

## **Speech to the BVA Annual Northern Ireland Dinner**

**Anna Judson, President of the British Veterinary Association**

Wednesday 18 October 2023 at Stormont

Distinguished guests, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to the British Veterinary Association's annual Northern Ireland dinner. Thank you so much for joining us.

We're extremely grateful to Tom Elliott MLA for hosting us this evening, and to Katrina Godfrey, Permanent Secretary for the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) for agreeing to be our guest speaker this evening. We look forward to hearing from her shortly.

But first, I want to say what an honour it is to be here at Stormont this evening. This event last year was my first visit to Belfast, and it's wonderful to be back in such a beautiful place and to be addressing you in what is to be my first major speech as BVA President.

I've stepped up at a challenging time for the veterinary profession - only yesterday we learnt of the impending strike action by vets working in Northern Ireland's ports – this following the announcement of the review of veterinary services by the Competitions and Markets Authority, the Prime Minister's decision that the American XL Bully type dog will be banned, and ongoing concerns about emerging disease threats.

BVA is proud to support and develop and champion its members across the whole of the UK, whether tackling issues impacting the whole profession or topics which have a specific impact on Northern Ireland, which I'll focus on tonight, specifically:

- The supply of veterinary medicines
- The Future Farming Framework and sustainable agriculture
- Veterinary education
- and the reform of the Veterinary Surgeon's Act

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At this event last year, Malcolm spoke about the challenges around access to veterinary medicines due to the Northern Ireland Protocol. The changes resulting from this legislation and required by EU regulations, would have seen 51% of veterinary medicines discontinued by the end of 2022.

The hard work of the BVA Northern Ireland Branch team, particularly by former President, Mark Little, contributed to a three-year grace period, meaning that access to veterinary medicines will continue under the old regulations until the end of 2025. Whilst a welcome extension, this has not reduced the need to work alongside a range of stakeholders, including the Government, the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) and the pharmaceutical industry, to find a permanent solution.

The loss of 1,700 veterinary medicines would result in vets being unable to deliver essential veterinary care with which to maintain high standards of animal welfare and protect human health.

This would have serious implications for the local, agriculture dependent economy. We are looking at the loss of the only licenced salmonella vaccine and both leptospirosis vaccines for cattle, diseases which affect both animals and people.

We would lose some flu and tetanus vaccines for horses - and we know tetanus is often a fatal disease *and* we could lose insulin for dogs and cats. These are just a few examples of the scale of impact if a solution is not found.

We believe the issue could be resolved with the introduction of a 'grandfather rule'. This would allow for the continued supply of veterinary medicines that were aligned with EU regulations pre-Brexit, with only newly licensed products required to adhere fully with EU rules.

We are lobbying the UK Government and European Commission, urging them to prioritise this issue, and work together to find a sustainable long-term solution to safeguard the future supply of veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland. With a General Election expected in 2024, we are also lobbying Labour and the Liberal

Democrats to ensure that this issue remains a cross party priority. We would welcome any support you can give us to help progress this important work.

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Whilst a potential loss of veterinary medicines has clear implications for animal and human health, especially in a region where livestock production is a major part of the agricultural sector, we also know that poor animal health leads to animal welfare problems, extra costs for farmers and contributes to climate change.

It is therefore vital that we continue to embrace the opportunities that leaving the Common Agricultural Policy present, and ensure animal health and welfare is central to the new Future Farming Framework. This will directly and indirectly support DAERA's primary policy priorities.

Our proposal is that government, vets, and industry work collaboratively to design a scheme with vet-farmer engagement at the centre to improve animal health and welfare in a consistent, long term and measurable way.

We recognise the current challenges faced by DAERA in the absence of a sitting Assembly, and with the Secretary of State's recent budget cuts. However, Northern Ireland has historically been held back by outdated or absent animal health and welfare legislation and lags behind the rest of the UK, an example being the current lack of a legal or regulatory requirement for farrier registration. We therefore urge you to ensure continued veterinary engagement in all relevant workstreams so that we can maximise opportunities around animal health and welfare.

Whilst we understand that the bTB and BVD Eradication Programmes will continue, and funding will be allocated to ensure preparedness for any potential disease outbreak, we ask you to ensure that short-term savings in other areas do not lead to serious adverse consequences in the long-term.

Investment in animal health and biosecurity is also an investment in human and environmental health, and it contributes to the efficiency and sustainability of our food production systems and agricultural sector as a whole. It is vital that sufficient funding is allocated.

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The veterinary profession also plays a key role in our local communities — supporting agriculture, food production and boosting the rural economy, yet the profession has been under significant pressure over recent years, with workforce shortages across all sectors. This is particularly challenging in remote and rural areas, where recruitment and retention can be harder.

The problem is further exacerbated in Northern Ireland as it remains the only part of the UK without a dedicated vet school. Not only does this leave the region reliant on vets trained in mainland Great Britain, the Republic of Ireland and the EU, it also forces students to move away to study, with very few returning after qualifying. The additional cost of moving away also prevents many potential students from pursuing a veterinary career. My Presidential theme is 'A Profession for Everyone', and tackling issues like this is very close to my heart.

One way to do this is through the provision of inclusive veterinary education which helps to break down the economic, social and geographic barriers which may prevent students from entering the profession.

While the recent report commissioned by DAERA fell short of recommending a purpose-built facility, it did acknowledge the need to address this workforce shortage. The provision of local veterinary education could play a key role in this.

At BVA, we support the ambition to invest in home-grown talent and establish veterinary education in Northern Ireland, with the veterinary profession fully engaged

to ensure an educational programme that will deliver what the region needs now, and in the future.

I chose the theme 'a profession for everyone' as I believe it is vital that we build a thriving profession, one that attracts and keeps our people and incorporates the whole veterinary team. However, we can't build the veterinary teams we need on the foundations of the current, outdated legislation which is no longer fit for purpose.

The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 fails to recognise the importance of other roles such as veterinary nurses and vet techs, or to embrace the full potential of the wider veterinary team. Veterinary nurses in my practice were highly qualified, experienced and important members of my team, and I find it incredible that this title isn't protected, and anyone can call themselves a vet nurse. This must be rectified, and we ask for your support as we lobby Defra for legislative reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act to bring about much needed UK-wide change.

During the evening, we would like to hear your thoughts on how best we can support and collaborate with you to progress these important issues:

- Access to veterinary medicines in Northern Ireland must remain high on the Government's priority list. We ask you to support our cross-party lobbying efforts to ensure this is the case.
- Veterinary engagement will be key to successfully developing Northern Ireland's Future Farming Policy, which must include animal health & welfare and sustainability. We encourage you to ensure there is adequate veterinary representation and sufficient funding to ensure that opportunities around animal health and welfare are not missed.
- We need local, sustainable provision of inclusive veterinary education that is focused on the people we need to maintain the future of Northern Ireland's veterinary profession. We urge you to allocate

funding and develop a strategy which meets this need.

- Reform of the outdated Veterinary Surgeons Act is essential for the future of our profession and veterinary teams whilst also improving animal welfare. We ask for your support in lobbying Defra to deliver this much-needed reform.

Finally, I would like to say a huge thank you to the BVA Northern Ireland Branch Officer team for their incredible commitment and passion in representing the veterinary profession and driving forward some of the issues I have mentioned this evening. Esther, Fiona, Sharon and Mark you are all a huge asset to BVA. Thank you.

I'll also add a big thank you to all of my colleagues, many of whom are in this room, who are part of BVA Northern Ireland Branch. Your energy and expertise are much valued.

If everyone would now please rise, and raise your glasses, I would like to make a toast to the future of the Northern Ireland veterinary profession. [Toast]

It's now my pleasure to hand over to Katrina Godfrey, Permanent Secretary for the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Thank you.