

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

A Sustainable Veterinary Workforce: Government Response

Fourth Special Report of Session 2026–27

HC 649

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee

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Publication

This Report was Ordered by the House of Commons, on 8 September 2026, to be printed. It was published on 11 September 2026 by authority of the House of Commons. © Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2026.

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Fourth Special Report

The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee published its First Report of Session 2026–27, [A sustainable veterinary workforce](#) (HC 270) on 5 June 2026. The Response from the Government was received on 5 August 2026, and from the CMA on 10 August 2026, and are appended below.

Appendix 1: Government Response

Introduction

The government thanks the Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs Committee for its thorough and thoughtful report into a sustainable veterinary workforce.

Since the publication of the EFRA Committee’s report, the government has published its White Paper setting out its vision for a thriving veterinary sector and proposes legislative reform to modernise regulation, support the full veterinary team and help address the workforce pressures identified by the Committee. The White Paper can be found [here](#). The government recognises the importance of a resilient, skilled and well-supported veterinary workforce to animal health and welfare, public health, food safety and consumer confidence. Individual veterinary professionals demonstrate incredible skill; however, the current legislative structure lacks flexibility with regards to which activities different professionals can complete.

Retention challenges across the sector

Committee recommendation paragraph 14: *Defra should, within six months, commission a sector-wide review, working in partnership with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, veterinary schools, and other major employers and representative bodies, including the British Veterinary Association, to build a robust evidence base on the drivers of retention challenges across the profession. This review should:*

- a.** *establish a consistent, data driven understanding of attrition across different sectors, career stages and geographies;*
- b.** *identify the key factors influencing retention, particularly in shortage areas such as public sector roles and rural practice;*
- c.** *set out targeted, evidence-based interventions to improve retention in these sectors such as incentives, support packages, and career pathways; and*
- d.** *include clear metrics and baseline data for monitoring workforce distribution and attrition rates annually, alongside measurable targets for improvement*

Government response:

This government agrees with the Committee that it is vital to ensure the retention veterinary professionals in the sector and partially accepts the recommendation. Given the wider work that is taking place in this space we do not agree that a sector-wide review of retention is currently needed. As a response to the National Audit Office and Public Accounts Committee, Defra is working to publish a government Veterinary Profession Workforce Strategy by end of March 2027. This strategy aims to build cross-departmental collaboration, including with the Devolved Governments, on veterinary capacity, recruitment and retention. Defra will also continue to work with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons on their workforce modelling to understand the wider pressures faced within the sector.

Our White Paper also sets out our proposed reforms to help tackle this issue.

Skilled Workers Visa

Committee recommendation paragraph 16: *The Home Office, in collaboration with Defra, should review the Skilled Worker Visa salary thresholds for veterinary roles by early 2027 to ensure they:*

- a.** *reflect realistic early career salary progression in the sector;*

- b.** *do not create barriers to recruiting overseas vets into shortage roles; and*
- c.** *are aligned with wider workforce needs in public health and food safety. This review should include consultation with the RCVS, BVA, and major veterinary employers, and publish its findings.*

Government response:

Defra understands and recognises the need to have sufficient veterinary professionals and related professions to meet any shortages in roles. However, the government do not agree with the recommendation to review the Skilled Worker Visa salary threshold.

Recent changes to the immigration system are designed to reduce reliance on overseas recruitment and incentivise employers and sector bodies to address weaknesses in domestic workforce planning and training pipelines. This includes raising salary requirements for sponsored workers, to ensure they are not seen as a cheaper alternative to investing in the domestic workforce.

The Home Office commissioned the independent Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) to review salary requirements for sponsored workers. The MAC published its report in December 2025, which included recommendations on occupational salary thresholds and early career workers: [Review of salary requirements - GOV.UK](#) The government is currently considering the MAC's advice and will announce any changes to salary requirements in due course. The government will not be carrying out a separate review of salary requirements for veterinary roles.

The current occupational thresholds are based on median full-time earnings data from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, collected by the Office for National Statistics. More information can be found [here](#). Setting thresholds at the median earnings of comparable UK workers ensures that higher-paying employers can continue to use the visa system, while preventing undercutting of UK workers.

Funding for veterinary education

Committee recommendation paragraph 26: *The government should, within the next Spending Review, undertake a full review of funding for veterinary education and take the recommended steps to ensure that funding levels reflect the true cost of training. This review, jointly undertaken by Defra and the Department for Education should:*

- a.** *assess the gap between costs and funding for domestic students;*

- b.** *set out options to close this gap, including increased teaching grants for high- cost courses; and*
- c.** *ensure the long-term financial sustainability of veterinary schools, recognising their strategic importance to the UK.*

Government response:

Veterinary education and research, including the number of veterinary surgeons that graduate, are vital to ensure animal health and welfare. However, the government does not agree that at this stage a full review of funding levels for training is necessary. Clinical subjects such as veterinary science attract the highest level of high-cost subject funding through the Strategic Priorities Grant (SPG), with funding set at £11,580 per student Full Time Equivalent (FTE) for Academic Year (AY) 25/26. SPG funding arrangements for AY26/27 will be announced shortly. However, Defra will commit to official level engagement as part of our ongoing dialogue with the Department for Education to monitor funding for veterinary courses.

Guidance on admissions

Committee recommendation paragraph 28: *Defra and the RCVS should, within 18 months, begin work with veterinary schools to develop and implement sector wide guidance on contextual and flexible admissions. This should:*

- a.** *support consistent use of contextual offers and alternative access routes;*
- b.** *encourage recruitment from rural and underserved areas; and*
- c.** *include annual monitoring of student intake by background and geography, with results published by the RCVS*

Government response:

Through engagement with veterinary schools, we are aware that many already use contextual admissions, access courses (which provide a route to university for those without traditional qualifications) or other routes to support applicants from a wider range of backgrounds, including rural and underserved areas. Decisions on entry requirements and admissions policy are primarily matters for education providers and the Department for Education, so Defra will continue to support cross-government engagement where this relates to veterinary workforce resilience.

Defra welcomes work by the RCVS and veterinary schools to widen participation and diversity in veterinary education. Defra is confident in vet schools' existing practices to widen participation and does not consider additional guidance is currently needed.

Defra will continue to monitor the situation and, if needed, will reconsider the need for guidance.

Accreditation requirements

Committee recommendation paragraph 30: *In bringing forward reforms to the 1966 Veterinary Surgeons Act, the government should ensure that it sets out how accreditation requirements can be made more flexible and adaptable, allowing greater freedom in curriculum design.*

Government response:

The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 does not set out detailed criteria for veterinary education, and the government does not propose to set such criteria in new legislation. Accreditation requirements remain a matter for the RCVS. However, the government recognises the importance of flexibility in curriculum design, while also ensuring that veterinary graduates have the breadth of capability needed to work safely across the sector.

Monitoring framework for CMA remedies

Committee recommendation paragraph 38: *The government should ensure the CMA's remedies are fully rural proofed. The government should instruct the CMA, in partnership with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, to establish a monitoring framework by September 2027 to coincide with the deadline for small practices to implement most of the remedies. This framework should monitor prices, competition, business sustainability and access to services in rural and isolated areas. The CMA should publish a formal review of the impact of its remedies by March 2029, giving small business 18 months to adapt to the new requirements. The review should assess impacts on mixed practices, rural provision, and market outcomes. Where adverse effects are identified, the CMA should implement corrective measures within a further six months to protect service provision and animal welfare.*

Government response:

The CMA's final report was published on 24 March 2026, which concluded the market investigation into veterinary services for household pets. The CMA is responsible for implementing and monitoring its remedies, including consulting on draft Orders and Undertakings and setting implementation requirements for businesses.

The next stage will be for the CMA to place Orders on businesses to enact their remedies which must be in place by 23 September 2026. with the first of their remedies coming into force from the date of the Orders, and all remedies being implemented within three to 12 months from that date. The CMA is continuing to work with Defra as the government progresses changes to legislation. Information on the Orders can be found [here](#).

The government recognises the need to understand any unintended consequences for smaller, independent, rural and large animal practices and will ensure any potential new regulations introduced to update the VSA are proportionate. Further detail is set out in our White Paper.

The CMA will also be responding to the Committee separately.

Coordination between CMA remedies and VSA reform

Committee recommendation paragraph 44: *The development of Competition and Market Authority's (CMA) remedies and Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (VSA) reform should be coordinated to ensure alignment, avoid duplication, and minimise unintended consequences. In response to this report, Defra should provide a clear explanation of how the CMA's interim remedies will interact with longer term legislative reform. Defra should explain how the reformed VSA will deliver a flexible, future-proof framework that supports workforce development and protects animal welfare.*

Government response:

The government agrees, and our White Paper contains the government's response to the CMA's recommendations. The government will ensure that, when needed, the CMA's remedies are aligned with longer term legislative. Our White Paper also sets out how proposed legislation to replace the VSA will be flexible and deliver a future-proof framework.

The government's White Paper also explains how proposed legislation would support a more flexible future-proof regulatory framework, and the government will continue to work with the CMA to ensure our longer-term legislative reforms are aligned with the CMA's remedies, avoid duplication and minimise any unintended consequences.

Delivery plan for VSA reform

Committee recommendation paragraph 45: *Defra should set out a clear delivery plan for VSA reform in response to this report, including estimated staff requirements, programme costs, key milestones, and an indicative legislative timetable through to implementation. This plan should also identify how engagement with the sector will be resourced and sustained throughout the reform process.*

Government response:

The government agrees on the importance of having a clear delivery plan to ensure the successful completion of new reforms. Our White Paper was clear that our proposed legislation will come into effect when parliamentary time allows and sets out information on our plans and intended approach. The government is committed to fully resourcing the programme of work for VSA reform and to ensure appropriate governance and structures are in place to deliver it. We will continue to work with the sector throughout this process. Defra will keep the committee informed once we have a clearer understanding of the timetable.

Regulatory functions

Committee recommendation paragraph 50: *As part of reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act, the government should separate the RCVS's professional leadership role from any regulatory functions within the veterinary profession, creating a new independent body that can oversee the expanded role of a reformed Act. It should draw on models used in other regulated professions to achieve this, taking account of the specific requirements of the veterinary profession.*

Government response:

It is the government's ambition to reduce regulatory burdens where possible on businesses. As part of the government's consultation, we asked whether a governance model that involved retaining a single organisation but ensuring a clear, internal split between the regulatory and professional leadership arms would be preferable, or whether to limit the

RCVS's responsibilities to those of a professional regulator and allow the professions to separately develop voluntary professional leadership bodies independent of the RCVS.

The response to the consultation indicated a preference for retaining a single organisation. We are therefore moving forward with this option.

The government believes this covers the benefits of both governance models. It ensures there is independence between the regulatory and professional leadership arms of the RCVS, minimising the potential for conflicts of interest. The government propose introducing a role of the 'Chief President' who will be the main accountable person for professional leadership policy. It also avoids the overall costs and upheaval involved in setting up a new body which may lose the operational history and experience of the RCVS.

As set out in our White Paper, the government are continuing discussions with the RCVS about the practicality of delivering all these responsibilities within a single organisation. This is to ensure the requirements are realistic and achievable. If it becomes apparent that this scope is not manageable for one organisation, the government will consider separating the professional leadership function from the regulator.

Appendix 2: CMA Response

Overview

1. The CMA welcomes the Committee's report 'A sustainable veterinary workforce' and the Committee's close engagement with our market investigation into the veterinary services sector. As part of its report, the Committee recommended that

The government should ensure the CMA's remedies are fully rural proofed. The government should instruct the CMA, in partnership with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, to establish a monitoring framework by September 2027 to coincide with the deadline for small practices to implement most of the remedies. This framework should monitor prices, competition, business sustainability and access to services in rural and isolated areas. The CMA should publish a formal review of the impact of its remedies by March 2029, giving small business 18 months to adapt to the new requirements. The review should assess impacts on mixed practices, rural provision, and market outcomes. Where adverse effects are identified, the CMA should implement corrective measures within a further six months to protect service provision and animal welfare.

2. The Committee has also recommended that:

The development of Competition and Market Authority's (CMA) remedies and Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (VSA) reform should be coordinated to ensure alignment, avoid duplication, and minimise unintended consequences. In response to this report, Defra should provide a clear explanation of how the CMA's interim remedies will interact with longer-term legislative reform. Defra should explain how the reformed VSA will deliver a flexible, future-proof framework that supports workforce development and protects animal welfare.

3. This response briefly recaps the findings of our market investigation and how we took into account the circumstances of smaller and rural veterinary practices; our approach to the design, monitoring and review of CMA remedies; and how we work with other regulators when our remedies relate to sectors for which they are responsible. We understand that Defra has responded separately to the Committee's report, including in relation to the aspects of the recommendations above that are directed at government.

The CMA's investigation and our approach to smaller and rural practices

4. The CMA's market investigation is the most extensive review of veterinary services in the UK in generations. It found that the market for veterinary services for household pets is not working as well as it should for pet owners, veterinary professionals or the animals in their care. Pet owners often lack the information needed to make informed choices; they face unnecessarily high medicine costs; and they are not always clear about practice ownership. Veterinary businesses, meanwhile, are not subject to effective independent regulation. The remedies and recommendations from our market investigation stand to improve transparency, support informed choice, strengthen competition and help pet owners obtain appropriate care for their animals at a fair price. It is important that household pet owners at all types of practices benefit from these necessary changes.
5. We are grateful to the Committee for drawing attention to the particular circumstances of smaller and rural veterinary practices, and we have looked closely at evidence it has gathered and the findings it has made.
6. We acknowledge and understand the Committee's concern that remedies affecting veterinary services should not impose disproportionate burdens on smaller, mixed or rural practices, particularly where service provision may already be fragile. The CMA designs each remedy carefully to ensure that it achieves its intended objective, without creating unnecessary burdens. With this in mind, smaller veterinary businesses have been given additional time to implement many of the requirements, recognising that they are likely to have fewer administrative and technical resources than larger groups. For example, once a final CMA order has been made, smaller veterinary businesses will have 6 months to provide pet owners with a comprehensive price list and 12 months to provide written estimates and itemised bills. Larger veterinary businesses will have 3 months and 9 months respectively. The smallest veterinary businesses will also be exempted from the obligation to make an annual attestation of compliance to the RCVS
7. Where we can, we have also sought to design our remedies in ways that could build on existing systems and processes that many veterinary businesses likely already operate, rather than require the development of new ones. The CMA will work closely with those businesses, as well as with veterinary associations and the RCVS, so that they understand their obligations; the steps required to achieve compliance within the relevant timeframe; and the action they should take if compliance cannot be achieved as expected.

Monitoring and reviewing CMA remedies

8. The CMA has a statutory duty to keep under review the undertakings it accepts, and the orders that it makes. An important part of that responsibility is considering whether, due to a change of circumstances, an undertaking or order is no longer appropriate and should be amended or removed. The CMA may also amend or remove an undertaking or order if it deems the undertaking or order to be ineffective. Further information about this framework and the CMA's usual practice is set out in our published [guidance on market studies, market investigations and the monitoring and review of market remedies](#).
9. In fulfilling its statutory duty, the CMA is committed to retaining only those remedies that remain appropriate on the basis that they continue to address the competition problem and consumer detriment it has identified. If remedies are no longer appropriate, the CMA may review and amend or remove, the remedy concerned. Complex changes may require a substantive review – in this context, such a review would incorporate the evidence and experiences of stakeholders including pet owners, veterinary businesses and professionals, consumer and trade bodies, and regulators. The timing and scope of any future review would be determined by the evolving evidence – including, in this context, developments in the veterinary sector and its regulatory framework – having regard to our statutory duty. Parties affected by a remedy, or other interested parties, may also request that the CMA initiate a review.

Working with other regulators

10. Where other regulators are present in a market in which the CMA is implementing remedies, the CMA engages closely with them to avoid inconsistency with, or unnecessary duplication of, the existing regulatory regime. Any relevant developments in the responsibilities of the RCVS, or in the legislation governing the veterinary professions, would inform how our remedies are monitored and enforced and kept under review. We strongly agree with the Committee's position that competition measures should align with, rather than undermine, longer-term regulatory reform.
11. Looking ahead, the CMA has recommended that, as part of reform of the legislative regulatory framework, the regulator should be given an express statutory duty relating to competition and consumer interests. The CMA expects that such a duty, accompanied by suitable resources, would help the regulator build more substantial expertise and capacity to identify, assess and respond to relevant competition and consumer issues within the veterinary sector. It would also enable these considerations to be integrated more fully into the regulator's ongoing oversight of animal health and welfare, the wider public interest, professional standards, and standards for veterinary businesses.