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Rt Hon Sir Robert Goodwill MP
Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
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23 May 2024

Dear Sir Robert,

Veterinary Workforce Shortages

Thank you very much for your letter of 7 May 2024 concerning shortages in the veterinary workforce, to which I am replying on behalf of the Secretary of State.

Both the Secretary of State and I are grateful for the Committee's views and work on how we ensure we have sufficient veterinarians to carry out their vital work on protecting human health, supporting animal welfare and food security, and maintaining our valuable food exports. I'd like to respond to the findings in turn.

Skilled Worker Visa

On Monday 4 December 2023, the Prime Minister and Home Secretary announced a plan to reduce migration levels and curb abuse of the immigration system. This has included increasing the earning threshold for skilled worker visas from £26,200 to £38,700 to encourage businesses to invest in British talent and deter an over-reliance of migration.

As you rightly note, this is not without potential implications for the veterinary sector given a large proportion of vets working in Britain have traditionally come from overseas – some 98% of Official Veterinarians working in abattoirs have been recruited from overseas.

Defra officials have therefore worked closely with the Food Standards Agency (FSA), Food Standards Scotland (FSS), the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), and the British Veterinary Association (BVA) to understand the potential impact of this and subsequently held discussions with Home Office officials.

In response to this, the Home Office have confirmed that the recruitment pathways for Official Veterinarians, working towards either full registration with the RCVS or a professional qualification, will be eligible for the new entrant discount on the Veterinary Salary threshold. This is a helpful measure while domestic veterinary capacity grows.

Legislative Reform

We are agreed on the need for reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act, and I know this is a priority for the veterinary profession both in and out of government. A new Act could better support vets deliver the animal health and welfare outcomes that we all value. The role of vets in society is hugely varied, from looking after the family pet, to underpinning international trade in animal products, to supporting public health, and pandemic preparedness.

I am grateful to the [RCVS for their recommendations for future veterinary legislation](#) and the work of the RCVS Legislation Working Party including the public consultation on their 2020 report. My officials continue to look at the options for reform taking this information into account, and the wider context of the role of vets in our society. Given the announcement on the general election, you will be aware that parliamentary time for this will now need to be allocated in a future parliamentary session and this is something I will continue to support from the Lords.

The Competition and Markets Authority announcement today that they will be [conducting a market investigation](#) into the veterinary services industry is welcome. It will provide useful input to our considerations of legislative reform while highlighting areas that the wider veterinary profession can change out with legislative reform.

Workforce Planning

Defra is exploring various avenues to improve the short- and long-term capacity issues in both the government veterinary service and private sector veterinary professionals. I am grateful for the work that the RCVS has done in creating [a workforce action plan](#). I, along with my officials and the UK Chief Veterinary Officer, have been working with stakeholders and my colleague Lord Trees to consider the next steps towards creating a workforce plan. I am grateful for all the recommendations that have been shared with the department, and the research that supports our aim to ensure the ongoing provision of highly skilled professionals across all sectors of the veterinary profession. We will continue to engage with stakeholders on additional data as it becomes available.

Funding

As part of our work on workforce planning and legislation reform, we continue to consider all options, including those that might incur additional costs such as changes to funding of veterinary degrees, specialist government veterinary pay, and debt forgiveness schemes. We will work closely across government, including with Treasury, on these initiatives.

Thank you again for your Committee's support and interest in this area.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'K. Douglas-Miller', followed by a long horizontal flourish line.

LORD DOUGLAS-MILLER