

Companion Animal Feeding Working Group (CAFWG)

Meeting 6 – Communication and review

Wednesday 20 March 2024, 11am- 3pm, via Teams

Attendees

- Sally Everitt (Chair)
- Liz Mullineaux (BVA Junior Vice President)
- Justine Shotton (BVA Past President)
- Andrew Prentis (Vet Sustain)
- Mike Jessop (VPHA)
- Georgia Woods-Lee (Weight Management Clinic Nurse at the University of Liverpool)
- Marge Chandler (BSAVA representative)
- Sarah Holliday (BVNA representative)
- Dan Makin (Veterinary Surgeon and Practice Owner, Vets4Pets)
- Alison Asquith (FSA)
- Genever Morgan (University of Liverpool)
- Megan Knowles-Bacon (BVA Policy & Public Affairs Officer)
- Ali Ramsey (BVA Head of Policy & Public Affairs)
- Nina Rossi (BVA Media & Campaigns Manager)

Apologies

- Taranjit Dhansay (FSA)
- Megan Cooper (EWAP representative)

1. Welcome and updates

S Everitt welcomed group members. She noted that G Morgan had been invited to join the group discussion on communication since this was a major element of her research on raw feeding. S Everitt also noted that N Rossi would be joining the discussion on group recommendations, as she would be the media lead on the launch of the group's final position.

2. Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved. It was noted that all actions had been completed and relevant details had been added to the themes document.

One of the actions had been to further research the health impacts of raw feeding, which was discussed:

- There are a number of small studies available which conclude animals developed illnesses as a result of raw feeding.
- There are significant challenges in researching the link to human health, including that a lack of awareness may result in incidents of illness not being linked to pet foods as their likely cause.
- It was noted that the lack of data means we do not understand the scale of the risk, and it should therefore be referred to as a 'potential' health risk in any final documents.
- Some people have questioned whether the potential risk is exaggerated to benefit commercial pet food sales. It was noted that many commercial pet food companies also sell raw foods, and it's important to remember that the risk may also be under-reported. More research is clearly needed to ascertain a clear picture.

- The group agreed the potential health risks from raw feeding would be highlighted, as increased awareness can only help to reduce any possible adverse effects. This is especially important for immunocompromised people who are likely to be at increased risk.
- It was also noted that the one health risks associated with the build-up of antimicrobial resistance are almost impossible to quantify but must be taken seriously.

3. Communication and education discussion

The group agreed to have a final discussion on education and communication, to add to comments already included in the themes document:

Current sources of information

- It is believed that most veterinary professionals get their nutritional information from food companies. Most people are unlikely to be reading scientific literature on the subject.
- Owners often receive a large amount of information from breeders, social media, and other sources. They do not tend to seek advice from veterinary professionals.
- Nutritional education in veterinary schools is varied and often limited. Only one UK veterinary school currently has board certified nutritionists within their team. Schools may bring in experts to lecture, and some host sessions sponsored by food companies, but most of this is optional and not part of the core degree.
- Graduates tend to focus their CPD on clinical skills, eg surgery, as that is the area they feel is most important. When nutrition is studied, they often focus on clinical rather than basic needs. BVA needs to work to highlight the importance of nutritional education.
- Veterinary nurses could play a key role in giving general nutritional advice which could help to prevent a range of health issues.
- Clients may ask veterinary professionals for advice, but the lack of education means they are often unable to give detailed information. This may have contributed to owners generally seeking nutritional advice from other sources. Veterinary professionals may not realise how important an understanding of this topic is until faced with questions from clients wishing to feed an alternative diet.
- The group agreed that the importance of nutrition should be stressed in day one competencies. It is also essential that veterinary professionals can considerably communicate with animal owners on this subject.

Animal owner concerns

- Within certain demographics of pet owners, cost is very important factor. For many owners, the only choice is the feed they can afford.
 - G Morgan noted that in her studies, cost was mentioned as a factor for many of those feeding a traditional diet, but not in the group raw feeding. This could be an indication that some groups of pet owners feel they are unable to afford a choice of feed types.
- Thought to be driven by social media and increased awareness of human nutrition, many owners are now concerned about the ingredients used in pet food. Prime meat cuts are popular as it is clear what they contain. Being seen as 'natural' is often very important to owners.
- Palatability of the food and perceived enjoyment when eating it are also considered.
 - This may sometimes include an element of anthropomorphism, with owners thinking about whether they personally would enjoy that type of food.
 - For many owners, choosing the diet their pet enjoys the most is considered an act of love. Ultimately, owners want their animal to be happy and healthy on the chosen diet. However, there is an element of perception, eg avoiding preservatives being healthier.
 - A major reason many owners switch to a less-traditional diet is because they perceive their pet to be happier or healthier when eating it.

- On sustainability, the recyclability of the packaging is usually the top concern. There appears to be a general lack of understanding on how the choice of pet feed ingredients can have an impact on this.
 - G Morgan's studies showed that sustainability was an important concern for those feeding a raw diet, with owners checking where food comes from and aiming for fewer ingredients.
 - Many raw food companies have grasped the importance of traceability and often use compostable packaging.
- It's important to note that most studies on this subject come from surveys, which are inherently biased and favour the more vocal pet owners. It is difficult to understand the real drivers behind decisions making from self-reported surveys alone.

Vet/Client interactions

- Animal owners do not currently trust veterinary professionals on nutrition. Professionals must educate themselves, so they can become that trusted source of independent advice.
- Transparency and choice is clearly important to pet owners. As some veterinary practices sell specific feeds, there could be a perceived or real conflict of interest. Veterinary professionals should aim to give clients the information with which to make a suitable choice, ie what to look for on the packaging to ensure their animal receives adequate nutrition.
- G Morgan noted that her research had revealed that whilst vets usually focused on the hidden risks associated with feeds, owners considered visible indicators to be more important. These different approaches make communication challenging.
- It was felt that vets usually do not feel they have time to have difficult conversations on nutrition, so clients with questions may be directed towards RVNs or the conversation shut down. This does not help to build trust or understanding.
- It was noted that social media influencers are often better at encouraging owners to do their own research, the presenting their evidence to support their own view. This comes across positively and appears to owners to be more transparent.

Suggested recommendations

- It was agreed that BVA should focus on educating veterinary professionals to support owners making nutritional decisions. This should include asking RCVS to increase the importance of basic nutrition in day one competencies, and awareness of the need for considerate communication on this topic with animal owners.
- BVA should also develop resources which support owners in making decisions. We cannot tell them what to feed their pets, but can provide the guidance on how to make the best choice.

Action: Secretariat to add notes from final discussion into themes document

4. Themes document review

The group reviewed the themes document to ensure it was reflective of their discussions to date and would be suitable as a basis for the working group report. Group members made minor corrections to points to ensure clarity and accuracy. During discussion, it was also noted:

- The importance of animal health and welfare needs to be a prominent theme in any final documents
- It had been questioned whether the topic of 'how to feed' (ie behavioural aspects) was within the scope of the working group. It was agreed this was a broad topic and would require far more in-depth discussion than the group had conducted. It was agreed that the importance of considering this would be acknowledged, but the group's scope was to focus on the feed itself.
- The group agreed they were happy to support the general 'rule of thumb' that feeding a pet up to 10% of its calories in the form of treats, where the remaining 90% is complete diet, was acceptable for healthy adult animals, acknowledging that growing animals or those with specific needs may need a different balance.

- Further clarity was required on the difference between bones and dental products for teeth cleaning. It was noted that dental disease is only reduced if the chew reduces plaque (not the more visible tartar). Chewing raw bones does not remove plaque. There is a significant body of evidence for this.
- It was agreed that case studies from industry would not be included. The group felt this would unfairly suggest industry involvement in the position development.
- When recommending more research on a topic, it will be important to identify what this means, ie controlled studies and long term epidemiological studies vs owner-reported surveys.

Action: Secretariat to draft working group report based on the themes document

5. Recommendations discussion

The group discussed possible recommendations to be included in the final position. It was agreed that the key recommendations would focus on:

- Resources to help pet owners make decisions on diets that are suitable for their pet, including nutrition, safety and sustainability aspects
- Awareness of the complexities around diet choice in a one health context
- Access to information about pet food products
- Understanding of animal by-products, how they are used and their traceability
- Traceability of animal welfare standards for animal products used in pet foods
- Awareness of the impacts of overfeeding
- Adverse reaction reporting for UK pet diets
- Nutritional education for UK veterinary professionals
- Recording of nutritional histories

Action: Secretariat to draft policy position based on key recommendations

6. Conclusions and next steps

S Everitt noted this was the groups' final meeting, but not the end of their work. Members were reminded to stay engaged, continuing to provide comments as the report and position develop. Some key dates for the policy development were highlighted:

- **1 May:** Draft policy to be discussed by BVA Ethics and Welfare Advisory Panel. It was noted that a draft would ideally be ready for mid-April to be included in their papers.
- **12 June:** Policy committee meeting, to hopefully agree the position can progress to Council.
- **17 July:** BVA Council meeting at which we hope to approve the position, with publication shortly afterwards.

It was noted that the timelines are tight and therefore provisional. Members were encouraged to share any additional thoughts ASAP to ensure they can be included.

Action: All members to comment on position and report as they develop

S Everitt thanked all group members for their work to date. She noted it had been a challenging topic to discuss, but she was pleased with the recommendations being developed. L Mullineaux thanked S Everitt for all her work as Chair.