



**Environment, Food
and Rural Affairs
Committee**

Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP
Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
London
By email

7 May 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

Veterinary workforce shortages

On 12 March, my Committee invited veterinary sector leaders, including the Chief Veterinary Officer, to give evidence on workforce shortages in the sector. In the meeting we considered the measures required to stop vets leaving the country and profession, and the steps the Government should take to bolster our veterinary workforce.

We heard that the UK's shortage of vets has worsened since the estimate of 11.5 per cent made in 2018, but we have no clear picture of the scale or nature of the shortages. 30,272 veterinary surgeons and 23,450 veterinary nurses are registered in the UK, but we cannot estimate the hours of labour this equates to, or the number of additional vets required to meet current and future needs.

Workforce shortages are of particular concern as the UK adapts to post-Brexit requirements for increased biosecurity measures at the border, changed food and animal certification and reduced ease of access to overseas labour. At a time when it is vital to retain vets, many are choosing to leave the profession due to high levels of stress, a poor work-life balance and feeling undervalued. In 2021, 45 per cent of leavers had been working in the profession for four years or less, including 21 per cent who had less than one year of experience.

Veterinary surgeons and allied professionals play a crucial role in protecting animal and human health, guaranteeing animal welfare and food security, and facilitating our £4.2 billion meat, dairy and egg export trade. We heard witnesses' concerns

House of Commons
Palace of Westminster
Westminster
SW1A 0AA

efracom@parliament.uk
020 7219 1119
Social: @CommonsEFRA
www.parliament.uk/efracom

about the UK's ability to counter a concurrent or significant exotic notifiable disease outbreak. Responding to such an event would call upon public and private sector vets to suspend business as usual activities due to an absence of domestic standby surge capacity.

On the basis of our evidence session, we took the opportunity to question you on vet shortages at our Work of the Department hearing on 26 March. We were encouraged by your engagement and also by the innovative work taking place in the private and public sector to promote the recruitment, retention and return of professionals. We have set out below some of the major challenges that remain and our recommendations for addressing them. We would be grateful for your response to this letter, and our outstanding questions, by 3 June.

Skilled Worker visa

Our most immediate concern relates to the potential impact on the veterinary sector of the reforms to the Skilled Worker visa that came into force on 4 April.

We commend the launching of new vet schools, but the country's needs are significant and urgent; Harper and Keele Vet School will not produce its first graduates until 2025 and SRUC School of Veterinary Medicine until 2029 at the earliest. Whilst the UK is expanding its training capacity, we remain reliant on recruiting veterinary professionals from overseas.

In correspondence to Defra, the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) expressed concerns that the new minimum salary threshold of £48,100 for veterinary surgeons will preclude all but highly experienced professionals from coming to work in the UK. They suggest a revised salary threshold of £38,700. Although the reduced salary threshold of £33,670 for graduates under 26 years of age is welcome, due to the length of the veterinary degree this pool of talent is smaller than in many other sectors.

We have already seen a significant reduction in vets from overseas coming to work in the UK in recent years. The number of EU vets registering to work in the UK has more than halved since leaving the EU, from 1134 in 2019 to 536 in 2023. We are concerned that the current minimum salary thresholds could further diminish our access to veterinary resources.

A crucial veterinary recruitment stream for overseas workers is the Vet Track pathway for meat hygiene inspectors. The Chief Veterinary Officer emphasised that this provides a valuable pipeline of talent for the whole sector, from food safety and the Animal and Plant Health Agency to private practice. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) told the Committee that to increase the salary of meat hygiene inspectors in line with the new Skilled Worker visa requirements would have "financial consequences in the millions", which would be passed onto taxpayers or the meat industry.

It is important that Defra, working with the Home Office, considers the implications of the incoming salary requirements and adjusts those requirements for veterinary professionals where necessary. It must ensure that our biosecurity and food security are not compromised. Both Departments, as a matter of urgency, should engage with stakeholders such as the FSA, Food Standards Scotland, the RVCs and BVA to develop appropriate minimum salary thresholds for veterinary surgeons and nurses, meat hygiene inspectors, and other allied professionals.

We welcome your commitment to considering this issue further. **I would be grateful if you could update the Committee on what steps your Department is taking to:**

- **review the impact of the Skilled Worker visa reforms on the veterinary and food safety sector;**
- **engage with the sector on suitable salary thresholds; and**
- **work with the Home Office to address these concerns.**

Legislative reform

The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 is, in the words of the Chief Veterinary Officer, “holding us back and is preventing us from having a sustainable and world leading veterinary system within the UK”. Reform of the Act is essential, long overdue and would bring wide-ranging improvements. For the purposes of addressing shortages, primary legislation allowing the RCVS to regulate an expanded number of associated roles within a veterinary care delivery team would enable greater delegation and efficiency. This would ultimately improve the capacity of practices and service providers.

The Chief Veterinary Officer recognised that there is limited scope to make further major changes to the Veterinary Surgeons Act via secondary legislation, but proposals for meaningful changes to relieve capacity concerns in the short term do remain. The RCVS’s proposals to modernise the statutory membership exam for overseas vets and the British Cattle Veterinary Association’s call for an expanded role for Veterinary Technicians in support of farm vets could both be implemented swiftly by statutory instrument.

Given that the Chief Veterinary Officer has already engaged with the RCVS and Ministers on detailed legislative proposals, and that these have broad support across the sector, the Government should launch a consultation on a new Act in this Parliament with a view to prioritising its passage in the next.

In advance of any new Act, the Government should continue to engage with the sector on secondary legislation and prioritise those outlined above.

Workforce planning

Witnesses highlighted veterinary workforce data and planning as areas requiring improvement and these would benefit from your Department's engagement. Commendable efforts have been made across the sector to better understand supply and demand within the workforce. Nevertheless, we do not have a proper understanding of the scale and distribution of shortages nor projections for future demand. The challenge of gathering this data is exacerbated by its dispersal across veterinary bodies.

To effectively address the shortages in the sector we need complete data to inform and measure interventions. Stronger data and a national strategy coordinated by your Department could help to build a sustainable, resilient workforce to meet the challenges of the future. In your appearance before the Committee, you reflected on your experience with the NHS's Long Term Workforce Plan and the scope for applying a similar approach to the veterinary workforce.

The RCVS is currently collaborating with the Institute of Employment Studies to develop a workforce model that aims to improve understanding of the scale of veterinary shortages, variations across roles and regions, and to make projections for the next ten years. The research also aims to measure the impact of initiatives designed to improve recruitment, retention and return.

The Government should actively support the RCVS's initiative and assist however it would benefit the project. This Committee also requests an update on any assessment your Department has made of the potential merits of developing a long-term workforce plan for the veterinary profession, and any steps you are taking to engage with stakeholders on data collection and sharing.

Funding

From stakeholders' evidence, we have identified areas where Government analysis and funding may be particularly effective at addressing workforce shortages and may provide a valuable return on investment.

- 1) A veterinary degree is the most expensive course for a university to deliver, costing between £27,000 - £32,000 per student per year. The unit of resource available for universities teaching veterinary students is £20,000 per year in England and Wales, and £17,500 per year in Scotland. Since 2017-18, tuition fees have been frozen and teaching funding has risen by only four per cent. We heard that for the Royal Veterinary College this has meant a reduction in real-terms funding of between 15 - 30 per cent since 2012-13.

Due to these funding pressures, universities have been increasingly reliant on the fees of international students to fund degree programmes. There is high

domestic demand for veterinary degree places, and a greater number could be made available to home students – who are arguably more likely to pursue long-term careers in the UK – if additional funding or alternative models were in place for veterinary courses.

- 2) As well as domestic talent, EU-trained professionals make a significant contribution to our workforce, but the way we recruit is evolving in the post-Brexit environment. In January 2024, the RCVS voted to end mutual recognition of European veterinary degrees within the next five years due to concerns about diverging standards. It intends to begin directly accrediting some EU veterinary schools to maintain both our professional standards and our supply of workers from overseas. However, the RCVS is concerned about the “considerable cost burden” that its membership will bear for this and seeks support from the Government to fund direct accreditation.
- 3) Pressures on veterinary teams are not evenly distributed; investment must target areas with acute need. Witnesses suggested that student debt forgiveness schemes should be explored as a means of attracting an appropriate number of graduates to work in particularly hard-hit specialisms and regions of the UK. Such schemes have been effective in countries such as New Zealand and the United States. In the UK, debt forgiveness could be a means of attracting talent to rural and public health roles.
- 4) The UK struggles to attract and retain domestic talent in public health veterinarian roles. Financial remuneration is one cause of this. For example, we heard that although the FSA can match private sector graduate starting salaries, it cannot match the pay progression seen in the private sector. Five years into a career, the estimated salary discrepancy between private sector roles and those with the FSA is £10,000 - £20,000.


Veterinary schools and public sector employers are taking steps to improve students’ awareness of and engagement with public health roles through work experience programmes, and the Government Veterinary Service is developing a career programme to attract and retain talent. In addition, employers are finding innovative ways to improve the lifestyle and conditions offered by public sector roles, such as adapting role design to allow for flexible working. But in the absence of competitive financial reward, these will be limited in their impact.

The Government should evaluate the potential impact of the following interventions on reducing veterinary shortages:

- **increasing the unit of resource for veterinary degrees to facilitate a greater number of home students on courses;**

- **financially supporting the RCVS to directly accredit EU veterinary schools;**
- **debt forgiveness schemes that incentivise work in particularly underserved regions and roles; and**
- **increasing salaries of public sector vets to promote recruitment and retention.**

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill MP', written in a cursive style.

Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill MP
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

CC:

Luke Hall MP, Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education, Department for Education

Tom Pursglove MP, Minister for Legal Migration and the Border, Home Office

Rt Hon Laura Trott MP, Chief Secretary to HM Treasury