

Companion Animal Feeding Working Group (CAFWG):

Meeting 1 – Scoping and Workplan
Tuesday 28 February 11am

Attendees

- Sally Everitt (Chair)
- Justine Shotton (BVA Senior Vice President)
- Calum McIntyre (Policy Committee representative)
- Megan Cooper (EWAP representative)
- Alex Taylor (BVNA representative)
- Andrew Prentiss (Vet Sustain)
- Dan Makin (Veterinary Surgeon and Practice Owner, Vets4Pets)
- Georgia Woods-Lee (Weight Management Clinic Nurse at the University of Liverpool)
- Alison Ramsay (BVA Head of Policy and Public Affairs)
- Vera Cottrell (BVA Policy & Public Affairs Officer)

Apologies

- Marge Chandler (BSAVA)
- Mike Jessop (VPHA)
- Taranjit Dhansay (FSA)

1. Welcome, introductions and apologies for absence

The chair welcomed members to the first meeting. Members of CAFWG introduced themselves to ensure other members were aware which organisations and sectors they were members of, and of the relevant experiences and networks in the room.

The chair confirmed that minutes would be non-attributed. The group will use glasscubes to share documents and for discussions between meetings. A page will be set up on the BVA website where information about the work of the group will be made available including the membership of the group.

2. Review of working group scope and objectives

The Chair noted that the working group had been convened to develop the BVA position on diet choices for cats and dogs, addressing nutrition, sustainability, and public health. Development of this position is a BVA policy priority for 2022-2023, in response to a growing focus on the topic. It was clarified that the group will look at anything that contributes to an animal's diet, including supplements, treats and liquids and that grain-free and home-made diets should form part of considerations.

Recognising that there are polarised views, it was agreed that the position should be principles and evidence based to ensure longevity and the potential application to other species. It should highlight the role of vets, nurses and other practice staff involved in giving advice on feeding pets. The aim was to produce a final position that could be used to break down misconceptions around nutrition and provide resources for the profession to facilitate discussions and help educate dog and cat owners about safe, healthy and nutritionally balanced companion animal feeding. The group will ensure that the position takes into account sustainability and economic affordability.

Background

The Chair highlighted BVA's previous work on related areas which would be relevant to this position. The group discussed the key points from these positions and noted:

- **Animal Welfare:** it was noted that animal health and welfare should not be compromised to address human want or need.
- **Sustainability and the veterinary profession:** the transferability of provisions in the BVA sustainability action plan to practice food procurement and feeding of pets in veterinary practice was acknowledged.
- **Voice survey of the BVA members (October-November 2022):** it was noted that the results highlighted that most respondents were unsure what percentage of the cats and dogs they see in practice were being fed non-traditional diets, suggesting that this is not routinely discussed or recorded. It was recommended that discussion and recording of dietary history should form part of consultations with pet owners. It was also noted that accurate classification was difficult as some pet owners fed a combination of different types of 'food'. The survey provided insight into the popularity of different diets with raw feeding as the most common form of alternative diet provision seen in practice with 95% of respondents confirming that they had clients who feed a raw food diet to their animals. 41% of respondents also see patients on meat-free diets and 19% see patients on insect-based diets.
- Savsnet and Vet Compass were suggested as additional data sources on feeding habits but concern was expressed that data may be incomplete as vets did not routinely record this information. The PDSA PAW report was highlighted as a source of owner reported data on diet and pet food sales data should also be considered for information on sales of different types of diets.

Scoping

Attendees were asked to identify anything missing from the remit and scope of the working group, any additional sources of evidence to be considered and any additional stakeholders who should be listed as potential consultees.

In discussion it was noted:

- How pets are fed should include consideration of environmental and social stressors. It was agreed that both issues would be covered by adding the term welfare to the objectives.
- It was agreed that the welfare of both companion animals and production animals used to produce the food should be taken into account.
- Intended audiences for the group's outputs should include veterinary nurses and other client facing staff in veterinary practices.

- The focus of the group should be to determine whether feeding pets non-traditional diets was a sound nutritional choice.
- The paucity of small animal nutrition teaching in vet school curriculums and the role of pet food manufacturers in filling this gap was raised. It was noted that food companies have student reps at each vet school. Concerns were raised whether the context in which students receive information on nutrition lent itself to stimulate necessary critical analysis.
- Links between nutrition, dental health and behaviour were discussed. Much veterinary treatment could be linked back to issues related to those areas. It was felt that dental health concerns should be taken more seriously in connection with meat-free diets.
- Nutrient deficiencies linked to meat-free diets in cats were highlighted as a potential concern and it was agreed that this should be explored further.
- It was suggested that obesity should form part of the focus of the group.
- Attempts should be made to raise awareness of issues around obesity amongst vet and vet nurse students.
- There was discussion to what extent the scientific evidence provided by food manufacturers engaged critical appraisal. The small sample size of some in-house studies was also raised as a concern.
- The similarity between a pet owners' responsibility for a pet's health and a parent's responsibility for a child's health was pointed out. It was suggested that we consult a human paediatric nutritionist in order to explore any similarities.
- The issue of human diet trends being mirrored in companion animal feeding was raised. Greater awareness should be brought to the difference in nutritional needs between humans and animals.
- The group discussed potential outputs and agreed that there were already many vet and client-facing materials to support conversations around companion animal nutrition. As a result, it was felt that the focus of the group should be on identifying and sign-posting to material that was scientifically sound and identifying any gaps.
- The group should also look to produce a 'myth-buster' document to be aimed at pet owners but also other audiences.
- The myth-buster should also address the fact that principles applicable to human nutrition do not necessarily apply to pet nutrition, highlighting that human diet is significantly more diverse so that individual meals do not need to meet all nutritional requirements.
- It was agreed that the group should draw out misconceptions around terminology and ingredients when it comes to pet food (examples are: pet food does not undergo any processes that could be considered as ultra-processed; supplements are necessary to create a complete pet food, a long ingredient list is not an indicator of unnecessarily added ingredients).
- It was questioned whether there was a public health risk around raw feeding and it was suggested that the use of the term 'perceived public health risk' was more appropriate.
- Different cultural and religious attitudes to certain foods should be considered.
- Consideration should be given to potential allergens in certain diets eg insect based diets.

- It was necessary to acknowledge that animals have different digestive systems and there is therefore a need to feed them what they are evolved to feed. The ethical component of this was also raised.

The following additional consultees were suggested:

- Vanessa Schmidt (Senior Lecturer in Veterinary Dermatology, Liverpool University)
- Jo Dukes-McEwan – head of SA Cardiology University of Liverpool
- Andrew Knight
- Pets at Home
- Internal medicine expert (suggested expert with expertise in microbiome: Silke Salavati, Edinburgh University)
- Behaviourists (both cat and dog)
- Human pediatric nutritionist
- Wylie vets (for information on raw feeding/health club)
- The role family, friends and media, in particular social media, play in influencing decision making around diets was raised and it was suggested that Pru Hobson-West's perspective as a sociologist should be sought.

Sustainability

- It was suggested that packaging should form part of sustainability considerations.
- Over-feeding had a significant impact on sustainability and any messages produced by the group should reflect this.

Safety / Public Health

- The group agreed to look at how risks around different types of feeding were communicated to pet owners.
- The issue of how potential public health risks should be addressed in labelling was raised, with the Defra website highlighted as a resource for information to give to pet owners on public health risks associated with raw feeding.
- Pathogenic risks caused by certain foods in hospitals and cross-contamination was raised and provision of guidance on allowing raw food to be brought onto hospital premises for in-patients was discussed.
- The potential public health and environmental implications of faecal output of companion animals should be considered.

3. Overarching principles

Attendees were asked to agree a set of overarching principles to guide the outputs of the working group.

The draft suggestions were discussed and redrafted as follows:

- The group added the principle "Communication" to cover both veterinary professional and owner education and responsibilities

- It was agreed that the principle of ‘animal health and welfare’ should be amended to: Companion animal foods should meet animal welfare requirements throughout life, in both health and disease.
- The sustainability principle should also cover financial sustainability. It was noted that there were often misconceptions around cost per meal, compared to cost per bag/box/pouch.
- It was agreed that the group should aim to highlight areas where additional research is needed and identify what type of research would be beneficial.

Actions –

- Secretariat to update principles and share with the group.

4. Review of workplan

Attendees were asked to agree the broad format of a work plan to facilitate the fulfilment of the objectives of the group.

The group discussed and agreed to organise the sessions as follows:

- **Nutritional requirements for dogs and cats – in health (including life stage) and disease**

(working group members were made aware of RCVS Knowledge as a source of information on unconventional diets)

Presentation from: Marge Chandler (Clinical Nutritionist)

Issues to consider:

- what should dogs and cats be fed
- how do the different offerings address the animals’ nutritional needs
- what behavioural feeding requirements do dogs and cats have
- potential nutritional issues eg cardiology, over supplementation of calcium (to go into myth buster) could be considered in discussion
- what sources of information/guidance are available to owners to meet nutritional requirements (issues with feeding information on packaging, role of active weight monitoring).

- **Structure and regulation of the pet food market and the relationship between vets and the pet food industry**

Presentations from different representatives of the pet food industry:

- UK Pet Food
- Andrew Knight
- Raw Food Vet Society

Issues to consider:

- what choices are currently available to pet owners
- Questionnaire to go to other alternative diet providers

- Contact VMD to provide information on regulation of supplements and their views on nutritional claims
- Lack of efficient reporting system for pet food
- Complexity of relationship
- Veterinary practice groups owning pet food manufacturers: Linnaeus owned by Mars, input from Purina into IVC
- Diet recommendations must put the pet's needs first
- Issues around the term *prescription diet*. Consideration whether *therapeutic diet* is a more appropriate term but would make it fall under VMD
- Information on prescription/therapeutic diet should be covered in myth-buster.

- **Safety and sustainability**

Presentation from: FSA and possible presentations on sustainability (Jen Gale), raw feeding (Genever Morgan) and insects as food source (Helen Miles – NHS Policy)

Issues to consider:

- public health concerns around specific diets.

- **Pet owners: their role and responsibilities and how to enable them to make informed choices through education and communication**

Issues to consider:

- Decision making process for owners – responding to what is on offer
- Further consideration of potential data sources on how pet owners make choices
- Current presentation of information about pet food – look at differentiating between marketing and nutritional information as this would be beneficial for pet owners
- Prior sessions will inform content of this session.

Actions –

- Secretariat to update workplan and share detailed version.

5. Next steps

The next meeting is scheduled for **24 April 2023 11-3pm**.