



Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office
His Majesty's Paymaster General
Cabinet Office 70 Whitehall London
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15th December 2025

Dear Lord Carlile,

REGARDING: VETERINARY MEDICINE SUPPLY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Thank you for your letter dated 26 November 2025. I fully agree with the importance of this matter and the Government remains fully committed to ensuring the supply of veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland. I will address the concerns you raise in turn.

We urge the Government to give urgent and earnest consideration to the issues raised by our witnesses and the proposals they have put forward to mitigate the impact on the supply of veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland.

The Government of course takes all concerns very seriously. We have undertaken extensive engagement and analysis on medicines at risk of discontinuation, which has resulted in our analysis that the vast majority of veterinary medicines will continue to be supplied. Where we expect discontinuations, these are largely either dormant licences or have multiple alternatives. We have also been working closely with industry to provide clear guidance on the arrangements. This includes the fact that there will be a transition period that allows for any products that have been placed on the market before the end of the year to continue to be supplied in Northern Ireland up until their expiry dates. In addition, we launched two schemes in the Summer as contingency plans in order to manage any residual uncertainty as we move into 2026. There has been considerable progress in the last few years regarding industry compliance, and our view is that we are now in a good position ahead of the new arrangements from 1 January. We are not complacent, and we will monitor the situation very closely into next year, alongside industry, and will address any issues that may arise. I provide further detail in the responses below.

For how many veterinary medicines has the Government received confirmation of continuation or discontinuation of supply in Northern Ireland following the grace period? What is the Government doing to ensure the accuracy of its estimates?

The Government has engaged extensively with industry across the full breadth of the veterinary medicines sector, including with pharmaceutical companies, retailers, wholesalers, vets and farming representatives. This has also included data gathering to understand the likely supply from 1 January. Over the last few years, we have conducted repeated surveys of pharmaceutical companies' intentions, engaged with many of them in meetings and worked with them on the administrative changes needed to continue supplying medicines to Northern Ireland.

We have always been clear that there is some uncertainty as not all businesses have made decisions or communicated these to us, but at the same time, within those parameters, we have built a very well-evidenced and robust estimate of supply. Our estimate has remained stable since our policy paper in June - we still expect that the vast majority of veterinary medicines will continue to be supplied. Products that are expected to be discontinued are often not currently supplied to Northern Ireland (they are dormant licences) or have multiple available alternatives.

Where we have heard concerns about potentially higher numbers of discontinuations, this has been because pack size discontinuations are combined with product licence discontinuations (products are often sold in multiple different pack sizes). Discontinuation of certain pack sizes is a matter we are monitoring closely, and we have addressed this point in more detail below. We have also seen some individual licence holders discontinuing more than others but the Government's data is based on a whole-of-market assessment. As noted, many of these products have multiple available alternatives.

Our current outlook is slightly more positive than it was in June. Then we said that we considered that fewer than 20 medicines could create significant health risks if not addressed through our schemes, the Veterinary Medicines Internal Market Scheme and the Veterinary Medicines Health Situation Scheme. This 'high-risk' list has fluctuated - in some cases, businesses decided to continue their product after all; in others, businesses decided to discontinue. However, the number has remained stable and is now well under 10, and we have now concluded that in none of those cases we expect to see a health impact - and therefore the use of the Veterinary Medicines Health Situation Scheme is not required at the moment but remains available if needed. Instead, authorised alternatives available in Northern Ireland or the use of the cascade or the Veterinary Medicines Internal Market Scheme can address any gaps in these products, none of which are of a critical nature in our view.

We have communicated a sample of this list to members of the Veterinary Medicines Working Group where the supply intention of these products was already publicly known. Otherwise, we remain bound by commercial confidentiality. We must stress that the commercial confidentiality of our discussions with licence holders has been critical to securing the depth and breadth of our assessment across the whole of the veterinary medicines market in Northern Ireland. It is understandable that stakeholders are concerned that they may not know the supply status of individual products. The Government has been clear to licence holders that they should communicate this to their

customers. The operational guidance we have published to stakeholders on the arrangements going into 2026, including the two schemes, is designed to address the level of uncertainty that remains and we will keep this under review.

Is the Government confident that farmers in Northern Ireland will have access to veterinary medicines in appropriate pack sizes following the conclusion of the grace period? What assessment has the Government made of the costs to farmers from the potential restriction of choice? How do you respond to the concerns raised by our witnesses in relation to antimicrobial resistance?

We continue to monitor the situation with regard to pack sizes very closely. We have engaged extensively with industry on this issue too, including with vets and those representing Suitably Qualified Persons (SQPs). We are not currently seeing this issue at a systemic level, nor have we received any evidence with regard to specific cases in which pack sizes are likely to cause risks. Based on our engagement with pharmaceutical companies, we understand that where pack size rationalisation is to take place, this would typically not affect the most commonly used pack sizes which will support availability that reflects NI's particular agricultural landscape.

However, we will continue to monitor this very closely. The Government already has processes in place for dealing with a potential lack of suitable pack sizes, as we see this issue across the whole of the UK from time to time. If an immediate solution is required, prescribers have the legal flexibility to split packs provided this does not lead to the opening of the immediate packaging for some prescribers; they can also prescribe larger quantities if needed. In addition, where we receive evidence that the pack size discontinuation is such that a health situation could emerge, we will review whether a particular product should be added to the Veterinary Medicines Health Situation Scheme. We have processes in place to do this at pace.

We understand that much of the concern about price impacts is linked to the concern about pack sizes, e.g. that pack size rationalisation will force vets, farmers or others to buy medicines in less economical pack sizes, such as having to buy too large a pack. As per the above, we are not expecting, based on current available information, to see pack size rationalisation at a systemic level, although we are monitoring this very closely and will always look to address problems where they arise. We have also heard from a number of pharmaceutical companies that they have committed not to increase prices, which we hope is welcome news.

Based on the evidence available to us, we therefore do not anticipate significant cost increases for farmers or impacts on antimicrobial resistance. However, I want to stress again that we will never be complacent on this issue - we recognise that there is uncertainty at this point in time about the precise impacts and we will continue to monitor this. We are currently working to set up a framework to review how these processes are working after 1 January and are looking to run further surveys across industry to make

sure that we continue to have a clear understanding of the impacts in Northern Ireland. We would strongly encourage all stakeholders to participate in such surveys.

What assessment has the Government made of the implications of the anticipated changes to the supply of veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland for UK food security, particularly considering the Government's recognition of One Health as an element of food security? What is the Government's response to concerns that lack of access to medicines will inhibit a timely intervention to treat disease outbreaks?

As per the above, we do not have any reason to expect impacts on food security. However, we continue to monitor this closely and have systems in place to respond to issues as they arise. If a lack of access to medicines would threaten to inhibit a timely intervention to treat disease outbreaks, we would look to the two schemes we have set up, for instance, we could temporarily authorise a suitable alternative product under the Veterinary Medicines Health Situation Scheme.

What assessment has the Government made of the likely impact of the expiry of the grace period on competition in the wholesale market for veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland?

Our understanding of the situation is that only two of the six wholesalers serving Northern Ireland would continue to trade in Northern Ireland. Currently, 24 wholesalers are registered in Northern Ireland (a list available [here](#)) and we expect those to continue to operate in Northern Ireland.

Does the Government consider that animal owners in Northern Ireland will experience a markedly different veterinary medicines market after the grace period concludes? What courses of action might the Government take in such a situation? What is the Government's assessment of the risk of the emergence of black markets for veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland? How will it mitigate this risk?

We do not consider that the Northern Ireland market will be markedly different after the end of the grace period. We recognise of course that there are changes and that these changes may impact some stakeholders more than others, and we remain committed to working with all stakeholders to find solutions to problems. As previously noted, many of the expected discontinuations are not currently supplied to Northern Ireland or have multiple alternatives available. The two schemes serve to help address any remaining risks. We recognise that it will be a change for pet owners who may not always be able to order from the same online pharmacies that they ordered from before. However, this is where we can see the market adapting already - based on our extensive stakeholder engagement, we are aware of several online pharmacies setting up to offer services in Northern Ireland and some of those have already announced this publicly. The VMD maintains a [public register](#) of registered online retailers, which indicates which territories these retailers are authorised to supply veterinary medicines.

Regarding the position of Suitably Qualified Persons, this concern about future divergence is speculative at this point in time. There are no known plans of the EU adjusting their veterinary regulations and if they do, the Government will engage with the EU on this

issue, as on all Windsor Framework issues, and the usual democratic scrutiny processes under the Windsor Framework would apply. The UK also continues to be firmly committed to supporting the important SQP sector.

What impact is the Government expecting from the re-routing of veterinary medicine supplies from Great Britain through the Republic of Ireland as a result of the EU Veterinary Medicinal Products Regulation? What are the predicted economic costs to the UK of this change? Is the Government satisfied that the proposed arrangements are consistent with the terms of Article 16 of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland?

We currently do not have evidence to suggest that there will be significant price increases as a result of re-routing. A number of businesses have proactively indicated that they will not increase prices.

We remain focused on a pragmatic approach to problems where they do arise, and at the moment our view is that the arrangements we have put in place, including the two new schemes, will help manage the transition to the new arrangements through 2026. We will continue to monitor this closely in the new year, working closely with industry to do so.

What is your response to our witness's view that an SPS deal will not resolve the issues in relation to veterinary medicines?

The expected scope of the SPS agreement was announced in May and does not include veterinary medicine authorisations. We remain focused on pragmatic solutions and in this case expect that industry adaptation, with government assistance, in combination with our schemes, will ensure that Northern Ireland continues to have access to the medicines they need.

Does the Government agree that the impact of the end of the grace period is unlikely to be felt immediately? How will the Government monitor supply and availability of veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland from January 2026?

The arrangements that we have put in place are designed to enable a smooth transition to the new arrangements through 2026. We continue to monitor this closely and will work with industry to do so, calibrating our response and the schemes in place as needed. The VMD has established processes in place for reporting and addressing supply problems, and the VMHSS provides another route by which we can intervene where we expect health impacts. In addition, we are committed to continued stakeholder engagement, including through running further surveys of industry after a suitable period of time. We will continue to engage with trade associations and other stakeholders to determine when that is best done.

Why has the Government not shared with the Veterinary Medicines Working Group what products are expected to be discontinued from January? In the interests of animal and human welfare and health, will the Government urgently work with pharmaceutical companies to share with the public, or at least with industry, what

products they will discontinue to aid stakeholders' preparations for the end of the grace period?

The Government is under an obligation to not share commercially confidential information it has gathered from manufacturers as part of this process. We cannot breach that obligation or the trust manufacturers have placed in us when sharing their commercial decisions with us. However, we are looking to share a sample of products we considered to be in the higher risk category with VMWG members shortly where this information is already in the public domain because the manufacturer has informed stakeholders publicly of their supply intentions. This sample represents some of the products we had considered for the Veterinary Medicines Health Situation Scheme; in these cases, we concluded that temporary authorisation of an alternative product was not necessary because sufficient alternatives remain available either authorised in Northern Ireland or under the cascade/VMIMS.

We would encourage stakeholders to ask their supplier about their supply intentions if they have not yet been told.

We would be grateful for answers to the following questions on the new schemes:

- ***Is the Government confident that the Veterinary Medicines Health Situation Scheme and Veterinary Medicines Internal Market Scheme will prevent harm to animal and human welfare resulting from the application of the EU Veterinary Medicinal Products Regulation to Northern Ireland?***
- ***What is your assessment of the capacity of Northern Ireland's veterinary sector to meet the demands posed by the Veterinary Medicines Internal Market Scheme?***
- ***How will the Veterinary Medicines Health Situation Scheme and Veterinary Medicines Internal Market Scheme support the Suitably Qualified Persons sector?***
- ***Will it be possible, under the Veterinary Medicines Health Situation Scheme, for the Veterinary Medicines Directorate to permit the supply of certain pack sizes of a product in order to prevent a potential adverse change in the animal or public health situation in Northern Ireland?***
- ***Has the Government developed contingency plans to respond, if necessary, to the risks presented by the conclusion of the grace period despite the schemes?***

The Government is confident in its analysis that the vast majority of veterinary medicines will continue to be supplied. Where we expect discontinuations, these products are often not currently supplied (dormant licences), or in very low quantities, or have multiple alternatives available. However, the two schemes will build the resilience to deal with risks posed by these discontinuations. In this sense, the schemes are the contingency plans, because our current expectation is that in the vast majority of cases, stakeholders will be able to access veterinary medicines authorised in Northern Ireland via the normal routes outside these schemes.

Under the Health Situation Scheme, the Government can temporarily authorise EU products where we have evidence to expect a health situation. All types of products and, in exceptional circumstances, pack sizes can be considered for this scheme, including products prescribed by SQPs. If we see issues arise, we will respond urgently.

In addition, the VMD is set up as a regulator to deal with shortages and supply issues more generally and has processes in place to respond to those.

Why has the Government not yet directly communicated to animal owners how they can expect their access to veterinary medicines to change from January? What are the Government's plans to directly communicate to stakeholders the changes they can expect from January?

The Government published a policy paper and extensive guidance in June and has updated the guidance since. This guidance also provides information for the general public, including animal owners. We have also recently published webinars that present the matter succinctly and in plain terms with specific sections for all relevant audiences, as well as a simple to use explainer that has useful practical case studies included. Stakeholders can also submit questions to the VMD who will then address these in one-on-one engagement or future Q&A sessions.

Why has the Government not yet directly communicated to animal owners how they can expect their access to veterinary medicines to change from January? What are the Government's plans to directly communicate to stakeholders the changes they can expect from January?

The Government welcomes suggestions from industry on such matters. My officials have already spoken to the BVA about this, and we are committed to setting up an implementation coordination group as we enter this next phase after 1 January. This will bring together stakeholders and Government to monitor impacts on the ground, identify any emerging issues and respond quickly.

As per the above, the Government has issued extensive guidance and continues to adapt this to best meet stakeholder needs. We have also worked extensively with the BVA and NIVA on developing more detailed guidance to address their questions.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nick Thomas-Symonds', written in a cursive style.

RT HON NICK THOMAS-SYMONDS MP
MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE
HIS MAJESTY'S PAYMASTER GENERAL