2025/2026
ENGLISH SPRINGER SPANIEL ANNUAL HEALTH REPORT

COMPILED BY THE ESS HEALTH CO-ORDINATORS
on behalf of
THE UK ENGLISH SPRINGER SPANIEL BREED CLUBS

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"Our destiny is not written for us, it's written by us."
- Barack Obama

The past year has been a momentous one, not least for our UK Kennel Club. To mark its 150th anniversary, the KC was granted a royal prefix by His Majesty King Charles III on November 25th 2025, and is now known as **The Royal Kennel Club (RKC)**. The RKC remains the oldest recognised kennel club in the world and this change reflects a renewed commitment to canine health and welfare for all dogs.

Also of huge significance was the appointment of Ian Seath as RKC Chairman on 1st July 2025. An RKC Board Member since 2019, he has owned Dachshunds since 1980 and awards CCs in all six varieties. He was a long-time leader of the Dachshund Breed Council, setting the gold standard for everyone else to follow in breed health education and improvement.

As Health Co-ordinators, we first met Ian in the House of Commons, where we were all giving evidence to a Parliamentary inquiry not long after the 2008 BBC documentary 'Pedigree Dogs Exposed'. Fast forward to 2025… It is customary for an incoming RKC Chairman to choose some paintings from the RKC art collection that they would like to hang in their Clarges Street office. Imagine how surprised and touched we were that Ian chose to include a beautiful painting, known as 'Mrs Santer's English Springer Spaniels' by FT Daws, as a reminder of that first meeting and our enduring friendship ever since.

Ian's business skills as a management consultant will hopefully also stand him in good stead as he steers the RKC through what is undoubtedly an unprecedented period of difficulty and turmoil, not least financially, with falling registrations and pedigree dogs in general under the most intense and often brutal scrutiny.

As part of its commitment to improving dog health and welfare, the RKC carried out a major review project throughout 2025, led by Dr Alison Skipper, its Veterinary and Research Advisor. The resulting report, **'A New Future for Dog Breeding'**, published in January 2026, offers a clear, detailed and candid assessment of the RKC's work in the areas of dog health, breeding, and governance.

The review brings together a wide range of evidence and perspectives from experts, breeders, veterinary professionals, researchers, and campaigners to provide a balanced evaluation of what is currently working well and where further improvement is needed. It openly addresses the challenges facing modern dog breeding, while also recognising the dedication and efforts of those committed to preserving the long-term health and sustainability of dog breeds. The report also highlights the RKC's new **'Breeding for Health Framework'** (see further details later in this report). Both the **full RKC report** and a **short summary version** are available on the RKC website.

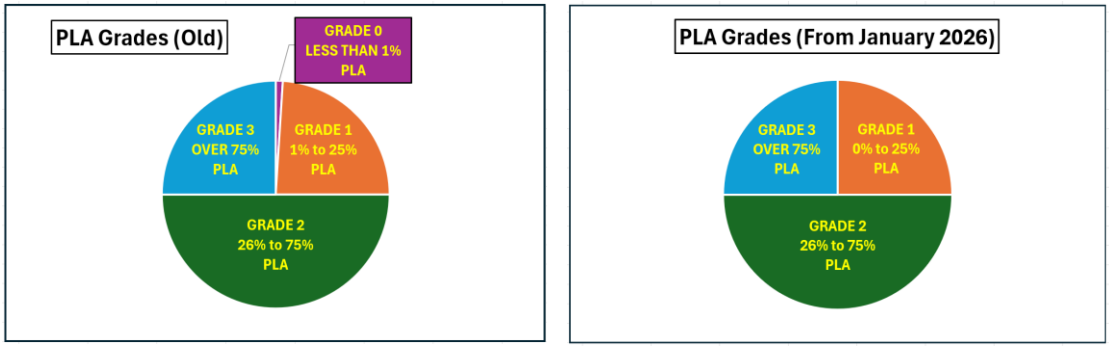
A major and controversial issue for the RKC and dog breeders is the **Innate Health Assessment (IHA)** tool, which was launched in November 2025 by the All-Parliamentary Group on Animal Welfare (APGAW) to encourage healthier dog conformation. The IHA uses a simple checklist of **ten physical traits** (e.g. eye shape, muzzle length, skin folds, jaw shape, etc.) to promote body shapes that support good quality of life in all dogs, whether pedigree or crossbreed. While currently voluntary, there are concerns it could become part of future legislation.

Although the RKC strongly supports the goal of improving canine health, it believes the IHA is too simplistic and could have unintended consequences for certain breeds and responsible breeders. It is therefore developing a more robust, vet-led 'Nose-to-Tail' visual assessment, designed to provide an evidence-based, objective, and standardised way to assess conformation across all breeds and track meaningful improvements over time. The RKC believes this veterinary-based and more nuanced approach will better support the pedigree breeder community.

Update on ESS health matters....

- **GLAUCOMA/PLA**

The RKC and BVA have announced a change to gonioscopy gradings effective from January 2026 which involves merging previous Grade 0 with Grade 1. Grades 2 and 3 will remain unchanged.



Under the existing system, Grade 0 indicated that less than 1% of the iridocorneal angle's circumference contained abnormal fibres (i.e. Pectinate Ligament Abnormality). It's important to note that Grade 0 did **not** signify the complete absence of abnormal fibres.

Under the new system, **Grade 0 will no longer be used** and **Grade 1 will be 0-25% PLA instead of 1-25% PLA**. As before, Grade 2 indicates 26-75% PLA and Grade 3 indicates more than 75% PLA. Clinically, it is dogs in the Grade 3 group that are at risk of developing Primary Closed Angle Glaucoma (PCAG) and should not be bred from.

Since gradings were introduced in 2017, it had become clear that a Grade 0 was perceived as being better than a Grade 1, when in fact clinically there is no difference in the risk of developing PCAG between the two grades. Indeed, under the pre-2017 system, all dogs with up to 25% PLA (i.e. equivalent to Grades 0 and 1) were classified as 'Unaffected'.

As there is inevitably a degree of subjectivity in PLA assessment, it has been particularly challenging for Eye Panellists to differentiate between the very narrow Grade 0 band of less than 1% abnormality and low-end Grade 1. As a result, over two-thirds of discrepancies have involved those two grades.

To further compound the problem, breeders have often been drawn to using Grade 0 dogs over Grade 1 dogs when they needn't be, which can have a profound and unnecessary impact on genetic diversity.

The BVA/RKC/ISDS Eye Panel Group consider that combining Grade 0 and Grade 1 will:

- Have NO effect on clinical disease
- Benefit genetic diversity
- Eliminate the majority of discrepancies between Panellists

Note: The new gradings will apply going forward only - there are no plans to update retrospective Grade 0 results.

At the time of writing, discussions are ongoing between the BVA and RKC to address a number of issues concerning this change and in particular to update breeding guidelines to take account of the new grading structure.

The RKC has also recently carried out an online survey of dogs that have had a gonioscopy grading for PLA under the official BVA/RKC/ISDS Eye Scheme. The aim is to build a better picture of progression and to see whether graded dogs have gone on to develop clinical glaucoma later in life. We'd like to thank ESS owners who participated in the survey. At the time of writing, it is still open and can be completed online by clicking **HERE**.

- **RETINAL PIGMENTAL ENDOTHELIAL DYSTROPHY (RPED)**

The BVA/RKC/ISDS Eye Panel Group have reviewed the low prevalence of Retinal Pigmental Endothelial Dystrophy (RPED) in ESS, there having been no reports of the condition in the last five years and very low prevalence before that. As a result, the Panel no longer feel it is necessary for this to be a listed condition for our breed under the official scheme's **Known Inherited Ocular Disease (KIOD) list**.

Therefore, from January 2026, RPED (re-named RVED) has been removed as a certifiable condition for ESS. Panellists still have the option to note an RVED-like appearance at the bottom of the eye test form, as they can for all breeds. These observations will continue to be recorded in the sightings report for ongoing monitoring.

Standard eye screening for other eye conditions that remain certifiable for ESS (as well as spotting any other eye problems) should continue to be carried out as 'Good Practice' tests under the ESS Health Standard.

Note: There is a known link between RPED and vitamin E loss, therefore the Eye Panel group have decided to change the name to Retinopathy with Vitamin E Deficiency (RVED) to make it more relevant.

- **CORD1 PRA**

As previously reported, the Cord1 (RPGRIP1) mutation **is** associated with PRA but is not, on its own, a definitive predictor of clinical disease. Two abnormal copies of the RPGRIP1 gene are **necessary** for an ESS to develop clinical Cord1 PRA, but a second modifier gene (MAP9) is thought to influence the age of onset and rate of progression of the disease.

The RKC has therefore decided to change the way Cord1 DNA tests are recorded and switch to these being risk based results. This change doesn't alter the current placement of the Cord1 DNA test within KC Health Standard as a **Best Practice** health test.

The new recording format will replace the current 'Clear/Carrier/Affected' classifications. Tested dogs will instead be recorded on RKC records as **'Minimal risk (0)'**, **'Minimal risk (1)'** or **'Increased risk (2)'**. The numbers assigned to each status indicate the number of copies of the PRA(Cord1) gene variant a dog has.

Important note: The timescale for this change has yet to be confirmed because the RKC also wants to change all hereditary results to the new format. This is a very big project for the digital team and will take some time, due to the number of hereditary results in the system. It also involves similar risk-based DNA tests in other breeds.

At the time of writing, the RKC Health Team is waiting on a technical update before this change can be implemented, and the assumption is that it won't be ready until the latter end of 2026 (although this

is not confirmed). We have, however, included the details in this report in order to let everyone know well in advance of the planned change.

- **EPILEPSY**

Researchers at the Canine Genetics Centre have been conducting a major study into **Idiopathic Epilepsy (IE)**, which aims to understand why some dogs are genetically more at risk of developing the disease. The study has focused on five breeds: ESS, Beagle, Giant Schnauzer, Hungarian Vizsla and Irish Setter.

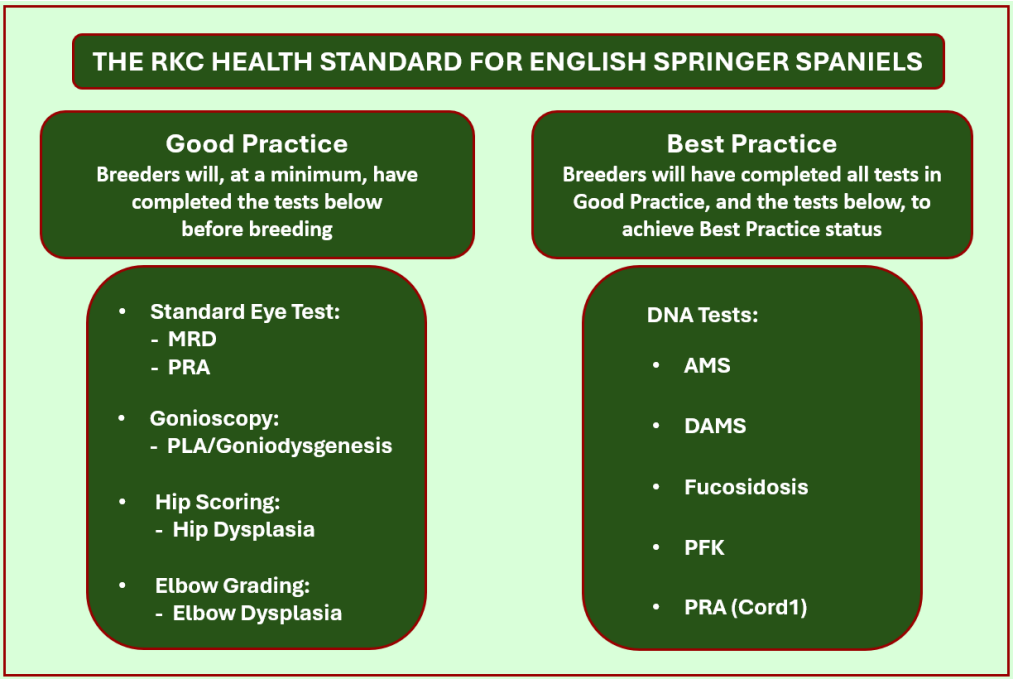
The 24 month project has been funded by a PetPlan Charitable Trust (PPCT) grant, which supported whole genome sequencing of five IE affected cases and five unaffected 'control' dogs from each of the five breeds studied. In addition, they used whole genome data generated previously for IE dogs via the Animal Health Trust Give A Dog A Genome project, making a total of 44 IE affected dogs across 15 breeds. This identified around 800 potential IE risk variants *(mutations)* which were then investigated in a larger group of 1,000 affected and unaffected dogs to determine whether any of the variants are consistently associated with IE.

The resulting data are being analysed and will be written up for publication in 2026. Further funding applications will depend on the outcomes of this analysis. In the meantime the researchers have emphasised that IE is a complex condition and unlikely to have a single, simple genetic cause.

- **RKC HEALTH STANDARD**

The RKC Health Standard was introduced in January 2025 to help breeders prioritise health tests that should be carried out before breeding and to highlight the tests puppy buyers should be looking for. Recommended tests for each breed are divided into **'Good Practice'** (the 'most critical' tests, which should be performed by all breeders that aim to produce healthy dogs - this name may change in the future, in response to feedback given to the RKC) and **'Best Practice'** (further tests that are suggested in addition to the 'Good Practice' tests for breeders aiming for the highest standards).

Advertisements on the RKC's **'Find a Puppy'** platform are now ranked according to the Health Standard testing compliance recorded for both parents.



Genetic diversity was originally included as part of the Health Standard. However, there has been some uncertainty because it isn't a health test that breeders can carry out or puppy buyers can check for and therefore it was felt that the Health Standard isn't the best place for it to sit. The RKC is therefore removing genetic diversity from the Health Standard and placing it instead as a top priority under the RKC's new Breeding for Health Framework (see further details later in this report). The Health Standard will be limited to listing testable conditions.

The RKC is working on how to incorporate disease severity in the prioritisation of different tests, which isn't currently factored into the Health Standard. They are also developing more flexible and tailored ways to identify suitable evidence.

Note: Only health tests officially recognised by the RKC are included in the Health Standard. The Standard will be regularly reviewed and is subject to change as new tests, further data, and published evidence becomes available.

- **ESS POPULATION ANALYSIS REPORT**

In January 2026, the RKC released the final versions of their individual Breed Population Analysis reports for each of 222 recognised breeds. The reports were based on the records of RKC registered dogs born between 1990 and 2021 and looked at trends in registration, litter size, breeding practices and genetic diversity.

One of the strongest warnings in the ESS report is the continued influence of the popular sire effect and echoes an earlier KC Population Analysis Report published in 2015 (which looked at dogs registered between 1980 and 2014). When a small number of males are used repeatedly, the gene pool narrows rapidly. Even in populations with robust numbers, this can quietly undermine long-term breed health. Less diversity means more risk of inherited disease and inbreeding depression (e.g. reduced fertility, increased puppy mortality, faulty immune systems, etc.).

Here are some of the key findings of the ESS population analysis:

- Based on the rate of inbreeding calculated for ESS born between 1990 and 2021, the effective population size was estimated at 44, compared with 45 in the 2015 report. *(Effective population size may be thought of as the total genetic variation of a breed's 'gene pool', not the size of the population itself. Large populations can have a low EPS and small populations a high EPS. An EPS of less than 50 puts a breed at critical risk of inbreeding depression - ideally it should be over 100.)*
- Average COI for dogs born in 2021 was 11.2%. There was a significant and negative association between COI and litter size – litters with higher COIs tend to be smaller.
- The average genetic relationship (AGR) among dogs assumed to be alive is 18.8% - i.e. the average ESS in the current population is more related to any other dog in the population than first cousins, but not as closely as half-siblings. *(While COI looks at a specific litter, AGR measures how closely an individual dog is related to the entire breed population. Dogs with a low AGR are genetically "rare" and highly valuable for maintaining diversity.)*
- The percentage of males used in breeding was low, which poses a risk to genetic diversity.
- Across time, there was strong evidence of popular sire use.
- Sires with stud book numbers and imported sires had significantly higher numbers of litters.
- The number of imported dogs significantly increased over time, with a simultaneous increase in the percentage of litters produced from imported parents.

The full ESS Population Analysis Report is available on the ESS Health website HERE.

There are practical steps breeders and owners can take to preserve valuable genetic diversity. This includes:

- Choosing less closely related mates.
- Avoiding repeated use of popular sires.
- Considering both COI and AGR (population diversity) when planning matings.
- Supporting genetic diversity over short-term success.

Every mating matters. Informed breeding today can protect the future health and welfare of the breed.

For further guidance on managing and maintaining genetic diversity, visit the RKC website.
For further information on the importance of genetic diversity, click HERE.

• DNA TEST RESULTS

The following tables are a summary of results of ESS DNA tests recorded by the RKC under official ESS Breed Schemes. The figures exclude any 2025 test results not yet recorded at the time of this report.

TESTED IN 2025	CLEAR	CARRIER	AFFECTED	TOTAL TESTED	HEREDITARY CLEAR	HEREDITARY CARRIER
AMS	139	0	0	139	721	0
DAMS	97	1	0	98	196	0
FUCOSIDOSIS	116	0	0	116	1154	0
PFK	132	0	0	132	801	0
PRA CORD1	115	12	0	127	1070	0

CUMULATIVE TOTAL TO END OF 2025	CLEAR	CARRIER	AFFECTED	TOTAL TESTED	HEREDITARY CLEAR	HEREDITARY CARRIER
AMS	1767	24	0	1791	5211	0
DAMS	198	16	0	214	278	0
FUCOSIDOSIS	2839	21	0	2860	19648	0
PFK	2011	1	2	2014	7350	0
PRA CORD1	3000	518	26	3544	16715	103

• EYE TEST RESULTS

The following tables show results recorded by the RKC for tests carried out under the official BVA/RKC/ISDS Eye Scheme. Figures exclude any 2025 test results not yet recorded at the time of this report.

STANDARD EYE TEST	2025	Last 5 Years 2021 - 2025
UNAFFECTED	295	1808
GPRA - Affected	0	0
CPRA (RPED) - Affected	0	0
MRD - Affected	8	35
Test results with owner	0	0

GONIOSCOPY EYE TEST	NUMBER OF ESS TESTED				
	PLA Grade 0	PLA Grade 1	PLA Grade 2	PLA Grade 3	Total Tested
January – December 2025	148	37	8	6	199
July 2017 – December 2025 (Since Grading Scheme began)	1289	339	80	20	1728
	Gonio Unaffected	Gonio Affected	Total Tested		
January 2013 - June 2017 (Before Grading Scheme)	654	38	692		

- **HIP SCORING AND ELBOW GRADING RESULTS**

The following tables show results recorded by the RKC for tests carried out under the official BVA/RKC Hip Dysplasia & Elbow Dysplasia Schemes. Figures exclude any 2025 test results not yet recorded at the time of this report.

ESS HIP SCORED IN 2025	ESS HIP SCORED IN LAST 15 YEARS	LAST 15 YEARS		LAST 5 YEARS	
		MEAN	MEDIAN	MEAN	MEDIAN
76	838	11.3	9.0	10.8	9.0

ELBOW GRADE	ESS GRADED IN 2025	ESS GRADED IN LAST 15 YEARS
0	62	443
1	4	25
2	1	9
3	0	0
Total	67	477

- **RKC RECORDING OF OVERSEAS HEALTH TEST RESULTS**

The RKC is now able to record official international health scheme screening results. These will appear on the RKC website **Health Test Results Finder (Dog Look Up)** as "Test result with owner". Individual test results or grades will not be published, as the registration system doesn't currently support this. However, results will be eligible for Health Standard icon allocation and prioritisation under the RKC's 'Find a Puppy' listings.

Conditions and screening methods appropriate for submission for ESS:

✓ Hip / elbow dysplasia screening via radiograph evaluation
✓ Inherited eye disease screening via an ophthalmic assessment

To be eligible for recording, results must be:

- Issued by an official international screening scheme
- Use a screening method comparable to the UK equivalent scheme
- Include the dog's RKC registered name or number and microchip number

To record an international test result, a copy of the dog's assessment form or certificate should be sent to **health.results@thekennelclub.org.uk**.

Note: Requirements for publishing DNA test results remain unchanged. A full list of worldwide approved DNA testing laboratories can be found on the RKC website.

Update on other health and welfare matters....

- **ROYAL KENNEL CLUB BREEDING FOR HEALTH FRAMEWORK**

Throughout 2025 the RKC ran a major review of its pedigree dog health work, from which a new model called the **Breeding for Health Framework** has been developed and published. This framework covers all aspects of health and welfare that should influence breeding decisions for **any breed or type of dog**, building on from previous Breed Health and Conservation Plans.

The framework is broken down into three main areas of health:

➢ Inbreeding/genetic diversity
➢ Conformation
➢ Breed-related disease/wellbeing

The RKC has identified three topic categories within each of these three areas, forming a framework with nine sections as shown below:

RKC Breeding for Health Framework		
Genetic diversity	**Conformation**	**Breed-related disease and wellbeing**
Population size	**Visible conformation**	**Testable conditions**
Harmful breeding practices/ popular sires	**Distinctive breed features of potential concern**	**Untestable conditions**
Limited pedigree data	**Shifting conformation over time**	**Temperament/ mental wellbeing**

By applying the **Breeding for Health Framework**, breeds that share a certain issue can be grouped together, so that the RKC can provide targeted support and breed communities can share relevant experiences and expertise. Further information can be found on the RKC website **HERE**.

- **CANINE GENETICS CENTRE (CGC)**

The **Canine Genetics Centre (CGC)** at the University of Cambridge has had another busy year, investigating inherited diseases in dogs while also working hard to secure sufficient funds to keep the CGC running. Its team have developed four new DNA tests during 2025, all for diseases that are painful, debilitating or blinding and reduce the quality of life of affected dogs.

They are continuing to investigate diseases including Intervertebral Disc Disease (IVDD) in the Dachshund and other short-legged dogs, inherited Glaucoma in many different breeds, and (as reported earlier) their Epilepsy study has focused on five breeds including ESS. These studies are funded by specific grants but also in part by donations from **Friends of the CGC**.

In general terms, the CGC's funding situation is considerably better than it was two years ago. It has several grants that mean the CGC is funded, to some extent, until 2028. Crucially, this includes securing their priceless collection of more than 42,000 DNA samples.

Although the outlook on future security and funding of the CGC is more optimistic, donations by way of **Friends of the CGC** or any other donations are still very much needed. Please visit their **'Become a Friend of the CGC'** website page if you would like to help.

In addition, all profits from the CGC's in-house commercial DNA testing laboratory **Canine Genetic Testing (CAGT)** are used to support the Genetics Centre. CAGT provides an excellent service, is very competitively priced and **offers ALL the Best Practice DNA tests listed in the Health Standard for ESS.** Tests can be ordered online individually or as a test 'bundle' by visiting the **CAGT website**.

- **CMA INVESTIGATION INTO VETERINARY SERVICES**

The UK Competition & Markets Authority (CMA) has been conducting a major review of the veterinary services market to address concerns over price transparency, competition and regulatory issues. Provisional recommendations were published in October 2025, with a final decision due to be issued by March 2026 and implementation of certain measures expected by the end of the year.

The main recommendations of the review are:

- ✓ **Mandatory Price Lists:** Vet businesses must publish comprehensive price lists for common services (e.g. consultations, vaccinations, dentistry, cremation, etc.).
- ✓ **Written Estimates & Itemised Bills:** Required for treatments likely to cost £500 or more.
- ✓ **Clearer Ownership Disclosure:** Highlighting when a practice is part of a larger corporate group or a group that owns multiple branches in the same local area.
- ✓ **Prescription Reforms:** Vets must provide prescriptions automatically and explain where cheaper medicines can be found, with a cap of £16 on prescription fees.
- ✓ **Improved 'Find a Vet' Website:** To help compare local options and prices.
- ✓ **Modernised Regulation:** To cover businesses and improve complaint handling.

And finally.....

As always, we encourage you to visit the **ESS Health website** for reliable information and the latest news, and to contact us if you have any questions or need any help or support. Just scan the QR code at the end of this report.

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