

## Obedience Liaison Council Discussion Paper

### 1 Introduction

This paper outlines the current issues facing Royal Kennel Club (RKC) Competitive Obedience in relation to the accreditation and ongoing continued professional development of judges and explores options for the OLC to address this pressing problem. It is informed by analysis carried out by Annette Boulter of the 2025 season entries; a survey conducted by the Obedience Liaison Council (OLC) in February/March 2026 and data provided by the RKC on the outputs from the current accreditation system.

### 2 Current Position

The OLC conducted a community survey in 2025 to inform the development of a strategic plan. Four strategic objectives were identified. Addressing what can be termed the judging crises came out as a key priority for action. This has been incorporated into the OLC Strategic Plan as a key strategic priority.

The current system for accrediting judges is that individuals must meet the following criteria:

- Won out of the beginner class
- Acted as a caller steward or scribe on eight occasions at RKC licenced shows
- Undertaken an online rule and regulations test and passed
- Undertaken a design and practice in person course and passed

The courses for the online rules and regulations exam and the in-person practice seminar are run by Obedience Accredited Trainers (AT's). These are experienced championship C judges who have been selected by the RKC to be Accredited Trainers, which is mirrored in other activities. A recent review by the OLC, of the information on the RKC website about the online course and exam found that more could be done to support potential candidates. The RKC are in the process of recruiting more AT's for Obedience.

In addition, newly qualified judges must firstly judge 3 novices, then 3 A's and then 3 B's. In order to judge Open C's the person must judge an additional 3 classes. This would mean that for any newly qualified judge it would take at least 4 to 5 years to be able to judge Open C. This system takes no account of prior learning or experience and does not offer any ongoing personal development.

In the last four years that we have data for 78 people passed the design and practice exam. This is an average of 19.5 a year. However the trend is declining with only 9 people passing the exam in 2025. The practice is not proactive, show societies and individuals contact an AT if they wish to organise a design and practice seminar. The recent experience is that some have been cancelled due to insufficient people applying. There is no central budget for running these courses. If the show society cannot subsidise the course costs the attendees are charged a small fee, which can act as a further disincentive. There is not a comprehensive geographical spread of AT's with several areas not covered. The RKC web site takes 7 clicks to find the details of the ATs. A common guideline is the 3 to 5 clicks. There are 7 AT's listed but 3 have no contact details and there is no profile information.

The online rules and regulations exam is more productive with 132 people passing over the past four years. However 138 people failed it. There is no information on what happened to those who failed and what support could have made a difference. Each person can have three attempts at the online exam.

### 3 Views from the Obedience Community

In February and March 2026 the OLC conducted a survey on judging. There were 371 responses to the survey of which 260 respondents judge at RKC shows and a further 50 respondents no longer judge. The recent analysis of entries in the 2025 season<sup>1</sup> that was presented to the January 2026 OLC meeting recorded 489 judges, suggesting that this survey has captured the views of between 50% and 60% of the judging population (depending on when some of the respondents stopped judging).

Whilst not everyone answered the question on their age group, 70% of those who did are aged 60 or over (225 people) with 110 of those being 70 or over. With the physical requirements of judging this could also be an important factor in the future proofing the pool of available qualified judges.

A very worrying result coming out of the survey was that 28 judges are planning to retire this year, with a further 51 judges planning to retire in the next 2-3 years. A total loss of 30% of judges over 3 years responding to this survey (79 people). Given the existing difficulties in finding judges this represents a huge loss to Obedience. To make up for the predicted loss of judges there would need to be at least 27 new judges a year qualifying, just to stay at the current low level. To have an effect on the existing shortage that figure would need to be more like 40 per year. This appears to be a very real, and very imminent, judging crisis.

Of the 65 responses from those who had won out of beginners and who would be eligible (to qualify to) judge 14 people (11%) had physical or other personal limitations that they felt stopped them. This raises the question of what accommodations could be made that would allow people with physical (or other) limitations to be able to judge.

There were 65 responses by people who have won out of beginners who would be eligible to judge but do not. 51 responses a massive 69% (35 people) stated they either did not have the confidence or the experience to judge, with 9 of those mentioning the lack of local judging exams/ seminars as a reason. An additional 7 people also mentioned the lack of local exams/seminar. This gives a potential pool of 42 new judges if training and mentoring schemes were in place to meet their needs to increase their skills and confidence.

There were other reasons such as the inability to show a dog on the same day as judging (30% of respondents mentioned this reason). This is currently subject to a draft proposal consultation by the OLC. Other reasons such as the reduced number of local and one day shows (compared to ten years ago) means the opportunities to compete have been reduced for many, so giving up a day to judge (or steward) clearly impacts the opportunities to show your dog and stops some people from volunteering to judge. Worryingly the behaviour of competitors (rudeness, keeping judges waiting - particularly mentioned in relation to judging Open C) was also mentioned as reasons people choose not to judge.

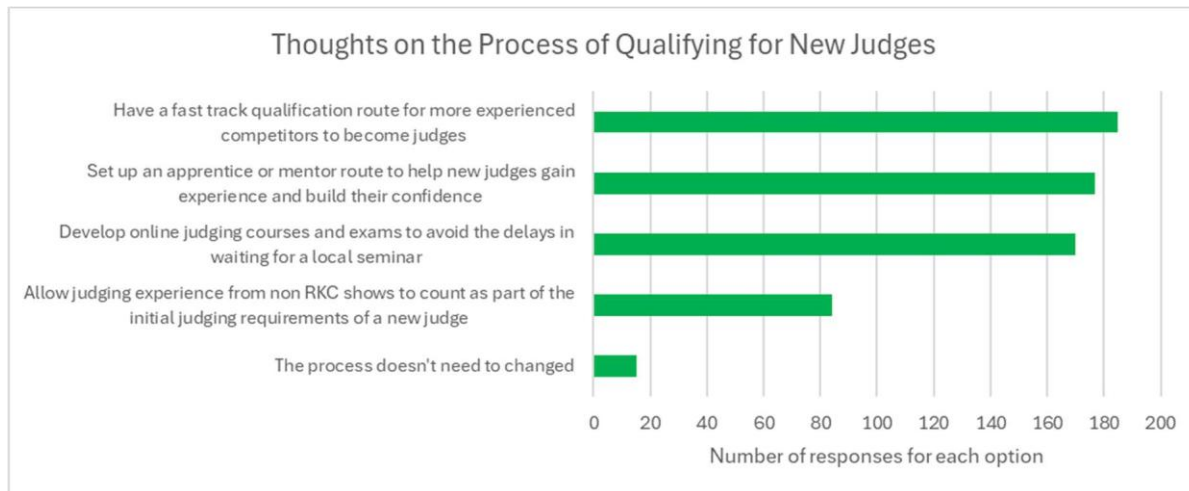
### 4 Ways forward

As shown earlier there is currently, or will very shortly be, a crisis in qualified judging numbers. Without an increase in the rate that new judges are qualifying, those who are retiring this year or in the next 2-3 years cannot be replaced. Looking at how the process for qualification of new judges could be improved, there were 59 respondents that said they did not know enough about the process to comment (which in itself could be seen as concerning). The other main responses were:

---

<sup>1</sup> Annette Boulter 2025

**Figure one: Additional measures**



## 5 Lines of enquiry

There is not one simple solution to resolve the judging crises. Any solution will be multi factorial. It is clear that any solution will need the support of the obedience community, the OLC, Accredited trainers and the RKC, both in finding and then actioning solutions.

The following are areas to explore but are not exhaustive:

### Short term

- Seek to market the current accreditation options, e.g. better web site information and the use of social media
- Consider what accommodations can be made for people experiencing disability barriers
- Consider support that can be provided for people undertaking the online course to increase the pass rate.

### Longer term

- Explore how more of the current accreditation process can be undertaken on line
- Explore additional accreditation routes such as apprentice, accreditation by experience and mentoring
- Explore ongoing CPD support to qualified judges and AT's

## 6 Options

<b>Option One: Do Nothing</b>	
<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No new initiatives required</li> <li>• Maybe 2025 was a bad year and things will pick up</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not a solution</li> <li>• The judging crises will worsen</li> <li>• Show societies and individuals will grow ever more demotivated when no response to organised courses</li> <li>• Crises most acute at the Open C end which takes time to skill up new judges</li> <li>• Drift into a scenario which can't be pulled back and the resulting impact on societies been able to run shows</li> <li>• National coverage is poor</li> </ul>
<b>Option Two: Set up a time limited Joint Working Party with OLC and AT membership</b>	
<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brings together interested parties</li> <li>• Gives focus to finding solutions</li> <li>• Allows for consideration of new ideas and innovation</li> <li>• Ensures solutions are workable</li> <li>• Making it time limited ensures pace and grip</li> <li>• Ensures legacy knowledge is not lost and informs new developments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires sign up of both OLC and AT's</li> <li>• Time lag to finding and implementing solutions</li> <li>• Difficulty to find consensus</li> </ul>
<b>Option Three: Set up an OLC working party</b>	
<b>Pros</b>	<b>Cons</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can be set up at speed</li> <li>• OLC has many of the skills required and is motivated to action</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Potential problems at implementation stage</li> <li>• Most likely to find solutions if all parts of the system involved</li> <li>• May not impact on the current system and potential for competing approaches, which would be confusing for the Obedience Community</li> </ul>

## 7 Recommendation

Option two is recommended to set up a time limited joint working party. The working party will meet during 2026 with the intention of bringing forward proposals for January 2027. The working group to set a provisional target of 40 people qualifying to judge each year from 2028, alongside other support and mentoring initiatives to maintain standards and aid retention.

## 8 Conclusion

The current judging crises of competitive obedience judges will continue to get worse if proactive innovative action is not undertaken. It is a multi- factorial problem which will require a number of initiatives to resolve. A collective system wide approach between the OLC and ATs is likely to maximise impact.