

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

**Liz Mullineaux, President of the British Veterinary Association**

Wednesday 2 October 2024 at Stormont

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

We're extremely grateful to Declan McAleer MLA for hosting us this evening, and to Andrew Muir, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for agreeing to be our guest speaker. We look forward to hearing from you soon.

But first, I'd like to say what an honour it is to be here at Stormont this evening. I attended the BVA annual dinner last year, in what was actually my first visit to Northern Ireland, and I can't think of a more beautiful place to be addressing you in my first major speech as BVA President.

This is a challenging time for the veterinary profession. There's a new government in Northern Ireland; the Competition and Markets Authority investigation into veterinary services for household pets is ongoing; and there's the prospect of a new veterinary agreement with the EU; as well as the urgent need to reform the Veterinary Surgeons Act.

BVA is proud to represent, support and champion our members across the whole of the UK, whether tackling issues impacting the whole profession, or topics which have a specific impact in Northern Ireland. Tonight I will focus on three main issues:

- The veterinary agreement with the EU and the supply of veterinary medicines
- the Competition and Markets Authority investigation
- And Reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966

At this event last year, our then President Anna Judson spoke about the challenges around access to veterinary medicines as a result of the Northern Ireland Protocol. Thanks to the hard work of the BVA Northern Ireland Branch, alongside our past President, Malcolm Morley, we managed to secure a three-year grace period, enabling medicines to be accessed under the old agreement. This extension however, is coming to an end and will cease by the close of 2025, unless a new arrangement with the EU is reached. Failing to find a solution risks both animal and human health, not only in Northern Ireland but in the Republic of Ireland, and ultimately across Europe.

The new UK Government's manifesto commitment to reach a veterinary agreement with the EU provides us with a new opportunity to secure access to veterinary medicines. The Government wants closer relations with the EU and so we'll be increasing our lobbying, to ensure ministers and officials not only understand the scale of the issue, but prioritise it so supply of Northern Ireland veterinary medicines is at the forefront of any agreement. We would welcome any support you can give us to help progress this work.

---

The Competition and Markets Authority investigation has been a huge challenge for those in clinical veterinary practice over the last year – and BVA has been proud to stand up for our profession and ensure that the veterinary voice is heard. Although this is limited to household pets, the outcomes of the CMA investigation are likely to impact upon the potential sustainability of all veterinary practices, especially small, mixed and rural practices such as some of those in Northern Ireland.

Following the CMA's initial review which began in September last year, and the subsequent confirmation that it intended to proceed with a formal market investigation, we have been continuously working to ensure that our members have access to the most up-to-date information and advice. We have also been actively challenging negative and often very unfair coverage of the profession in the media.

We have worked constructively with the CMA throughout the investigation process, to ensure that they fully understand the veterinary landscape and to help avoid any unintended consequences, including those for animal welfare.

We remain committed to working closely with the CMA to ensure that its investigation leads to positive outcomes, while supporting the profession with measures such as our [new guidance to help address concerns on transparency and client choice](#). We continue to stand up for the veterinary profession in our discussions with the CMA, calling for a balanced approach that allows healthy competition and prioritises animal welfare and professional integrity.

---

My personal commitment to the veterinary profession comes from over 30 years of loving the job I do. I strongly believe that for our profession to thrive, we need to ensure that we can attract new talent whilst building inclusive veterinary teams. To do this, we need a fit-for-purpose modern regulatory framework that recognises the importance of all members of the veterinary team.

The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 is woefully outdated and fails to recognise the importance of other allied professionals such as veterinary nurses, equine dental technicians, musculoskeletal professionals and vet techs, or to embrace the full potential of the wider veterinary team. It also fails to regulate veterinary practices, meaning that individual vets and veterinary nurses are held accountable for business decisions which are often way outside their control but can directly impact on animal health and welfare. This is not appropriate and must be rectified.

During the evening, we would like to hear your thoughts on how best we can support and collaborate with you so we can continue to ensure that veterinary surgeon's work is understood and valued and that they're supported to grow and thrive personally and professionally.

Finally, I would also like to pay tribute to a very valued colleague, Des Thompson, who as you know sadly passed away recently. He was extremely well known to all of us in the profession having served as RCVS President, and we acknowledge his tireless work as an advocate for the profession, particularly in Northern Ireland.

I would also 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 talked about this evening. Sharon, Esther, Kirsten and Mark you are all a huge asset to BVA and valued colleagues to me and to the BVA team. Thank you very much. I would also like to extend my appreciation for all his work in NI to Simon Doherty, past President of BVA, who unfortunately can't be with us this evening as he is unwell. I am sure you all join me in wishing him a speedy recovery.

And of course, I'd like to say a big thank you to all members of BVA's Northern Ireland Branch, many of whom are in this room. Your energy and expertise are really valued by all of us at BVA.

And now, if everyone would 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 great pleasure to hand over to Andrew Muir, Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Thank you.