

The BVA set out its concerns around a 'no-deal' Brexit and the veterinary profession⁸ in the 8-point Plan for surviving no-deal Brexit⁹. The RCVS also called on the Government not to accept a no-deal Brexit. Both organisations highlighted the very real risks to the profession and, particularly, to the veterinary workforce and animal health and welfare.

Even though there is still uncertainty in many areas, the Government is working hard to try and plan for future scenarios, especially a no-deal Brexit. Many of the technical notices¹⁰ produced as a result of no-deal planning apply to areas affecting the veterinary profession.

One area of uncertainty that had been causing concern was the ability to export animals and products of animal origin to the EU in the event of a no-deal. This uncertainty has been lifted with the agreement of the EU Member States of the UK's 'listed status' application. While this is to be welcomed, it is important to note that in the event of a no-deal, third country veterinary certification will be needed for all imports and exports of animals and products of animal origin.

Where the uncertainty still prevails is around the movement of pets, as the third country status does not include the Pet Travel Scheme. In the event of a no-deal, pet owners will need to meet the additional testing and certification requirement as laid out by Defra¹¹. This area of uncertainty around the future relationship is causing problems for pet owners and the profession.

The BVA's February 2019 Voice of the Veterinary Profession Survey showed that 74 per cent of vets reported an increase in pet owners seeking guidance on what to do if they wish to travel with their pets to the EU. The concern around the uncertainty is summed up well by one vet who writes, 'We are advising clients of the Defra guidelines and advising rabies blood testing again in plenty of time. Many clients are angry with us (!!) for telling them this information, and for being uncertain – especially those who travel back and forth regularly'.

Looking to the future, it is still uncertain regarding the terms of the UK's exit from the EU and what any transition period will look like. While this is proving to be tricky, the next stage regarding the future relationship and future trading relationships with other countries could also have a major impact on the veterinary profession – but this is all to come. While there will undoubtedly be bumps in the road, there are also opportunities.

Leaving the Common Agricultural Policy gives us the opportunity to reform our agriculture system. The Agriculture Bill that is making its way through parliament covers both reserved and devolved policy matters; but mainly contains provisions for the future agriculture policy for England with one of these being 'public goods' for public money with animal health and welfare considered a 'public good'. As the veterinary profession is the guardian of animal health and welfare, we have the opportunity to further strengthen our relationship with other stakeholders in this sphere and be an essential part of reform.

There is also an opportunity to strengthen the Pet Travel Scheme to reduce the risk of importing disease, particularly via non-native tick species.

Summary

Vets are at the forefront of changing and shaping the landscape for the future and EU exit has transformed Defra with thousands of new people working in the department. Many of them are looking at issues for 'Day 1' post-EU exit and the future of farming. This presents an opportunity to address issues that the Common Agricultural Policy has failed to allow us to reform previously and there is also the 'Brexit Bonus' money to assist in addressing these issues.

There is no doubt that EU exit will affect the profession – although it is a real crystal ball-gazing exercise to see how that may be. The industries with which we work are likely to go through significant changes. It is imperative that vets remain the essential ingredient and that our value is recognised and rewarded.

Importantly, whatever we might think of EU exit, the veterinary voice is powerful and needs to be heard. Thankfully it is being heard loud and clear in government as a result of the work of the BVA and the RCVS – not forgetting the tremendous work of government vets who are working in overdrive to achieve the best outcomes for animal health and welfare. ■

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