

BVA report on discrimination in the veterinary profession

Background

Throughout the many and varied conversations during the Vet Futures project, workforce issues have been prominent, and many of the recommendations within the [Vet Futures report](#) related to better understanding our work-related challenges. When the Vet Futures Action Plan was published in July 2016, BVA embraced the task of undertaking a veterinary workforce study that would provide evidence to help inform the development of resources, guidance and recommendations to foster and maintain a happy, healthy profession.

Through BVA's work on workplace and working conditions to date, there has been a common theme of vets wanting to feel like they "fit in". For example, the first of the two workforce studies we carried out in conjunction with the University of Exeter in November 2018, [Motivation, Satisfaction, and Retention: Understanding the importance of vets' day-to-day work experiences, showed that](#) the creation of an environment where individuals feel they fit in and ensuring that employees feel valued and admired for the work that they do would likely improve the experiences of vets and improve the retention of skilled and motivated staff.

When it comes to the gender balance, the veterinary profession has already passed the 50:50 mark and with a student population that is 80% female it's only heading in one direction. Our second workforce report, [Gender discrimination in the veterinary profession: A brief report of the BVA Employers' Study 2018](#), offers a compelling piece of evidence that even when everything about two vets is equal, their gender can still significantly impact upon how they are perceived, treated, and paid. It highlights that those who do not perceive gender discrimination to be an issue are most likely to perpetuate this inequality.

The Vet Futures report also included some worrying statistics from a diversity point of view. The UK veterinary profession is only 3% non-white, compared to a UK population that is 14% non-white. In terms of widening access to the profession from a socio-economic point of view, the report showed that people entering the profession are more likely to come from certain socio-economic groups – for example, almost a quarter of vets (24%) responding to the RCVS 2014 survey had been privately educated, and 30% had attended school outside the UK¹. By comparison, just 6.5% of school children in the UK are educated in the independent (private) sector².

In discussions with the veterinary diversity groups, such as the British Veterinary Ethnicity and Diversity Society (BVEDS) and the British Veterinary LGBT+ group (BVLGBT+), we understood that it was very difficult for people to share experiences of discrimination in a public forum. To better understand the issues faced by the profession, we needed to encourage those affected to share their stories.

We are extremely grateful to the members of the veterinary team who shared their experiences with us, and who have given their permission for us to use their words in this report to help raise awareness of these critically important issues.

¹ Buzzeo J, Robinson D, Williams M (2014). The 2014 RCVS survey of the veterinary profession. Institute for Employment Studies

² Independent Schools Council (2015). Website information. Available at: <http://www.isc.co.uk/research/> (accessed on 12 October 2015)

What we did

In February 2019 we launched the first survey of discrimination in the veterinary professions. The questionnaire was completely anonymous, with the option for respondents to provide their contact information if they wished.

The aim was to capture first-hand experiences of vets, vet nurses, students and other veterinary team members who had either witnessed or experienced discrimination in a work or learning environment. We were keen to understand how members of the veterinary team were experiencing discrimination and where there were examples of good practice or ideas for better support and resources.

The respondents were obviously self-selecting and no information on prevalence could be drawn from the results, although it is worth noting that many people responded to tell us they had not experienced or witnessed discrimination. This questionnaire was designed to gather examples of discrimination rather than statistics on the prevalence, so these responses have been excluded from the report.

In order to gain a better understanding of the scale of the problem, we separately included questions in the Spring 2019 Voice of the Veterinary Profession survey. This survey was completed by BVA members only (ie veterinary surgeons), so the two pieces of research are not directly comparable but together they provide a fuller picture of what is happening in veterinary workplaces and vet schools.

To distinguish between the two pieces of research in this report, we refer to the first piece as the **discrimination questionnaire** and the second as the **Voice survey**.

The results of both the questionnaire and survey have been analysed by Alpha Research, an independent research company: www.alpharesearch.co.uk

The results

How big is the problem?

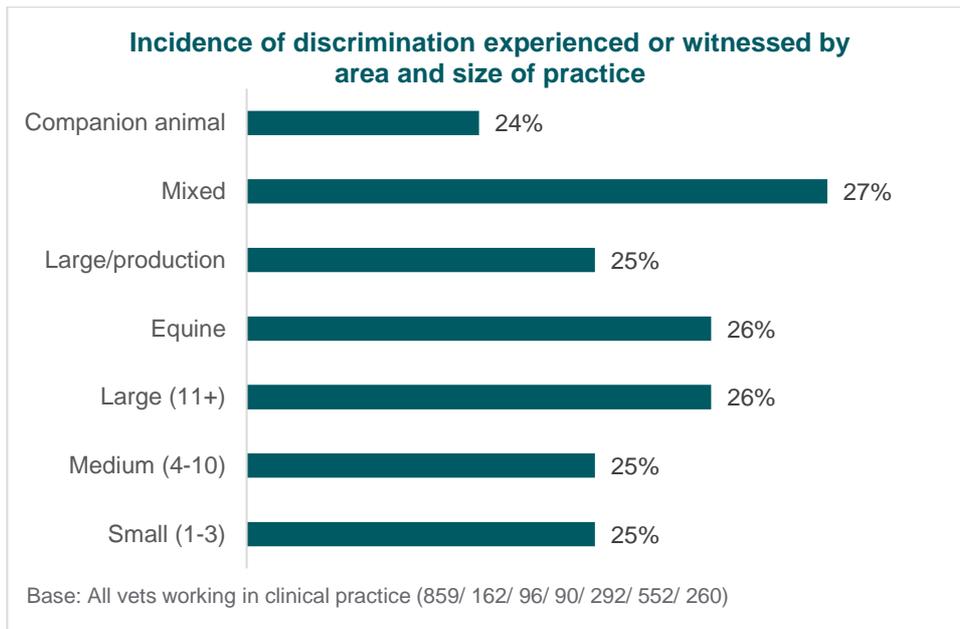
The **discrimination questionnaire** received an unprecedented 2445 responses. In total, 721 respondents had experienced or witnessed perceived discrimination, giving accounts of 1305 incidents. 70% of the incidents described by respondents had been personally experienced and 30% were witnessed. Although this survey was not designed to examine the scale of the problem, the high number of responses indicated that it was likely to be widespread.

The questionnaire included incidents of discrimination from across the veterinary profession. 82% were experienced by vets (68% in clinical practice), 9% were experienced by vet students and 7% by vet nurses.

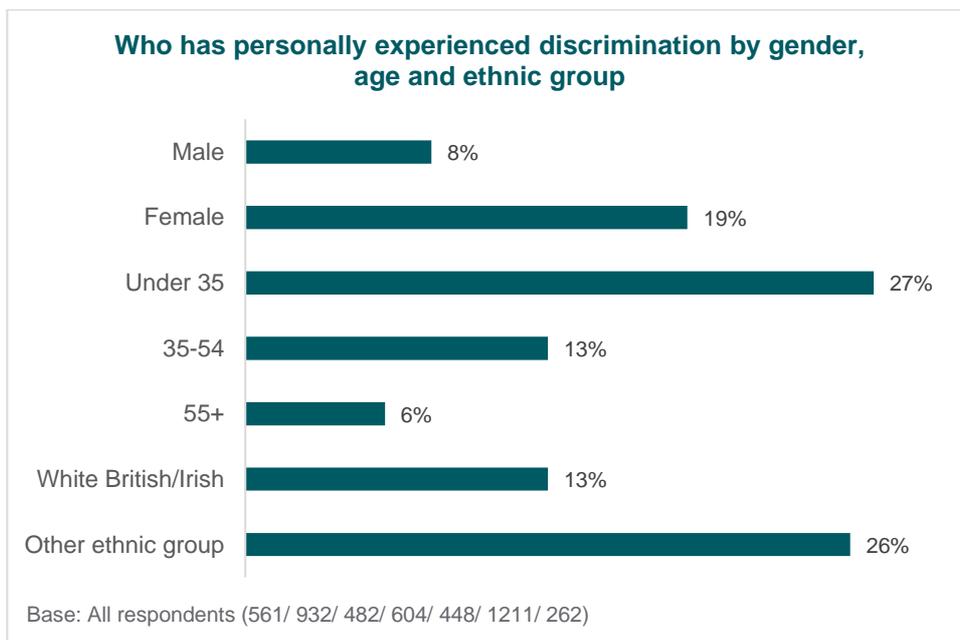
We received 1551 responses to the **Voice survey**, with around a quarter of the BVA members surveyed (24%) claiming to have witnessed or personally experienced discrimination within a veterinary workplace or learning environment in the past twelve months. 71% of respondents said they had not witnessed or experienced discrimination in the last 12 months.

24%
have witnessed or
experienced
discrimination in the
last 12 months
(Voice survey)

The **Voice survey** results showed there is little difference in the incidence of experiencing or witnessing discrimination in different working environments. Vets working in clinical practice, those working in non-clinical roles and veterinary students were equally likely to have experienced or witnessed discrimination. It also showed that incidence is similar in all areas of clinical practice and in both smaller and larger practices:



However, as the graph below shows, there are significant differences in the experiences of different demographic groups. Younger vets are significantly more likely than older vets to have personally experienced discrimination in the past year. Female vets are significantly more likely to have experienced discrimination than male vets (19% and 8% respectively).



The **Voice Survey** showed incidence of discrimination is higher amongst vets from a range of minority ethnic backgrounds, and more than one in four vets (27%) who described their sexual orientation as bi, gay or lesbian had personally experienced discrimination in the past year; almost double the incidence amongst vets describing themselves as heterosexual or straight (15%).

Although we received a number of responses stating that discrimination is not an issue in the profession, the results of both surveys suggest otherwise.

What characteristics are being discriminated against?

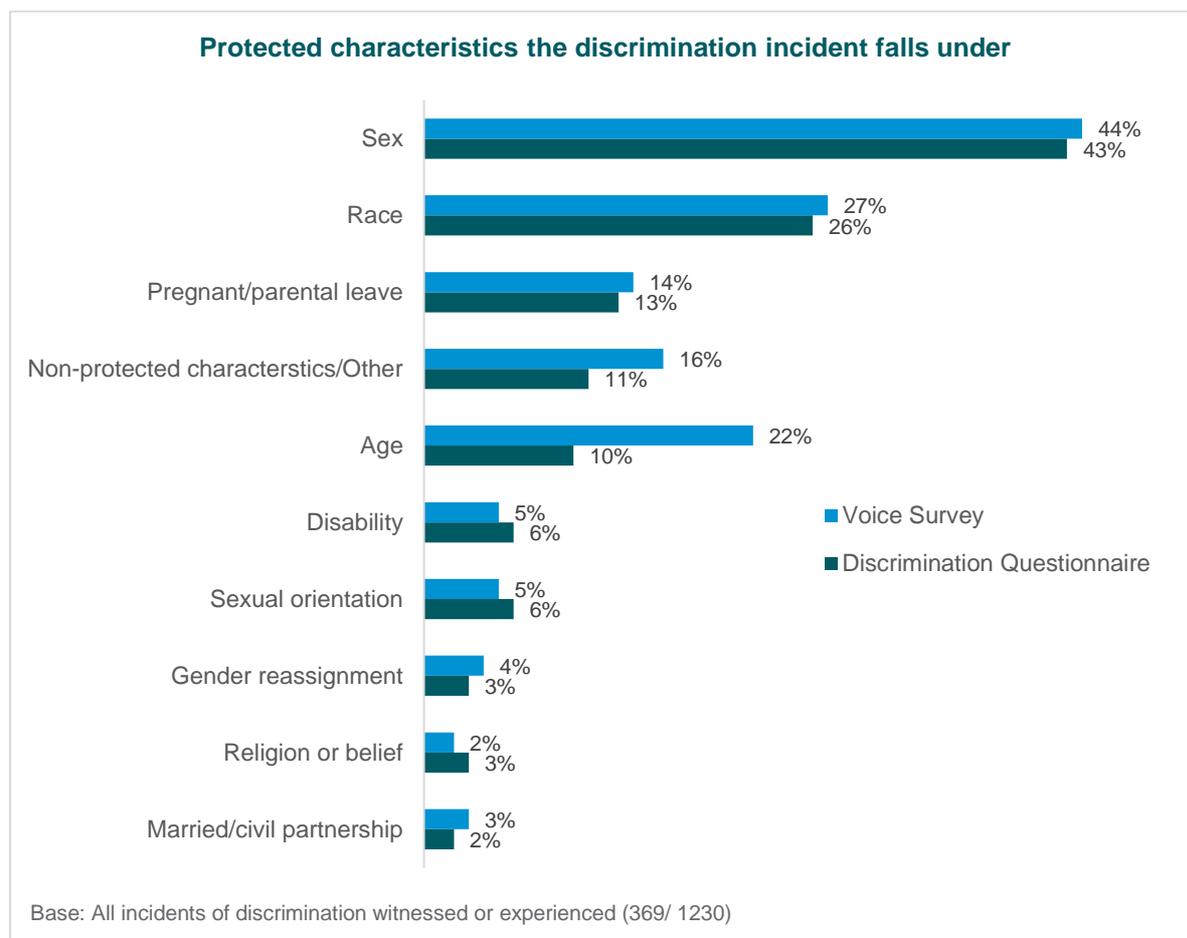
The types of incidents detailed in the two surveys are broadly similar, and any differences are likely to reflect the different methodologies employed and variation in the profiles of the respondents.

The **discrimination questionnaire** results showed that different types of discrimination were generally experienced in similar proportions by vets in clinical practice, in non-clinical roles, and current students, although the **Voice survey** revealed some slight differences according to workplace.

Sex discrimination was the most common type of discrimination reported in both the **discrimination questionnaire** (43% of incidents) and the **Voice survey** (44% of incidents). The **Voice survey** suggested that sex discrimination is particularly high in academic settings and in production animal, equine, and mixed practices.

Race discrimination was the next most commonly reported, with 26% of incidents in the **discrimination questionnaire** and 27% of incidents in the **Voice survey** falling under this category. The **Voice survey** showed that for vets working in companion animal practice, the incidence of race discrimination is particularly high and similar to that of sex discrimination, each making up around a third of the most recent incidents witnessed or experienced. Race discrimination was less commonly mentioned by vets working in production animal practice, equine practice or mixed practice.

The graph below shows the breakdown of incidents by protected characteristics under the Equality Act:



The **discrimination questionnaire** revealed a perceived resistance at the recruitment stage to hire people of a particular characteristic, despite being as well or better qualified than others applying for the role. A higher proportion of sex (pregnancy/parental leave and maternity discrimination) was reported at this stage compared to other forms of discrimination. At the end of employment, a higher proportion of disability discrimination was reported, with cases of redundancy, unfair dismissal, and constructive dismissal being cited:

“Experienced older male vet telling me that I should not go into equine practice and that he hated hiring young female vets because they 'go off and get pregnant' and can't stick with the equine profession once they've had children.”

“I did declare that I had a disability when I started... I asked if there was not a place for disabled people to park. The practice was on a very large farm. He said tough, I must park there. The next day I was fired and escorted out of the practice. I had no warning, meeting or any chance to discuss anything. All he said was he did not care what I said his mind is made up and I must go immediately.”

What type of discrimination is happening?

Language: Descriptions of the incidents given in the **discrimination questionnaire** showed that the use of offensive language was the most common form of discrimination, with cases involving physical harassment being much less frequently described. Some examples include:

“During my ambulatory equine rotation I was asked by the vet in the car where I was from. When I stated where I was from I was laughed at and asked where my ancestors were from. I felt really uncomfortable but didn't know who I could report the incident to.”

“On farm EMS and some farmers start liberally using 'faggot' around me, start doing the same thing to the vet and the vet just casually joins in, meanwhile I'm stood there silently watching.....I appreciate it's just meant to be 'banter', but the vet joining in was a bit much and became VERY uncomfortable for me.”

Workplace conditions: In the workplace, respondents commonly described discrimination such as being asked to take on greater workloads, being allocated less desirable tasks, a lack of tolerance of when needing to work at a different speed or quality, or a need for time off, lower rates of pay and lack of access to flexible hours or training. Incidents involving clients refusing to accept service from vets of a particular protected characteristic were also frequently described. Examples include:

“In small animal practice I am often asked to carry heavy dogs because I am male and there is a societal pressure for me to be strong, I now have a bad back.”

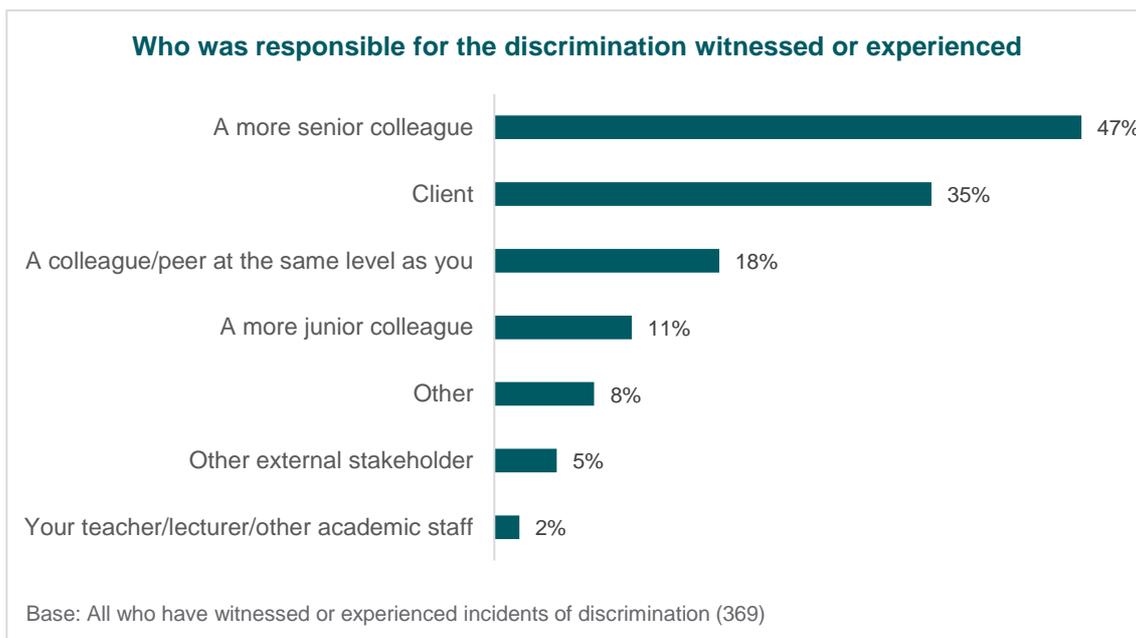
“Mixed animal clinical practice, when pregnant I was told by my boss (practice owner) the I was 'f**king useless' because there were calls that I wasn't able to complete. This attitude and tone continued throughout both of my pregnancies, it caused me stress, upset and caused me to take unnecessary risks and feel unsupported by my colleagues. This included completing out of hours care to [calving] cows until 37 weeks pregnant including Caesarean sections and uterine prolapses. I was made to feel second rate and a burden to the practice. At this time I took no action because I believed in a small rural practice bringing up my concerns would cause more trouble.”

Who is responsible for the discrimination?

The incidents of discrimination reported in the **discrimination questionnaire** showed the perpetrator could be managers, other colleagues or clients. The **Voice survey** showed that it is most commonly a senior colleague who is responsible for the discrimination (47%). However, discrimination from clients is also common, accounting for one in three (35%) of the most recent incidents detailed by all respondents and four in ten (41%) of those experienced or witnessed by companion animal vets.

Using data from the **Voice survey**, the chart below shows the breakdown of incidents by who was responsible:

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While colleagues were most commonly responsible for most types of discrimination, clients were most commonly responsible in the case of incidents of race discrimination (60 of 100 cases, 60%) and discrimination on the grounds of gender reassignment (10 of 14 cases, 71%).

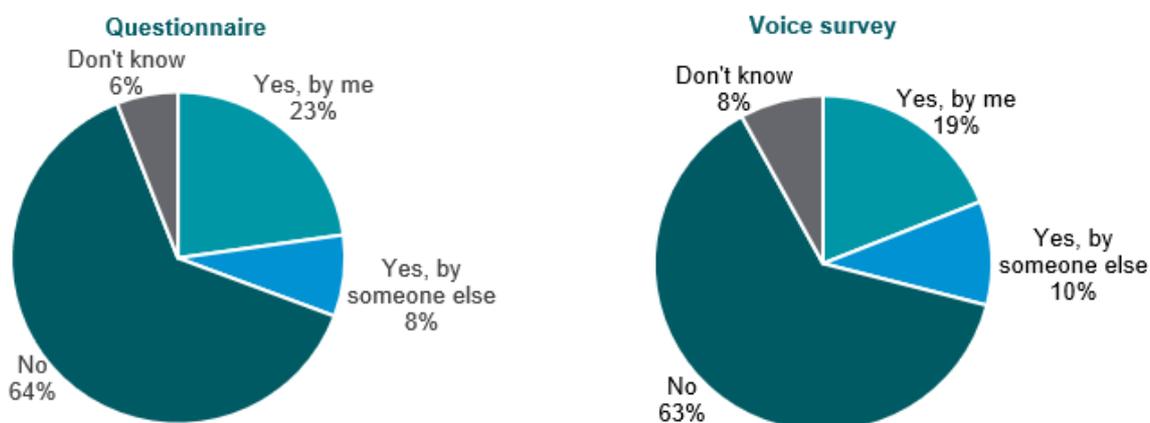
In cases where a client is responsible for the discrimination and senior colleagues/employers do not support the complainant or ignore the problem, veterinary team members face a 'double whammy'.

“Everyone laughed and said that he had a reputation and what did I expect? I was treated like a pariah.”

Are the incidents being reported?

Both surveys revealed that around two-thirds of incidents go unreported, as shown by the graphs below:

Was the incident reported?



Base: All incidents of discrimination witnessed or experienced (1240 / 368)

According to the **discrimination questionnaire**, disability discrimination was more likely to be reported (47% of incidents). Sex discrimination (27%), age discrimination (27%) or

pregnancy/parental leave discrimination (24%) were less likely to be reported. Both surveys indicated that sex discrimination was more likely to go unreported than race discrimination.

The **discrimination questionnaire** found that incidents of discrimination experienced or witnessed by vets in clinical practice and those working in non-clinical settings were equally likely to have been reported. However, the results suggest that discrimination experienced or witnessed by vet students is more likely to go unreported, with only one in five incidents witnessed or experienced by students having been reported (19%). Meanwhile around half (52%) of the incidents of discrimination experienced or witnessed by vet nurses were said to have been reported.

19%
of incidents witnessed or experienced by **vet students** were reported (Discrimination questionnaire)

The most common reasons given in the **discrimination questionnaire** for not reporting an incident were:

- **Ignored incident or decided not to take it further** (47 incidents). Respondents said that they took no notice of the incident, or thought it was not sufficiently serious to take action. Respondents also reported that they ignored the incident because they were used to it and were less affected by it than they might have been, suggesting some victims have become desensitised and some forms of discrimination somewhat normalised.

“I just accepted it as part of my working life and something I had to put up with.”

- **Not knowing how to complain or report the incident** (44 incidents). The procedure was deemed to be unclear or policies or protocols were not in place, for example if the perpetrator was a manager, practice owner or other senior colleague. This was slightly more common for incidents experienced by those who felt discriminated against on the basis of sexual orientation but did not vary significantly by role.

“The discrimination was conducted by my bosses, so there was nobody to report it to, thus I left the practice and it was never dealt with.”

- **Not having the confidence to complain** (31 incidents). Some respondents felt unable to take it further because they were intimidated by the prospect of complaining. The numbers are small, but incidents experienced by veterinary students were more likely to be not reported for this reason.

“I felt extremely isolated. I was worried about addressing the issue as I was new, and also that the incident would be dismissed as a misunderstanding, a joke or denial.”

- **Did not believe reporting would lead to action** (27 incidents). There was a perception that either action might not be taken as a result of reporting an incident, or that it would be difficult to prove or that one might not be believed.

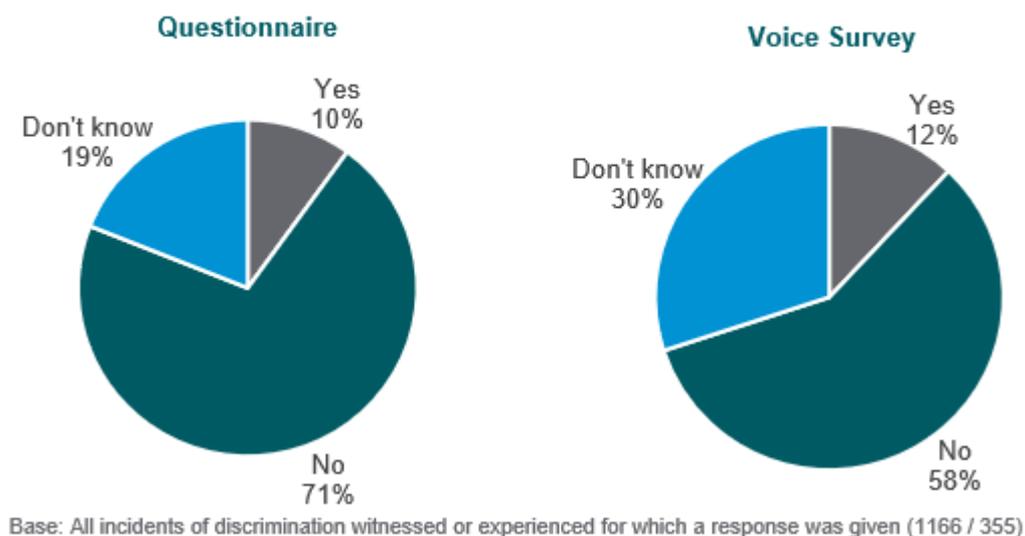
“Unfortunately, it will always be difficult to prove when nationality/background is in question and therefore not worth spending time on.”

- **Fear of reprisal** (17 incidents). Some thought that it would be less than fruitful to complain about an incident because there may be repercussions and working life might become more intolerable as a result.

“Did not take it further due to wanting to work locally in the same field, and I was worried about my chances of employment being affected”

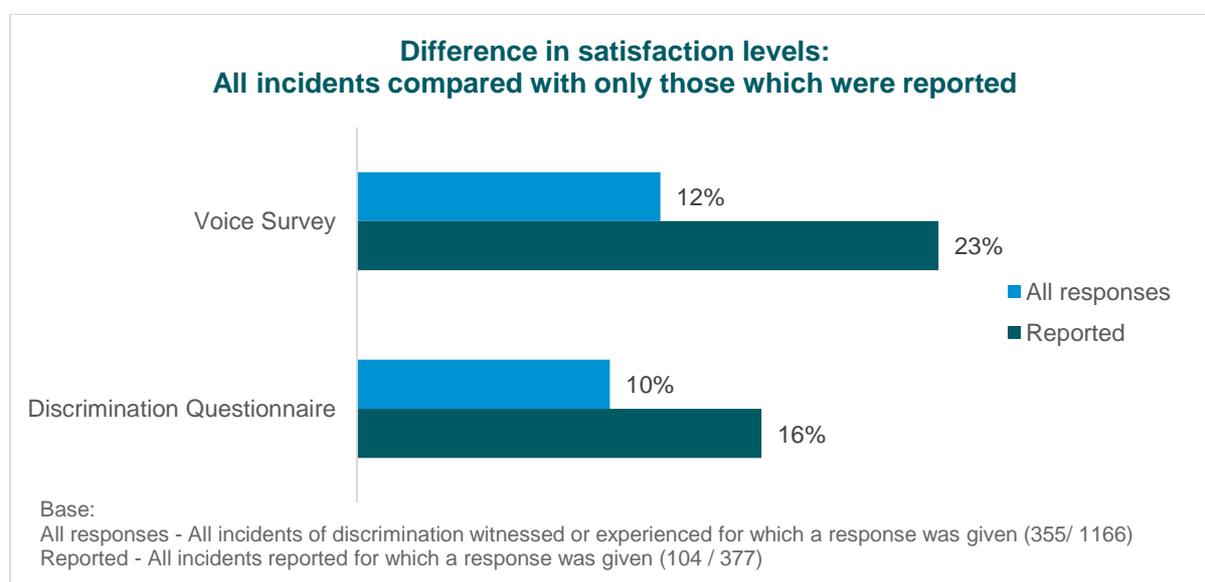
The majority of respondents did not feel the incident had been dealt with satisfactorily. Just 10% of the responses to the **discrimination questionnaire** and 12% of those in the **Voice survey** were satisfied with how the incident had been dealt with, with 71% and 58% of respondents respectively said it had not been dealt with satisfactorily.

Was the incident dealt with satisfactorily?



Opinions on whether or not the discrimination was dealt with appropriately varied by the type of discrimination. In both surveys, incidents of race discrimination were generally more likely to have been dealt with satisfactorily, although more than half of the respondents were not happy with how it was dealt with. In both surveys, cases of disability discrimination (2% discrimination questionnaire and 0% Voice survey) and pregnancy/ parental leave discrimination (6% discrimination questionnaire and 4% Voice survey) were less likely to be seen to have been dealt with satisfactorily.

When an incident had been reported, the satisfaction levels increased slightly, but remained low at 16% of incidents recorded in the **discrimination questionnaire** and 23% of those in the **Voice survey** being dealt with satisfactorily. 72% and 61% respectively reported that they were not satisfied with the outcome.



The **discrimination questionnaire** gave respondents an opportunity to give further information on how an incident was dealt with. Of those that provided details, a quarter of cases (25%) described positive outcomes, such as a perpetrator no longer being discriminatory, or workplace benefits being harmonised. However, negative outcomes were more frequently identified (62% of comments), such as the incident being dismissed, no action taken by managers, or discrimination continuing.

How concerned is the profession?

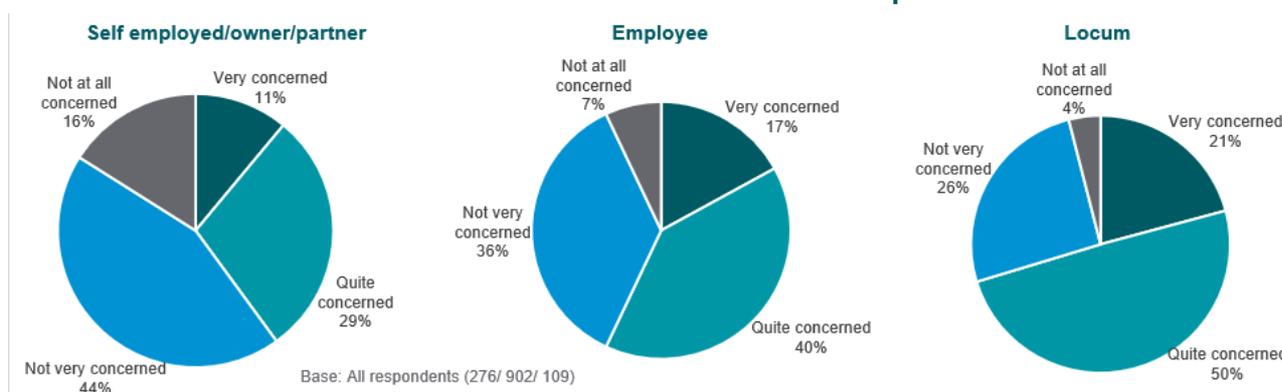
The **Voice survey** asked vets how concerned they were about discrimination and diversity in the profession. Only 45% of vets said they were concerned about diversity in the profession, and 56% said they were concerned about discrimination. These results suggest a lack of awareness and/or acceptance of the problem and therefore there is an opportunity to educate a large proportion of the profession on this topic.

56%

of vets are concerned about discrimination (Voice survey)

As the graphs below show, employed and locum vets were significantly more likely to be concerned about these issues than those who were self-employed/partners/practice owners. Concern about discrimination was particularly high amongst vets working in non-clinical roles and students.

Levels of concern about discrimination in the profession



What are examples of good practice?

The surveys also gave respondents the opportunity to highlight areas of good practice and suggest resources and campaigns which may be helpful.

The **discrimination questionnaire** revealed six main themes for examples of good practice:

- Support groups and networks, such as BVLGBT+ and BVEDS
- Visibility and role models. Publicity of the issues was cited as positive by those who felt less alone by reading/hearing about other people's experiences. It was also mentioned in terms of providing ideas for promoting/celebrating diversity.
- Workplace culture and actions. Having systems in place and a positive culture set by leaders. Some organisations and individuals were named for good practice.
- Training and resources, such as unconscious bias training. From the responses, specific diversity and discrimination training seems to be more prevalent in non-clinical workplaces, particularly within government.
- Services. Some specific services were mentioned as positive example of good practice, such as the BVA legal advice line.
- Other examples of good practice, including congresses, friends and the questionnaire itself.

Respondents to the **discrimination questionnaire** also suggested ways for BVA to help address problems with discrimination, which mostly fell into four main areas:

- Actions – such as promotion of existing services, resources and support groups
- Campaigns – suggestions which could help to raise awareness of issues and highlight good practice
- Services – support groups and helplines for a range of specific issues

- Resources – training and guidelines on how to handle discrimination and bias, for both employees and employers

There were similar responses in the Voice survey, with the most frequent suggestions being: prioritising tackling gender discrimination; focusing on best practice for employers; and facilitating increased diversity in the profession.

What next?

We hope this report will ignite debate and discussion within the veterinary profession.

In April 2019, BVA convened the Good Workplace Working Group which aims to develop a vision for a good veterinary workplace, supplemented by a “good place to work” voluntary code/standard. The group will look at diversity, equality and inclusion, as well as the health and wellbeing, career and community elements of what makes a good veterinary workplace, across all sectors and working environments. These results, as well as those from the workforce studies and other sources of information will feed into the work of the group and the recommendations they make.

To help identify potential actions and resources for BVA to progress, these results have also been considered by the BVA Ethics and Welfare Advisory Panel and Policy Committee, and will be further discussed by our Council and Membership Benefits Committee. The results will also be shared with the RCVS Diversity and Inclusion Working Group chaired by Niall Connell.

We are launching our “Big conversation on equality and inclusion in the veterinary professions” and we want to hear directly from members of the veterinary teams across the UK. During 2019 we will run online engagement sessions through social media and invite BVA members to feed in views via their regional representatives on Council.

For further support and information about some of the issues raised within this report please do not hesitate to get in touch with the following:

- [Vetlife](#) (Helpline number: 0303 040 2551)
- [BVA legal helpline](#) (members only)
- [British Veterinary Ethnicity and Diversity Society](#)
- [British Veterinary LGBT+](#)
- [BVNA Support page](#)
- [Veterinary Spoonholders UK](#)
- [Mind](#) (Infoline number: 0300 123 3393)