

Wednesday 22 October 2025

British Veterinary Association Annual Northern Ireland Dinner 2025

President Rob Williams speech

Thank you, Kirsten.

Good evening, distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends. It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the British Veterinary Association's Northern Ireland Dinner.

I'd like to thank Michelle McIlveen MLA for hosting us this evening, and extend a special welcome and thank you to Andrew Muir MLA, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

What makes this dinner so special is that it's not just vets in the room. It's great to see farmers, policymakers, and colleagues from across the sector, all of us who recognise that healthy animals mean a healthy agriculture sector, and agriculture is at the heart of Northern Ireland's economy, environment and communities. Vets are central to that chain, protecting animal health, supporting public health, and sustaining livelihoods. It's not just confined to farm and agriculture though, vets are

integrated across the whole of society, From supporting the health and welfare of horses integral to Northern Ireland's rural life and sporting heritage, to providing care for loved pets which are increasingly recognised as members of the family across the course of their lives, vets here aren't just clinicians, we are trusted partners.

This evening, I'd like to focus on three issues that really matter to the veterinary profession here in Northern Ireland: the supply of veterinary medicines, the need to reform the Veterinary Surgeons Act, and the Competition and Markets Authority investigation into veterinary services for pets.

You've already heard from Kirsten about the long-term supply of veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland. I would like to begin by thanking those of you in the room who have listened to our concerns, the concerns of the veterinary profession, shared information, and spoken up on our behalf on this issue. Your support has made a real difference, and we feel very grateful for that.

I would like to namecheck a few people, in particular, Mark Little, who is a veterinary surgeon, he is the Honorary Secretary and a former President of the BVA Northern Ireland Branch, who has shown

extraordinary dedication over many years to both understanding the problem, explaining the risks including at Westminster in a committee session, and supporting colleagues across the profession to ensure this issue remains firmly in the front of decision-makers minds.

I also want to thank some parliamentarians who have continued to raise the issue and although they couldn't be here this evening, particular thanks go to Carla Lockhart MP, Robin Swann MP, and Robbie Butler MLA, for their consistent support and engagement on this very important topic.

Securing veterinary medicines is vital for today, but if we want to safeguard the profession for the future, we also need to look at the framework that governs how we work as veterinary surgeons. That's why reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act is so important: many of you will not know that the act which sets out the legal framework for the profession is 60 years old, we don't live in 1966 anymore, it is incredibly important that we get this act reformed. It doesn't reflect modern practice and it fails to do a number of things.

It fails to protect the title of 'veterinary nurse', despite their essential role in practice teams across Northern Ireland. It doesn't recognise allied

professionals, such as equine dentists, who make a huge contribution to animal health and welfare. Equally, it doesn't regulate veterinary businesses, which means individual vets and individual registered veterinary nurses are held accountable for business decisions that they do not control.

And increasingly as the ownership of veterinary practice changes over time, that is becoming more and more critical that it changes.

That is why BVA has been working with Defra alongside devolved governments to press for reform. But for change to succeed, we need the whole profession to be united, and we need political support from this room in order to achieve that. Because modernising this legislation is not just about bureaucracy, it is about protecting animal health, safeguarding livelihoods, and ensuring Northern Ireland's profession is ready for the future.

The final issue I want to touch on is the Competition and Markets Authority investigation into veterinary services.

Although this is focused on household pets, its impact is very likely to be felt much more widely. Many practices in Northern Ireland are mixed and

rural, serving both pet animals but also farm and equine animals. And the remedies that may be designed to have an impact on the competition in small animal practice could also have unforeseen consequences that potentially have the possibility of undermining veterinary services in rural practice.

That's why the British Veterinary Association has stressed throughout the process that any changes must be proportionate, workable, and mindful of the realities of rural mixed veterinary practice across the UK. Because protecting the viability of local and community practices is not just about vets, it's about farming communities, animal welfare, and the wider Northern Ireland economy.

We have welcomed the strong call from CMA, they have published the report into their provisional outcome last week and they've come out very strongly in favour of changing the current regulatory framework and in particular calling for the regulation of veterinary businesses, which is something that we welcome. The veterinary profession are fundamentally a caring profession, we know we have high levels of trust from our clients already, but anything we can do to improve this through better information sharing about treatment options and pricing of services is also to be welcomed.

Taken together these issues may look very different on the surface, but at their heart it's about the same thing: the sustainability and the future of veterinary practice. And here in Northern Ireland, that sustainability matters not just for the profession, but also to many of you who are here this evening who are from farming communities for farming, for wider society, and for the wider economy.

So let me finish by saying a huge thank you to the BVA Northern Ireland Branch for your tireless work and expertise. To our colleagues across the sector for your collaboration. And to parliamentarians for the support you have shown, and we hope you will continue to show on these vital issues.

And now it is my great pleasure to hand over to Andrew Muir MLA, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

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