

Baroness Hayman of Ullock
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State
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25 November 2025

Dear Baroness Hayman

Re: Urgent concerns regarding veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland.

We are writing collectively as representatives of the veterinary profession, agriculture and wider animal health and welfare industry in Northern Ireland. With the current grace period for the supply of veterinary medicines due to conclude on 31 December, we want to acknowledge the work that has gone into developing the Veterinary Medicines Internal Market Scheme (VMIMS) and the Veterinary Medicines Health Situations Scheme (VMHSS), and the intention to protect both animal and public health by supporting the continuity of supply.

However, there remains uncertainty across the sector about how the new arrangements will operate in practice. Recent indications from manufacturers suggest that the number of products likely to be discontinued or subject to change may be higher than originally understood. We also understand that some marketing authorisations may be maintained for administrative or intellectual property reasons without guaranteeing continued supply into Northern Ireland. As a result, changes to product availability may become apparent only at the point of ordering. This makes forward planning extremely difficult for veterinary practices, Suitably Qualified Persons (SQPs), farm businesses and producers, and increases the risk of disruption if more products are affected than currently assumed.

At the same time, the operation of VMIMS and VMHSS places significant reliance on individual clinical discretion. Without a shared and consistently understood approach to how these decisions should be made, responsibility risks falling disproportionately on individual practitioners. Communication to veterinary practices, SQPs and agricultural businesses has so far been limited, meaning that many are preparing for transition without the clarity they need.

A significant proportion of preventative and herd health medicines in Northern Ireland are supplied through the SQP route. If product availability reduces or prescribing routes change, these medicines may no longer be accessible through SQPs. As SQPs cannot use the veterinary cascade to source alternatives, this could result in delays or gaps in access to familiar preventative treatments. Any reduction in timely access to these products increases the risk of avoidable animal health and welfare issues, including increased disease risk and more reactive rather than preventative treatment on farms.

These issues also extend beyond agriculture. Pet owners may face additional costs and inconvenience if familiar medicines become more difficult to source. Without clearer guidance, uncertainty within practices can have direct consequences for pet owners, which we are keen to avoid. Many pet owners obtain prescriptions from their veterinary surgeon to obtain their pet's medication from an online veterinary pharmacy. Currently, all online veterinary pharmacies supplying veterinary medications to Northern Ireland are situated in Great Britain. Following 1 January 2026, these pharmacies will no longer be able to dispense into Northern Ireland, which will both restrict access to medicines for pet owners and create a barrier to Great Britain-Northern Ireland trade.

We note that the Competition and Markets Authority, following its market investigation into veterinary services for household pets, intends to require practices to inform pet owners of their right to obtain veterinary medicines from alternative suppliers such as online veterinary pharmacies. This means that choice will be limited in Northern Ireland, and pet owners may be advised of rights they are not realistically able to exercise in practice.

Continuity of access to routine veterinary medicines is also essential to maintaining the herd and flock health standards that underpin Northern Ireland's agri-food trade with Great Britain. Any sustained reduction in access to preventative treatments risks increasing disease pressure, which could in turn create avoidable confidence or certification challenges for NI products. We are also aware that some products currently supplied wholesale from Northern Ireland into Scotland may no longer be eligible for movement after January, which may further affect supply stability.

Our shared concern is that, without greater coordination, there is a risk of disruption, increased cost pressures, rising workload and avoidable disease pressure at a time when veterinary capacity is already stretched. We are keen to ensure that responsibility for managing system-level uncertainty does not fall on individual vets, farmers or pet owners who are doing their best to safeguard animal health and welfare under difficult circumstances.

We are therefore seeking reassurance that arrangements will be in place to support consistent interpretation of the new schemes and to ensure that clear, timely communication reaches those who need it. We believe there is a strong shared interest across Government, the veterinary profession and the agriculture and food sectors in ensuring that the transition proceeds smoothly and that any emerging issues can be managed collaboratively rather than reactively.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss how this can be supported in practical terms. Given the limited time remaining before the end of the year, we would be grateful if a meeting with your office and officials could be arranged at the earliest opportunity, ideally in the next two weeks.

Yours sincerely,

Rob Williams, President, British Veterinary Association

Kirsten Dunbar, President, The North of Ireland Veterinary Association and BVA Northern Ireland Branch

William Irvine, President, Ulster Farmers' Union

James Lowe, Chair, Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers Association

Bryan Lovegrove, Secretary General, Animal Health Distributors Association

Ian Stevenson, Chief Executive, Dairy Council for Northern Ireland

Daryl McLaughlin, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association

Colin Smith, Chief Executive, Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland

Colin Henry, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Pork and Bacon Forum