MINUTES OF THE HEELWORK TO MUSIC LIAISON COUNCIL HELD AT 10.30AM ON MONDAY 20 JULY 2026 VIA MICROSOFT TEAMS

Present

Miss L Heath (until paragraph 42)
Mrs D Heaton
Mrs E Higgins
Mrs C Knight
Miss L Reynolds
Miss E Stock

In Attendance

Miss D Deuchar	Senior Manager Canine Activities
Miss A Morley	Activities Liaison Manager
Mrs E Osborne	Activities Liaison Advisor

ITEM 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

1. Apologies had been received from Mr R Moss.

ITEM 2. MATTERS ARISING/RESULTS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

2. The Liaison Council noted that there were no matters arising or results of recommendations from the Board as no recommendations had been made at the previous meeting.

ITEM 3. ACTIVITIES JUDGES SUB-GROUP

3. The Liaison Council noted that there had been no update from the April meeting of the Activities Judges Sub-Group as no Heelwork to Music matters had been discussed at the meeting.

4. The office confirmed that the Terms of Reference for the Activities Judges Sub-Group was under review by the Activities Committee. It was noted that a Heelwork to Music representative would be appointed to the Judges Sub-Group in due course and that all members of the Activities Judges Sub-Group would be Accredited Trainers.

ITEM 4. COMMUNITY SURVEY RESULTS AND REPORT

5. The Liaison Council discussed the results of the Heelwork to Music Liaison Council Community Survey (March/April 2026).

6. The Liaison Council noted the findings of the survey, which identified the geographical distribution of shows and training opportunities as the most significant issue. It was explained the majority were concentrated in the south of the country, and a wider geographical spread was needed to improve accessibility for competitors and enthusiasts.

7. The survey also highlighted the importance of encouraging new competitors to participate in the discipline. In addition, respondents identified consistency in judging, together with greater transparency in judging and scoring, as key priorities for future development.

ITEM 5. PROPOSALS

To submit a proposal or discussion item, the community was invited to use the online form so the Heelwork to Music Liaison Council could discuss and review any suggestions prior to the next meeting in July. Submissions were accepted at any time of year via the online form: Liaison Council Agenda Item.

Proposed amendment to Regulation L17.b.(iii) and L17.b.(iv)

8. Following the public consultation, the Liaison Council considered the proposed amendment to the above regulation to introduce a mandatory practical seminar in addition to the existing mandatory theory seminar before becoming eligible to judge and when judges renew their qualification.

Regulation L17.b.(iii) Judges approval
To:
Additionally judges must have attended a Royal Kennel Club Heelwork to Music Regulations and Judging Procedure Seminar and passed the Regulations and Judging Procedure examination **and attended the practical judging seminar**. ~~From 1 January 2016 this will apply to new and existing judges.~~ The initial Regulations and Judging Procedure Seminar, examination **and practical seminar** must be classroom based.
(Deletions struck through. Insertions in bold)

Regulation L17.b.(iv) Judges approval
To:
All Judges must have attended a Regulations and Judging Procedure seminar every five years since passing the Regulations and Judging Procedure exam. From 1 January 2023 all judges must have attended a Regulations and Judging Procedure seminar, either classroom based or online, and must have passed the examination, every five years since passing the Regulations and Judging Procedure examination. **From 1 January 2027 all judges must attend a practical judging seminar, every five years since passing the Regulations and Judging Procedure examination.**
(Insertions in bold)

9. A brief discussion was had, and it was noted that Accredited Trainers had expressed support for making the requirement mandatory, as that was considered beneficial in maintaining consistent standards.

10. It was recognised that uptake had previously been limited, largely because participation had not been compulsory and the Liaison Council noted that implementation of a practical seminar would now be more achievable given the increased number of Accredited Trainers available to facilitate.

11. Following a unanimous vote, the proposal was recommended.

ITEM 6. DISCUSSION ITEMS

a. Barking Deductions

12. Following the public consultation, the Liaison Council discussed the regulation which stated that judges should deduct marks for 'excessive barking or noise'.

13. Concerns were raised regarding consistency in judging, and it was noted that some competitors had queried why marks were deducted in some cases but not in others. It was acknowledged that, although all judges had undertaken the same education programme, variations in the interpretation and application of the regulation remained.

14. The office advised that Incident Books could be used where there were concerns that a judge was applying the regulations inconsistently.

15. Whilst it was acknowledged that only a small proportion of respondents to the community survey had raised this issue, the Liaison Council noted that the matter had been raised at a number of competitions and therefore warranted consideration.

16. It was acknowledged that the current wording of the regulation could, if applied inconsistently, have a significant impact on marks and, in some cases, could be open to misuse.

17. The Liaison Council discussed the need for greater clarity, particularly in relation to what constituted excessive barking, and agreed that the matter should be progressed by working with the Accredited Trainers to provide clearer guidance for judges.

b. Welfare Marks

18. Following the public consultation, the Liaison Council discussed the potential of introducing a dedicated welfare mark into the Heelwork to Music scoring system, with the aim of making welfare-related deductions more transparent and helping handlers identify where improvements were needed.

19. The Liaison Council noted that any plans to introduce welfare marks would require further discussion and development to ensure the wording and implementation were appropriate before any changes were introduced.

20. It was acknowledged that there had previously been occasions where judges had been booed by audiences for marking competitors down on welfare grounds and that some issues previously seen at Crufts had come from international competitors who trained independently in countries where the discipline was not formally recognised and therefore had no opportunities to compete under experienced judges before the Crufts finals.

21. A lengthy discussion was had regarding the options, including the earlier proposal which made practical seminars mandatory, introducing a separate welfare mark, providing dedicated welfare seminars for judges on either a mandatory or voluntary basis, and introducing a way for judges to provide feedback where marks had been deducted for welfare-related reasons.

22. It was noted that handlers may not always identify welfare concerns in their own dogs and the Liaison Council considered that feedback could help competitors understand when welfare concerns had influenced their marks, reducing the likelihood of deductions being misconstrued as accuracy or performance issues.

23. It was agreed that the Liaison Council would develop an outline proposal for a seminar for newcomers to the discipline, to cover a range of issues including music, props and welfare.

24. The Liaison Council noted that there was potential to bring a proposal forward to a future Liaison Council meeting. In the meantime, it was agreed that the immediate priority was to work with the Accredited Trainers to promote greater consistency in judging.

ITEM 7. STRATEGIC 5 YEAR PLAN

25. The Liaison Council reviewed the Strategic 5 Year Plan and discussed progression on the subject.

26. It was noted that the Strategic 5 Year Plan had been developed using feedback from the community survey and that the main themes highlighted were to promote the discipline and prioritise dog welfare.

27. The Liaison Council acknowledged that some progress had already been made and that some good feedback had been received about improved communication between the Liaison Council and the Heelwork to Music community.

28. A question was raised about how Heelwork to Music could align with other disciplines, and the Liaison Council discussed the option to collaborate with those disciplines which had heelwork elements.

29. It was noted that Obedience had an introductory class, and a query was raised about whether that could help Heelwork to Music.

30. The office confirmed that an Obedience introductory class could not be held under a Heelwork to Music licence, but clubs could introduce their own special introductory class if required.

31. A discussion was had around youth development, and it was noted that the Heelwork to Music numbers within the Young Royal Kennel Club were very low with just six confirmed handlers across both Freestyle and Heelwork to Music.

32. It was suggested that an increase in the number of competitions would be beneficial to young competitors and could provide a foundation for a number of other initiatives to be progressed.

33. The Liaison Council noted that the availability of suitable venues remained a significant challenge, with appropriate surfaces, accessibility, car parking and adequate dog exercising areas all requiring consideration.

34. The option of holding Starter competitions more frequently was discussed and the office confirmed that this would not affect a club's licence and that societies could determine which class levels to schedule at their own competitions.

35. It was highlighted that encouraging more clubs and trainers to become Listed Status would increase visibility through the 'Find a Club' facility and enable more competitions to be run. It was noted that obtaining Listed Status was a straightforward and relatively quick process.

36. The Liaison Council considered the impact of increasing Starter classes and noted that it had the potential to create a bottleneck at Novice level, which was already heavily subscribed at many competitions.

37. It was considered that modernisation of the discipline could increase participation from younger generations, and it was noted that the continued reliance on CDs presented practical challenges, particularly for younger competitors who had little experience with them. It was also recognised that music files were not always available in MP3 format, creating additional difficulties in preparing music for competition.

38. It was acknowledged that some societies had already introduced an online entry system, which had proved beneficial, and it was considered that greater promotion of online entries and other modern methods of administration could further improve accessibility.

39. The Liaison Council suggested that guidance on entry processes and music submissions could be incorporated into any future seminars to assist competitors and support continued modernisation of the discipline.

ITEM 8. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

Tricks Awards

40. The Liaison Council discussed the potential introduction of a Tricks Awards scheme in the UK and considered how such an initiative might be developed.

41. It was noted that, whilst a scheme could have wider application across a number of activities, it may be appropriate to pilot it within Heelwork to Music in the first instance.

42. It was queried whether there was potential for official recognition of awards by the Royal Kennel Club, subject to the development of a suitable framework and the office agreed that it could be brought back as a proposal to a future meeting.

43. The Liaison Council agreed that a well-structured awards scheme could increase engagement with Heelwork to Music and encourage greater participation within the discipline. It was therefore agreed that a draft framework should be developed, incorporating appropriate consultation with the community, and presented for consideration at the next Heelwork to Music Liaison Council meeting.

Miss Heath left the meeting

Adding Costume Vs Prop Wording

44. A concern was raised regarding costumes and props and the definition of those following a query raised at a recent competition.

45. It was suggested that a public post be issued on social media to offer some clarity as to what was classed as a prop and therefore allowed and what was classed as a costume and would not be permitted.

46. A question was raised about whether clarification was needed if the query was raised by only a small group of people and it was noted that as this was just guidance and not a regulation change it would be beneficial to clarify to prevent further issues.

47. The Liaison Council agreed that the post should reiterate that props were allowed but that the dog's welfare should remain the priority and that any props used on or around the dog should be something which the dog could easily remove itself from if they chose to, ensuring they were never restrained or placed in a situation they found uncomfortable.

48. The Liaison Council agreed on the following wording and subsequent to the meeting a public post was issued on social media.

    Obedience, Obreedience, Rally & Heelwork to Music News | Royal Kennel Club | Facebook

Heelwork to Music – Props vs Costumes

We've recently received a few questions about the difference between a **prop** and a **costume** for dogs in Heelwork to Music.
Dogs **must not be dressed up or required to wear a costume** as part of a routine. However, **props may be used**, provided the dog's welfare remains the priority.
As general guidance:

- Any prop placed on or around the dog should be something the dog can easily remove themselves from if they choose, ensuring they are never restrained or placed in a situation they find uncomfortable.
- Judges are encouraged to use their discretion to assess the use of props, with the dog's comfort, confidence and welfare being considered at all times.

As always, competitors are encouraged to ensure their dogs are happy, comfortable and confident with every aspect of their routine. The welfare of our dogs will always come first.

ITEM 9. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

49. The Liaison Council noted that the date of the next meeting would be announced in September 2026.

50. The meeting ended at 12.20pm

THE ROYAL KENNEL CLUB'S STRATEGIC AIMS

- Champion the wellbeing of dogs
- Safeguard and enhance the future of pedigree dogs, addressing breed-associated health issues
- Protect the future of dog activities together with our grassroots network
- Become relevant to more dog owners to increase our impact
- Deliver an excellent member experience and widen our community
- Ensure we are financially secure and sustainable