

Wednesday 4 February 2026

British Veterinary Association Annual London Dinner 2026

President Dr. Rob Williams speech

Good evening, it's my great pleasure to welcome you all to the British Veterinary Association's annual London Dinner. Thank you very much for joining us. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Rob Williams and I'm the President of the British Veterinary Association.

I would like to extend a special welcome and thank you to our guest speaker this evening, Baroness Hayman of Ullock, who is the Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Baroness Hayman has been a real advocate for animal health and welfare since taking office. I want to congratulate her on Defra's ambitious animal welfare strategy, which promises to deliver on many of the issues BVA has long campaigned for, including an end to

puppy farming; a transition away from confinement systems and banning of snare traps. These are positive steps forward that will improve the lives of millions of animals.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to thank and congratulate everyone who helped to make the Animal Welfare (Imports of cats, dogs and ferrets) Act a reality. It's a great win for animal welfare and I would particularly like to recognise Danny Chambers MP and Neil Hudson MP for co-sponsoring the act, and to Lord Trees for supporting it through the House of Lords. We are very fortunate to have three members of our profession working collaboratively to advance animal health and welfare in Parliament.

BVA are also grateful to be supported by many MPs and Lords, who understand the important role vets play in society. I personally want to thank Robin Swann MP, he's given us amazing support over the last year campaigning on the issue of access to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland. Again thank

you to Baroness Hayman and her colleagues at Veterinary Medicines Directorate for agreeing to establish a new Supply Coordination Forum, which we hope will enable any issues with supply of medicines in Northern Ireland to be identified and dealt with swiftly.

This spirit of collaboration is what makes events like this special, as it brings together the wide range of people who support the veterinary profession. As we gather here today, we live in interesting times, for lots of reasons, they will challenge our perspectives and possibly our conception of what it is to be a veterinary surgeon. This is demonstrated by the three topics I will now focus on: the Competition and Markets Authority investigation, the need for reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act, and the UK's approach to biosecurity.

The CMA investigation into veterinary services for household pets will change how we interact with and provide clinical care

to pets and their owners. We're engaging with the CMA to make sure this is a positive change, one which builds trust with pet owners, and gives them a much better understanding of the valuable service that vets provide. It has been quite disheartening to see and hear the level of negative coverage about our profession, particularly when we remain a trusted and valued profession, indeed we should acknowledge that the CMA have recognised that vets "work hard, act ethically, and put animal welfare first". We support many of the CMA's plans to improve transparency and we are grateful for their strong recommendation to Government to reform the legislative framework.

That brings me nicely onto my next point: that the challenges facing vets today cannot be met with outdated legislation. The Veterinary Surgeons Act is now 60 years old and not fit for purpose. We urgently need a modernised Act that recognises

the value and reality of the veterinary profession today and its future focused by design.

A reformed Act could make it possible to regulate veterinary practices, meaning those responsible for business decisions which directly impact animal health and welfare can be held accountable. It could formally recognise allied professionals, such as equine dental technicians, allowing a wider range of suitably qualified colleagues to support our work and deliver the best possible care. And importantly it could legally protect the title of 'veterinary nurse', recognising and valuing our colleagues in that profession, their knowledge, skills and professionalism, putting the veterinary nurse profession on a proper statutory footing.

That's why we've been working closely with Defra as they prepared their consultation, which we are really pleased to see is now live until 25th March. Again, thanks to Baroness Hayman and her team for making such progress towards this much needed change.

These reforms will affect everyone in this room, so I ask you all to engage with the consultation, supporting the case for change and encourage your colleagues to do so too. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for us to shape the future of our sector for years and generations to come.

The final issue I want to touch on is a key reason why vets are essential to society – and that's protecting the UK from animal disease.

The UK Government has announced it will negotiate a Veterinary Agreement with the European Union, supporting trade and giving us direct access to disease surveillance networks. This is welcome news, though it comes at a time when there are significant resourcing and operational issues across Government departments and agencies responsible for biosecurity, and for animal disease resilience as shown in the recent National Audit Office and EFRA committee reports.

Import of novel animal disease is a significant challenge for all parts of the veterinary profession and it poses some questions. How as a profession do we best advocate for evidence-informed, pragmatic and effective biosecurity? What role do vets in private practice have to play in our national biosecurity, and disease outbreak readiness in support of our colleagues working across Government departments and agencies? How can we collectively meet these challenges in the national interest? These are important questions and I think that as a profession we stand ready to help, and I would like to call on our colleagues from Defra to meet with us and discuss how we can do this collaboratively.

The CMA investigation, reforming the Veterinary Surgeons Act, and disease resilience are all challenges and they could be viewed in a negative light; however, I'm an optimist, and I would like us to meet them positively. There are challenges to be

embraced, and opportunities to be realised, provided we continue to work collaboratively.

So let me end by thanking you all, our colleagues across the sector for your continued collaboration with BVA on these and many other important issues, to parliamentarians for your continued support, we hope this will continue to show, as we face the challenges.

And now, if everyone would please stand, and raise your glasses, I would like to make a toast to the future of the veterinary profession. **[Toast]**

It's now my pleasure to hand over to Baroness Hayman of Ullock, Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.