

Wednesday 15 July 2026

British Veterinary Association Annual Welsh Dinner 2026

President Dr. Rob Williams speech

Thank you, Phoebe, for your welcoming speech, and your fantastic work as Welsh Branch President, championing animal health and welfare in Wales.

Tráthnóna maith, a aíonna measúla, agus a chairde. Is cúis áthais dom fáilte a chur romhaibh chuig Dinnéar Breatnaise Chumann Tréidliachta na Breataine.

Noswaith dda, gwesteion, cydweithwyr a ffrindiau nodedig. Mae'n bleser mawr eich croesawu i Ginio Cymreig Cymdeithas Filfeddygol Prydain.

And for those of you who do not speak either Welsh or Irish, it's my great pleasure to welcome you all to the British Veterinary Association's annual Welsh dinner. Thank you so much for joining us. And I will be doing this in three languages the whole way through, so you might as well get comfortable.

I'd like to extend a special welcome and thanks to our guests of honour, First Minister of Wales Rhun ap Iorwerth, and Cabinet Minister for Rural Resilience and Sustainability, Llyr Gruffydd. We are very grateful for your commitment and leadership on animal health and welfare, and for your ongoing engagement with the veterinary profession.

I think Dylan Thomas perfectly describes why animals are important. I am just going to quote a very small passage from the opening monologue of *Under Milk Wood*: "The anthracite statues of the horses sleep in the fields, and the cows in the byres, and the dogs in the wetnosed yards; and the cats nap in the slant corners or loop sly, streaking and needling across the warm clouds of the roofs." That guy could really write. He was amazing. I think that connection between place and people and animals is really important. And the veterinary profession safeguards that every day in Wales, whether it's supporting farmers, caring for companion animals or safeguarding public health, vets in Wales work in relationships built on trust, compassion, and shared responsibility.

That relationship works best when it sits within a wider partnership with government. Welsh Government has long recognised the value of veterinary expertise in shaping policy, protecting animal health and welfare, responding to disease threats, and supporting rural resilience. We are proud of the collaborative spirit that exists here in Wales, and we look forward to building on it further.

The challenges that lie ahead will require exactly that: collaboration and shared responsibility. One such challenge, as Phoebe referred to, is protecting the UK from animal disease. Recent years have reminded us how quickly novel disease threats can

emerge and how far reaching their consequences can be. Effective biosecurity both on farms and at a national level is essential for protecting animal health and welfare, public health, trade and livelihoods.

We support the fact that the UK government is working on a veterinary agreement with the European Union, as this will support agricultural trade whilst also maintaining biosecurity. So we welcome the fact that this is being negotiated. It does come at a challenging time where there are significant resourcing and operational issues across government departments and agencies responsible for biosecurity and animal disease resilience, as shown in the National Audit Office and EFRA committee reports. We all know that disease doesn't recognise borders, so we ask all of you present tonight to support us in calling for the UK Government to take this matter seriously, to provide the resources necessary to keep the diseases out, and to work with the veterinary profession on how we can collectively meet these challenges across the UK.

A strong veterinary workforce is key to tackling challenges like these, and I'd like to echo Pheobe's congratulations to the recent graduates from Aberystwyth who represent a really exciting future for the Welsh Veterinary workforce. However, these new Welsh vets will be restricted by the currently outdated framework that governs how they work. The Veterinary Surgeons Act is now 60 years old, and it is not fit purpose. Reforming this Act is essential if vets in Wales are to meet the challenges of the future.

The current Act doesn't reflect modern veterinary practice. It fails to legally protect the title of 'veterinary nurse', despite their essential role in practice teams across Wales. And it doesn't recognise the very many allied professionals, such as cattle foot trimmers, who make a huge contribution to veterinary practice and the rural communities they serve. Most importantly, the Act does not regulate veterinary business. Which means that individual vets and registered veterinary nurses are held accountable to business decisions that they have no influence or control over.

After years of campaigning, we're pleased that both the Competition and Markets Authority and the UK Government have listened to the profession. We were delighted to see Baroness Hemingway publish the white paper last week, detailing what reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act might look like. But for this change to succeed, we need the whole profession to be united, and we need political support from everybody present in this room. Modernising legislation is not just about bureaucracy; it's about protecting animal health, the public interest and ensuring Wales' veterinary profession is fit for the future.

Across these issues and those Phoebe spoke about, the message is the same: Wales thrives when vets and government work side by side, building knowledge and trust, shaping policy through evidence, and by grounding it in the practical realities of rural

life. So tonight is more than just a celebration, it's a reminder of what we can achieve together.

First Minister, Minister, and colleagues across Welsh Government, thank you for coming tonight and demonstrating your commitment to animal health and welfare. To our members in Wales, I thank you for your dedication, your expertise, and your service to animals and communities. And thank you to all our guests, for coming together and highlighting the spirit of collaboration that defines this sector.

If you're able to, could everybody please rise? I'd like to make a toast to the future of the Welsh veterinary profession.

Now it's my pleasure to hand over to First Minister of Wales, Rhun ap Iorwerth.

Diolch yn fawr, and enjoy the rest of the evening.