

BVA response to Animal Welfare Committee:

Call for information on animal welfare issues related to Covid-19 restrictions

Who we are

1. The British Veterinary Association (BVA) is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom. With over 18,000 members, our primary aim is to represent, support and champion the interests of the United Kingdom's veterinary profession. We, therefore, take a keen interest in all issues affecting the profession, including animal health and welfare, public health, regulatory affairs and employment matters.
2. This period of restrictions has highlighted a number of animal welfare issues across all sectors. Therefore, we welcome the opportunity to provide evidence on the impacts of Covid-19 on animal welfare.
3. Below we consider the effect of covid-19 on animal welfare, particularly focussing on:
 - The operation and sustainability of veterinary practice to provide services that support the health and welfare of animals
 - The effect on domestic pets and equines, including the effects on animal welfare charities.
 - The impact on livestock sectors.
 - The impact on zoological collections.

Veterinary practice

4. The ability of veterinary practices to operate during this period of restrictions has been essential for the welfare of animals across all sectors. Additionally, animal welfare depends on the sustainability of veterinary businesses during this period of restrictions and longer-term.

The operation of veterinary practice

5. In recognition of the vital role performed by veterinary surgeons in maintaining animal health, animal welfare, public health and the food chain, the UK government exempted veterinary practices from the requirement to close during the lockdown.¹
6. At the start of lockdown, BVA² and RCVS³ issued guidance to support the profession. BVA guidance noted:

“During this period veterinary professionals can continue to work, in line with the UK government's advice to business, but must only provide in-person services that are needed to maintain the food supply chain, or which are essential for animal health and welfare or public health, including to relieve pain and suffering.

These services must also be provided in a manner that supports social distancing, including avoiding all unnecessary in-person contact with clients, maintaining a safe

¹ HM Government, Guidance Closing certain businesses and venues

² British Veterinary Association, Guidance for veterinary practices in providing essential veterinary care during the Covid-19 pandemic <https://www.bva.co.uk/media/3434/bva-guidance-for-veterinary-practices-on-covid-19-from-14-april-2020-final.pdf>

³ Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, Flowchart - guidance for clinical practices during COVID-19 <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus-covid-19/flowchart-guidance-for-clinical-practices-during-covid-19/>

physical distance, and ensuring that animals are only seen face-to-face where absolutely necessary.”

7. All non-essential cases that could be delayed were postponed, putting a significant strain on veterinary practice income and threatening the long-term viability of some businesses. In order to continue to provide veterinary services in support of animal health and welfare and public health it is essential that we maintain businesses and a workforce that can carry out this work.
8. In line with the easing of restrictions across the UK, many veterinary practices have begun transitioning towards providing as full a range of veterinary services as possible in a safe manner. However, it will not be a return to pre-Covid ‘business as usual’. Practices have adapted to this new way of working and have been able to ensure clients and their animals receive care. However, in order to comply with social distancing and good hygiene requirements the provision of many services will be at a reduced efficiency.

The sustainability of veterinary practice

9. The ability of veterinary practices to sustain their businesses during this period of restrictions is essential for the long-term welfare of animals across all sectors. The RCVS has run a series of surveys of veterinary practices to capture the financial impact and to understand the trends.
10. In the first week of April, the RCVS ran a survey to assess the immediate impact of Covid-19 on veterinary clinical practices.⁴ The survey revealed that 2 in 3 veterinary practices saw a decrease in turnover of over 50 per cent and almost a quarter of all practices saw turnover fall by over 75 per cent. A second survey in the first week of May⁵ showed that, following new guidance from RCVS and BVA issued in April, practices had been able to expand their caseload to include some non-urgent and non-emergency procedures, but over a quarter of all practices had still seen turnover fall by over 50 per cent since measures were put in place (ie 23 March 2020). The table below shows the impact on turnover practices have endured:

To what extent has your weekly practice turnover changed?		
	Since social distancing measures were put in place (i.e. 23 March 2020) Results from April survey	Since the guidance was updated on 14 April, compared with pre-covid-19 Results from May survey
Not reduced at all	1%	7%
Reduced by less than 25%	4%	12%
Reduced by 26%-50%	29%	47%
Reduced by 51%-75%	42%	29%
Reduced by more than 75%	24%	6%
	n=497	N=236

11. The figures below from the April show the reduction in turnover by sector.

⁴ Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, Results from RCVS survey #1 (carried out between 3-7 April 2020) on the economic impact of Covid-19 on veterinary clinical practices 17 April 2020 <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/publications/coronavirus-economic-impact-on-veterinary-practice/>

⁵ Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, Results from RCVS survey #2 (carried out between 1-5 May 2020) on the economic impact of Covid-19 on veterinary clinical practices 13 May 2020 <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/publications/rcvs-survey-2-on-the-economic-impact-of-covid-19-on-veterinary/>

Reduction in turnover broken down by practice type (April Survey)			
	Small animal	Mixed	Equine
Not reduced at all	1%	2%	0%
Reduced by less than 25%	3%	5%	2%
Reduced by 26%-50%	30%	47%	9%
Reduced by 51%-75%	48%	33%	24%
Reduced by more than 75%	19%	14%	65%
	n=346	n=66	n=55

12. The figures for mixed practice in the table above will capture a significant proportion of farm animal work in the UK. We have also received the input from BVA farm animal divisions to add more qualitative information from those sectors. At this time, farm animal practice can continue to provide services which are vital for the continuation of food production. There has, however, been a reduction in other future planning services, such as herd health planning, which will have an impact on animal health and welfare in the longer term. The profitability of farm animal practice is inextricably linked to the wider livestock industry, which saw huge disruption, particularly in sectors that have been affected by the shutdown of the foodservice industry as well as restaurants, cafes and coffee shops.
13. In the May survey, a low response rate in some categories made it inappropriate to report the data in the same format. It was however notable that the most frequent response had improved for small animal and equine practices, but not mixed practices, where it had stayed the same. The table below shows the most frequent response for each practice type:

Reduction in turnover broken down by practice type						
	Small animal		Mixed		Equine	
	April	May	April	May	April	May
Not reduced at all						
Reduced by less than 25%						
Reduced by 26%-50%		X (51%)	X (47%)	X (48%)		
Reduced by 51%-75%	X (48%)					X (53%)
Reduced by more than 75%					X (65%)	
	n=346		n=66		n=55	

Access to financial relief

14. The financial package that the UK and devolved governments have made available to businesses and workers during this time is unprecedented and largely welcomed. However, in many ways, this package did not cover the unique circumstances of veterinary practices, and this is a significant concern.
15. We support the Job Retention Scheme (JRS) as a means to reduce staff costs during this time. However, the practicalities of operating a veterinary practice limited the ability of some practices to make use of the scheme. Creating a workable rota with 24-hour coverage becomes more difficult if working staff become sick or need to self-isolate. Therefore, practices have not utilised the scheme where they would need to bring staff at short notice.
16. It was therefore welcome when the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced the coronavirus (COVID-19) Self-employment Income Support Scheme. However, many veterinary surgeons are directors or joint venture partners within their practices and their take-home pay is derived from the practice income. As noted above, practices are experiencing a significant financial loss, leading to significantly reduced income for those vets. The package announced for the self-employed explicitly excludes those who derive income from dividends, which will have a hugely detrimental impact on their personal finances. Furthermore, a failure to support these vets will affect the sustainability of their business and potentially disrupt essential veterinary services both during this period of restrictions and going forward.
17. 100% business rates relief has also been announced for businesses in retail, hospitality and leisure. A grant of £25,000 is being made available for businesses in the same sectors. Medical services, including veterinary practices, have been excluded from both of these support schemes. This is despite the significant drop in turnover in veterinary practices that far exceeds that experienced in much of the retail sector.
18. According to the Office for National Statistics,⁶ in March 2020, the monthly retail sales volume fell by 5.1%. Within the retail sector, clothing store sales saw a fall when compared with the previous month, at negative 34.8%. Food stores and non-store retailing saw growth in the monthly volume series in March 2020, with food stores seeing the strongest growth on record, at 10.4%. The modal drop in the veterinary clinical sector turnover was between 51%-75% according to the RCVS survey data.⁷
19. Amongst the vast challenges facing our profession at this time, such an exclusion places many of our members at a great disadvantage compared to other industries. We are concerned that this action may devastate the income of veterinary practices. This may lead to the permanent closure of practices particularly in more remote parts of the country, with serious implications for animal welfare.

Impact of contact tracing

20. It is our understanding that the next phase of restrictions will be characterised not by national lockdowns but by localised targeted actions including the use of contact tracing where individuals test positive for Covid-19. We support this direction of travel which, if effectively operated, will allow a greater easing of restrictions for a greater number of people, which in turn will allow greater provision of veterinary services to support the health and welfare of animals.
21. However, there have been concerns about the potential impact of the contact tracing programmes introduced across the UK on the veterinary profession. These could have a significant impact on the provision of veterinary services as the nature of veterinary work means members of the veterinary team

⁶Office for National Statistics, Retail sales, Great Britain: March 2020
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/bulletins/retailsales/march2020>

⁷Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, Results from RCVS survey #1 (carried out between 3-7 April 2020) on the economic impact of Covid-19 on veterinary clinical practices 17 April 2020 <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/publications/coronavirus-economic-impact-on-veterinary-practice/>

are in close contact with their colleagues in order to work safely with animals. If a member of the team tests positive, this could impact on their ability to staff a full rota to maintain 24/7 care.

22. Veterinary teams are continuing to work in fixed pairs or small teams as much as possible to reduce their contact with different individuals, and to support affected neighbouring practices, but this will not always be possible. We have significant concerns about the impact on animal health and welfare if practices are unable to provide veterinary services. It is vital that vets are able to ensure full geographical cover for veterinary services even when some team members are asked to self-isolate.
23. Many of our members have queried whether veterinary professionals need to self-isolate if they have been wearing PPE during the 15+ minutes of contact with an infected person. Our understanding of the current contact tracing systems is that, as it stands, they are not flexible enough to take these details into account. Contact tracing call handlers will not be able to talk through the different levels of risk associated with different types of PPE and the algorithms of the system will only be able to look at the basic information.
24. We're calling on governments to alter the system so that people working in a veterinary context are considered in a similar vein as those working in human healthcare settings, schools, and prisons. In the English system these are the 'Tier 1' calls, which are handled by local public health experts. These calls allow for more nuanced discussions with people who would understand our clinical ways of working and how to assess the level of risk if a contact has been with colleagues who have been wearing PPE.

The effect on domestic pets and equines

Animal welfare charities and a wider economic downturn

25. The Covid-19 crisis is one of the biggest shocks to the economy in modern history. The labour market impacts so far are well understood, being very sectorally differentiated, with the young, the low paid and the self-employed most likely to be affected. The longer-term economic impact is more uncertain.
26. According to the Resolution Foundation⁸:

“With the lifting of lockdown restrictions, mobility has increased since May, and output is expected to increase over the course of 2020. Unlike in other recent income hits, inflation is also expected to remain low, falling to 0.3 per cent by Q4 2020. But despite that overall recovery, the phasing out of the JRS and continued impacts from coronavirus mean that rising unemployment is now a critical concern. The OBR forecasts unemployment hitting 11.9 per cent in Q4 2020: much higher than the peak following the financial crisis. The workers most at risk are disproportionately already in lower-income households, with 23 per cent of workers in the poorest fifth of the household income distribution working in retail, hospitality or leisure; compared to 9 per cent in the highest income fifth. And compared to the JRS, unemployment support in 2020-21 is far less generous.”
27. This forecast is deeply concerning for animal welfare. As incomes decrease, owners will become less able to afford the costs associated with their animals including vet bills. Pet owners may also take the short-term decision to cancel insurance coverage. This can mean pet owners may delay treatment, including preventative health care, which may have negative consequences on the welfare of their pets.
28. Consequently, there is an expectation that more animal owners will turn to the safety net of the charity sector that provides veterinary services to those facing financial hardship. There is the possibility surge of relinquishment in the later months of 2020. This will likely be the case for traditional pet animals, equines and exotic pet animals.

⁸ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-living-standards-audit-2020/>

29. The demand will be directly related to the worsening economic situation with higher levels of abandonment of animals need for low-cost veterinary services. There are historical precedents for this: following the 2008 banking crisis Blue Cross saw a 27% rise in abandoned or stray cats.
30. An increased demand for animal welfare charities services would come at a time when the incomes of those charities has been constrained. The charitable sector as a whole has been negatively impacted: Pro Bono Economics⁹ estimates that charities are facing a £10.1 billion funding gap over the next six months as a result of Covid-19, with incomes expected to drop by £6.7 billion at the same time as demand for their support rises by the equivalent of £3.4 billion.
31. Blue Cross¹⁰ notes the effect on their operation, which will be replicated across the sector:

“All our shops were closed; some staff were furloughed, and revenue was lost: Blue Cross reported a loss of £1m in income from stores closing in March to the end of May. Our Community and Events Team is expecting a gross loss of £600,000, with a further £600,000 loss from face to face fundraising activities. Overall, Blue Cross is forecasting a loss of £4m income in this financial year.”

Welfare of domestic pets

32. The companionship pet ownership can bring has brought much-needed solace to individuals, helping them with feelings of loneliness and anxiety that have defined the period of Covid-19 restrictions. With so many people unable to work, and locked down in their homes, owning or caring for a pet has been seen by many as an option for helping to cope with the pandemic.
33. An increase in demand saw many animals bought online without owners necessarily considering long term costs or commitments. The increase demand for pets during lockdown alongside difficulty visiting to see the pup in its home environment with m and litter mates could see a number of welfare issues emerge in the coming months and potentially increased abandonment.
34. An increase in pet ownership, especially amongst new, inexperienced owners who may be unable to cope with their recently purchased pet is a welfare concern. A lack of owner knowledge around the welfare needs of domesticated animals came out as a top issue in a recent study which was commissioned by the Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF) and [published with peer review](#).
35. Lockdown has had a massive impact on both the behaviour of our pets and the needs of owners in terms of trying to deal with them. The change in owner lifestyles has increased exposure to physical contact, overhandling and a lack or respite from busy home life has potentially resulted in behavioural problems developing.
36. For puppies, socialisation is a crucial part of development. Usually, this would include meeting lots of different people, other dogs, going to regular puppy classes and exposure to a wide range of situations and environments. Covid-19 restrictions, though, mean that puppies are unable to be socialised in all the ways we ordinarily would and, as a result, animals are developing behavioural problems during lockdown. These problems could in turn lead to more puppies being abandoned due to owners being unable to cope.
37. Pets will have become used to having their owners around virtually all day and receiving the extra attention this will have brought. As people return to their workplaces, this could lead pets to develop what is known as ‘separation anxiety’ which can manifest itself in certain behaviours: hyperactivity, whining, increased heart rate.

⁹ www.probonoeconomics.com/news/charities-facing-%C2%A3101-billion-funding-gap-over-next-six-months

¹⁰ Blue Cross Covid 19 Pets and Pet Owners: Blue Cross Briefing

38. Since the beginning of the lockdown on 23rd March, calls to the National Domestic Abuse helpline increased by 25%.¹¹ The link between violence to people and violence to animals is well documented. The Links Group – a coalition of organisations focussed on the link between domestic and animal abuse - has written to the Vet Record and the Vet Times expressing its concern that there may be an increase in such cases, often allied to domestic abuse within the home: “the family pet is often part of the domestic abuse cycle with perpetrators using the pet to exert power and control over their victim.”¹²

Welfare of equines

39. The National Equine Welfare Council (NEWC) and the Association of Dog and Cat Homes (ADCH) have conducted a survey on the ‘Impact of Covid 19 on Equine Rescue Organisations’. It found that the initial ban and subsequent restrictions on rehoming will have added pressure and additional costs to the sector:

- 66% of those who responded had stopped or reduced rehoming, while only 38% of all rescues had stopped taking in animals
- 51% report they had reduced access to non-essential veterinary interventions and, more worryingly, 32% said they had reduced access to essential veterinary care.
- It is important to note animal cruelty concerns are not limited to small animals. 14% of equine rescue organisations are already reporting more calls about cruelty to animals while only 5% are receiving fewer calls.

The effect on the livestock sector

40. Throughout the pandemic, the importance of agriculture, and all those involved in the farm to fork process, has been brought into sharp relief. This includes farm animal vets and Official Veterinarians in abattoirs who continued to provide essential services to ensure sufficient food for the UK at the height of lockdown restrictions.

41. There are concerns abattoirs and meat processing plants may be unable to operate because of localised outbreaks of covid 19. This could have knock on effects on farms. If livestock is unable to move to an abattoir there this can lead to overstocking occurring on farms resulting in detrimental effects on animal welfare and health.

42. Covid has come on top of the challenges brought about by a long wet winter, a very dry spring and a poor summer. The industry was already raising concerns in early spring that feed would be in short supply in the back end of 2020 as a result. Reduced stock movements during lockdown may have increased the severity of this need in some areas.

43. As with other sectors, an anticipated economic downturn will have consequences for livestock sectors. There is a concern that economic uncertainty will see farmers postpone more future-minded services, such as herd health planning or vaccination, or delay investments in systems that would see an increase health and welfare.

44. With this in mind, to support a sustainable UK agriculture and aquaculture industry going forward, it is important that government continues to work with the sector to promote the UK’s high animal health and welfare standards, support UK-based food production and encourage consumers to value UK produce.

¹¹ <https://www.refuge.org.uk/25-increase-in-calls-to-national-domestic-abuse-helpline-since-lockdown-measures-began/>

¹² <https://veterinary-practice.com/news/2020/survey-showing-dramatic-effect-of-covid-19-on-horse-rescue-organisations-fuels-fears-of-worsening-equine-welfare-crisis>

45. In addition, with Brexit negotiations ongoing, it is vital that the UK government honours its manifesto commitment to maintain and enhance animal welfare standards, ensuring that any future trade deals do not compromise undermine the essential work of UK agriculture.

Effect on zoological collections

46. The wide range of licensed zoos, from small and large mixed collections to safari parks, bird of prey centres, reptile houses and aquariums, are facing unprecedented challenges resulting from sudden loss of visitors and significant loss of income, along with staff and volunteer shortages. Of course, this industry must also continue to meet their statutory and moral obligations in respect of animal welfare.

47. Government has put in place a bespoke financial support for the zoo sector. On June 27, was announced that zoos and aquariums in England were set to receive up to £100 million to help mitigate the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic.¹³ This will run until the end of March 2021 to ensure the necessary long-term support is in place to help with severe financial difficulties.

48. In England, zoos and aquariums have been able reopen outdoor areas since 15 June, subject to social distancing measures being in place. However, visitor number have reduced and this reopening would likely be reversed in the event of a second spike in infections.

49. Throughout the pandemic zoos have continued to ensure animal welfare standards are upheld and animals' health needs are met. This funding will help zoos cover costs relating to animal keeping such as feed, heating and security. However, the longer term financial could see zoos forced to close. That disruption could impact negatively on animal welfare.

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/100-million-rescue-package-for-englands-zoos-and-aquariums>