Executive Summary

Recruitment – A Crisis for the Veterinary Profession

Between 25th September and 6th October 2017 the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) conducted a survey on recruitment within the veterinary profession. The survey drew 276 responses, 238 from veterinary surgeons and 38 from practice managers. This compares with 326 responses to a similar survey SPVS conducted in 2015.

The majority of veterinary surgeons who responded were UK nationals, with 8.9% coming from the EU and 3.4% from other overseas countries. 37% of veterinary surgeons were planning to reduce their working hours in the foreseeable future, whilst 6% were planning to move to a different sphere of work.

More than half of the businesses responding did not have a full complement of veterinary surgeons, with 28% of these reporting a severe effect on their ability to cover out of hours (OOH) work.

Most businesses had attempted to recruit a veterinary surgeon in the past 12 months, and of the applicants only 38% had come from the UK. Only 22% of respondents had found it easy to recruit a suitable applicant (defined as taking less than 3 months) compared with 30% in our previous survey. 10 businesses had received no applications at all, and 31% had failed to recruit a suitable candidate at the time of responding. An unwillingness to do OOH work was the commonest reason for candidates rejecting an offer of a position.

In further comments, 14 respondents identified the recruitment problems in the profession as being of crisis proportions. A shortage of vets, especially experienced vets, was widely recognised. A number of respondents felt that universities were failing to select suitable candidates and not preparing them for a life in practice, especially general practice. At the same time it was felt that factors such as stress, lack of recognition and low pay, coupled with the increasing feminisation of the profession, were leading to more vets reducing their hours in search of a better work life balance (WLB) or leaving the profession altogether.

A number of respondents feared that Brexit would reduce the supply of vets from the EU, further exacerbating the problems of recruitment, and there were calls for the profession to be placed on the skills shortage list to facilitate recruitment from other overseas countries.

Peter Brown
SPVS President Elect
Demographics of Veterinary Surgeons Responding

Of the 238 vets who responded the average period qualified was 20.8 years, with a range from 0 to 58. Respondents were split equally between male and female, and 86.9% worked full time (35 or more hours per week).

Nationality and Place of Graduation:

Sphere of Work:

Status at Work:

56.8% of practices were described as urban, 41.5% rural, and 1.7% as geographically remote.
Working Intentions of Veterinary Surgeons

Are you planning to reduce your working hours in the foreseeable future?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

Do you intend to continue in your current field of work in the UK in the foreseeable future?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

If you do not intend to continue in your current field of work in the UK for the foreseeable future, what do you plan to do?

- Work in another branch of veterinary practice in this country
- Work in another branch of the profession (non-practice) in this country
- Work in the veterinary profession in another country
- Work outside the veterinary profession
- Not yet decided
Recruitment

Respondents were asked about their current workforce.

Just over 70% were UK nationals.

52.3% of business did not have all the veterinary surgeons they needed, with the average shortfall being 21.6% (approximately 1/5 of the workforce). They were asked what effect this had on OOH cover:

- Severe - we are unable to cover OOH without unacceptable levels of overtime
- Moderate - we can cover OOH with acceptable levels of overtime
- Mild - we can cover OOH with minimal/no overtime
- Not applicable - we use an OOH provider
87.6% of businesses had tried to recruit in the past 12 months, which is similar to our previous survey (84%).

**Level of Experience Sought:**

- 77.5% of posts were full-time (35 hours a week or more) and 22.5% part-time.

**How was position advertised?**

The average number of responses received was 5.1, with a range from 0 to 35. 10 had received no replies at all. 7% reported more responses than the last time they advertised, 32% a similar number, and 61% reported fewer than before.

Of the applicants, 38% were from the UK, 53% from the EU and 9% from other overseas countries.
Our previous survey reported that 30% of those advertising a position had found it easy, defined as taking less than 3 months to identify a suitable candidate. By the same definition, this time only 22% of respondents had easily recruited a candidate, with 47% taking more than 3 months to find someone, whilst 31% had failed to find any suitable candidate at the time of response to the survey.

Able to recruit a veterinary surgeon within 3 months:

If you were able to recruit a suitable candidate, how long did it take?

If you did not recruit a suitable candidate, why was that?

- No applicant was deemed suitable 38.2%
- No candidate was willing to accept the position 30.3%
- Other 31.5%

Some respondents who answered other cited a combination of the two alternative responses. The commonest other reasons were either that there had been no applicants or that the process was not completed yet.
If no candidate would accept the position, what reasons if any were given?

Relative to the situation 4 years ago, how do you think the current process of recruitment in the veterinary profession compares?
90% of respondents thought the situation was worse than before, and 9% thought it was about the same, with only 1% thinking it was better.

Further Comments
136 respondents provided additional comments, many of which echoed those made in our previous survey.

Most respondents (66) commented on the general shortage of veterinary surgeons, with 17 highlighting a shortage of experienced vets, particularly in rural areas (3). A further 2 said the problem was particularly bad in specialist areas, where the vast majority of applicants were from the EU. 8 respondents also saw recruitment as an issue for the veterinary nursing profession. According to 3 the shortage of experienced vets meant new graduates were sometimes being taken to fulfil these roles, and ended up, in the words of one, being used “like cannon fodder”. 10 respondents were fearful of the effects of Brexit, which was described as “a disaster for recruitment”, and 11 highlighted the need to continue drawing on the pool of EU candidates, despite language and training being a problem for 3 people. Having the profession on the skills shortage list to facilitate recruitment from English-speaking non-EU countries was mentioned by 9 people. 14 respondents saw the current recruitment situation as a crisis for the profession, with words such as ‘frightening’, ‘nightmare’, and ‘dire’ being used. One respondent declared, ”I have been in practice 34 years and it is the worst it has ever been.”
Various explanations were advanced for the shortage. The problem of vets leaving the profession or wanting to work fewer hours, to maintain a good work life balance was mentioned by 20: one person commented, “We are producing enough excellent vets, we just need to retain them” whilst another described the drop-out rate as ‘alarming.’ 24 people highlighted the problem of vets not wanting to work out of hours; “I cannot find anyone prepared to work OOH,” said one.

For some (6) these problems were explicitly linked to the increasing feminisation of the profession, a much lower number than in the previous survey. Low wages (5) and the problem of vets feeling stressed or undervalued (10) were also seen as contributory factors, with one remarking “we really need to address issues of mental health and disillusion[ment] as well as encouraging flexible and supported working in order to prevent the skills haemorrhage that seems to occur.”

Undergraduate selection (12) and education (12) were also seen as issues, with one respondent observing “we are not selecting the right students to go to university in the first place” whilst 3 respondents pleaded for more UK undergraduates to be selected. 4 respondents highlighted the problem of applicants seeming not to want a career in general/first opinion practice, something that also arose in our previous survey.

Recruitment agencies came in for some criticism (9) for being expensive or ineffective, but one respondent reported a positive experience as a candidate looking for a position.

On the positive side, a handful of respondents reported a positive experience recruiting vets which they linked either to having good training and support (4) or offering internships (1).