

BVA President John Fishwick Speech at BVA London Dinner

on Tuesday 30 January 2018 at One Great George Street, London

– PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY -

My Lords, ladies and gentlemen, a warm welcome to the British Veterinary Association's annual London Dinner.

We are hugely grateful to have Lord Gardiner of Kimble, Under Secretary of State for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, join us this evening. We always welcome the opportunity to work with Lord Gardiner, and we look forward to his sage insights shortly.

Team vet

I hope you all enjoyed the photographs next door? As I'm sure many of you are aware – and hopefully saw – a few weeks ago these photographs were part of our '*Through the eyes of vets*' exhibition, held in the Upper Waiting Hall in the House of Commons. The exhibition aimed to highlight the vital and varied roles fulfilled by vet-led teams today.

'Team vet; working together' is my focus as BVA President. From clinical practice and research to the armed forces and civil service, the significant role that the veterinary profession plays in so many areas of personal and political life is an issue that Brexit has brought into sharp relief.

Maintaining health and welfare standards

It is veterinary input and expertise that underpins the UK's high standards of animal health, animal welfare and public health. We are rightly proud of these high standards, and must ensure that they are, at the very least, maintained post-Brexit.

Our call, that current high levels of animal health, animal welfare, environmental protection and public health are not jeopardised post-Brexit, was recently echoed across Europe by the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe; who we continue to work with through our ongoing links to the wider international scientific community.

Yet these standards can only be maintained with a robust, sustainable veterinary workforce in place.

Trade

In trade alone, it's been estimated that the volume of exports requiring veterinary certification could increase by as much as 325%.

Veterinary services and certification are recognised as "fundamental" for food safety by the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

Depending on the outcome of Brexit negotiations, we may no longer enjoy the same trading freedom and could be treated as a 'third country' by the EU.

As such, exports and imports of meat and agricultural products like milk, gelatine and hay will need new veterinary certifications. These will need to be developed and supervised to ensure the continuation of smooth trade, which will require an increase in the number of specially trained Official Veterinarians to perform this role.

Currently, there are just over 1,000 Official Veterinarians authorised by the Government's Animal and Plant Health Agency to certify food products for export to third countries from Great Britain, and this workforce would need to increase significantly to accommodate the rise in veterinary certification that could happen post-Brexit.

We believe the UK Government must undertake an urgent review of third country certification to ensure we have the workforce capacity to fulfil any new trade agreements.

Veterinary workforce

As many of you will be aware, Brexit has also shone a spotlight on the UK's reliance on EU veterinary professionals. In food safety and hygiene alone, it is estimated 95% of Official Veterinarians in abattoirs are from overseas, with the large majority of these from the EU. These colleagues are critical to ensuring that meat produced for both at-home and export markets is of one single, high standard.

The Prime Minister and Cabinet colleagues have offered reassurances that the living and working rights of non-British EU nationals currently resident in the UK will not be affected by Brexit, however we know that for many EU colleagues this is not enough. Research by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), the profession's regulator, has shown that nearly a third of vets and vet nurses whose nationality is non-UK European are considering a move out of the UK.

To prevent an acute crisis in veterinary capacity, we are urging the Home Office to add veterinary surgeons to the 'Shortage Occupation List'.

We have done a lot of ground work on this, scoping out the potential challenges and opportunities.

Within a month of the EU Referendum, BVA had coordinated a Brexit working group of stakeholders from across the veterinary profession and the UK with relevant experience and expertise. We developed a report with 52 short, medium and long-term recommendations across seven far-reaching areas of public policy.

We have been working hard alongside Defra, the RCVS and Vet Schools Council on a strategic Veterinary Capability and Capacity Project to assess these interconnected issues, and ensure the development of a flexible and skilled workforce that meets the UK's needs for both the immediate and longer term future.

Article 13

A couple of months ago, we were at the forefront of the very public conversation around animal sentience, and the principle of Article 13 of the EU Lisbon Treaty: speaking out for our members on the Today programme, coordinating a 1200-strong Open Letter to the Daily Telegraph with the British Veterinary Nursing Association, and having behind-the-scenes conversations with MPs and civil servants.

BVA was clear in our calls that the duty on the state to have due regard for animal welfare - as captured in Article 13 - must be enshrined in UK law.

We believe our campaigning helped bring about the timely introduction of the draft Animal Welfare Bill that captures the substantive obligation that Article 13 currently puts on national governments to consider animal welfare, as well as explicitly recognising animals as sentient beings.

We are supporting the Bill's development, and look forward to seeing it come into force later this year – and, crucially, before the UK leaves the EU.

Animal health and welfare as public goods

Through this and other commitments the Government has promised to ensure the UK remains a global leader in animal welfare post-Brexit. We saw the public strength of feeling on animal sentience and welfare last November.

Animal welfare, alongside high animal health standards, provides our trade with a unique selling point that should be maximised post-Brexit. I have heard the Secretary of State speak passionately on the continued need for these standards on a number of occasions. It is for all of these reasons that we believe animal health and welfare should be considered 'public goods' in any future UK agricultural policy.

We were pleased to hear the Secretary of State's announcement at the Oxford Farming Conference that delivering public goods will be at the heart of a new agricultural policy to benefit producers, consumers and wider society.

Yet Mr Gove committed to investing in the public goods of the natural environment, technology and skills, infrastructure, public access and rural resilience. These are all laudable aims, but animal health and welfare must also be supported as a public good, since this is the very reason that we have our global reputation for agricultural produce and high standards.

While Brexit presents an opportunity to tailor our agricultural policy, coordination and oversight across the UK remains crucial. We are keen to hear how agricultural policy, including animal health and welfare challenges, will be jointly tackled by the four administrations of the UK post-Brexit.

In addition to our work around Brexit, we will be looking for opportunities to progress some of our other priorities, such as working towards an end to non-stun slaughter; rolling out mandatory CCTV in slaughterhouses across the UK; strengthening veterinary surveillance; and reducing antibiotic resistance through continued joined-up working to ensure antibiotic usage for livestock remains ahead of the Government target.

#breedtobreathe

Across the UK we know there is a growing welfare concern around the rise in popularity of brachycephalic breeds, with 9 out of 10 companion animal vets reporting that the number of flat-faced dogs being brought into their practice has greatly increased over the past three years.

With half of the 700 vets we surveyed reporting that their clients who have brachycephalic dogs were swayed by social media, merchandise or celebrities, we have launched our Breed to Breathe campaign to challenge the perception that these breeds' short noses, big eyes and skin-folds are 'cute'. Society as a whole - including veterinary teams, dog owners, breeders and breed clubs - has a social and moral responsibility to work together on this.

It's not that we 'have it in' for Pugs or French bulldogs. We know that they are much loved pets. However, many of these animals will likely suffer serious and life-limiting health and welfare problems. 56% of the flat-faced dogs that vets saw over a 12-month period needed treatment for health issues related to how they look such as breathing difficulties, skin problems, eye ulcers or dental problems. However our members also estimated that only one in 10 owners could recognise their dog's breed-related health issues.

To raise awareness of the serious health and welfare problems these breeds suffer, we're asking you to join our campaign to raise awareness and use the hashtag 'breedtobreathe' to help tackle the 'normalisation' of these serious health problems.

We have already raised concerns with Comic Relief, Heinz, HSBC, Marks & Spencer and many more who have pledged to work with us in a bid to stop the use of brachycephalic animals in advertising. Big brands are willing to listen.

Thank yous

We can only make a success of this campaign, and improving animal health and welfare more widely, if vet-led teams work together, be that in clinical practice, public health, government services, academia or research. And we can only achieve the breadth of what we do through your support; so, thank you.

Please do use BVA as an evidence-based source of information and professional advice, by speaking to a BVA colleague in the room this evening or contacting us in future.