INTRODUCTION

1. Mr Harvey Locke, President of the British Veterinary Association (BVA) welcomed attendees to the inaugural meeting of the Veterinary Development Council (VDC) and introduced the Chair, Professor Richard Bennett.

2. Professor Bennett opened the meeting with a brief explanation of the terms of reference, explaining that these were purposefully broad to allow for the attendees to identify the key issues of focus for the VDC. The purpose of the meeting was to obtain a greater understanding of the needs and expectations of veterinary clients.

PRESENTATIONS

3. Professor Bennett introduced the first speaker, Chief Veterinary Officer, Nigel Gibbens.

Nigel Gibbens – Chief Veterinary Officer, UK

4. N Gibbens began by thanking the BVA for taking the VDC forward. He then discussed the relationship between the Government and the private veterinarian and its changing nature, highlighting that whilst at one time the Vet-Government relationship had been the predominant relationship of the profession, this was now no longer the case.

5. N Gibbens commended the Lowe report as a useful and neutral analysis which had identified gaps that needed to be filled. He said that the VDC was the most important of Professor Lowe’s recommendations and was a body which had the opportunity to reflect on challenges and decide the way forward for the veterinary profession.

6. He stressed that in considering the challenges facing the veterinary profession, the VDC should also recognise the challenges now confronting food producers including:

   - the removal of production-linked subsidies;
   - the impact of any review of the Common Agricultural Policy;
   - increased pressure on farmers to improve production and make it more sustainable; and
   - the Responsibility and Cost Sharing initiative that would bring them into managing risk alongside the Government and ultimately change the relationship between the two.

7. N Gibbens summarised some of the findings of the Lowe report and in particular that the profession needed to see the food producers as their ultimate customers. The veterinary profession needed to engage with individual farmers, establish their clients’ needs and adopt a business based approach. He noted that the veterinarian was one of the best informed people on-farm and more use should be made of this.

8. He pointed to the National Farmers’ Union (NFU) as outlining some of the wants and needs of farmers. It was clear that farmers wanted advice on genetics and nutrition as well as disease, and this was an opportunity for vets to use their expertise. Vets should engage with some of the new debates on climate change and tackle issues like zero grazing and GMO. They
should also look at the role of veterinary education and paraprofessionals (in this context he noted that if the Veterinary Surgeons Act was reopened, it was more than likely that the Government would wish to look at veterinary services as well).

9. N Gibbens saw the current time as an opportunity for the veterinary profession. With drives for economic efficiency in the current economic climate, vets needed to make themselves key to efficient production.

Questions & comments

10. Attendees discussed the current regulatory framework regarding paraprofessionals, citing it as a stumbling block to veterinary-led teams of paraprofessionals. The economic structure of practices would also require change to accommodate this type of working.

11. Professor Bennett thanked Nigel Gibbens for his presentation and introduced Catherine Brown, Chief Executive of Animal Health and soon to be Chief Executive of the merged Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA).

Catherine Brown – Chief Executive Animal Health

12. Catherine Brown opened her presentation by discussing the relationship between private veterinarians and Animal Health, noting that private vets were Animal Health’s biggest supplier but not to the extent that they could be. She cited the upcoming merger between Animal Health and the VLA as a potential opportunity to look at new ways to work together, think creatively about the relationship and to develop a strategic partnership. Her message was that vets should perceive Animal Health as a customer.

13. C Brown discussed ways in which the profession could look to take advantage of the opportunities by identifying solutions to customer problems, and achieving growth from more customers, from customers buying more, and from reducing costs. From Animal Health’s perspective the ‘needs’ were surveillance, disease control and providing a response to an outbreak. This needed to be consistent across a wide geographical area, working to a quality specification and as cheap as possible.

14. C Brown noted that costs were a major driver in the procurement of veterinary services. She highlighted the difficulty in co-ordinating with 600 veterinary practices and suggested that a new mechanism could increase efficiency and reduce costs. In looking at a new mechanism, the veterinary profession should consider the role of paraprofessionals and should aim to develop the right skills mix.

Questions & comments

15. Attendees asked whether it would be possible for Animal Health to share information on disease risk more freely with veterinarians and farmers. C Brown said that this was something that she was hoping the new body would be able to do.

16. Attendees also asked for more clarification on what a strategic partnership would mean. C Brown responded that it would mean looking for things that Animal Health and the veterinary profession could do together and she was happy to hear ideas from the profession.

17. Attendees stressed the difficulty of increasing profits in a time of downward pressure and C Brown suggested that the use of paraprofessionals might help to reduce costs. Once again, the point was raised about existing practice structure and its compatibility with the use of paraprofessionals.
18. Professor Bennett thanked Catherine Brown and noted the challenge and invitation that she had put to the profession. He then introduced Catherine McLaughlin from the NFU.

Catherine McLaughlin - Animal Health and Welfare Adviser, NFU

19. Catherine McLaughlin began by highlighting the importance of this issue for the NFU. She noted that in preparation for the Lowe report, the NFU had provided a list of what farmers wanted. This had been reviewed preceding the VDC and the results had been very similar. This list comprised of the following:

- Price transparency (especially with veterinary medicines);
- Fair and open trading practices and operating standards;
- A 24 hour emergency service;
- Routine health care;
- Horizon scanning;
- Consultancy;
- Diagnostics;
- Farm health planning; and
- New technology and research and development.

20. C McLaughlin also mentioned the extreme pressure that farmers were under at the current time with the possible implications of Mercosur, high costs on inputs and feed, and falling levels of disposable income. Farmers were moving to consolidate, produce more, impact less and still retain profits. She noted that the current time provided an opportunity for vets to make themselves indispensable to farmers and she gave a few examples where veterinary input might be welcome:

- Adverse weather – farmers had already been experiencing unusual weather and this could continue, with farmers and vets having to adapt. She suggested that vets could become more involved in building design, genetics, and behaviour.
- New disease threats – e.g. bluetongue, FMD (recent outbreak in Bulgaria). Are there enough large animal vets to help? Can vets help farmers keep up?

21. C McLaughlin outlined some of the other issues which her members had raised. She highlighted the trust that farmers had in their vets and the need to maintain stability and familiarity with vets on farms. She said that farmers were happy to pay for extra services, e.g. veterinary specialists, if the benefit could be demonstrated and she noted the importance of the technical competence and ability of vets in helping a farmer meeting his contractual obligations vis a vis a retailer. Her members had felt that the veterinary education was failing young vets in terms of farm health planning and had said that more knowledge about building design, genetic improvement etc would be beneficial. C McLaughlin closed by underlining the opportunities that vets would have if they looked upon themselves more as business advisors.

22. Professor Bennett thanked Catherine McLaughlin and welcomed Heather Jenkins from Waitrose.

Heather Jenkins – Director, Buying (with responsibility for Meat, Poultry, Fish, Frozen Food and Dairy) and Director, Agriculture Strategy, Waitrose

23. Heather Jenkins explained the driving principles behind Waitrose’s operations and discussed the needs of retailers and the importance of protecting the brand. One of the key needs was consistency of supply, and for Waitrose this meant sustainable supply chains. Dedicated supply chains reduced variables on-farm and increased consistency in terms of product and
delivery, which consumers were more likely to pay more for. These dedicated supply chains allowed for a long-term view with more opportunity to invest in research and development.

24. The cost of disease and underperformance limited profitability. Because of this, there was a considerable amount of ‘slack’ in the system and a great potential to unlock this. In this connection, H Jenkins noted the work that Waitrose had been involved in with the Royal (Dick) Vet School. Here they had looked at developing a more efficient way of working by examining herd health status, herd performance, fertility and replacement costs. This approach was one which could be replicated to great effect.

25. H Jenkins highlighted the isolated nature of the farming business and therefore underlined the importance of bringing farmers together to obtain cross sector views, as well as speaking to individuals. It would also be helpful to engage more with retailers. She noted that the workshops developed with the Dick Vet School that brought together all three groups and had been very helpful and insightful.

Questions & comments

26. Attendees talked about making consumers more aware through retailers about product differentiation, so that consumers really understood the issues behind the products. The willingness to pay more for a bottle of water than a pint of milk was cited as an example.

27. Professor Bennett thanked Heather Jenkins and welcomed Professor Sandy Trees from the University of Liverpool and the RCVS.

Professor Sandy Trees –Professor of Veterinary Parasitology, University of Liverpool, Senior Vice President, RCVS

28. S Trees gave an overview of veterinary healthcare in the UK, noting that it was mainly private, small and competitive with many incentives driven from the bottom-up. He identified a trend towards increased specialisation and an aggregation of livestock practices with a larger pool of staff and a wider geographical spread. He also noted an emerging dichotomy in the client base between those owners who kept farm animals as livestock and those who kept them for a hobby. This would have implications for large animal practice in the profession.

29. S Trees gave a breakdown of UK veterinary practices categories and noted that large animal practice accounted for only 2.7% with mixed practice 28.7%. He then discussed the aspirations of veterinary students when they first entered veterinary school. These aspirations were predominantly centred in mixed practice, something which did not appear to change between the first and fifth years, despite the fact that elective choices were evenly balanced. He also looked at other factors which might influence students’ career choices, including background, remuneration and debt, comparing these with findings from the US.

30. S Trees stated that all vet schools gave substantial attention to food animals, population medicine and public health and noted that modern curricula stressed an integrated approach, including things such as herd health planning. Despite this, he highlighted the role of vets in food production as something which was not fully appreciated by veterinary students in the UK and noted the preponderance of overseas vets involved in UK food hygiene.

31. He concluded by stating that whilst he believed that the current system of veterinary education provided the appropriate emphasis on food animals, there was an issue with students appreciating vets’ wider role in human society/well-being. He suggested that vet schools could offer more in career advice but said that if there was a problem with food animal provision, market pull was more of an issue than educational push.
Liz Redmond – Veterinary Director, Foods Standards Agency (FSA)

32. Liz Redmond noted that the proportion of government vets in the UK was significantly smaller than in other countries. In the UK, 84% of vets were in private practice whilst 4.7% were employed by the Government, a decline since 2000. Food sector work comprised a fraction of this 4.7%. In Australia, government working accounted for around 10% of vets, whilst in Spain, 33% were employed by the government.

33. L Redmond highlighted a number of possible reasons for the different circumstances between the three countries. These included the culture and education surrounding food and veterinary professional roles in particular norms, beliefs and stereotypes which were reinforced by education. In the UK, for example a vet’s role was seen as treating animals and the focus of veterinary education was on the clinical role. In Spain, for example, culturally food was very important and in veterinary education there was an equal focus on clinical, animal production and food production.

34. L Redmond stated that the UK Agri food sector was growing, albeit slowly and stressed the opportunities for vets in the UK to broaden their involvement in food sector work. To do this the profession needed to consider the skills that were required to expand into this sector, in particular some non-veterinary skills such as financial management could give vets the edge. EU reform could have implications for government and private veterinary roles in meat processing and on farm. There could also be a greater need for vets in assurance, improving husbandry practices and raising food safety and quality standards.

35. Professor Bennett thanked Liz Redmond and welcomed David Catlow.

David Catlow- Practising Vet, Past President, BVA

36. David Catlow noted the reduction in large animal veterinary practices and their aggregation. He discussed how his practice had responded to the changing demands on the veterinary profession, in particular by focusing on the practice as a business, by looking at the needs of clients and by working to provide new products and services. For example, there was a need to keep in touch with clients and encourage active involvement. As such, the practice communicated regularly with their clients via roundtable meetings, on-farm meetings, newsletters and sharing outputs with farmers. Farmers were increasingly aware of the need for farm health planning and there was therefore an increased momentum in this area which vets could take advantage of.

37. D Catlow emphasised some of the problems facing practices such as his own. He noted that margins were tight and practices were not able to rely on fees alone to make a profit, but had to also look to medicines. He stressed the vulnerability of practices who relied on government (i.e. by providing Official Veterinarian services) to supply a large proportion of their income in the current climate of government cuts. He also noted the incentivisation of farmers through grants and subsidies to engage in things like farm health planning, and warned that there was a question over whether farmers would remain interested in some services if these subsidies were removed.

Questions & comments

38. Attendees noted that the review of European Medicines Regulations next year might mean that reliance on revenue from medicines was no longer a viable option.
DISCUSSION

39. Professor Bennett thanked David Catlow and all of the speakers for their presentations and gave a quick recap of some of the issues raised. He then led a discussion to establish the key themes and also what direction the VDC should take. Some of the main points mentioned in the discussion included:

- **Recognising the challenges to the farming industry**
  Attendees noted the challenges to the farming industry and that although demand for food worldwide was increasing, this did not necessarily equate to an increased profit for farming, as feed costs were also increasing. Attendees noted the difficulty in servicing an industry with very narrow profit margins and geography.

- **The need for increased dialogue with the farming industry and retailers**
  Attendees recognised that the farming and veterinary professions were linked. The veterinary profession needs to engage more with farmers and retailers to gauge their expectations and search for opportunities. Vets made a significant clinical contribution on farm and it was also important to note that the veterinary profession had an additional responsibility to inform and educate farmers.

- **A changing business model?**
  Vets might need to adapt and change their business model. Vets had to engage with the debate on the role of paraprofessionals and look at possible solutions to the rota and 24 hour cover issues that could occur if paraprofessionals were used to a greater extent. Paraprofessionals as part of a veterinary led team could help to reduce practice costs and their role could be reviewed if the Veterinary Surgeons Act was reopened.

- **Veterinary Education and recruitment**
  Attendees were concerned about the possibility that vet student recruitment could fall because of the increase in fees. They also felt that there had to be a broadening in the skills base that vets have through post-graduate education and CPD. In addition, a broadening of EMS at undergraduate level would give students a wider perspective on the things that vets could do.

40. The veterinary profession needed to recognise the different situations in different sectors of farming. Vets should consider the opportunities for increasing their role in the food sector and other areas such as city farmers.

41. Regarding the role for VDC, there was suggestion that agricultural levy boards could provide a potential model. The VDC could act to gather market information about the demand for veterinary services and how this is going to change. It could then establish the tools that small businesses can use to reduce their vulnerability to risk. In looking back at Professor Lowe’s report, attendees felt that the VDC should seek to endorse where appropriate but should not be afraid of rebutting findings that were now incorrect.

42. There was a question regarding the future funding and work of the VDC beyond its twelve month remit. Professor Bennett responded that what was needed now was a better idea of the current market for veterinary services, how this was changing and how the veterinary profession might adapt. Once this had been done it would then be the time to think about what was needed.
43. From the discussion, Professor Bennett summarised the role of the VDC as providing information, acting as a facilitator and providing a mechanism for engagement with customers and the food industry.

44. Professor Bennett thanked all attendees and speakers for their participation.

**CORE/FOCUS GROUP MEETING – 4PM**

45. A number of representatives attended a smaller meeting to take stock of what had happened during the day and help establish a way forward.

46. Professor Bennett welcomed attendees and underlined some of the key messages of the main meeting. These were:

   - The need for the veterinary profession to engage more widely in the food supply chain, with the VDC as a facilitator (including looking at new roles for vets within the supply chain);
   - Engagement, via the BVA, with Animal Health/VLA in the ‘new partnership’ role;
   - Information gathering regarding new business models for practices and veterinary-led teams of paraprofessionals;
   - Vet education and continued professional development for specialisms and also for new skills such as team working, management.

47. There was some discussion about how the VDC should act as a facilitator and whether that should be with the customer, i.e. the farmer, and the retailer (the retailer being the customer’s customer). It was agreed that in some situations retailers were also vets’ customers and therefore the VDC should engage with them.

48. Attendees also agreed that the VDC should look to Europe and other countries and learn from their engagement with the food chain.

49. The VDC was a call to action for a sustainable future for Large Animal Practice and would provide leadership. It was accepted that the VDC was limited in terms of its resources and that it would need assistance from divisions and FVE.

50. Professor Bennett suggested that the VDC meet another two or three times and asked the BVA Secretariat to arrange the next meeting before Easter 2011.

51. The group confirmed the importance of Government participation in these discussions as one of the major customers for veterinary services.

52. The BVA Secretariat was asked to create an email loop for attendees.