

**Written evidence submitted by Labour shortages in the
food and farming sector (LS0056)**

October 26 Oral hearing on Labour shortages in the food and farming sector

First may I thank you and your Committee for the extremely valuable work you are undertaking into labour shortages in the food and farming sector. The problems your committee are examining would be crucial at any time, but are particularly pertinent as we emerge from the Covid pandemic and adapt to life post-Brexit.

The oral evidence session you conducted on October 26 was particularly informative and did an enormous amount to expose the problems that are besetting the sector and including those faced by the company I lead, Eville & Jones. As you may be aware Eville & Jones holds the contract to provide Official Veterinarians and Meat Hygiene Inspectors to all abattoirs in England & Wales. The work our c300 vets do (95% are from the EU) is crucial to maintaining food supply in the UK, maintaining the highest standards of animal welfare, and facilitating exports. As a company we are proud of the role that we play to protect animal welfare, human health and international trade.

While I understand that the deadline for evidence for your enquiry passed on 15 October I hope you will accept this submission as a response, or addendum, to some of the evidence you heard on October 26. During the session you heard well informed insights into the problems facing the food and farming sector. We would concur with everything your panelists said, particularly those whose expertise overlaps with what we do, such as Nick Allen, Chief Executive Office of British Meat Processors Association and James Russell, Senior Vice President, British Veterinary Association.

One of the subject areas that was touched on by your panelists was the problems being posed by English language tests and how these tests are creating an insurmountable barrier to recruitment. Mr Allen referenced this during his evidence and I note you made reference to this problem in your letter to the Prime Minister in which you asked the Government to review the English language requirements applicable in the sector.

Your intervention is very welcome. However, what the evidence you heard on October 26 did not address is how the veterinary industry has created serious problems for itself with the introduction of English language tests. For decades the UK veterinary industry, and particularly the Official Veterinarian sector, has relied on EU migration, with roughly half of all new recruits to the industry coming from the EU, and 95% of OVs coming from the EU. Prior to Brexit, there were no language tests for any EAEVE accredited EU vet to practice as a veterinarian in the UK. However, in response to Brexit our regulator, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, took the decision to remove a language exemption for EU vets and as such required all vets entering the UK from the EU to pass Level 7 IELTS. The standard is extremely high, equivalent to the test required for students wanting to pursue post-graduate education in the UK.

The experience of my company is that it is primarily this English language test that has led to the calamitous fall in recruitment from the EU, as referenced by Mr Russell during your hearing. My company has data that I would be happy to provide that clearly evidences this fact. Indeed, the recruitment of OVs effectively stopped after this policy was unexpectedly introduced on 1st January of this year. In May of this year, following representation from DEFRA, the Royal College tacitly accepted the problems posed by the Level 7 English language test, and introduced a temporary reduction on the requirement for OVs working in abattoirs. This was for a 12-month term, with a review after six months. It set the hurdle at Level 5. However, it is important to note this waiver is only temporary. If it is not extended until such time as long term, sustainable alternative sources of veterinary recruitment are put in place, the UK will face significant challenges in recruiting the required number of OVs.

As a company we accept that a minimum standard of English is desirable, even necessary. This has actually been dealt with by the Government which mandated a Level 4 requirement for vets applying for a Skilled Worker visa. In addition, the fact that veterinarians are included on the Shortage Occupation list has also significantly helped as it accelerates the visa process but up to a month or more when compared to the process in place for other categories of workers, such as Meat Hygiene Inspectors, which are not on the Shortage Occupation list.

This confusion around English language standards for EU vets coming into the country - none required prior to Brexit, Level 4 required under the Government visa system post Brexit, and Level 7 required by the Royal College - has created a real problem in our industry.

For the veterinary profession, the reliance on EU vets has developed over decades, and there is no quick fix. There is simply nowhere near enough capacity within the UK veterinary education system to meet demand (supply of c900 vets per year vs a demand of over 2,000), the number of vets leaving the profession each year are too high, and from an OV perspective, this side of the profession is culturally undesirable whereas in the EU, being an OV is a highly regarded and respected career pathway.

A long-term strategy, developed through a partnership with all stakeholders including Universities, RCVS, Government, Vets and employers is the only way that the UK will be able to reduce its reliance on overseas veterinary resource, but it will take time. The visa system works, the shortage occupation facility works, and we have proven over many decades that EU vets' level of English pre-Brexit was not a problem.

We are aware that Defra and the industry are currently consulting on whether or not to maintain the Temporary Registration to June next year, but frankly it needs to be in place for a much longer period of time, or Level 7 needs to be significantly reduced for all cohorts of vets. I hope you will join me in looking forward to a positive outcome from those talks. Whatever the outcome of the discussions I would be happy to provide more evidence or input to your enquiry either in person or via written submission.

Yours sincerely