

British Veterinary Association Northern Ireland Dinner

BVA President Malcolm Morley's Speech

Wednesday 12 October 2022 at Parliament Buildings, Stormont

Thank you, Fiona.

Good evening, I am so pleased to welcome you all here tonight.

Northern Ireland is a fitting place to make my first speech as BVA President. As a practising equine vet of nearly thirty years, many of the horses I've cared for originated from the island of Ireland, with its long-standing reputation for horsemanship, horse-breeding, and championing equine welfare.

Introducing the Minister

I'd like to join Fiona in welcoming Edwin Poots, the Minister for Agriculture, the Environment-and--Rural Affairs. I know this is an extremely busy time for DEARA, and I'm so pleased he is able to join us this evening, and we will hear from him shortly.

We had a very positive meeting with the Minister earlier today, where we had the opportunity to discuss several pressing issues facing the veterinary and agriculture sectors right now in Northern Ireland. We also considered the opportunities that could help both sectors not just survive what is currently a difficult period, but in the longer-term, thrive.

Setting the scene

I am sure you will agree with me these are challenging times. I would love to be delivering a really positive, upbeat speech, but I'm afraid I have a list of challenges. However, challenges must be a catalyst for change and I want everyone to consider how you can be part of that change.

The realities of Brexit, which we continue to navigate, were swiftly followed by the Covid-19 pandemic, which brought an extraordinary and unexpected rise in pet ownership, at a time when the profession was already facing workforce shortages. Now, we are entering a cost-of-living crisis that the UK has not seen the like of for more than fifty years.

Make no mistake, the veterinary profession across the UK is stretched to breaking point. Farms and auxiliary businesses are facing unsustainable increases in expenditure and sadly, with pet owners already struggling to make ends meet and forced to make tough choices, we are starting to see animal welfare suffer.

As if that wasn't enough to contend with, here in Northern Ireland, vets face additional hurdles. The most pressing being access to vital veterinary medicines, that we heard from Fiona, as a direct result of Brexit and the impact of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Brexit and access to medicine

This situation is extremely concerning to all of us. Northern Ireland has a unique place in both the UK and EU regulatory spheres, costly bureaucracy, onerous regulation and checks

on veterinary medicines moving across the Irish Sea pose a serious threat. Unless action is taken soon, it risks an animal welfare crisis in all key sectors.

There is an urgent and immediate need to find a resolution. The 'grace period' currently in place, which delays the need for these requirements, concludes at the end of the year. The UK government and EU must not let this deadline lapse without a workable solution, or we risk the discontinuation of around half of all veterinary medicines in NI, for a variety of animals and livestock. This affects all sectors – farm, equine and pets. It is also not just an animal health issue but a public health issue, particularly if salmonella vaccines become unavailable to poultry vets. Such public health risks would also jeopardise access to markets outside Northern Ireland.

Longer-term there is a question about how new medicines come onto the market. Should there be a requirement for a standalone authorisation process or dual regulation? Given the size of the market here, there is a real and worrying possibility that medicines companies will simply choose to bypass Northern Ireland. That would be a disaster, not just for veterinary practices and our direct clients, but for livestock agriculture - which means so much to Northern Ireland - and most importantly, for animals who in the end will suffer the consequences most acutely.

I'm pleased to report that BVA's Northern Ireland Branch President, Fiona McFarland and her team, have been working hard to set out for officials what the consequences of this loss of veterinary medicines would mean. They continue to work closely with our colleagues in The Ulster Farmers Union, the National Office of Animal Health, and others to find a way forward.

I believe a path forward can be found. We've seen that it is possible to navigate the same issue for human medicines and adopting a similar approach for animals seems like a clear way forward. It was great to see UK and EU Commission negotiations restart. We need this issue to be top of their agenda.

I know we can put the politics to one side and seek practical solutions. After all, to fail risks an animal welfare disaster, significant impacts on livestock productivity and disruption to food chains in Northern Ireland at a time when we can least afford it.

People, and workforce and sustainability of the profession

Vets, however, are an amazing profession, with many of you here tonight devoting your lives to animal health and welfare in different ways. While our profession is characterised by animals, in reality it is a profession intrinsically centred on people, whether they are our colleagues, our clients, the animal owning public or farming communities.

The well-being of vets and other veterinary staff in Northern Ireland is of grave concern to me personally. My presidential theme for this year is 'investing in people' and it worries me that right across our profession we are seeing a rapid increase in staff leaving - disillusioned by excessive workloads, unhealthy workplace culture and lack of career development.

BVA's Good Veterinary Workplaces initiative goes to the very heart of this and shows how changes that focus on workplace culture, flexibility, career progression, inclusivity and wellbeing can boost contentment, help retain staff and of course, build a sustainable profession.

Leaving the EU has increased the workload for vets across the UK. In Britain OV's are signing Export Health Certificates to move live animals and meat products into the EU. OV's in small animal practice have been getting to grips with the complicated travel arrangements

that come from leaving the PET travel scheme. In NI, DAERA has had to find the capacity to build and staff border control posts to undertake controls on goods moving from Britain.

BVA's Northern Ireland Branch, Senior Vice President, Mark Little, has been working with many of you to provide some certainty around the impact of future demands should the current STAMNI grace periods be lifted. There would be the potential need for a huge jump in the number of vet-signed Export Health Certificates in GB and more inspections at border control posts here in Northern Ireland. This means vet staff already overworked and at capacity, could reach burnout.

We are putting pressure on the UK Government and EU to work with stakeholders to find a joint solution. We are also trying to engage the UK Government on the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill as it moves its way through Parliament; it had its second reading this week.

Put simply, there are just not enough vets in place in the UK today to cope with the additional level of work that would come into force should the grace period end.

Vet School

We must also ensure we are bringing through the next generation of vets. Northern Ireland remains the only part of the UK without a dedicated vet school. At BVA we support the ambition to invest in home-grown talent by establishing a world-leading vet school that can also support and grow the strong and innovative industry that is already here. I believe there would be many economic benefits that are difficult to quantify and such an initiative would go a long way to attracting leading vets from farther afield.

Additional funding for vet school places should be agreed and supported to ensure the quality of the education. It's vital that the profession is engaged with the creation of a new vet school, ensuring we are building an educational programme that will deliver what Northern Ireland needs, now and in the future.

Animal disease control and future farming

Whilst the realities of Brexit continue to dominate politics in Northern Ireland, we mustn't lose sight of the opportunities presented to us to from leaving the Common Agricultural Policy, and how we can use that to improve animal health and welfare outcomes on farm, particularly by tackling endemic disease. We all know that poor animal health leads to welfare problems, results in economic costs for agriculture, and can also contribute to climate change - low productivity is not sustainable.

According to the World Office for Animal Health, over twenty percent of animal production losses are linked to animal diseases.

Research by the Scottish Government has found that the costs attributable to veterinary services in Scotland, for thirty endemic diseases of farm animals, were estimated to be between 100 and 154 million pounds each year. That is money saved by government and farmers - at a time when everyone is worried about their budgets for the year ahead, it is important to reiterate that investing in animal health is good economics.

The success of Animal Health and Welfare Northern Ireland shows that endemic diseases such as BVD and Johnes can only be controlled by partnership working between farmers, vets, and government.

Last year, BVA responded to the Northern Ireland Government consultation on Bovine TB policy. We believe there are exciting opportunities to apply new approaches to tackling the disease, based on behavioural science—and vets are keen to be part of that.

We're calling for enhanced data sharing between government vets and private vets. There should also be a system of earned recognition where farmers are rewarded for good biosecurity practices, including responsible purchasing of animals.

We're confident this new direction, focused on the vet-farmer relationship, can have a significant impact on levels TB in herds. We're keen to see the Government's next steps and how we can best support it.

Puppy welfare issues

We continue to champion the passage of the Kept Animals Bill through the UK Parliament. This week I will be writing to the UK Environment Secretary calling on the Government to deliver on its commitment to the Bill.

Many of you will be familiar with our #CutTheCrop campaign and know that one of the issues this Bill tackles is canine ear cropping. Urgent action is essential to curb this worrying trend. It's an unnecessary and painful mutilation and has no welfare benefit. The Bill will bring about a complete ban on importing dogs who have been subject to this mutilation. While it's illegal to crop dogs' ears in the UK, it's not illegal to sell them, import them, or take dogs abroad to be cropped. This Bill will help close these loopholes, which also act as a smokescreen for this barbaric practice continuing in the UK.

The Kept Animals Bill would go a long way to eliminating it and I urge you all to join BVA in giving it your full support.

At BVA, we continue to challenge the un-scrupulous breeding of pets for profit and fashion over welfare. A key aspect of this is our #Breed-To-Breathe campaign, and collaborative efforts as part of the Brachycephalic Working Group.

A concerning development we've seen, resulting from the demand for these popular flat-faced breeds, is the rise in canine fertility clinics, which have spread rapidly in response to soaring demand for puppies of this type.

These clinics are unregulated and many are operating with absolutely no veterinary oversight, with unqualified people undertaking potentially harmful procedures. It's a worrying trend and we are keen to work with DAERA, and other veterinary and animal welfare organisations, to ensure the welfare of dogs, is safeguarded through proper veterinary oversight of regulated activity.

The illegal movement of dogs across borders is a specific issue here in Northern Ireland and we would like to see existing legislation strengthened and better enforced to clamp down on the smuggling of puppies into Britain via Northern Ireland. We're pleased that DEARA has taken action to build awareness through education, but we need a five-nations approach to coordinate efforts and achieve the greatest impact.

And finally, we come to horses. The equine industry in Northern Ireland contributes an estimated 212 million pounds a year to the Northern Ireland economy, creating around 3500 full-time jobs. It's a thriving and varied sector.

The old adage of no foot, no horse still stands. I work closely with farriers almost every day and recognise the vital role they play in supporting the equine industry and veterinary profession. I believe a key equine issue for Northern Ireland is the registration of farriers to ensure farriery standards are upheld.

This should be the first step in a wider strategy to support this important industry. There is potential for the industry to expand, in many areas, but there will be a requirement for specific equine welfare guidelines and standards. I urge DAERA to work with us to address this as a matter of urgency, so the industry can harness the opportunities before them.

Thank yous

Much of the activity and engagement that I've mentioned here could not have been achieved without my incredibly committed BVA Northern Ireland Branch colleagues. I want to say a huge thank you to our Branch president, Fiona McFarland, and Senior Vice President, Mark Little.

To our guests, please do contact Fiona, or any BVA colleague if we can be of assistance on animal health and welfare, or veterinary public health matters, moving forwards. And now to the crux.

I have laid down some of our big challenges in this speech. Once again, I would like all of you to reflect for a moment about how your organisations can collaborate to help bring about the changes we need.

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

I'd now like to hand over to Edwin Poots, Minister for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs.

Thank you.