

BVA response to the request for feedback from the National Audit Office (NAO) study on Skilled Worker visas

The British Veterinary Association (BVA) is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom. With over 19,000 members, our mission is to represent, support and champion the whole UK veterinary profession. We are a professional body and our members are individual veterinary surgeons. We take a keen interest in all issues affecting the profession, including animal health and welfare, public health, regulatory issues and employment matters.

We welcome the NAO study on Skilled work visas and given the nature of our organisation, we will focus our response on question 2 – rule changes that are having an impact on sponsors or applicants- and question 8, the future of the system.

Immigration: skilled worker visas

Rule changes

2. What impacts have recent rule changes had on sponsors or applicants?

- **Have businesses found it more difficult to recruit or fill vacancies as a result of changes to the system?**
- **How have the rule changes affected different cohorts of applicants / different sectors?**

BVA believes that the rule changes, specifically the introduction of new skilled worker visa rules requiring veterinary surgeons to meet a salary threshold of £48,100 or £24.67 per hour has presented a significant challenge for our profession. Already grappling with a well-recognised veterinary workforce shortage, compounded by retention and recruitment challenges, the United Kingdom remains heavily reliant on overseas graduates registering and practicing in our country. Vet salaries vary considerably throughout the regions of the UK and across veterinary sectors (domestic pet, farm animal, 'mixed practice') so the threshold has led to a disproportionate impact, with some areas suffering greater shortages than others.

There has been a significant decline in overseas graduates joining the UK register, in particular from the EU, due to the post-Brexit requirements of applying for visas, requirements for sponsorship from employers, and the need for an English proficiency test. Registrations from graduates of EU veterinary schools dropped from a height of 1195 in 2018 (over half the total) to only 365 veterinary surgeons in 2021, and have subsequently only recovered to a total of 536 in 2023.

The rule changes also include the provision for veterinary surgeons under the age of 26 to use the Skilled Worker Option E, with a salary threshold set at 70% of the going rate (£33,670 or £17.27 per hour). However, even the youngest (first degree) veterinary students undergo a five- or six-year degree course, meaning those graduates are typically between 24 and 26 years of age, with many several years older, making this option viable for only a limited number of individuals.

Data from the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) in 2022/2023 indicates that UK veterinary surgeons typically do not reach the £48,100 salary threshold until they are at least five years post-graduation. Starting salaries for overseas veterinary surgeons working in the UK are likely to be lower due to their lack of prior UK practice experience. Raising salaries to compensate for the Home Office changes would have an impact on the cost of veterinary services at a time when the veterinary industry is under considerable scrutiny, not least in the current Competition and Markets Authority investigation.

We warned the then Secretary of State in March 2024 that the implementation of the £48,100 going rate will make it almost impossible to recruit veterinary surgeons from overseas unless they are either very experienced or under 26 years of age. This change will continue to have far-reaching implications across the UK veterinary profession, particularly impacting areas such as public health, veterinary education, and remote and rural livestock practice, as raised in the recent [EFRA committee inquiry into Vet shortages](#). As highlighted by FSA in their [written evidence](#) for this session, vets working across the meat sector also underpin the economy, providing value to the £9.1bn domestic meat industry and the £2.1bn meat export trade. We anticipate a rapid exacerbation of the UK veterinary workforce shortage, jeopardising animal welfare and public health standards in the process.

The future of the system

8. How could the work visa system be improved? Any areas the Home Office should focus on in the future?

We believe that the work visa system should consider the individual professions, in this case veterinary professionals.

The Home Office should consider rethinking the current rules and revising them to set the applicant salary threshold for veterinary surgeons to the standard rate of £38,700 rather than the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) 2020 system. While BVA welcomes an increase in veterinary salaries, recognising the need for appropriate remuneration for our skilled roles, the substantial rise in salary requirements for sponsoring visa applicants is likely to cause significant disruption for all veterinary employers.

Lastly, simplifying the visa application process will encourage more practices to recruit internationally, helping to address the current shortages.