



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 issue [1–7]. Sadly, however, this problem persists.

Dogs and cats are the species most commonly affected at present [8–64], but exaggerated physical features are also intentionally bred into rabbits [65–70], fish [71–80], horses [81–88], reptiles [89–91], rodents [92–94] and birds [95], 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.

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

1.1. What is extreme conformation?

Examples of harmful physical traits that are intentionally bred into companion animals are provided in Table 1, along with examples of breeds/ types who are commonly affected [8-96]. These examples of extreme conformations are not exhaustive as 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.

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Table 1. Examples of extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxxxx.

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 extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxxxx.

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, Pearl scale, Eggfish, Lionchu, Pom pom, Ranchu, Tosakin Reptiles: Silkback (scaleless) bearded dragon, Silkback (scaleless) corn snake	

Table 3. Examples of extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxx.

Spinal or tail abnormality	
Examples of extreme conformation (non-exhaustive)	Taillessness, ‘Corkscrew’ tails, Sloping backs, Chondrodystrophy
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 extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxx.

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 extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxx.

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. 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 5. Examples of extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxx.

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, Dwelf, Persian, Peterbald, Sphynx, Ukranian 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, Holle cropper pigeon, Jacobin pigeon	

*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 6. Examples of extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxx.

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 ball python snake, Super champagne royal python snake, Super jungle boa snake, Super motley boa snake	

Table 7. Examples of extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxx.

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, Ukranian levkoy Rabbits: Lop-eared varieties Rodents: Dumbo mouse, Dumbo rat	

Table 8. Examples of extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxx.

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	

▶ Scottish fold cats 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.

Table 9. Examples of extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxx.

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: Dwelf, Munchkin, Teacup and mini varieties Rabbits: Dwarf and mini varieties Horses: Miniature varieties, Shetland pony	

Table 10. Examples of extreme conformations and affected companion animals xxxxxxxxxx.

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	





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



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

Many of these 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). 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 vision.

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

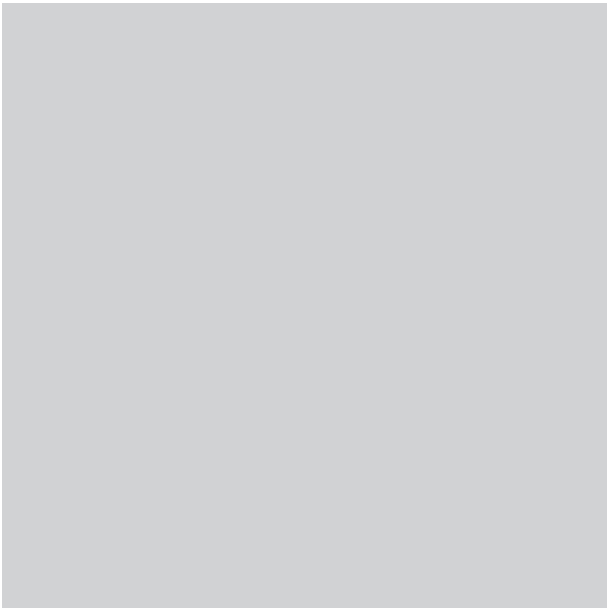
the flow of cerebro-spinal fluid. Syringomyelia is the term used to describe this obstruction of cerebro-spinal fluid, which can occur for a variety of reasons but is frequently associated with chiari-like malformation. Hydrocephalus is the abnormal accumulation of cerebro-spinal fluid within the brain, 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 incontinence. Deformed or missing tails are also associated with chronic skin infection and faecal impaction in dogs and with incontinence, incoordination and spinal lesions in cats.



Dachshund puppies in RSPCA care, all born with tail deformities.



Dachshund 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, amongst 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. In some dachshund varieties, as many as one in every four dogs are affected by IVDD.

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 death. 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 amongst Burmese cats.

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; breeding for colour dilution can cause alopecia (hair loss) and hair follicle infections in dogs and cats; white or piebald (black-and-white) colouration is associated with deafness in dogs (e.g. Dalmations) and in cats, with deafness occurring in 60–80% of white cats with two blue eyes.

Colour morphs in reptiles

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



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].

- **Pearl scale 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 sink [118].
- **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.

▲ Bubble eye goldfish xxxxx xxxxx xxxxx xxxx xxxx xxxxx xxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx xxxxxxxx.

These traits have been purposely selected by humans, making this an entirely man-made 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 X). Both of these dog breeds typically have multiple extreme conformations, including absent or corkscrew tails, excessive skin folds, flat faces and protruding eyes.

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Figure 2. XXXXXX XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXX XXXXXXXXXX



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.

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 X).

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.

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Table X. 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	Examples of impairments that can be impacted by 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

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.

The RSPCA's work is informed by the recognition that **animals have emotions, feelings and needs**, 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.

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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.**

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02 How do we achieve change?

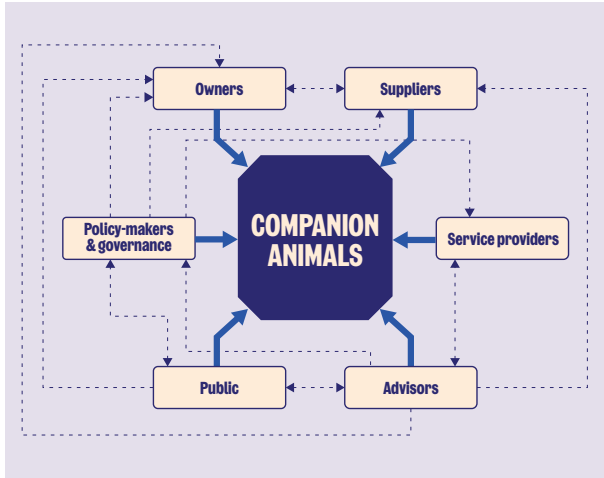
2.1. Key stakeholder groups

Companion animals are both the central stakeholder and key beneficiary of efforts to address extreme conformation. They are influenced by six 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 X).

For example, whilst 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.

Figure X. Interconnections between stakeholders influencing extreme conformation in companion animals xxxxxxx.



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 X). 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.**

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

Stakeholder group	Description	Strategic goal
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 amongst 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 changes [128].

The RSPCA's theory of change 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 outcomes: achieving **greater public awareness** of harmful physical traits in pets; and **more robust protection** for animals at risk.

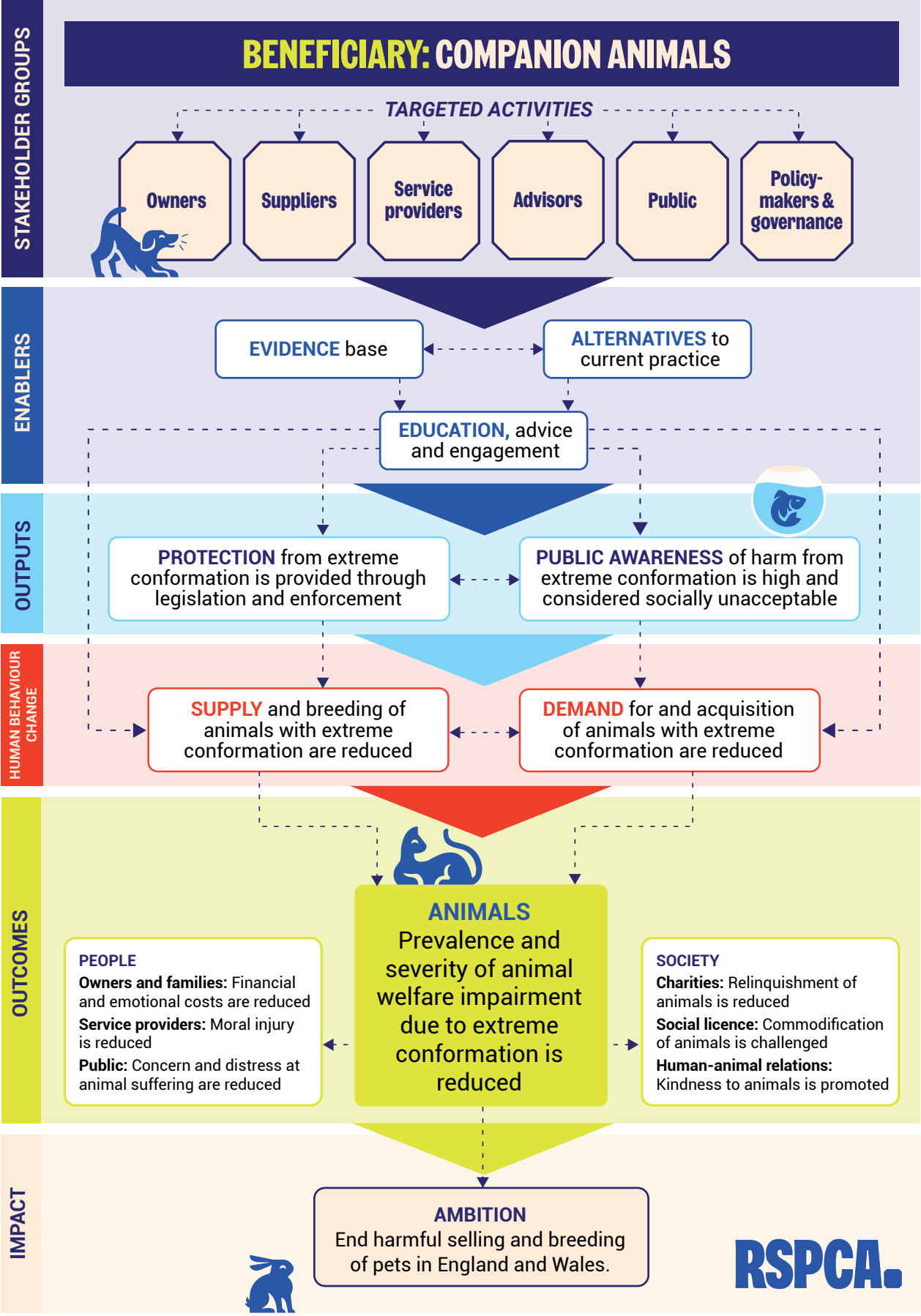
Ultimately, the aim is to **change human behaviour** around demand for, and associated supply of, pets intentionally bred with extreme traits, which is fundamental to achieving the goal of **reducing prevalence and severity of animal suffering** due to extreme conformation.

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Theory of Change



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. Some may show increased aggression as a consequence of thwarted behavioural motivation, frustration or pain^{8–10, 12, 15–19, 31, 34–39, 40, 46, 67–77, 80, 83–85, 93, 95}, and dogs with extreme conformation can be subject to aggression from other dogs, as the distortion of their physical features makes it difficult for their behaviour to be interpreted correctly. 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}.

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 euthanised on welfare grounds. With this inherently unhealthy breed, unfortunately the prognosis is always guarded because of the cartilage problem that they are deliberately bred with (osteochondrodysplasia); 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.”

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; or 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, man-made health problems^{97, 151, 152}.
- 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}.
- 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, 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 issues at present¹⁵⁷.

- 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}.

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 euthanised 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.

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 other 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, experiments or intensive farming systems^{168–170}.

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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.



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, whilst 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 these 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.

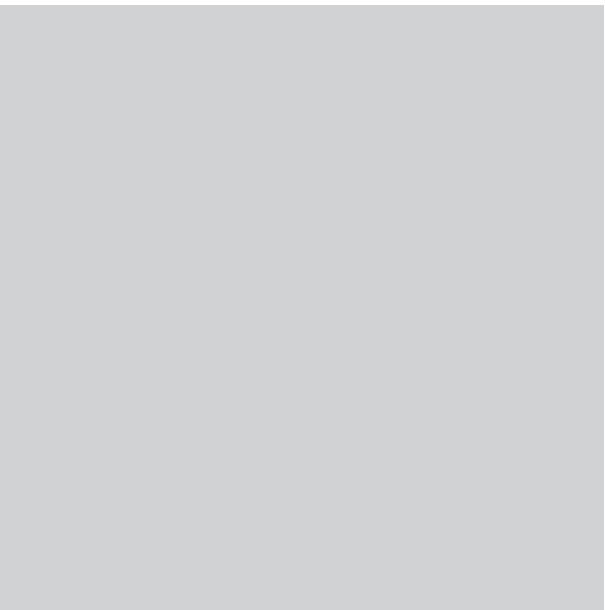
Which strategic goals align with your work? Identify the areas where your knowledge, resources or influence could contribute to meaningful progress.

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?



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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 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 welfare 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.

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Name, role, organisation

- 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, acknowledge 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 extreme traits can contribute to encouraging their popularity and desirability.

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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 responsibly.**
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 who intend to buy only to purchase healthy animals from responsible breeders and suppliers.
- **Support responsible 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.

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Name, role, organisation

- **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 options to change to breeding healthier types of pets, who are unaffected by extreme 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.

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- **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 providing 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); 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; offering 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.
- **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 sector, as applicable) 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.

How can service providers contribute to achieving this goal?

- **Counsel clients.**
Utilise opportunities during client contact to educate, raise awareness, encourage and support welfare-friendly choices. Offer counsel on future, healthy pet acquisition, and on optimising welfare for existing pets at risk of harm due to exaggerated features.
- **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/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 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 educational content 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 pro-

gress on protecting animals from extreme traits.

How can advisors contribute to achieving this goal?

As for 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 issues [174].
- **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.
- **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.

■ **Recommend reputable 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 clear 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 amongst 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 educational activities.

■ **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 highlighting the health and welfare implications of exaggerated, unnatural features.

■ **Fundraise responsibly.**

Only feature pets with exaggerated traits in fund-raising materials when accompanied by acknowledgement of the ways in which their unnatural features impact their welfare – using these communications as an additional 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.

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 screenshot 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 amplify 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, nnnnnnnnnnnnsending emails to politicians or industry and participating in surveys, quizzes and pledges – helps amplify the call for change.

■ **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 the irresponsible 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 challenge the features they see in pets when these may be harmful. Become a partner in their lifelong learning journey to be a responsible 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.

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 ani-

mal 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, 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 amongst 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. 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 assessment, 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 animal 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.

■ **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.

5. 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 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 whilst 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.

BOX: Our reasons for optimism

Together, we can...

Create a movement for healthy pets – one that makes breeding with harmful physical features unacceptable.

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.

Shift demand, supply and social acceptability towards healthy companion animals, instead of animals bred with intentionally exaggerated traits that cause them harm.

Advocate for responsible, welfare-focused breeding and rehoming of pets that prioritises health and welfare over appearance.

Empower prospective owners in making informed choices about pet acquisition.

Encourage service providers to engage with clients about extreme conformation.

Strengthen animal welfare legislation and breeding regulations to better protect animals from suffering due to exaggerated physical features.

Support those who enforce legislation relevant to extreme conformation, through practical guidance and learning opportunities.

Integrate current scientific and human behavioural change principles within our collective activities, ensuring we are consistently evidence-informed and adaptive.

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.

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.

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