vocal in sharing the decision to pivot, so prospective buyers are aware that welfare is being prioritised in your breeding practice.

- **Ensure transparency.**

Be honest in clearly communicating any additional care needs and costs of pets with extreme traits. Educate clients on how conformation affects welfare and any related specific needs their pets may have.

- **Assess client suitability.**

Appraise whether prospective owners are willing and able to provide the high standards of care, additional needs and associated costs that pets with extreme traits are likely to have. Avoid supplying animals to buyers who do not appear to have the capability to meet the pet’s needs throughout their entire lifetime.

- **Adhere to high standards.**

Understand and follow legal requirements relating to animal welfare and breeding – including the Animal Welfare Act, and Animal Welfare (Licensing of Activities Involving Animals) Regulations – and advertising requirements from the Pet Advertising Advisory Group (PAAG) and Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) as applicable to the species and nature of breeding/supply.

How can others contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Avoid harmful pet adverts.**

Do not engage with or share adverts for pets that emphasise exaggerated features, appearance and rarity over health, welfare and temperament.

■ **Encourage adoption.**

Raise awareness of the high numbers of companion animals – including popular pure-bred and cross-bred pets – currently housed in rescue centres and in need of loving new homes, as well as the benefits of adoption or rehoming.

Prospective buyers

■ **Conduct pre-purchase research.**

Invest some time into learning about the impact of exaggerated physical traits on animals, the species and breeds affected, and how to identify a healthy pet. Be prepared to ask questions of any pet supplier to help assess their appreciation of this issue and whether welfare is their priority.

■ **Recognise ‘red flags’.**

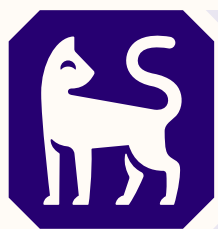
Be able to identify indicators of poor breeding practice – and be prepared to walk away from a supplier if necessary. Significant ‘red flags’ and warning signs include: inability to see young animals alongside their mother (for species with maternal care provision, e.g. mammals, rodents); reluctance to sign a contractual agreement; use of computer-generated or fake imagery in pet adverts; inability to answer welfare-related questions; poor understanding of extreme traits and other health issues; application of high-pressure sales tactics.

■ **Reward good suppliers.**

Recognise and reward breeders and other suppliers of pets (e.g. through private rehoming and charity adoption) who demonstrate good practice with a focus on animal welfare. Examples include: showing none of the aforementioned ‘red flags’; proactively asking questions to assess buyers’ abilities to provide the necessary care and costs for the new pet; offering lifetime support and a ‘take-back’ policy; pre-purchase video calls showing young animals in their home environment with their mother prior to an in-person visit.

■ **Insist on high standards.**

Know your rights, exercise consumer power and demand best practice by insisting on: pre-purchase video calls and visits; tools such as the puppy and kitten contracts (freely available online); and ample opportunity for questions to be answered. If in doubt, do not proceed with the purchase! Responsible pet suppliers will never pressurise buyers into completing a sale.



Mr Steve Crow, cat breeder and board director of the Governing Council of the Cat Fancy, reflecting on exaggerated physical features in cats.



The health and welfare of animals should always take precedence over appearance, and this principle applies across all companion animals and indeed many domesticated species. Where selective breeding results in exaggerated conformations that are shown to compromise normal function, health or quality of life, these should be addressed through responsible breeding, evidence-based breed standards and continued scientific research.

Responsible breeders have an important role to play, alongside all other stakeholders, in continually improving health and welfare through responsible breeding practices, education and ongoing review of standards. At the same time, I hope that future policy will continue to be guided by robust scientific evidence and objective assessment of health and function.

I welcome the RSPCA's commitment to improving animal welfare and believe that a shared strategy can help bring together breeders, veterinary professionals, researchers and welfare organisations around common goals – as **lasting improvements are most likely to be achieved through partnership rather than polarisation.**

Ultimately, we all share the same objective: to breed and care for healthy animals capable of expressing their normal behaviours and enjoying long, comfortable lives. By combining scientific evidence, responsible breeding and collaborative working, I believe we can continue to improve welfare while preserving healthy, genetically diverse breeds for future generations.



■ **Report concerns.**

Report significant animal welfare concerns – about breeding animals, their offspring or other animals at the premises – to the RSPCA. Report concerns about integrity of pet advertising to the Advertising Standards Authority, and concerns about potential illegal activity to the police.

4.3. Stakeholder: SERVICE PROVIDERS

What is the strategic goal for service providers?

Advocacy for prioritisation of welfare over aesthetics in companion animals is enacted through dissemination of consistent advice to clients.

How can the **RSPCA** contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Demonstrate best practice.**

As a veterinary service provider, implement evidence-based and welfare-focused animal healthcare practice and encourage other service providers to adopt similar standards. Ensure that any surgical interventions aimed at addressing extreme traits are within scope of service, reflect best practice and are preceded by robust quality of life assessment.

- **Deliver consistent advice.**

Ensure all advice to clients, charity service users, fellow professionals and members of the public is consistent and transparent about the implications of extreme traits on animal welfare and quality of life. Do not shy away from difficult, honest conversations about treatment options and euthanasia when these are in the animals' best interests.

- **Support service providers.**

Offer recommendations and guidance to other animal service providers (including veterinary, grooming, nutrition, behaviour and training services), supporting them to implement good practice in relation to minimising harms to companion animals with extreme conformation.

- **Liaise for learning.**

Coordinate with other service providers and animal health professionals (in the charity, private and public sectors) for mutual learning and evolution of best practice for mitigating suffering due to extreme traits.

- **Recognise allies.**

Recognise, reward and amplify the voices of other service providers who proactively speak out on the suffering caused by extreme conformation, advocate for healthier pets, and proudly prioritise animal welfare over profit.



Dr Emma Milne, Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund patron and veterinary advisor, reflecting on exaggerated physical features in rabbits.



To my mind, the breeding of animals that we know categorically will suffer is the same as physical abuse, which would never be tolerated by law. The need to address this has been urgent for as long as we've known about it, but now with body shapes becoming more and more extreme and more species affected, it's paramount that it is stopped.

Rabbits have evolved to have upright ears, almost 360-degree vision and teeth that grow continuously throughout their lives. We have bred them to have shortened faces, which means their teeth don't line up properly, so don't get worn down as they should. This results in dental disease, pain, ulcerated cheeks and tongues. Breeding them to have lopped or droopy ears creates an abnormal ear canal and waxy build up and predisposes them to ear-based abscesses. We have effectively taken a superbly evolved animal and made them dysfunctional. Exactly as we have with dozens of other species. There are around one million companion rabbits in the UK and half of these are brachycephalic, lop-eared, or both. This is unacceptable suffering.

This RSPCA report also highlights the mental and emotional impact of these body shapes. This is incredibly important as so much coverage concentrates solely on the physical impact – but that is just the tip of the iceberg. I hope this call to action is heeded, and as soon as possible.



How can service providers contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Counsel clients.**

Utilise opportunities during client contact to educate, raise awareness, encourage and support welfare-positive choices. Offer counsel on future, healthy pet acquisition, and on optimising welfare for existing pets at risk of harm due to exaggerated features.

▶ Huge numbers of rabbits suffer due to breeding for unnatural traits. Service providers can counsel clients to choose healthier breeds, like this pair, instead.

■ **Adapt practice.**

Modify professional practices to accommodate the additional needs of animals with extreme traits (e.g. dog-walkers exercising pugs who are at high risk of respiratory problems; cat-sitters caring for sphynxes who need frequent bathing; veterinary nurses handling dachshunds who have spinal problems).

■ **Provide consistent advice.**

Ensure advice to clients is aligned throughout the profession and follows guidance from relevant governing/advisory bodies and animal welfare organisations. Liaise with fellow service providers and communities of practice to ensure cross-specialism consistency and avoid mixed or confusing messages for clients or the public. Maintain up-to-date knowledge on the welfare impacts of extreme conformation on different companion animal species.

■ **Be vigilant for harm.**

Capitalise on regular opportunities for direct engagement with clients and their pets to detect welfare impairment and need for intervention at an early stage. Remain alert for any physical manifestations of harm from extreme traits that may require veterinary attention, and advise clients accordingly without delay.

■ **Have honest conversations.**

When appropriate, be willing to engage in honest discussions with clients about their pets' quality of life and euthanasia considerations, making it clear that surgery is not a definitive

'quick fix' for extreme physical traits. Encourage pet owners to recognise the importance of behavioural and emotional aspects of welfare in addition to physical health, as well as the value of animals being able to perform normal, species-specific activities without discomfort, fear or pain to ensure they have a good quality of life.

■ **Speak out.**

Proudly and loudly prioritise animal welfare in your practice, and tell prospective clients why the issue of extreme conformation is important and how this can be addressed together.

■ **Advocate for animals.**

Use your professional profile and communication channels to champion an end to breeding animals with harmful features.

How can others contribute to achieving this goal?

■ **Be discerning.**

Exercise your consumer power and choice when selecting providers of animal-related services. Proactively ask service providers about their position on pets with extreme traits, to ensure they have a welfare focus and up-to-date knowledge, before procuring services or recommending them to others.

■ **Reward positive practice.**

Recognise, reward and amplify the voices of ethical service providers who actively speak out on behalf of animals suffering from extreme conformation, and who clearly prioritise animal welfare over profit in their businesses.





4.4. Stakeholder: ADVISORS

What is the strategic goal for advisors?

Education using welfare-focused, evidence-based messaging about the impact of extreme conformation upon companion animals is championed widely.

How can the RSPCA contribute to achieving this goal?

■ Highlight the issue.

Utilise the RSPCA's organisational voice and communications opportunities to highlight the importance of extreme conformation as a companion animal welfare issue – and the imperative to address it.

■ Equip others with knowledge.

Develop and promote educational and advisory materials, making these available to relevant stakeholders.

■ Amplify allies.

Share high-quality information and learning materials developed by allied organisations and individuals.

■ Work in coalition.

Use the RSPCA's influence to bring stakeholders together, when there is rationale and opportunity to do so, to collaborate on strengthening progress on protecting animals from extreme traits.

How can advisors contribute to achieving this goal?

As for the RSPCA above, plus these further points.

■ Establish policy.

Develop clear positions and organisational policies in favour of reducing the suffering of pets with extreme traits, addressing their treatment, depiction, usage, promotion and education on the issue (as relevant to your advisory remit). For example, the Reptile and Exotic Pet Trade Association (REPTA) developed a policy calling for their members not to breed, sell or purchase reptiles with any morphs or genetic traits known to cause significant welfare issues¹⁷⁴.

■ Tailor communications.

Develop tailored educational resources and public communications for your respective audiences (e.g. members, practitioners, clients, public) to help them understand and recognise the animal welfare impacts of harmful conformation.

■ Support research.

Proactively seek out and promote research opportunities on extreme conformation and advocate for funding. Provide or allocate funding if in a position to do so, reflecting the significance of this welfare issue in organisational funding priorities. Champion open-access research content so all learners can engage with new evidence.

❑ Even with the best-available surgeries and treatments, pets with extreme traits often still experience a reduced quality of life compared to their healthy counterparts – there is no ‘cure’ for these problems. Advisors are key to educating about these realities.

■ **Identify your contribution.**

Proactively explore how you/your organisation can add value to this movement and use your power and influence as an advisor to advocate for healthier animals. For instance, educators can consider steering their students towards topics related to extreme conformation for literature reviews and research projects.

■ **Collaborate.**

Liaise with allied advisory bodies or individuals to ensure alignment in messaging and practice, and consider sharing data and statistics on the problem of extreme traits and means of improvement.

■ **Maintain integrity.**

Recognise where conflicts of interest may exist within your particular field, and how these may be navigated to prioritise animal welfare.

How can others contribute to achieving this goal?

■ **Spread the word.**

Use social media as a means of amplifying advisors, by sharing and following organisations or individuals who are actively working to highlight and address the problem of harmful, unnatural features in pets.



▲ Old tyme bulldog showing multiple unnatural, exaggerated features. These include: severe brachycephaly (flattened skull shape); eye deformity (lower eyelids turning outwards and drooping); dental malocclusion (undershot jaw); facial and body skin folds (wrinkles from excessive skin); and a nose rope (large, heavy skin fold above the nose).



**Professor Dan O'Neill,
professor of companion
animal epidemiology at the
Royal Veterinary College,
reflecting on exaggerated
physical features in dogs.**



I consider extreme conformation to be one of the most important and preventable welfare challenges facing domestic dogs today. Unlike many diseases, the health problems associated with extreme body shape are entirely human-driven and therefore avoidable.

Evidence from the Royal Veterinary College's VetCompass shows that 11 of the 26 most common dog breeds in the UK typically exhibit some form of extreme conformation. This is no longer an issue that any single organisation can solve alone. Meaningful and lasting change will only be achieved through coordinated action and consistent messaging across the full spectrum of organisations committed to improving canine welfare.

The shape of suffering strategy provides a clear, evidence-based framework that brings together the key stakeholders behind a shared goal of improving welfare. Importantly, it combines robust scientific evidence with practical tools, such as the Innate Health Assessment, that empower breeders, owners, veterinary professionals and policy-makers to drive meaningful change. By aligning the actions of all those involved, **this strategy offers the best opportunity yet to reverse a century of harmful selective breeding** and ensure that future generations of dogs are bred first and foremost for health and welfare.



■ **Recommend credible advisors.**

Direct people in your personal and professional networks – especially those who may have an animal with exaggerated characteristics, or are considering acquiring a new pet – towards advice and information from reputable, welfare-focused advisors.

■ **Avoid non-reputable sources.**

Only access and share information and advice on extreme conformation from reputable advisory bodies and individuals, avoiding unreliable sources, those with conflicts of interest, or those who do not clearly prioritise animal welfare.

4.5. Stakeholder: PUBLIC

What is the strategic goal for the public?

Awareness that extreme conformation impairs companion animal welfare is high among the general public, and considered socially unacceptable

How can the RSPCA contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Create a movement.**

Strive to generate a pro-health movement for companion animals throughout the UK, through campaigns, communications and education.

- **Advance educational outreach.**

Incorporate learning about extreme conformation into educational activities for children, youth and communities, helping to equip future pet owners with knowledge and empathy. Raise awareness of how this issue impacts animals, people and society.

- **Engage with industry.**

Engage constructively with pet and advertising industries to ensure animals with extreme conformation are not used as props for commercial gain. Advocate for an end to the featuring of companion animals with harmful traits in commercial advertising, film and media productions in the UK, and challenge their irresponsible use, promotion, featuring and selling on social media platforms.

- **Mobilise support.**

Utilise the RSPCA's voice and media influence to mobilise support for healthier pets. Seek to amplify consistent, evidence-based messages from other charities, experts and individuals.

- **Help people learn.**

Continue to develop and publicly share evidence-based resources and learning materials explaining the health and welfare implications of exaggerated, unnatural features.

- **Fundraise responsibly.**

Only feature pets with exaggerated traits in fundraising materials when accompanied by acknowledgement of the ways in which their unnatural features impact their welfare – using these communications as an opportunity to highlight this problem. Help supporters to fully understand this problem by being transparent about the additional care needs and costs it creates, and why financial support is required to help charities like the RSPCA prevent this form of harm.



Ms Preeti Baid, animal-lover and director of philanthropy, reflecting on exaggerated physical features in fish.

“ Learning about the severe impacts on fish is deeply concerning and highlights how overlooked their welfare can be. **These animals experience real, chronic harm, yet their suffering is often invisible and underestimated.** ”

It is essential that we address the breeding of animals with exaggerated, unnatural features now, as it prioritises human preference over animal welfare and causes lifelong suffering. Failing to act allows these practices to become normalised and entrenched.

The RSPCA's strategy is both timely and necessary in driving collective action across sectors to tackle this issue at its root. A coordinated approach is vital to shift behaviours, strengthen standards and ensure animal welfare is no longer compromised for aesthetics. ”

How can the public contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Audit your social media.**

Be intentional about the social media content and accounts you like share and follow, and avoid those promoting or glamourising animals with extreme unnatural traits. Always consider whether welfare has been prioritised in any content featuring animals – if in doubt, do not engage! Engagement rewards unethical creators, and can encourage others to use pets, including those with harmful features, for online attention or financial gain. Therefore, it is better to screen-shot any content of concern rather than respond to it directly on social media platforms.

- **Challenge harmful promotion.**

Actively challenge the promotion or celebration of animals with extreme conformation in the public sphere or advertising, when this has not acknowledged the harms. Contact companies to express concern when pets with harmful traits are featured in adverts (the exception being when the aim is to raise awareness of their plight).

■ **Spread evidence-based information.**

Share useful, evidence-based resources and messages from allies to counteract misinformation and highlight the need for change.

■ **Use your voice.**

Help shape political change by taking action against extreme conformation when prompted by charities and sector leaders. Lending your support through a variety of actions – such as signing open letters, sending emails to politicians or industry and participating in surveys, quizzes and pledges – helps amplify the call for action.

■ **Participate in coordinated high-level actions.**

Experienced, committed campaigners can heed calls from the RSPCA and other animal welfare charities to take collective campaigning action when timely, such as creating local movements through community engagement, writing to industry or key public figures, attending workshops, engaging with influencers, and distributing marketing materials. This support makes a real difference to the impact that charities have.

■ **Report irresponsible content.**

Report inappropriate use, promotion and selling of animals affected by extreme conformation

to the relevant social media platforms or pet-selling websites.

■ **Encourage children's compassion for animals.**

Parents, carers and educators can support children and young people to develop critical thinking in relation to animal welfare, to consider experiences from the animals' perspectives and to question the features they see in pets when these may be harmful. Become a partner in their lifelong learning journey to be a positive advocate for animals.

■ **Join the movement.**

Become part of this social movement to challenge irresponsible breeding practices and trends for extreme features in pets in any way you can – and help reduce demand for these traits across England, Wales, and beyond.

▼ Raising public awareness of the ways in which exaggerated features affect multiple species is vital when empowering people to use their consumer power by making welfare-positive pet choices – and to use their online influence by only liking, sharing or following social media content that prioritises health over aesthetics in animals.



4.6. Stakeholder: POLICY-MAKERS and GOVERNANCE

What is the strategic goal for policy-makers and governance?

Protection for companion animals from extreme conformation is provided through effective legislation, enforcement and practice.

How can the RSPCA contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Advocate for legislative improvement.**
Identify necessary improvements to existing animal welfare legislation, and advocate with the UK and Welsh governments for strengthened legal protections to prevent suffering from extreme traits.
- **Champion conformational health assessments.**
Support and encourage the development and implementation of tools that assess the conformational health of companion animal species; for example, the Innate Health Assessment tool launched by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare in 2025, developed in conjunction with the Royal Veterinary College. Offer support to owners, breeders and officials with responsible usage of such tools for the benefit of animal welfare.
- **Engage constructively.**
Liaise with stakeholders with opposing views, to identify pragmatic means of achieving progress for pets affected by extreme conformation,



▲ Policy and legislative change can help to ensure that pets of every kind are bred with healthy features.

respecting differences but prioritising animal welfare. Collaborate with other stakeholders to achieve progress jointly.

- **Implement and support enforcement.**
Maintain the RSPCA's role in ensuring enforcement teams within councils in England and Wales have adequate resources, training and expertise to utilise the legislation in this area. Support others who enforce animal welfare legislation, policy and practice through advice, collaboration and learning exchange.
- **Consult with subject-matter experts.**
Engage and collaborate with legal scholars and the animal welfare law sector to understand legislative routes to advance this issue, and, when feasible, enact emergent recommendations derived from legal research.

How can policy-makers and governance actors contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Turn evidence into action.**
Use this report as an aid to identify how to effect meaningful action to protect animals from avoidable harm from exaggerated characteristics. Share the report to help build awareness among colleagues and networks.
- **Establish organisational policies.**
Incorporate the issue of extreme conformation into relevant organisational policies in the charity, public, private and commercial sectors. Understand pertinent intersections and consider how this welfare issue relates to the organisation's role and responsibilities.
- **Learn and act.**
Gain a thorough understanding of the consequences of extreme traits upon animals, listen to advice from experts (e.g. the RSPCA and other animal welfare charities, veterinary advisory bodies, All-Party Parliamentary Groups and governmental agencies), and actively seize opportunities to create important and impactful change. Advocate internally by promoting this issue with colleagues, when it has relevance to their work.
- **Commit to responsible communications.**
Pledge to never irresponsibly feature, promote or glamourise animals who show extreme physical traits in any organisational communications, presentations or advertisements.
- **Lead by example.**
Adhere to guidance from reputable advisory bodies, including the Pet Advertising Advisory

Group (PAAG), Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), Social Media Animal Cruelty (SMAC), the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare (APGAW), the RSPCA and other animal charities.

Enforcers of animal-related policy and practice.

■ **Exchange knowledge.**

Liaise with other professionals involved in the implementation of, and compliance with, animal welfare regulation and standards, to share experiences and opportunities for mutual learning on this issue. Encourage the use of conformation assessment tools (e.g. the Innate Health Assessment for dogs) or recommended standards (e.g. the REPTA policy on deleterious genes in reptiles) when these exist for the species.

■ **Utilise learning and training opportunities.**

Review, access and engage with any available learning tools and training to build knowledge on how extreme conformation affects companion animals and how it can be addressed. Examples include resources on conformational health, existing legal guidance in the Animal Welfare Act, and advice from animal welfare charities and veterinary organisations.

How can others contribute to achieving this goal?

■ **Share this report.**

Disseminate this report widely to others who are in a position to develop, influence or implement organisational, local or national policy.

■ **Support campaigns.**

Lend your voice to current and future campaigns that seek legislative change to help protect animals from harmful breeding practice, by implementing campaign asks and actions, and sharing campaign materials with contacts.

■ **Contact MPs.**

Consider communicating with Members of Parliament about extreme conformation, highlighting this as a key welfare issue for pets in the UK.

■ **Advocate at work.**

Promote responsible animal welfare policy and practice within your organisations, work-places and professional networks. Recognise and champion good practice when this already exists in organisational policy.



**Professor Angus Nurse,
professor of law and
environmental justice at
Anglia Ruskin University
and director of the Centre
for Access to Justice and**

**Inclusion, reflecting on exaggerated physical
features in companion animals.**



My work is predominantly about the law and its application. This includes looking at how negative animal welfare impacts are caused for companion animals, and identifying where there may be gaps in the law or its enforcement that allow this to happen.

My experience is that the law's failure to adequately address this issue, combined with some enforcement gaps, means that animal breeding that causes extreme conformation continues. The research my team has done identifies that consumers still demand animals with 'unique' features and UK law only deploys limited controls.

This strategy is useful in identifying the problem of extreme conformation as one that requires action from a range of stakeholders to resolve. It requires the involvement of consumers, policy-makers, enforcers and other animal welfare professionals. But, in my experience, the two core problems to address are consumer demand for animals with extreme conformation, and the behaviours of those who seek to meet that demand and are willing to ignore or subvert controls on animal breeding to do so. My perspective is that while calls to action are useful, they must also be accompanied by clear legal controls, and robust and effective enforcement.



■ **Report concerns.**

Report serious and urgent animal welfare concerns to the relevant authorities and do not ignore significant suffering due to extreme conformation – just because it is commonplace, does not mean it is acceptable.

05 Next steps

The RSPCA has developed a comprehensive five-year strategy for addressing extreme conformation. However, given its complex nature and significant animal welfare impact, tackling this problem requires collaboration, long-term commitment, contribution and leadership from each of the six key stakeholder groups. Together, we need to implement an array of targeted, pragmatic, impactful activities across these multiple stakeholders, and monitor the efficacy of these actions.

But while it is recognised that preventing harm to animals from breeding for exaggerated traits will be a longer-term endeavour, a robust, coordinated effort is required now to instigate tangible change in the right direction, which can be continued into the future.

Owners, suppliers, service providers, advisors, the public, policy-makers and governance actors play a vital and integrated role in collectively addressing this problem – and the RSPCA is committed to working collaboratively to achieve our shared goals.

Companion animals do not choose the bodies they are born into, and they do not choose a life of suffering – the responsibility for protecting them rests with us.

Whatever your stakeholder role, the decisions you make will help shape a future where no animal is bred to suffer for the sake of appearance.

Please help us make that future a reality.



▲ Our companion animals deserve the same opportunities to thrive in healthy bodies as their free-living relatives.

Our reasons for optimism Together, we can...

1. **Create** a movement for healthy pets – one that makes breeding with harmful physical features unacceptable.
2. **Transform** public understanding to raise awareness of the harms caused to companion animals by extreme conformation, by amplifying clear, evidence-based messaging about its impact on animal welfare.
3. **Shift** demand, supply and social acceptability towards healthy companion animals, instead of animals bred with intentionally exaggerated traits that cause them harm.
4. **Advocate** for responsible, welfare-focused breeding and rehoming of pets that prioritises health and welfare over appearance.
5. **Empower** prospective owners in making informed choices about pet acquisition.
6. **Encourage** service providers to engage with clients about extreme conformation.
7. **Strengthen** animal welfare legislation and breeding regulations to better protect animals from suffering due to exaggerated physical features.
8. **Support** those who enforce legislation relevant to extreme conformation, through practical guidance and learning opportunities.
9. **Integrate** current scientific and human behavioural change principles within our collective activities, ensuring we are consistently evidence-informed and adaptive.
10. **Unite** as allies in animal welfare; advisors and influencers to advocate for the breeding of healthy companion animals, and mobilise synergistic action from others who care about animal welfare.

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