

Speech to the BVA annual NI Dinner

**Justine Shotton, President of the British Veterinary
Association**

**on Wednesday 20 October at Parliament Buildings,
Stormont**

PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you, Mark.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm absolutely delighted to be welcoming you to the British Veterinary Association's 2021 Northern Ireland dinner. After the understandable hiatus of last year, it is such an immense pleasure that Stormont forms the backdrop for what is my first major speech as BVA President, as well as the first in-person parliamentary event we've been able to hold since

February 2020. I know that the set-up is a little different to previous years, but we are so grateful for the smiles behind the facemasks and the warm welcome from Northern Ireland's veterinary and farming communities that we receive whenever we come here.

Covid-19

We are particularly grateful to be here after an extended period of time conducting the bulk of BVA's core activities and relationship-building through computer screens. Holding this event tonight feels like a huge step in the right direction towards the new normal.

However, we also know how much the past 19 months have tested us all personally and professionally, and that we can be under no illusions that there will be more challenges to come.

Since those fateful early days in March 2020, we've made it our top priority to keep pace with new restrictions brought about by Covid-19, and worked hard to support our members through these difficult and

dizzily unpredictable times. Tonight, I want to recognise and pay tribute to the efforts of everyone who has navigated and supported each other through the changes, challenges and uncertainty during this period.

Introducing the Minister

I'd like to start by thanking Edwin Poots, Minister for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs, for joining us this evening and addressing us shortly.

We had a very positive and productive meeting with the Minister earlier this evening, and it's clear that he has a well-embedded understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by the veterinary and agri-food sectors in Northern Ireland.

Through Mark and our Branch we work closely with DAERA on the issues that matter most to our members, and we are really pleased that both Chief Veterinary

Officer Robert Huey and DAERA Permanent Secretary Anthony Harbison are also here tonight.

BVA President's theme

Speaking of working together, I hope you'll all agree that my presidential theme – Sustainability – is an issue which demands collaboration and clarity of purpose from all sides.

The pandemic has centred the world's attention on emerging diseases and how these interplay with how we use and impact on the natural environment.

As a vet working for a conservation-focused zoo, I have always believed that we each have a part to play in ensuring our practices are sustainable for the long-term, and that we need to find the balance to allow humans to thrive while supporting our wider ecosystems and all the wonders they hold. On the cusp of COP26, I can think

of no better time to really push forward these priorities, across our profession and beyond.

A One Health perspective is necessary, considering always the health of the environment, animals and people, to ensure we can all continue to prosper.

Please do engage with us in this vital work, and keep considering what we can all do at sector, organisational, and individual levels to help protect the planet both now and for our future generations.

Future Agricultural Policy

BVA was pleased to see DAERA recognising the importance of sustainability in its Future Agricultural Policy. And putting it front and centre by making ‘Sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape valued by everyone’ the tagline for the Framework Portfolio from which the vision will start to take shape.

But, we were disappointed that this document seemed distinctly lighter on detail when it comes to the role of the veterinary profession in achieving the stated aims. In fact, there is very little mention of animal health and welfare at all.

Vets have an integral part to play in securing positive outcomes for animal health and welfare and public health, but also in supporting the wider goals around environmental protection, resilience and productivity.

We had some success last year after calling on the UK Government to use public money to incentivise and support animal health and welfare outcomes as public goods. And in England, the soon-to-be-launched Animal Health and Welfare Pathway underlines the real benefits to be had from veterinary involvement and all parties working together with clear goals in mind. We can see similar opportunities emerging in Northern Ireland, and we're keen to see these seized as early as possible.

We'll be feeding into the forthcoming Future Farming consultation making the case for animal health and welfare to be central to the overall aims, and with a clear reminder that government, farmers and vets all need to work together to make this vision a reality.

Veterinary workforce

My sustainability theme weaves wider into other areas of the profession, such as the sustainability of our workforce. And given the unprecedented challenges that we have all faced since the beginning of the pandemic, it's critical that we consider how we can best support and retain our existing vets, as well as doing all we can to train and recruit new professionals to help boost supply.

A triple whammy of Brexit, Covid and a surge in pet ownership has taken its toll on the veterinary profession

to levels we could never have imagined at the beginning of 2020.

I know from the vets I have spoken to in Northern Ireland and across the UK that they have adjusted admirably to new pressures, new requirements, and new measures to keep themselves, colleagues and clients as safe as possible. But it is not sustainable. And as we take these small steps towards the new normal, it's clear that weathering a perfect storm of pressures continues to be immensely difficult across the veterinary community.

Alongside a surge in pet ownership, we've unfortunately seen a marked increase in aggressive behaviour and intimidation from clients towards vets and their teams during these challenging times. While the majority of clients have been supportive and understanding, it's unacceptable that any veterinary professional should have to face threats and abuse just for trying to do their job against such a difficult and unprecedented backdrop.

We continue to call on all animal owners via our #RespectYourVet campaign to #BeKind to veterinary teams and recognise that they are doing the best they can to prioritise animal health and welfare.

Veterinary Education

We need to look out for our existing vets, but part of the longer-term solution to deep-seated shortages lies in encouraging others to join our profession and ensuring there is a steady stream of future colleagues coming through the UK's vet schools over the years to come.

We're watching with interest as plans gather pace for the development of Northern Ireland's first vet school, and we're delighted that some of the key players within those proposals can join us tonight. With other new schools and places in the offing in other parts of the UK, success hinges on ensuring that they can all benefit from adequate funding, staffing and resource.

We're looking forward to playing an active role in these discussions as they take shape. Northern Ireland should be rightly proud of the innovation and collaboration emanating from its existing ecosystem of educational institutions – let's take the opportunity to build on and harness this in the best way we can.

Brexit

I couldn't get far into talking about capacity issues without bringing up Brexit. I'm well aware that there will be varying perspectives around the room tonight about the current situation and the future outlook, but what I will say is this.

Five years on from the EU referendum, veterinary certification of animals and animal products, medicine supply and the intricacies of travelling abroad with your dog, cat or ferret remain high on the list of legislative areas that still need to be worked out in 2021.

BVA has repeatedly raised concerns throughout the changes and complexities of the past five years around whether there will be enough veterinary capacity to meet new levels of demand for certification and checks.

I am pleased that Minister Poots recently recognised the shortage of vets within DAERA and also more widely in Northern Ireland, and confirmed that an independent analysis of ways to address this is underway.

But the challenges we face are happening now. Against the backdrop of existing shortages – and most recently the pandemic – vets have had to spend this time keeping pace with new requirements, increased demands on already-constrained capacity, shifting timeframes and reams of complex paperwork.

With Covid pressing pause on so much global trade, we know that some of the expected challenges and levels of veterinary demands have yet to materialise at their full force and that the true tests for veterinary capacity may still lie ahead.

Like everyone in this room, we are watching the latest negotiations on the Northern Ireland Protocol with great interest.

As vets, we will always advocate for the pragmatic and proportionate approach. To us, the paramount priorities are preserving the integrity of the supply chain, supporting agriculture across the UK and – our overriding *raison d'être* – upholding high standards of animal health and welfare at every turn.

Ultimately, it is those on the frontline of the food chain – the producers, farmers and vets – who stand to be most affected by any changes. And so I ask those involved in these important discussions to keep the agricultural community front and centre and make sure that there is adequate ongoing support for all those who may be impacted.

Animal Disease Control

In our integral role in trade and the smooth running of supply chains, vets are critical in ensuring high levels of biosecurity and monitoring and mitigating against disease risks, including those that can pose a threat to human health.

In Northern Ireland over the past year it's been incredibly positive to see attention turning to how we protect our livestock from - and eventually eradicate - one of the most devastating of these diseases: Bovine TB.

BVA fully supports the development of a partnership approach involving farmers, vets and government. It's the best way to encourage engagement and ownership, and ensure that the eradication strategy is unified and appropriate to the local area.

Beyond TB, the past year has amplified the importance of control programmes for other diseases including BVD

and John's. Keeping animals healthy is one of the veterinary profession's greatest contributions to environmental sustainability by reducing waste in the agricultural sector.

And I commend the efforts and collaboration of Animal Health and Welfare NI in these vital areas, and am really pleased that several representatives are able to join us tonight.

Antimicrobial Resistance

Next month marks the start of World Antibiotic Awareness week, and there is a lot of work underway and upcoming to protect our antibiotics for the future.

This year saw the launch of the Farm Vet Champions scheme, a major project which will work to unite and empower farm vets as they establish good antimicrobial stewardship both on farm and in practice. And it's positive to see that attention has also turned recently to

what we can do to tackle the threat of AMR in small animal practice too.

AMR is a One Health issue; it's vital that we build on the sterling work so far and do everything we can to reduce risks and address the challenges ahead for future generations.

Pet welfare

Turning to pet welfare, this has been a year where vets and their teams have needed to be particularly agile to new trends, pitfalls and pressures throughout the pandemic.

In the early days of lockdown, we had to respond quickly to put new measures in place to keep everyone safe without compromising animal health and welfare, and we know that this presented particular difficulties in terms of prioritising urgent care, limiting in-practice appointments and managing the expectations and frustrations of clients who were as anxious as we were.

While some 'new normality' can now return to practices, we know that veterinary teams are exhausted, many to the point of almost running on empty. And in many places they are struggling to accommodate the surge in pet ownership; it's estimated that 3.2 million UK households have taken on a pet since March 2020.

The mismatch between demand and supply adds up to some very difficult decisions for some practices, who are having to close their books to new clients and send them further afield for care and treatment. We continue to ask prospective owners to carefully consider local veterinary capacity as part of their research before taking on a new pet, and we ask you all to help us in getting that message out.

#CutTheCrop

The surge in demand unfortunately seems to have also paved the way for more instances of low welfare

breeding and owners unknowingly buying puppies and kittens from disreputable sources.

Last night's BBC NI exposé into the huge numbers of puppies illegally coming across the border is a particularly stark and pertinent reminder to us all that more must be done to enforce rules around the movement of pets.

We know that there is a huge amount to do collectively to manage these challenges and we're keen to work with DAERA and others to tackle this trade once and for all.

However, I want to draw to a close on a happier note.

In such a difficult year, I consider it a resounding achievement that BVA and others successfully lobbied the UK Government to take action to curb the rise in dogs with cropped ears being imported to the UK.

There is no place for this barbaric and purely cosmetic practice in the UK, and the provisions via the new Kept Animals Bill will send a strong signal that mutilating dogs for the sake of social media likes simply cannot be tolerated. While ear cropping may not yet be such an issue in Northern Ireland, we are immensely grateful to DAERA and other stakeholders for helping us to campaign and amplify such an important message to “Cut the Crop”.

Thank yous

Much of the activity and engagement that I’ve mentioned here could not have been achieved without my incredibly committed BVA Northern Ireland Branch colleagues. I want to say a huge thank you to Mark Little, the Branch President and his predecessor Susan Cunningham; in a year like no other they and the wider branch team have achieved a huge amount and made sure that our members in Northern Ireland have a strong voice on the issues that matter most.

To our guests, please do contact Mark, or any BVA colleague, if we can be of assistance on animal health and welfare, or veterinary public health matters moving forwards.

If everyone would now please rise, and raise your glasses, I would like us to toast sustainable agriculture, a sustainable veterinary workforce, and a sustainable world. To “sustainability”. [Toast]

I'd now like to hand over to Edwin Poots, Minister for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs. Thank you.