

Wednesday 28 February 2024

## British Veterinary Association Annual London Dinner 2024

President Anna Judson speech

### **AS DELIVERED**

Good evening, it's my great pleasure to welcome you all to the British Veterinary Association's annual London Dinner. Thank you so much for joining us.

I'd like to start by welcoming the Right Honourable Steve Barclay MP, Secretary of State for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who joins us as our guest speaker this evening.

BVA works closely with Defra, representing the views of our members and the wider profession, on important issues with far reaching impacts on animal health and welfare, UK biosecurity and international trade. We are extremely grateful to have the Secretary of State with us tonight and we look forward to hearing from him shortly.

As we move through 2024, the veterinary profession continues to navigate many challenges. These include the Government's recent decision to add XL Bully type dogs to the banned breeds list, the ongoing threat of avian flu and emerging diseases such as Bluetongue virus 3, and the Competition and Markets Authority's review of veterinary services, announced towards the end of last year. BVA is working hard on each issue, including ensuring that the CMA review is informed by a full understanding of the veterinary landscape.

However, this evening, with a General Election imminent, I would like to focus on four key issues from our manifesto for animals, vets and public health, namely: the pressing need for reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966; the case for overhauling the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991; the need to tackle key animal welfare concerns left unresolved after the abandonment of the Kept Animals Bill; and the importance of securing permanent access to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland.

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On this last issue, BVA has consistently highlighted the serious threat to Northern Ireland's access to veterinary medicines as a result of leaving the European Union. The anticipated loss of over half of all veterinary medicines in December 2025 will have serious and far-reaching consequences for the veterinary profession, the farming and equine sectors, as well as public health. While we welcome the Government's recent announcement regarding the formation of a working group tasked with urgently finding a permanent solution, the inclusion of veterinary professionals in this process is critical to its success and we look forward to continued engagement in this matter.

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The loss of the Kept Animals Bill last May was incredibly disappointing. A Government manifesto commitment, it would have tackled several significant animal welfare issues. It's therefore positive to see progress being made on individual pieces of animal welfare legislation currently going through Parliament which tackle some of the same pressing issues, with bills on live exports, a strict licensing scheme to help prevent the keeping of primates as pets, and pet abduction, all of which are progressing at pace. However, we would encourage Government to capitalise on the opportunity provided by the introduction of the Live Export Bill and lead on broader discussions to improve animal welfare and conditions during transport.

The recent incident on Dartmoor in Devon, where 45 sheep were killed by dogs in a single incident, highlights the importance of the introduction of the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) Bill. The updated legislation will help to tackle the ongoing problem of livestock worrying by increasing police powers to seize dogs and use modern investigative methods.

We also support the Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets Bill, which will restrict the importation and non-commercial movement of these animals. While we have yet to see the draft Bill, we're keen to see it include both a ban on the import of dogs with cropped ears, and the introduction of appropriate pre-import testing. This would help us tackle diseases like *Brucella canis*, which can be transmitted to humans, and which are not

currently endemic in the UK. We look forward to working with the Bill's sponsor, Selaine Saxby MP, who is here tonight.

Finally, while not part of the former Kept Animals Bill, we would welcome an assurance from Government that the ban on electric shock collars in England will be delivered as promised. Banning these aversive training devices would be a huge step forward in terms of animal welfare and has significant public support – recent polls revealed it had the support of more than 9 out of 10 UK adults and BVA's Voice statistics show that three quarters of vets are concerned about their use in training dogs. It is therefore extremely disappointing that progress has stalled.

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In contrast, the speed with which the XL Bully ban has been enacted is causing significant concerns, not least the fact that it will not solve the serious and distressing issue of increasing dog bite incidents and dreadful fatalities.

Dog bite incidents have steadily risen since the introduction of the Act, with hospital admissions increasing from around 3,000 to nearly 9,000 in 2021-22, that's a three-fold increase. This is despite four types of dog already being on the banned breeds list. Along with other members of the Dog Control Coalition, we believe that the only way to protect public safety is by overhauling the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991.

The speed at which the ban has come into force is also putting additional pressure on vet teams, who are already overstretched.

Since the ban was announced, we have engaged constructively with Defra to ensure the veterinary perspective is taken into account. We continue to make the case around the need to extend the current neutering deadlines, mindful of both veterinary capacity and the growing body of scientific evidence which suggests that neutering large breeds early risks the development of orthopaedic problems, alongside other medical and behavioural conditions.

Breed specific legislation as enshrined in the Dangerous Dogs Act is ineffective and hard to enforce. It must be replaced with breed neutral legislation. The law should not focus on certain types of dogs but instead deal with aggression in all dogs, with responsible dog ownership and training at its core. Only then can we properly protect the public.

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Also in need of reform is the outdated Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. Created in a different era, this legislation is nearly 60 years old and not fit for purpose. It fails to embrace the full potential of the veterinary team and does not recognise the importance of other roles such as veterinary nurses, and vet techs who could play a key role in the livestock sector.

Veterinary nurses are vital members of the practice team, highly qualified and experienced. It is therefore concerning that the title of vet nurse isn't protected in law, and anyone can call themselves a veterinary nurse. This must be rectified.

My presidential theme 'a profession for everyone' reflects my belief that we must build a thriving profession, one that attracts and keeps our people and incorporates the whole veterinary team. We simply cannot achieve this on the foundations of the current, outdated legislation.

Working closely with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, we're calling for modernisation and reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act, including the mandatory regulation of veterinary practices. It is inappropriate that only individual vets and veterinary nurses can be held accountable for business decisions which can directly impact on animal health and welfare.

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During this evening, we would like to hear your thoughts on how best we can support and work collaboratively with you to progress these important issues:

- Access to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland must remain high on the Government's priority list. We ask you to help ensure this is the case.
- The animal welfare legislation currently going through Parliament will tackle a number of pressing concerns. We urge you to support these Bills to become law.
- Banning individual dog breeds will not protect public safety in the long term. We urge all political parties to include reform of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 as a manifesto commitment.
- Our discussions with MPs and peers have shown that reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act has cross-party support. To support the future of our profession, please press for this to be included in election manifestos.

And it's now my pleasure to hand over to the Secretary of State for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Thank you.