Northern Ireland Affairs Committee: Brexit and Northern Ireland inquiry

Introduction
1. The British Veterinary Association (BVA) is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the UK with over 17,000 members. BVA represents, supports and champions the interests of the veterinary profession in this country. We therefore take a keen interest in all issues affecting the profession and how the profession can effectively serve the needs of society.

2. The BVA’s Northern Ireland Branch brings together representatives of local veterinary associations, BVA’s specialist divisions, government, and research organisations in Northern Ireland. The Branch advises BVA on the consensus view of the Northern Ireland members on local and United Kingdom issues.

3. We welcome the opportunity to provide input into what the Committee should look at as part of its Brexit and Northern Ireland inquiry.

4. The agriculture and food sector is the cornerstone of the Northern Ireland economy. We believe it would be beneficial for the Committee to consider the impacts and opportunities of Brexit on the sector holistically considering the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland as the only part of the UK to share a land border with an EU Member State. Within the scope of this inquiry it will be essential that the veterinary profession is consulted as an integral part of the agricultural and food sectors.

5. Clinical and non-clinical veterinary surgeons, working collaboratively with others, protect animals, people and the environment they share. Veterinary surgeons provide preventive healthcare and treatment for livestock, as well as carry out surveillance, promote good biosecurity, promote high animal health and welfare and optimise productivity and sustainability. Official Veterinarians (OVs) certify the trade in animals and animal products thus contributing to economic prosperity and the sustainability of food production. The future of the UK agri-food production is therefore of great interest and importance to the veterinary profession.

6. The Committee should consider the following:
   - Agricultural policy
   - Trade in animals and animal products
   - Veterinary Workforce
   - Veterinary Medicines
Agriculture Policy

7. Northern Ireland has large rural areas which rely heavily on a local social and economic network of agriculture, food production and related sectors including the veterinary profession. Veterinary surgeons play a crucial role in helping to build strong communities and supporting Northern Ireland’s agricultural industry, which is the cornerstone of the local economy.

8. Brexit provides the opportunity to develop a strong, competitive and innovative food industry which enjoys the confidence of customers at home and abroad. A new agricultural policy, replacing the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) should be both ambitious and focussed on delivering outcomes. BVA has developed a Veterinary Vision for Post Brexit Agricultural Policy where public money is utilised to incentivise and support animal health and welfare outcomes as public goods.¹

Trade in animals and animal products

9. Agriculture, as a sector, is particularly exposed to any disruption in trading relationships with the European Union (EU) and other countries. As the House of Commons Library notes; agriculture has a “high degree of reliance on the EU market for both inputs and revenues.”² This is particularly true for Northern Ireland, where the shared land border between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland has resulted in the development of a highly integrated agri-food sector. According to figures from the Irish Farmers’ Association,³ the scale of agri-food trade across the Irish land border is vast, annually:

- Over 400,000 pigs are exported from the Republic of Ireland for processing in Northern Ireland.
- Almost 400,000 lambs are exported from Northern Ireland to Republic of Ireland for processing.
- Over 800m litres of milk are exported from Northern Ireland to be processed and then exported from the Republic of Ireland.

10. The Government White Paper, Preparing for our future UK trade, published by the Department for International Trade states the following approach to trade.

“In order to ensure continuity in relation to our trade around the world and avoid disruption for business and other stakeholders, the UK needs to prepare ahead of its exit from the EU for all possible

¹British Veterinary Association, Veterinary Vision for Post Brexit Agricultural Policy, 2017 https://www.bva.co.uk/uploadedFiles/Content/News,_campaigns_and_policies/Policies/Future_of_the_profession/VETERINARY%20VISION%20FOR%20POST%20BREXIT%20AGRICULTURAL%20POLICY.pdf
²House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper Number 8065, 1 August 2017 Importance of trade with the EU for UK industries file:///C:/Users/michaelm/Downloads/CBP-8065.pdf
³Irish Farmers’ Association, Brexit: The Imperatives for Irish Farmers & the Agri-Food Sector 2016
outcomes of negotiations and to ensure that we have the necessary legal powers and structures to enable us to operate a fully functioning trade policy after our withdrawal from the EU.”

11. For the Government to implement this approach, the role of the veterinary surgeon in facilitating trade must be recognised and supported.

12. Veterinary surgeons working as official controllers at farms, food premises and other settings in Northern Ireland carry out official controls (inspection and audit). These Official Veterinarians (OVs) work collaboratively with private practitioners in Northern Ireland. Based on the outcome of this effective working relationship, OVs both certify and supervise the import and export of animals and animal products to and from third countries. The role of veterinary surgeons in trade, protecting public health, food safety and animal welfare, is therefore recognised as essential throughout the EU and around the world.

13. The demand of veterinary certification is increasing and will grow significantly following exit from the EU. Nigel Gibbens, Chief Veterinary Officer UK, has suggested that this could lead to the volume of products requiring veterinary export health certification increasing by as much as by 325% in the event of no deal being reached between the EU and UK. This is likely to be higher for Northern Ireland, where initial estimates suggest the increase could be more than twice that of the UK generally.

Veterinary workforce
14. Ensuring the UK has a veterinary workforce to meet this demand will be critical to ensuring the UK is able to exploit the opportunities for trade in agricultural produce, and this applies to Northern Ireland as much as anywhere else in the UK. Therefore, the Government must ensure that an appropriate number of veterinary surgeons can be recruited from overseas, whether from the European Union or from outside the EU, to ensure this essential veterinary work continues.

15. The UK veterinary workforce is highly reliant on EU graduates. Statistics from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) reveal the dependence of the UK on non-UK EU vets. RCVS currently registers around 1,000 overseas vets per year, of which EU nationals make up the clear majority. In 2016, the proportion of new registrants in that year from non-UK EU vet schools was 47%.

Veterinary medicines
16. Available estimates suggest 30,000 people are cross-border workers. This includes a significant number of veterinary surgeons with practices straddling the

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4 Department for International Trade, Preparing for our future UK trade, 2017
border. Harmonised regulation of medicines has provided certainty to these vets in their work on either side of the border. To protect animal and public health there must be parity in medicine regulation. The Government should guarantee the UK veterinary profession has ongoing access to all existing and future veterinary medicines licensed through the EU regulatory systems and existing import certificate mechanisms.