

# Transforming Veterinary Practice for the 21st Century

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Building a thriving workforce to meet evolving client  
expectations and support workplace wellbeing

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2025

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# Glossary and Acronyms

## Burnout

We use the World Health organisation definition of burnout as a cumulative syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed. It is characterised by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one’s job, feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job and reduced professional efficacy<sup>1</sup>.

## Low workplace wellbeing

A combination of indicators such as high levels of stress, emotional fatigue and poor work–life balance, with workplace structures as contributing factors. Distinct from “job satisfaction”, as despite low workplace wellbeing many veterinarians remain committed to their job and still derive job satisfaction from clinical practice. Also distinct from mental wellbeing, which individualises a systemic wellbeing issue.

- AVA**  
Australian Veterinary Association
- AVMA**  
American Veterinary Medical Association
- CMA**  
Competition and Markets Authority
- BEVA**  
British Equine Veterinary Association
- BSAVA**  
British Small Animal Veterinary Association
- BVA**  
British Veterinary Association
- FECAVA**  
Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary Associations
- FVE**  
Federation of Veterinarians of Europe
- RCVS**  
Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
- SPVS**  
Society of Practicing Veterinary Surgeons
- VMG**  
Veterinary Management Group
- WSAVA**  
World Small Animal Veterinary Association

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>

# Foreword

At Zoetis, we have long recognised the vital role that veterinary professionals play in society. From protecting animal health to ensuring food security and public wellbeing, their work underpins systems that we all rely on. But the demands of the profession are growing and many vets today face significant pressures that can impact their ability to stay and thrive in practice.

We developed this white paper to better understand the challenge of retention in the veterinary profession. It explores what is driving veterinary professionals to reconsider their future and identifies three critical areas where systemic change is needed: reimagining how practice works, adapting to meet evolving client expectations and broadening the professional pipeline.

In conducting this research, we were struck by how often retention is framed as an individual issue, when in reality the causes are structural and collective. The feedback we heard was clear: change must be rooted in workplace culture, support systems and how the profession values and enables its people.

At Zoetis, we have already been working to advance change in these areas. The Zoetis Foundation funds programmes that directly support the mental health and well-being of veterinary professionals. These include 24-7 helpline and counselling resources through **Vetlife** in the UK, psychological safety training in Australian practices, via the **Australian Veterinary Association's** Cultivating Safe Teams programme, and emergency financial support and mental health services through **Not One More Vet** in the US. The Zoetis Foundation's grant to the **Federation of Veterinarians of Europe** and their **VetJoy** programme extends this commitment across Europe, through initiatives such as workplace coaching vouchers and early-career mentoring, to promote positive workplace culture and mental well-being.

Zoetis is committed to using the findings of this white paper to inform our ongoing efforts in the veterinary sector. We will continue to engage with stakeholders across the profession to help implement the strategies outlined here, supporting initiatives that promote mental health, work-life balance, and innovative practice models. Through collaboration with industry leaders, veterinary organisations, and educational institutions, we aim to help build a stronger, more resilient workforce that can meet the challenges of the future.

This issue is too significant to tackle in isolation. It requires collaboration and collective action from all corners of the veterinary sector. We encourage all stakeholders – whether you are a practice owner, an educator, a policy maker, or an industry partner – to join us in advancing these three pillars of change. Together, we can ensure that veterinary professionals receive the support they need to thrive, ultimately benefiting animals, their owners, and society as a whole. The time for action is now, and by working together, we can build a more sustainable and rewarding future for the veterinary profession..

# Executive Summary

This white paper draws upon evidence from a multi-phase research programme designed to capture both the breadth and depth of the retention issue facing the veterinary industry. We combined a literature review of sources from around the globe with qualitative and quantitative investigations across Europe, aimed at capturing both the scale of the issue and the human experiences at the heart of it.

In-depth interviews with experts and perspectives from a roundtable of industry leaders were combined with statistical results from a wide-ranging survey distributed across veterinary practices in Europe. Insights delivered by the research provided a foundation for exploring causes, effects and potential discussion points aimed at stimulating a re-imagining of collaborative sector-wide action to address the subject of retention.<sup>1</sup>

Our research suggests that there are three pillars for transformation that could create meaningful change:

- Reimagining the Veterinary Workplace**

A major rethink of traditional practice structures is needed, to create sustainable working environments with more flexible scheduling, better workload distribution and technologies that reduce administrative burden. This will allow the sector to directly address the significant number of veterinarians considering leaving the profession due to work intensity, poor work-life balance and stress.
- Adapting to Meet Modern Service Demands**

Veterinarians can be equipped with enhanced communication skills and new service models can be created to realistically balance client expectations with practitioner wellbeing. This will reduce the ethical strain and client conflict that drives burnout, helping retain veterinarians and reducing anxiety both for veterinary professionals and pet owners in the context of clinical interactions.
- Broadening the Professional Pipeline**

Creating diverse pathways into and through the profession which include more inclusive selection criteria and expanded funding opportunities. This will not only increase the talent pool but create further sustainable career trajectories for existing practitioners, addressing the high attrition rates among both early-career and mid-career veterinarians.

This white paper aims to stimulate discussion, and collaboration toward strategic evolution, that will help ensure veterinarians can continue to enjoy long and rewarding careers.

<sup>1</sup>Primary interviews were conducted predominantly with veterinary surgeons and practice managers but our literature review suggests many of our findings have relevance across the entire veterinary team.

# Introduction:

## Why this matters now

For many veterinarians work is more than a job and constitutes a defining feature of their identity: a calling. Motivations for entering the profession include an affinity for animals, a desire to contribute to society, and a striving for clinical excellence and customer care. These intrinsic drivers give veterinarians high levels of vocational purpose and job satisfaction.

“We do have the most beautiful profession in the world.”  
Dr Ann Criel, Vice President, Federation of European Companion Animal Veterinary Associations

70%  
A 2023 Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) survey found that 70% of veterinarians rated their choice of profession highly (FVE, 2023).

51%  
A 2019 Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) survey found that 51% of veterinarians reported job satisfaction, and 67.7% cited “working with animals” as the best thing about their job (Robinson et al., 2019).

“An overwhelming majority of veterinarians agreed both with the statements ‘veterinary work is stressful’ (83%) and ‘veterinary work is enjoyable’ (93%)” (Cake et al., 2015).

Given the documented passion and commitment among veterinary professionals, what is causing the current retention issue and how can it best be addressed? This paradox is at the heart of the contemporary veterinary experience and is what we aim to address in this white paper.

Multiple studies from across the industry over the past 15 years tell a story of deeply dedicated professionals whose passion for animals and personal strengths are diminished in the face of workplace challenges. Veterinarians face high workloads, compassion fatigue and moral injury within workplace structures that have struggled to keep pace with broader societal changes and professional expectations. Pet ownership is booming but while client expectations are rising, they are not always matched by owner capacity to pay for the desired treatments and services. A significant proportion of veterinarians around the globe report low workplace wellbeing and many are choosing to leave the profession, as discussed in Chapter 3.

Our own survey of 1,083 veterinarians across Europe found that nearly 50% report frequent feelings of burnout at work. This trend is replicated in multiple global studies, as discussed in Chapter 4.

Burnout is associated with higher odds of sick leave (Kostev et al., 2024). Our research found that 70% of veterinarians surveyed took time off work in the previous year due to issues impacting workplace wellbeing. Similarly, the FVE workforce found that 22% (2023) and 23% (2024) of more than 12,000 veterinarians asked took more than two weeks off work due to burnout, exhaustion, compassion fatigue or depression (FVE, 2024).

Recent research from the FVE also states: “All indicators show veterinary workforce shortages are increasing worryingly, and expanding across most European countries” (FVE, 2024). The “five to seven year itch” is a commonly accepted departure point for veterinary staff (Vetfutures, 2018). Our expert roundtable discussion and qualitative interviews identified a troubling pattern of premature exit that threatens the sustainability of veterinary care across the globe. Results from our survey found that 59% of veterinarians asked had considered leaving the profession. These figures are marginally higher than other industry statistics but broadly correlate to trends seen within other data sources, as discussed in Chapter 4.

“The profession has provided me with the most remarkable journey and I want that for all future veterinary surgeons... there is a responsibility on us to put our house in order, to remember those entering the profession, who I hope will have the same experience I have had.”

Dr John Dinsdale, Country Medical Director and Senior Veterinary Advisor, IVC Evidensia

“Once they leave, they don’t come back.”  
Dr Nancy De Bryne, Executive Director, FVE

The British Veterinary Association (BVA), British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA), Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) and Veterinary Management Group (VMG) have jointly reported that 60% of practices have vacancies for veterinarians and that there are significant problems filling the roles (BVA, 2023a). Similarly, the FVE reports that 49% of veterinarians across Europe identify recruitment and staff shortages as a key issue facing the sector, with rural and remote practices facing particularly severe staffing shortages and impacts (FVE, 2024).

Retention has been repeatedly identified as a critical matter for the sector to address. This is not only an issue of individual career decisions but has wide-ranging impacts. It represents a systemic risk for animal health, food safety and public health infrastructure.

As a long-standing partner to the veterinary profession, Zoetis recognises that the retention question and its corollary of low workplace wellbeing within veterinary practice represents a threat to the sector’s sustainability. Previous Zoetis initiatives aimed to support the profession by focussing on ways to improve individual wellbeing e.g. mental health toolkits, wellbeing training and funding initiatives like Vetjoy. It has become increasingly clear, however, that addressing this problem requires looking beyond personal resilience strategies to addressing the systemic factors contributing to the retention challenge.

Although shortened veterinary careers, high attrition rates and increasing workforce shortages have been clearly identified as effects, causes are complex and multilayered. If multiple stakeholders work together to address the issues, meaningful change will occur. This white paper represents a commitment to facilitating informed conversations about systemic and structural issues underlying the subject of retention. With extensive research including a global literature review, in-depth interviews with veterinary experts and professionals in Europe, and a quantitative survey across Europe, we have interrogated the nature of workplace wellbeing and its underlying role in issues facing the industry.

While we have found extensive definitions of the problems facing the sector, it has been harder to identify definitive routes forward or clear and well accepted definitions of “what good looks like”. We have therefore worked closely with the industry to articulate three pillars for change where strategic evolution could create better outcomes for veterinary teams and the health of the sector at large:

- Reimagining veterinary practice structures to align with modern workforce expectations;
- Adapting practice to meet evolving client demands;
- Broadening access to bring diverse talent into the profession.

We present these pillars as a starting point for discussion and ultimately to support a drive towards strategic and thoughtful transformation. This is not about implementing quick fixes, it is about creating a new definition of veterinary practice that is fit for the 21st century. We believe collaborative discussion can expedite a reimagining of how the profession can thrive in an evolving world. We want to celebrate existing strengths while supporting initiatives that nurture clinical proficiency, structural resilience and workplace wellbeing.

We recognise that the challenges are many and constraints faced by industry leaders wishing to address them are complex and numerous. By bringing together the voices of practitioners, experts and industry leaders, we hope to be part of a collective effort to champion best practice across the industry and ensure veterinarians can rely on tools and structures across the sector to support them in long and rewarding careers.

“Not only are we a huge employer of veterinarians, but we work every day with vets to bring veterinary pharmaceuticals and diagnostic solutions to animals in their care. If we don’t have a thriving veterinary workforce, then we know that care for animals, be they in the livestock sector or in pet care, will suffer. So we’re really invested in partnering with vets across the world to find solutions to build a thriving workplace.”  
Dr Stephanie Armstrong, Regional President Zoetis Asia Pacific and Africa (former Senior Vice President, Cluster lead for Northern Europe).

# Chapter 1

## Methodology: Consolidating Voices Across the Sector

### Summary

We conducted a literature review of research on wellbeing and retention in the veterinary sector from around the globe. We then interviewed five industry leaders and 15 veterinary surgeons and practice managers from Belgium, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, the Republic of Ireland, Sweden and the UK. Our opt-in survey was distributed across Europe by Censuswide, with 1,083 veterinary surgeons and practice managers responding from across Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Republic of Ireland, Spain and the UK. We then gathered industry leaders for a full day roundtable discussion of our findings.

Broadly, our findings align closely with industry statistics gathered over the past 15 years. Where our research revealed patterns that appear anomalous compared to established veterinary literature, we have identified methodological considerations and limitations, and made a decision to either discuss or exclude such statistics from our analysis. The substantial areas of corroboration between our findings and previously published industry data give overall confidence in our research. The broad scope, combined with the methodological triangulation achieved through our multi-stream research approach, provides a substantive evidence base for understanding both the scale and nature of retention challenges facing the veterinary sector.

Disclaimer: This discussion paper reflects a snapshot of views from veterinary professionals who opted to share their experiences. While not statistically representative, the findings provide valuable insight into emerging trends that warrant further exploration.

Foundation: Literature review and expert insight

Our initial phase of research was an analysis of 50+ academic and industry documents, spanning peer-reviewed literature, veterinary journals and practice-based information from governing bodies and support providers, taken from sources around the globe.. For a full list please see references in Appendix 1.

Five leading industry experts agreed to in-depth interviews and their perspectives helped shape our initial understanding of underlying issues. We are grateful to the following for giving their time to speak to us:

- **Dr Wiebke Jansen**, Policy Officer, Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE);
- **Dr Nienke Endenburg**, Former Chair of the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) Professional Wellness group & Associate Professor in Veterinary Medicine at Utrecht University;
- **Yassine El Ouarzazi**, Senior Director at Mutual Value Labs;
- **Dr Nancy De Briyne**, Executive Director, Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE);
- **Dr James Russell**, President, Vetlife & Assistant Clinical Professor, Nottingham University.

Capturing lived experience: seeking out diverse perspectives

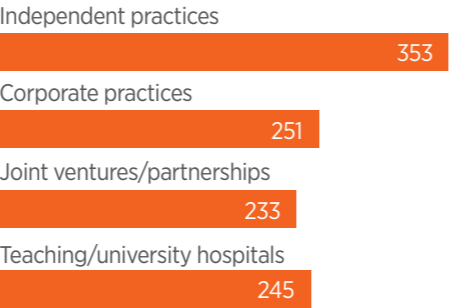
To understand the day-to-day reality of veterinary practice, we invited veterinary professionals from across Europe, at various career stages and from different practice types, to take part in the study. As well as the five experts, we interviewed fourteen veterinarians in depth. Dominance of an older age range in the sample was noted and considered in discussions and analysis.

The conversations aimed to explore both challenges and potential solutions from those experiencing the profession’s realities first-hand. We asked about career journeys and for perspectives on cultural and structural shifts in the profession. We probed into changing client-veterinarian dynamics, workplace structures and the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary veterinary education. We also sought views on the consequences of poor mental health, including factors contributing to the number of professionals leaving the sector.

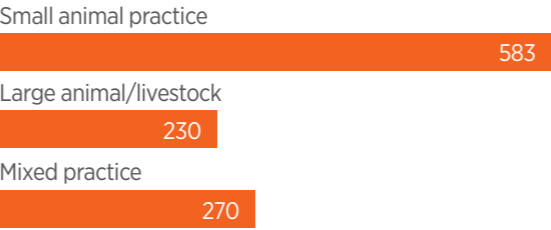
Quantifying the challenge: Survey

To validate and scale these insights, we conducted a comprehensive opt-in survey of 1,083 veterinary professionals across eight European countries: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the UK. The survey was distributed via Censuswide. The sample provided representation across practice types and specialisms as follows.

Practice Types (number of respondents)



Areas of Specialisation (number of respondents)



Gender distribution was balanced (513 male, 570 female) and perspectives were captured from all career stages.

Validating and activating: Expert roundtable

The final phase of our research methodology brought together industry leaders for a full-day roundtable. This workshop served two purposes: to discuss our research findings through the lens of sector expertise; and to begin translating these insights into possible suggested pathways for transformation. We are especially grateful to the roundtable attendees for being so generous with their time and for engaging in detail with the content of this white paper. Constructive criticism and feedback from the roundtable has helped us to frame our insights. Examples of best practice from across the industry have also been invaluable.

Dr Rob Williams – MRCVS & Junior Vice President at BVA

“Reframing practice in regards to mental health is really important. It gives us an opportunity to refocus and reimagine what practice could be and what the working lives of vets, nurses, receptionists, and the whole practice team could be. It gives us a huge opportunity to have more positive outcomes for people working in veterinary practice.”

Dr Angharad Belcher – Director for the Advancement of the Professions at Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)

“There is a growing movement for people to not just talk about mental health but to consider the different potential solutions. How might we challenge some of the perceptions of what veterinary work looks like and how might we challenge some of the different ways in which we’re trying to resolve those.”

Dr John Dinsdale – Country Medical Director and Senior Veterinary Advisor, IVC Evidensia

“I’m extremely passionate about the profession. It’s provided me with the most remarkable journey and I would want that to be a feature for all future veterinary surgeons... [The roundtable has] been a great opportunity to develop the ideas across the profession about where we are going, where we might be able to go and what actions we might be able to take. I think what we need to do is then convert that to actions so that we can take that forward. We should be talking up the profession and the values of that profession.”

Dr Patricia Canedo – Head of Policy and Public Affairs, BVA  
Dr James Glass – Trustee Vetlife & PHD Student, Suicidal Behaviour Research Laboratory  
Dr Ann Criel – President-elect, FECAVA

“What we decided with FECAVA and our working group is to try to look into it [the retention and wellbeing challenge] more positively. I think in the end we will get there. It will not be easy to get there but if we work on it together we can make a positive change.”

Richard Casey – Executive Director WSAVA & former President at Veterinary Management Group UK

“This is a challenge we need to come together on and find collective solutions for. Together we can make a better world for pets and people. I truly believe that we’re all out there to make sure that the veterinary workplace is one that we all want to come back to every single day.”

Dr Edwina Gildea – UK director of Veterinary operations, Zoetis

“One of the things that we need to look at is how we support the veterinarians of the future, starting at that early stage of vet students, so that they are prepared not just clinically. A lot of our job is actually dealing with people, whether that’s the pet owner, the farmer, our colleagues and our bosses.”

# Limitations and Considerations

## Our qualitative and quantitative research present methodological considerations that warrant careful interpretation.

### Qualitative interviews

Our research participants skewed towards experienced practitioners, primarily in management or partnership roles. This demographic provided valuable insights on diagnosing sector-wide challenges from a viewpoint of having had established careers in the sector. These senior participants also offered a unique vantage point, having witnessed the profession’s evolution. Many however had partially transitioned out of clinical practice, either to seek different experiences, to build flexibility into their work lives or as a result of workplace wellbeing issues, meaning that their insight into the realities of working full time in clinical practice was reflective and external rather than being “in the thick of it”. Given that their formative experiences occurred in a very different professional landscape they were not as cognisant of the nature of the pressures faced by today’s early-career veterinarians.

Though our participant pool included a handful of recent graduates, this limited representation of younger practitioners creates a gap in our understanding. We lacked robust first-person insights into the lived experiences of those navigating the critical early years of veterinary practice, when the pressures of working in veterinary practice often first manifest. Furthermore, while our senior participants frequently referenced “generational differences” in workplace expectations, we have been unable to thoroughly validate these perceptions through direct research with younger veterinarians. This limitation is particularly notable given that early-career experiences represent a pivotal intervention point for addressing professional wellbeing and retention within the sector.

Our research focused exclusively on veterinarians rather than capturing the broader experiences of the full veterinary team. This narrow focus represents a significant limitation, as we lack the perspectives of veterinary nurses, technicians and reception staff. The literature suggests these essential team members face similar structural challenges and wellbeing impacts to veterinarians, making this an important omission in our understanding of practice-wide dynamics.

Future research efforts should aim to incorporate a fuller range of voices to develop a more comprehensive picture of workplace wellbeing across all career stages, practice types and in all roles within veterinary practice settings e.g. veterinary nurses, technicians and receptionists.

### Survey

The survey’s self-selecting recruitment approach, explicitly framed around wellbeing issues, likely attracted participants with particularly strong feelings about these issues. Unlike studies conducted through established industry bodies that might capture a more representative cross section of practitioners, our sample potentially skews towards those experiencing more pronounced distress. This methodological limitation becomes most evident in our gendered findings, which notably diverge from established patterns in veterinary literature. Unlike the consistent industry data indicating higher distress levels among female practitioners, our research revealed significantly elevated rates of psychological strain among male respondents. Male veterinarians reported experiencing depression at dramatically higher rates with 60.8% reporting weekly or more frequent episodes, compared to 37.7% of women. Our data on retention intentions follows this same unexpected pattern, with male practitioners significantly more likely to consider leaving the profession at 70.6% versus 48.4% of women. Men were dramatically more likely to have “seriously considered” departure with 43.7% far exceeding the 17.9% of female respondents. This striking divergence from established patterns raises important methodological questions.

While our findings align with broader industry statistics in many areas, these gender-specific results represent a sampling anomaly, as the substantial body of veterinary literature consistently documents higher burnout rates among women and minoritised practitioners. As Steffey et al. (2023) note: “Women veterinarians face higher burnout risks, partly due to greater expectations for balancing work and home life, including child-rearing. Additionally, minority groups and LGBTQIA+ veterinarians often experience discrimination and isolation, which further contributes to burnout.” Similarly, Jansen et al. (2024) found that: “In both surveys, more female veterinarians reported taking medical leave (25% and 26%) than male veterinarians (17.3% and 18%).”

This divergence from established patterns warrants further dedicated investigation to determine whether it represents a methodological artefact or an emerging shift in gendered experiences within veterinary medicine.

# Chapter 2

## Setting the Scene: The Retention Challenge in Veterinary Practice

### Summary

Labour shortfalls aren't simply a staffing inconvenience. They represent a core threat to service provision. With fewer staff, essential services begin to contract. Remaining staff face a vicious circle of increased workload, further burnout and increased likelihood of attrition.

The implications of this retention issue extend far beyond individual careers or practice sustainability. Rural and food animal practices particularly struggle to maintain adequate staffing. Critical gaps can emerge in food safety systems, disease surveillance and emergency response capabilities. What transpires is both an employment and systemic problem with cascading effects that threaten the profession's ability to fulfil fundamental purposes such as protecting animal welfare, supporting food security and safeguarding public health. Addressing this retention challenge is about individual wellbeing and also about preserving essential veterinary services for society at large.

“I think probably this is the most fragile I’ve ever seen the profession in the 40–odd years of being within it.”

Expert roundtable discussion

The scale of the retention challenge: A global issue

The challenges facing the veterinary sector are nuanced and complex but the statistics and commentary from professionals within it tell an undeniable story of a profession under strain.

Studies globally paint an unequivocal picture of a global retention issue at a time when demand for veterinary services is surging worldwide. The scale and geographic range of the issue illustrates a systemic pattern of attrition that cuts across experience levels, practice types and national boundaries.

“We provide value to our country, to the community, to the clients, to the animals. We’re in drug research, we’re in the Home Office, we’re in food production, we’re in animal food production, we’re in companion care, we’re in sports medicine. Veterinary surgeons are vital. So it’s vital to support that entire environment.”

Expert roundtable discussion

Our survey revealed a striking picture of disillusionment and desire from many to exit the veterinary sector. 59% of the veterinary professionals who responded had considered leaving the profession, with 30.1% having seriously contemplated it and 28.9% entertaining the idea during particularly stressful periods. Only a small minority, 17.8% of respondents, expressed confidence in their long-term commitment to veterinary medicine.

These figures exceed some of those found in broader industry surveys but align with a pattern of significant retention challenges emerging globally across the sector.

While the RCVS survey found only 9.5% of respondents intended to leave the profession at some point over the next five years for reasons other than retirement (Robinson et al., 2019), other industry statistics present this figure as significantly higher.” Over 40% of U.S.-based practitioners, who graduated during the last 10 years, were thinking of leaving the profession” (Jansen et al., 2024).

The 2023 FVE workforce survey found that 43% of the 12,397 veterinarians surveyed were contemplating leaving the profession for another career, with 25% reporting it likely and 18% somewhat likely (FVE, 2023).

A 2020 BVA study found that 43.7% of 2,390 veterinarians surveyed reported that they were likely or very likely to leave their employment within two years (Hagen et al., 2020).

A desire to leave is not the same as actual attrition rates reported. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) census estimates the upper limit of veterinary turnover at 23% annually (McKay & Vaisman, 2023). Although there is a gap between intention and action, when practitioners remain in the profession despite a desire to leave, many experience what researchers term “psychological exit”. This means they become emotionally disengaged in their role. A 2018 BVA study reported that 61% of veterinarians felt less ambitious in their careers, while approximately 25% reported a lack of engagement (Begeny et al., 2018). When in a state of disengagement, motivation and professional efficacy decline while cynicism and presenteeism increase. Begeny et al. also found this affects staff morale within teams and creates a negative feedback loop where the team as a whole may become increasingly disaffected.

As such, it is unsurprising that it is not just veterinarians experiencing high attrition in their role. The whole veterinary team is similarly impacted. The AVMA census found that nearly 44% of veterinarians have considered leaving the profession, while 58% of veterinary technicians were considering leaving their job or the profession entirely within the next two years (McKay & Vaisman, 2023). The BEVA, BSAVA and RVC recruitment and retention survey (2019) reinforces this pattern, reporting that 43.2% of veterinary surgeons would look for a new job in the next two years, while 30.5% of veterinary nurses were very likely to seek a new job in the next two years (BEVA et al., 2019). The survey also found that a desire to leave cut across practice types: 46.6% in corporate versus vs 42.3% in non-corporate settings; and similar figures across mixed practice (43.3%), equine (39%), farm animal (46.5%) and small animal (44.3%) specialities.

Retention challenges affect the veterinary profession broadly but manifest unevenly across different practice types and settings. The most acute workforce shortages are concentrated in several areas of strategic importance. Rural and large-animal practices face particularly severe recruitment and retention difficulties, due to geographic isolation, demanding on-call schedules and comparatively lower compensation. Government and official veterinary positions face chronic understaffing.

In contrast, academia, research and corporate roles demonstrate notably stronger workforce stability. This sectoral variability suggests that structural and cultural factors, rather than inherent aspects of veterinary medicine itself, may be the primary drivers of retention issues.

The impact of the retention challenge

With significant numbers of practitioners contemplating departure against a backdrop of surging demand for services, the veterinary profession faces an increasingly urgent workforce sustainability problem that stretches far beyond individual practices.

Beyond the more obvious implications of failing to retain talent, this creates a self-reinforcing cycle which compounds the pressures faced by those who remain. Experienced practitioners leaving the profession take with them their physical labour, clinical expertise and also their potential as mentors and role models.

“We have lost supportive mental hierarchies... now there is a gap in the numbers of those who can support junior veterinarians.”

Veterinarian interview

49%

of veterinarians reported recruitment difficulties or staff shortages as a key challenge facing the sector (FVE, 2024).

Veterinarians who responded to our survey identified five critical impacts of the retention issue:

30.3%

Many veterinarians will leave the sector to seek other opportunities.

29.6%

Staff shortages across the sector will worsen.

29%

Burnout and low morale will increase among remaining staff.

28.4%

Opportunities for professional growth will decrease.

28.9%

Quality of animal and client care will decline

A global workforce challenge in the making

The scale of this matter is amplified by rising demand for veterinary services globally. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects veterinary employment will grow by roughly 19% from 2021 to 2031, a rate classified as “much faster than average” across all occupations (BLS, 2024). Against this backdrop of expanding need, AVMA has estimated that by the end of this decade, the U.S. could be facing a shortfall in the range of 3,000 to 15,000 veterinarians, depending on region and sector, creating a future issue for supply and demand (Lloyd, 2023)<sup>1</sup>.

This pattern repeats internationally. The FVE has identified critical workforce shortages across Europe, with particularly pronounced impacts in southern and eastern Europe and with certain sectors being at disproportionate risk. “All indicators show veterinary workforce shortages are increasing worryingly, and expanding, across most European countries. Almost all FVE members report workforce shortages in their countries, especially in certain critical areas such as rural and remote areas, livestock veterinary practices, and state and official veterinarians” (FVE, 2024).

The Australian Veterinary Association reports similar patterns, noting acute shortages in large-animal and rural practice settings, where a combination of stress, lower remuneration, especially in rural areas, and limited locum coverage are contributing to higher departure rates (AVA, 2023).

<sup>1</sup> In 2024, AVMA updated its modelling and suggests that with the pending accreditation of 13 new veterinary schools, capacity to train new veterinary students could increase by 40% over the next 10 years, in theory reducing the labour shortfall (Larkin, 2024).

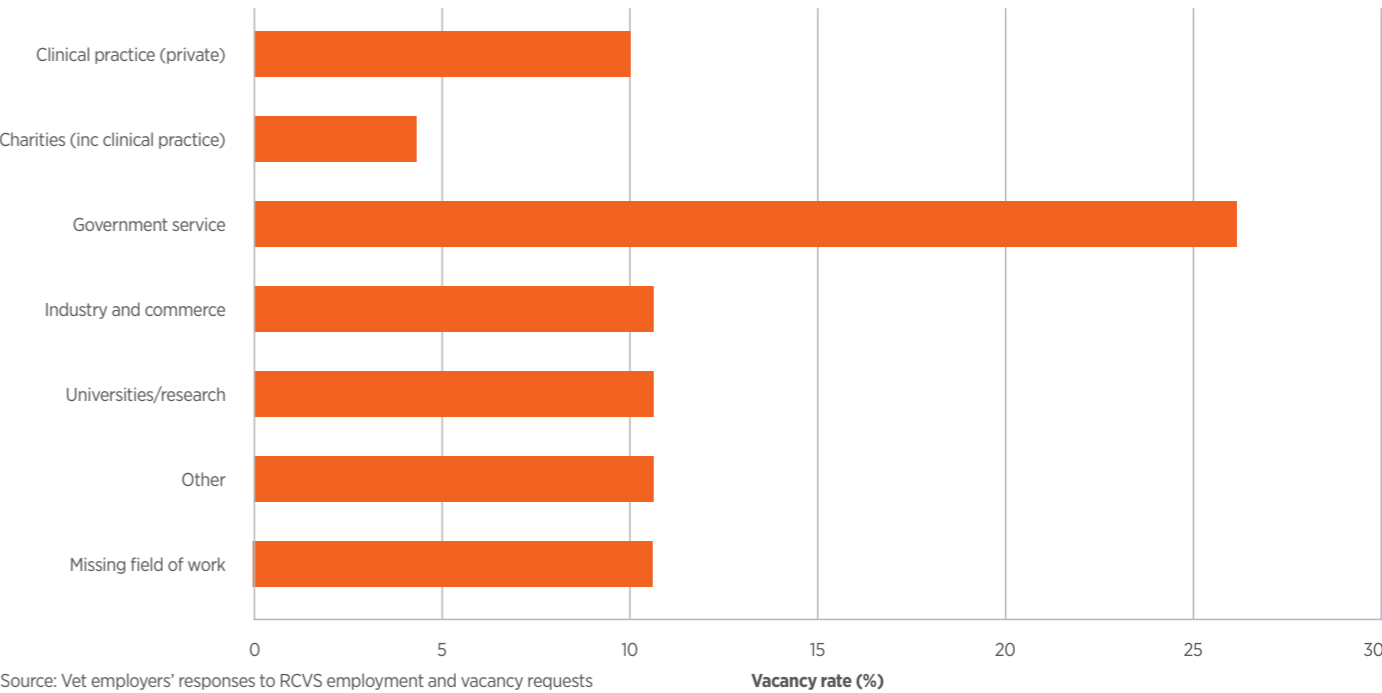
The UK veterinary workforce: a case study

The UK veterinary sector offers an illustration of how quickly external factors can exacerbate existing workforce challenges. Following Brexit, the veterinary profession was returned to the UK’s Shortage Occupation List after experiencing a dramatic collapse in European recruitment.

“Data released by RCVS revealed that the annual number of registrants coming to work in the UK fell by 68 per cent from 1,132 in 2019 to just 364 in 2021... There is no question that the UK continues to need significantly more qualified vets” (BVA et al., 2023).

The BEVA, BSAVA and RVC recruitment and retention survey also found that 74.1% of practices said it was “very difficult” recruiting an experienced veterinary surgeon. While the survey results showed 55.4% said it was very difficult to recruit an experienced veterinary nurse. 47% said that there was “definitely” a problem with retention of veterinary surgeons, and 58.7% said that there was “definitely” a problem with retention of veterinary nurses (BEVA et al., 2019).

Vacancy rate (%) by field of work, 2023/2024



Despite these ongoing challenges, a 2024 RCVS report sets out a more promising picture of future workforce shortages. Data for this modelling exercise was provided by eight large private and public sector employers, across clinical practices, government services, charities and universities (Williams et al., 2024).

Thus, the RCVS was able to ascertain the balance between the supply of full-time equivalent (FTE) veterinarians and total demand for vets by field of work and for the profession as a whole, up to 2035. “Overall, the supply of vets equated to 90% of total demand in 2023, and this is projected to increase to 96% in 2032, before dropping off very slightly to 2035” (Williams et al., 2024).

Notably, this study does not account for increased flexibility needed from the workforce to accommodate greater desire for part-time and flexible working.

However, the study revealed markedly different forecasts by field of work.

+8%

In private clinical practice, supply will increase from 91% of total demand in 2023 to nearly 99% in 2035.

-6%

Supply in industry and commerce currently meets 90% of demand, but will fall steadily to 84% in 2035.

-1%

In government service, supply will fall from 79% in 2023 to 78% of total demand in 2035.

# Chapter 3

## Wellbeing as a Symptom: The Nature of Attrition

### Summary

Wellbeing issues within veterinary medicine are not isolated cases of individuals struggling to cope with an inherently demanding profession. Rather, they represent systemic patterns that emerge from structural misalignments between how the profession is organised and the needs of those within it.

While individual resilience and mental health support remain important, addressing wellbeing requires looking beyond personal coping strategies to examine and transform the underlying structures, expectations and cultural norms that create these patterns of distress.

# The multifaceted nature of veterinary attrition

Any individual’s decision to leave veterinary practice is rarely driven by a single factor. Our research reveals a complex pattern of motivations spanning professional ambition, changing life circumstances, financial considerations and workplace dynamics. The data consistently points to discontent around workplace wellbeing and work–life balance as key drivers of the current retention challenge.

“I spend a huge amount of my time dealing with complex employee relations cases, which almost always have an element of mental ill health involved... but I think the problem is largely environmental. The solutions are environmental, not individual.”  
Expert roundtable discussion

For many high-achieving veterinarians, the decision to leave stems from a desire for professional growth rather than dissatisfaction. The BVA Voice of the Profession survey found that 43% of veterinarians who had moved to non-clinical roles were seeking new challenges, while 33% wanted different types of work altogether (BVA, 2024b).

Life stage transitions create another significant pressure point, particularly for women practitioners. In a 2021 survey, 10% of respondents reported that clinical work was incompatible with family or outside commitments, while 14% specifically sought more flexible working hours to create better work-life balance (RCVS, 2021). This suggests that for some, the day-to-day reality of working in a clinic fails to adapt to meet their changing needs as life priorities and needs change.

Our own survey revealed five key drivers shaping practitioners’ desire to leave the profession:



Three of these five factors directly relate to workplace wellbeing and sustainability: work intensity, feeling undervalued and misalignment between expectations and reality.

Our literature review pointed towards an overwhelming consensus that desire to leave the profession is driven by underlying wellbeing issues. “The most frequently cited reasons for planning to leave the profession for reasons other than retirement are poor work-life balance, not feeling rewarded/valued (non-financial), long/unsocial hours and chronic stress” (Robinson et al., 2019).

A survey of 2,037 associate veterinarians who participated in the 2021 and 2022 AVMA census found that of the 44% of veterinarians who expressed a desire to leave the profession, 36% cited mental health reasons and 27% pointed to work-life balance as the key driver (McKay & Vaisman, 2023).

This data paints a clear picture. While not all veterinary transitions reflect negative experiences, the workplace wellbeing pressures behind these statistics have a profound human cost.



## The scale of distress: a profession under pressure

Wellbeing problems experienced by veterinary professionals aren’t merely individual struggles but evidence of systemic tensions between how the profession is structured and the needs of those within it. What emerges from our research is a picture of a sector where daily stress, anxiety and isolation have become normalised, creating unsustainable working environments that ultimately drive talented practitioners from the field.

These patterns across our European survey sample are mirrored in global research results and industry studies. The reports paint an unequivocal picture of veterinarians being more at risk of mental health issues than the general population: “The World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) Professional Wellness Group’s recently conducted worldwide survey indicates that issues concerning mental health and wellbeing affect all members of the veterinary team in all corners of the globe” (FVE et al., 2019).

The greater propensity towards mental health strain is already evident among veterinary students. “The high-stress environment of veterinary students has been established, and the implication that 30% of students in this sample were at high risk for burnout indicates the possibility of an at-risk population” (McArthur et al., 2019).

This consistency in global findings underscores how wellbeing issues faced by veterinary professionals transcend cultural, educational and practice differences. This suggests they stem from fundamental aspects of how the profession is structured, rather than local or regional factors alone.

# Stigma and structural barriers to support

## Burnout: The culmination of chronic stress

The cumulative toll of workplace pressures on veterinary wellbeing puts veterinarians at high risk of burnout. “Burnout is a deep-rooted, self-perpetuating occupational problem whose resolution will require changes in professional culture, workplace climate, and in some instances, organisational structure, and function” (Steffey et al., 2023).

Our research, alongside other industry-led studies, found burnout to be pervasive.

48.1%

Our survey found that 48.1% of veterinarians reported burnout.

50%

Approximately 50% of veterinarians report moderate to high levels of burnout (Steffey et al., 2023).

63%

“High levels of stress and burnout, with 63% feeling they were working too hard and 48% feeling burnout” (Begeny et al., 2018).

While data suggests that population level incidences of depression, anxiety and stress have increased over the past 20 years (Dykxhoorn et al., 2023), unique pressures within the veterinary profession create incidences over and above population level.

## The tangible impact: Absenteeism and lost productivity

The personal cost of low workplace wellbeing translates into significant operational impacts across the sector, leading to absenteeism, lost productivity and escalating workforce shortages within practices. “Burnout may be related to the development of depression, increased sick leave, and loss of work ability” (McArthur et al., 2019).

Our survey revealed that 70% of veterinarians who responded have taken time off in the last year due to work-related mental health issues. This figure is significantly higher than the Ipsos World Mental health survey, which suggested 39% of the global population had taken time off work for mental health issues (Ipsos, 2023). Our results showed a further 27.9% had taken time off twice or more in the last year due to mental health issues resulting from work.

“I know so many friends and colleagues who have been signed off with stress.”

Veterinarian interview

Further, research by the FVE found patterns of longer-term absences: “22% (2023) and 23% (2024) of veterinarians needed to take more than two weeks off work due to burnout, exhaustion, compassion fatigue or depression in the last three years” (Jansen et al., 2024).

Beyond the obvious human cost, sick leave creates substantial financial and resourcing burdens for practices: “Veterinary health organisations estimate that burnout-related costs to practice reach \$2 billion annually in lost revenues” (Steffey et al., 2023).

Veterinary medicine has a longstanding culture of self-reliance and stoicism. These values can foster clinical competence but also create barriers to seeking help. The belief that struggling is a personal failing rather than a result of workplace stress can leave practitioners isolated in times of need.

“People find it hard to sort of come forward and speak to somebody... I was embarrassed by having depression and you felt you were sort of weak because you were getting this.”

Veterinarian interview

Stigma around seeking support can make it difficult for practitioners to ask for help. Even as mental health awareness grows, sector-wide cultural expectations that reinforce endurance over vulnerability leave many feeling they must navigate problems alone. “A culture that regards chronic stress as a rite of passage may engender feelings of self-stigma, whereby individuals believe that they should be able to cope with this unavoidable aspect of their chosen career” (Cardwell & Lewis, 2019).

16.2%

Our research reveals a concerning gap between need and accessibility, with 16.2% of practitioners surveyed reporting that they don't feel comfortable seeking support even when they recognise they need it.

35.2%

report experiencing stigma around mental health support in their workplace (Nett et al., 2015).

59.4%

agreed that seeking mental health support carries stigma within the profession more broadly (Nett et al., 2015).

This cultural reluctance to seek help can be exacerbated by structural issues. Nearly half of veterinary professionals were unaware of mental health resources available through their workplace or professional associations (AVMA, 2019).

“The idea of ringing Vetlife was too big. Mental health in the profession is so stigmatised. Asking for help is the bravest thing I ever did. It is so difficult to be open... you feel like you’ve failed.”

Veterinarian interview

Gender and demographic patterns:  
Uneven impacts

Our survey revealed patterns that challenge some prevailing narratives about gender and wellbeing in veterinary medicine. While much literature suggests women face higher rates of burnout, our research found that male practitioners exhibited particularly high rates of severe distress.

- 60.8% of male veterinarians we surveyed reported experiencing depression as a result of workplace dynamics once a week or more, compared to 37.7% of women.
- Only 28.9% of male practitioners surveyed feel comfortable discussing workplace pressures compared to 41.6% of women.
- Higher feelings of isolation were reported by men, at 60.8%, than women, at 37%.

Our survey also found that male practitioners were significantly more likely to consider leaving the profession.

- 70.6% of men vs 48.4% of women we surveyed have considered leaving the profession.
- 43.7% of men vs 17.9% of women surveyed “seriously considered” leaving the profession.

While this pattern may reflect sampling variances, it raises important questions about how gender dynamics shape professional wellbeing. On the one hand, it is important to note that this is likely an anomaly associated with a self-selecting sample, as much of the literature presents a clear case that women and other minoritised groups show significantly greater stress and burnout levels than their male counterparts. On the other hand, it could signal that there is a subset of male veterinarians, who might not show up in veterinary population level data, who are experiencing profound distress. We might hypothesise that as men become less visible within the sector, their potential to have “like-minded” mentors, role models and colleagues declines, along with their outcomes, sense of wellbeing and job satisfaction.

This finding warrants further investigation, particularly as it directly contrasts with existing literature. For example:

- “Women veterinarians face higher burnout risks, partly due to greater expectations for balancing work and home life, including child-rearing. Additionally, minority groups and LGBTQIA+ veterinarians often experience discrimination and isolation, which further contributes to burnout” (Steffey et al., 2023).
- “In both surveys, more female veterinarians reported taking more medical leave (25% and 26%) than male veterinarians (17.3% and 18%)” (Jansen et al., 2024).
- “Veterinarians who were recently qualified, on lower salaries and female, were more likely to plan to leave” (Hagen et al., 2020).

Our statistics around attrition and the different motivations men and women have for leaving the profession aligned with previous industry research. Our findings identified that the top two motivations for male practitioners leaving the sector were related to finances: 29.9% of men surveyed cited financial concerns or strains e.g. higher education debt or rising bills for owners. 25% said changing financial structures have reduced the financial incentives of a career in veterinary practice.

Female practitioners who responded to our survey were more likely to report the nature and demands of the job as key motivations for leaving the sector. 32.6% cited pace and volume of work. 31.9% cited the nature of the work e.g. euthanasia and sick animals. “Lack of decision latitude and opportunities for professional development contributed most to the variance in exhaustion and cynicism in females, while lack of support from superiors and lack of opportunities for professional development contributed most to exhaustion and cynicism in males” (Mastenbroek et al., 2014).

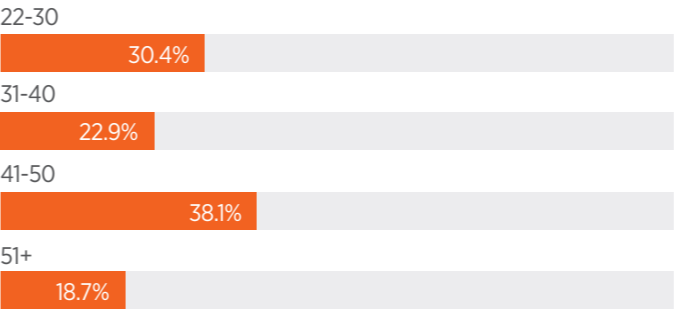
Career stages:  
fluctuating risk of burnout and attrition

Two career stages emerge as critical pressure points, early-career (22-30 year olds) and mid-career (41-50 year olds).

Taking burnout as an example, 48% of early-career veterinarians (22-30) and 57% of mid-career veterinarians (41-50) we surveyed reported burnout, in comparison to 40% of 31-40 year olds and 30% of 50+ year olds. A trend of these age groups reporting higher impacts emerged consistently across the whole survey, suggesting that the stress of working within the profession may fluctuate with critical life transition points.

Those in the early-career stage and mid-career stage were more likely to seriously consider leaving the profession than those in the 31-40 and 50+ age brackets:

Yes (seriously considered):



Early-career

The beginning of a career is where working patterns and culture are established, where ideals collide with the reality of the daily grind and where fledgling veterinarians put their academic skills into practice. The learning curve associated with this transition point is steep and many report feeling underprepared for the realities of their role and undersupported by the overstretched teams surrounding them.

“You go into practice with no high level support. That is so difficult because it’s not like you come out of university as the finished article. You need to learn the skills on the job.”

Veterinarian interview

On the one hand this means that a sizeable portion of early-career veterinarians become disillusioned with their choice of career and decide it is not for them. On the other, it is also a time where commitment and determination come to the fore, where veterinarians feel more strongly about staying in the profession than other groups, as shown in our survey results.

I don’t feel this way:



Mid-career

The mid-career point represents another life-stage transition point for many veterinarians. By 40, both male and female practitioners will typically be entering a new phase of life, where the heaviest demands of raising a family have subsided, offering space for greater reflection about the structures that best serve quality of life and personal or professional ambition.

In all of our statistics, those in the 51+ age category tended to report better experiences and outcomes within the profession. We can extrapolate that age is a protective factor and those remaining in the profession have done so because they can both cope with the pressures and enjoy their job. As age corresponded to seniority these people may have greater confidence, autonomy and control over their working lives. Also, those in this age bracket became veterinarians in a different era which had a different set of benefits and challenges.

# Chapter 4

## Framing the Retention Challenge: Beyond Mental Health

### Summary

Understanding the necessary interconnected layers of transformation is essential to addressing the dynamics underlying the retention issue. The profession cannot control macro-level shifts but it can evolve its practices to better align with changing expectations. Individual psychological characteristics can be deeply ingrained and at the same time workplace structures can be redesigned to support rather than strain these traits.

The path forward requires addressing all strata simultaneously. This means adapting to broad societal shifts while ensuring workplace structures are evolving to create environments which foster sustainable strength by supporting the vulnerabilities inherent in professional dedication. By broadening our understanding of the retention challenge beyond mental health, we create space for more comprehensive and effective solutions. We can address not only how individuals cope with the profession but also how the profession itself might evolve to better serve those who dedicate their lives to it.

# Multi-layered challenges in the changing world of work

Understanding the drivers behind these trends requires an examination of how broader societal transformations intersect with profession-specific issues. The veterinary profession’s concerns cannot be understood or addressed through a single lens. Instead, they emerge across multiple layers, micro to macro, and are being experienced across all professional sectors as the world of work undergoes radical transformation. While some aspects of the veterinary retention question are unique to the profession, many reflect broader societal shifts in how work is valued, structured and experienced.

## The three layers of transformation

### At the macro level

Cultural, structural and demographic shifts are fundamentally reshaping all professional landscapes, not just veterinary medicine. The “Great Resignation” (Morgan, 2023; Janicki, 2024) that followed the pandemic, revealed widespread workplace dissatisfaction across sectors, with many professionals reassessing their relationship with work (Ng & Stanton, 2023). Changing expectations around flexibility, purpose and work-life balance are not unique to veterinary medicine but represent a broader societal evolution in how careers are conceptualised.

Post-pandemic workplace evolution has dramatically altered expectations across all sectors. Yet while many industries have adapted with flexible working models, remote options and restructured workloads, the veterinary profession’s traditional working patterns, rigid schedules and resistance to flexible arrangements appear increasingly anachronistic.

Within the rising expectations around flexibility that affect all professionals, veterinary medicine faces distinct barriers to implementation due to its hands-on clinical nature. However, the profession’s relative slowness in adapting compared to other healthcare sectors suggests structural inertia rather than inherent impossibility.

There can be resistance to evolving in order to meet changing workforce needs. For example, our roundtable raised the profession’s hesitancy to embrace technological innovation and flexible working models that could alleviate pressures and create more sustainable working patterns.

**“We know that remote consulting is possible. You can do it from home... during COVID, many of us did that.”**  
Expert roundtable discussion

The pandemic proved that alternative working models are possible but many practices have reverted to traditional patterns rather than building on this experience.

### At the sector level

Operational tensions within veterinary practices reflect a deeper misalignment between established professional models and emerging societal priorities. This isn’t unique to veterinary medicine as similar tensions are playing out in other service professions where traditional structures clash with modern workforce expectations (Ballantine et al., 2022; Ray & Pana-Cryan, 2021).

Perhaps most significantly, the democratisation of health information through internet use has radically transformed the traditional power dynamics between veterinary professionals and clients. This mirrors similar shifts across all healthcare sectors, where public engagement with historically trusted experts is dramatically altered. Today’s veterinarians must navigate a landscape where clients inform themselves, from sources of varying reliability, and expect collaboration in decision-making rather than an assumption that they will defer to professional authority.

**“Social media and access to information has changed the dynamic between professionals and clients. But now smart clients can find out things too. The power balance has changed.”**  
Veterinarian interview

Maintaining professional authority, while engaging in increased democratic decision-making about animal health, demands additional skill sets to those historically cultivated in the profession. Veterinarians must develop communication skills, emotional intelligence and intellectual agility. These capabilities may not have been emphasised in traditional veterinary education.

“We know what the 20th century veterinarian looked like... Now the question is: who are they in the 21st century, and what skills do they need?”

Expert roundtable discussion

### At the individual level

The psychological paradox facing veterinarians, where professional strengths can become personal vulnerabilities, has parallels across high-pressure professions. However, the specific combination of perfectionism, emotional investment and independent problem-solving may create unique patterns of vulnerability within veterinary contexts.

These psychological dynamics intersect with changing economic incentives and cultural shifts within the profession. Wage stagnation combined with rising costs of living and substantial educational debt have transformed veterinary medicine from a financially secure career path to one increasingly chosen primarily for love of the work rather than economic advancement.

**“People are being asked to work harder, longer hours, for less pay in real terms.”**  
Veterinarian interview

Meanwhile, the profession’s demographic transformation, with women now comprising upwards of 65% of the workforce (FVE, 2024), has shifted the cultural identity of the veterinary profession. What is needed is not only incremental change to existing structures but also a foundational reimagining around the goal of what modern veterinary professionalism could look like in the 21st century.

# Chapter 5

## Reframing the Narrative

### Summary

While wellbeing issues are tied up in the high attrition rates, they are not the cause of retention problems. The retention and wellbeing challenges experienced within the sector are symptoms of deeper structural and cultural tensions that need to be properly understood and acted upon.

Mental health support remains vital but the sector must look beyond individual resilience to reimagine its basic structures and create sustainable pathways that align with the evolving expectations of its workforce.

This isn't about crisis management but strategic evolution, preserving the passionate dedication that defines veterinary professionalism, while building systems that support rather than strain that commitment.

“There are lots of people who are trying to help, and we need to bring those helpers together, so that we might be able to focus on one thing and tackle it step by step. It is systemic but that doesn’t mean it’s too big.”

Dr Angharad Belcher, Director for the Advancement of the Professions, RCVS

Moving beyond the mental health narrative

While mental health issues within the profession are significant and well-documented, viewing retention solely through this frame individualises what is essentially a complex structural issue with multifaceted drivers. This risks overlooking critical factors that feed into the subject of retention and that may be significant in solving it.

Throughout our research, our veterinary experts and participants cautioned against overemphasising the mental health aspects of the profession’s challenges.

“It’s not a mental health problem, per se. It’s an occupational health problem because the environment is fundamentally not working in the way that it should.”  
Dr Rob Williams. MRCVS & Junior Vice President at BVA

Very real wellbeing difficulties exist within the sector. The evidence clearly demonstrates that veterinarians face significant psychological pressures, with rates of distress, burnout and psychological strain that are higher than, or comparable to, related professions.

However, framing retention issues solely or even primarily as a mental health issue creates a problematic narrative where solutions focus on helping individuals cope with demanding working environments rather than addressing the structural conditions that create these problems in the first place.

Reframing the challenge

To address the retention issue, the veterinary sector needs to evolve to meet changing societal expectations, technological possibilities and workforce demographics.

This requires moving beyond crisis-focused thinking to envision a positive future for the profession, one that balances clinical proficiency with emotional intelligence, technological fluency and sustainable working patterns.

Our roundtable noted a tendency in the profession toward a cautious or critical outlook and focussing on problems. This risks creating inertia at precisely the moment when bold, visionary thinking is required. Encouraging practitioners to reimagine practice from a blank slate, free from the constraints of “how things have always been done”, could catalyse transformation.

Pillars of change

Our research reveals three interconnected pillars where transformation could create powerful change.

**(1) Reimagining the veterinary workplace**  
In the immediate term, the veterinary profession must evolve its structures to align with contemporary workforce expectations and support sustainable practice. This means rethinking everything from working patterns to support systems, ensuring that veterinary practices are able to support and value their staff. Leadership is required to drive changes that reduce workload burdens, improve workplace wellbeing and encourage a sector-wide shift from celebrating endurance, to embedding collective resilience and sustainable service provision.

**(2) Adapting to meet modern service demands**  
In the near and medium term, as client expectations evolve and practice economics shift, new models of service delivery could emerge that better balance clinical skills with contemporary demands. Adapted curriculums could ensure new graduates entering the profession are properly prepared for the day-to-day realities of practice. Ongoing continuing professional development (CPD) efforts could help address any skills-gap in the current veterinary workforce. Practices need to think more innovatively about the services they offer clients and focus on upskilling the veterinary workforce to feel competent and comfortable having conversations with clients around pet care.

**(3) Broadening the professional pipeline**  
In order to expand both capacity and capability in the sector in the longer term, the veterinary profession must future-proof the veterinary workforce. This will require redefining veterinary professionalism to meet the 21st century and ensuring that a diverse talent pool sees both status and financial value in a veterinary career and can access affordable pathways into the industry.

The chapters that follow explore each of these pillars in detail, examining both the challenges they present and the opportunities they offer for meaningful transformation. While the statistics paint a challenging picture, they also point clearly toward where strategic evolution could create positive change.

The veterinary profession stands at a pivotal moment, one where thoughtful transformation could create more sustainable and fulfilling career paths for current and future practitioners alike.

“Let’s try and generate a culture and an environment which is more conducive to people surviving longer within it.”  
Veterinarian interview

# Chapter 6

## Reimagining the Veterinary Workplace

### Summary

Creating truly flexible veterinary workplaces requires more than superficial change. The solution lies not in asking veterinarians to work differently within existing constraints but in a core reimagining of both veterinary culture and practice structures, to create positive and fulfilling work environments. Continuing with rigid structures that create overworked, resentful practitioners threatens both individual wellbeing and the very sustainability of the profession.

The veterinary sector's retention challenge is partially due to tensions between traditional practice structures and the evolving expectations of a modern workforce.

Historically, practitioners were expected to maintain long hours and manage unpredictable on-call duties, prioritising practice demands and emergencies over personal commitments. This approach has become increasingly anachronistic given that workforce expectations have fundamentally shifted during the last decade.

The contemporary workforce expects flexibility, work-life balance and environments that actively support wellbeing. When veterinary workplaces fail to provide these elements, practitioners often respond by creating their own solutions – working part-time, seeking secondary roles or leaving the profession entirely.

This strategy of finding workarounds in order to build flexibility was remarkably common among the veterinarians we interviewed, showcasing the need for greater flexibility. While expectations in the profession continue to evolve, many practices remain rooted in traditional models, which can sometimes limit adaptability and openness to new ideas.

These structural tensions contribute directly to the sector's retention problems. Unless practices evolve to meet contemporary workforce expectations, this exodus is likely to continue, threatening the sustainability of veterinary care.

# Adapting workplace structures for contemporary needs

## Post-pandemic pressure points

European countries, like many others across the global north, face acute workforce pressures, with the UK additionally affected in the wake of Brexit. As competition for talent intensifies across all sectors, the veterinary industry faces its own particular difficulties. Staff shortages compound pressures on those remaining in practice, particularly given growing demand for veterinary services.

“We’ve had Brexit, so we’ve had a load of EU vets leave, so there’s workplace shortages of frontline vets.”  
Veterinarian interview

Multiple studies show the pandemic has driven down average working hours globally (Arce et al., 2023; Astinova et al., 2024; Powell et al., 2022). The number of hours worked at veterinary practices, however, has not necessarily reduced in line with workforce trends.

A 2023 survey found the average working week of veterinarians in Europe, where work-life balance is generally culturally enshrined, has shrunk from 40 hours in 2015 to 37 hours in 2023 (FVE, 2023). These veterinarians still reportedly work typically four to six hours more than contracted and struggle to take allocated holidays due to workplace pressures (FVE, 2023). This also appears to be significantly lower than average working week statistics from around the world.

- A 2018 survey found the average full-time vet in the UK works 57 hours a week, with practice partners and owners working up to 71 hours a week (Veterinary Practice 2020).
- A 2024 study found that full-time veterinarians in the USA work an average of 48.7 hours a week, greatly exceeding pre-pandemic work norms (AVMA, 2024).

## The flexibility gap

As well as a reduction in average working hours, the pandemic led to a transformation of cultural expectations around work, with a shift towards flexibility and homeworking. The veterinary profession’s traditionally rigid schedules appear increasingly out of step with these evolving workplace expectations.

This misalignment is compounded by significant demographic transition within the profession. Women now comprise 65% of all practitioners (FVE, 2023) and over 75% of new admissions (Robinson et al., 2019). Both the literature and our qualitative interviews make the point that the demographic shift towards a predominantly female workforce increases the need for greater staffing levels, to accommodate home or flexible working arrangements, career breaks and part-time working. Robinson et al (2019) note: “a failure to predict that a shift to majority female intake... would lead ultimately to a more part-time workforce exacerbating the current severe shortage...”

Yet these evolving expectations reflect more than gender dynamics. They represent a generational shift in workplace values that cuts across demographic lines. Our research found that 19.7% of male practitioners surveyed, and nearly 29% of female practitioners, cited lack of flexibility as one of the key causes of workplace dissatisfaction. 40% of global workers would not take a job that doesn’t offer flexible working, while 81% of workers globally prefer to work in a hybrid or remote format (Owl Labs, 2023).

“I only work three days a week now. I really enjoy being part time.”

Veterinarian interview

## Reimagining practice structures

The solution to this structural challenge requires imaginative leadership and a willingness to think beyond established structures and envision new possibilities.

“It is possible to ensure that flexibility is built in. Why wouldn’t we think about... offering people twilight shifts or split shifts... Why wouldn’t we start thinking a little bit more imaginatively?”  
Expert roundtable discussion

Practice managers and leaders, caught up in the daily demands of clinical work and administration, may lack the capacity to step back and consider alternative approaches, creating inertia and a lack of imagination about how to run practices more innovatively. “Most practices are small businesses without the benefit of dedicated human resources staff or occupational health professionals to advance improvements in working conditions” (Bartram & Boniwell, 2007).

Even in larger practices, there is often still a culture that inhibits imagining about how things could be done differently.

“The default in an awful lot of instances is to say, ‘No, it’s too difficult’. And a better answer is, ‘I wonder how we could make that work.’”  
Dr Rob Williams, MRCVS & Junior Vice President at BVA

However, change is possible. The COVID pandemic highlighted that the structures of practice can be radically altered, when the need arises. Many practices, both big and small, are increasingly working to offer their employees greater autonomy and flexibility in their working lives.

## The need for innovation

Reimagining veterinary practice will demand a systemic examination of how workload is distributed across the professional ecosystem. Our research revealed a number of areas where structural and digital innovation could reduce workload, alleviate pressure and improve work-life balance.

**Workforce innovation**  
A significant opportunity to improve work-life balance and build in greater flexibility in veterinary workplaces lies in reconsidering how work is distributed across the entire practice team. Our research indicates this approach resonates strongly with practitioners seeking sustainable change.

20.7%

of veterinarians surveyed reported a desire to reduce out-of-hours or on-call commitments and 25.4% of veterinarians believe a better work-life balance would improve wellbeing.

27%

When asked to choose factors that would improve professional satisfaction and workplace wellbeing, the measure that came top, chosen by 27% of veterinarians surveyed, was “enhancing the training of support workers e.g. veterinary nurses, to take on more responsibility”.

This focus on team-based approaches to workload distribution reflects a growing recognition that veterinary expertise is most valuable when deployed strategically, rather than spread across all aspects of practice.

“If you elevate the roles of everyone in the vet team... the vet surgeon isn’t bearing all the workload alone.”  
Expert roundtable discussion

The Swedish model demonstrates how this approach can work in practice, with an average ratio of three veterinary nurses employed to one veterinarian. This staffing model allows veterinary expertise to be focused where it adds most value, while enabling appropriately trained support staff to handle tasks within their competence and within the regulatory framework of the country.

This approach leads to benefits beyond reducing veterinary workload. Veterinary support staff often represent an underutilised resource whose skills could be enhanced through additional training. Practices that have implemented such roles for veterinary nurses and technicians report multiple benefits. Not only does this approach reduce pressure on veterinarians, it also improves retention of support staff by providing them with greater responsibility, career progression opportunities and professional satisfaction.

**“Technicians and nurses are underutilised... let’s give them a bigger role but at the same time let’s train them and help those who want to develop their careers. Our study of more than 1000 clinics has shown this approach has a significant impact: the voluntary attrition of nurses went down while the number of pets seen and overall clinic revenue went up.”**  
Yassine El Ouarzazi, Senior Director at Mutual Value Labs

By reviewing how work is distributed across different practice roles, veterinary workplaces can simultaneously address veterinarian burnout, enhance career satisfaction for support staff and improve practice efficiency. To achieve this, changes to regulation may be required to enable para-professionals and technical staff to take on additional responsibilities.

**Technological innovation**  
Technological solutions offer promising pathways to address workload issues and enhance practice flexibility. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many practices successfully implemented remote consultations and digital communication tools out of necessity. This natural experiment demonstrated the viability of more flexible working arrangements supported by technology.

Yet as pandemic restrictions eased, many practices reverted to traditional in-person models rather than integrating these digital innovations into their ongoing operations. This is a missed opportunity to leverage technology as an enabler of both workforce flexibility and practice efficiency.

The reluctance to embrace technological solutions often stems from fear of the unknown or concerns about maintaining care quality.

**“We understand the fear of AI but we’re going to have to move away from the fear of remote prescribing and digital innovation and embrace what it can offer us.”**  
Expert roundtable discussion

Technological innovations could help transform several aspects of veterinary practice:

- **Remote consulting and telemedicine** allow for initial triage, follow-up appointments and certain types of monitoring, without requiring physical presence in the clinic. This creates opportunities for flexible working arrangements, including home-based work for part of the week, significantly reducing stress associated with packed appointment schedules.
- **AI-assisted diagnostics** can support clinical decision-making and reduce the cognitive load on practitioners. While not replacing veterinary expertise, these tools can help with managing complex caseloads more efficiently.
- **Digital practice management systems** can streamline administrative tasks, allowing veterinarians to focus more time on clinical care, and reduce the burden of documentation that often leads to staff working beyond official working hours.

Forward-thinking practices are recognising that technological innovation isn’t about replacing the core elements of veterinary care. Technology can help create more sustainable frameworks that enhance both client service and practitioner wellbeing. By moving beyond the fear of change and embracing digital transformation, the sector can develop practice models that align with contemporary workforce expectations while maintaining high standards of animal care.

Adapting workplace culture for contemporary needs

Beyond structural innovation, veterinary workplaces also require cultural change to meet modern workforce expectations and needs. In order to increase the longevity of veterinary careers, workplace leaders need to think imaginatively about how they can create practice cultures that prize clinical expertise and professional dedication without sacrificing worker wellbeing.

**A generational shift on wellbeing and work-life balance**  
Post-pandemic workforce expectations, alongside a demographic transformation of the veterinary workforce, towards being predominantly female, have a number of implications for practice culture. Across all industries, the modern workforce is redefining the social contract with employers, demanding a more comprehensive vision of professional fulfillment. In line with these trends, veterinarians expect to see clear progression pathways, competitive benefit packages and structures that enable them to balance personal and professional wellbeing with the demands of their job.

**“They don’t want to work for 50 hours anymore... Their work-private life balance is very important for them.”**  
Veterinarian interview

The sector’s traditional culture, shaped by historically masculine values of stoic independence, self-reliance and unquestioning endurance can create an environment where stress becomes normalised and seeking support is seen as weakness. This mindset perpetuates unsustainable work patterns, which ultimately lead to burnout and the potential for premature exit from the profession.

This working culture is out of step with the gendered needs of the workforce. The values are also increasingly removed from younger generations’ professional expectations, meaning that practice realities often fall short of modern workforce needs.

**“My generation... are probably the last... who came into the profession with that quite macho... ‘What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’ attitude.”**  
Expert roundtable discussion

Research on workplace trends shows that younger generations bring different perspectives on workplace wellbeing. They are generally more open to conversations about wellbeing, challenging outdated norms and championing systemic change. They prioritise work-life integration, collective resilience and preventive wellbeing strategies.

72%

of Gen Z workers want to talk openly about mental health in the workplace and are three times more likely to rank wellbeing at work as important compared to older members of the workforce (CALM, 2023).

70%

Nearly 70% of Gen Z and millennial workers expect proactive employer support for mental wellbeing (Handshake, 2024).

Many practices either lack the infrastructure, formalisation or desire to support these evolving expectations.

36%

Only 36% of veterinary teams regularly discuss wellbeing in team meetings and only 38% of clinics offer employee assistance programs (Rahway, 2024).

This gap between expectation and reality causes friction in daily operations, where generational and demographic views on work and wellbeing collide.

Some older veterinary leaders view these shifting expectations with scepticism, perpetuating the stereotype of the younger generation as “lazy”, “entitled” and overly sensitive. This fails to recognise that new entrants bring different attitudes and equally powerful motivation, skills and dedication into their practice.

77%

77% of Gen Z prioritise work-life balance (Francis & Hoefel, 2018).

“Older veterinarians say young ones don’t want to work but this is untrue; they just have different expectations and priorities.”

Dr Nancy De Briyne, Executive Director, FVE

“They are very motivated but they have other job resources and expectations... They want to have an impact. They want to have autonomy”.

Veterinarian interview

These evolving expectations around wellbeing and work-life balance are an opportunity for positive transformation of veterinary culture and can also support clinical functionality. They can benefit everyone, as the desire for better work-life integration cuts across demographic lines.

From individual to collective resilience

Ultimately, the veterinary profession’s cultural basis requires redefining to meet the needs of its modern workforce. Historical values centred on stoicism, independence and endurance may have served previous generations but they clash with the expectations and working preferences of today’s practitioners.

A shift is needed from celebration of individual endurance to fostering a sense of collective responsibility and shared achievement.

“Expecting individual resilience is not helpful. We must look for team resilience and structural solutions.”

Veterinarian interview

To create a culture fit for the modern veterinary workforce, the profession needs to prioritise team performance over individualism, recognising that consistent optimal outcomes emerge from collaborative and empathetic environments, rather than individual striving. This means fostering environments where:

- Collaboration is valued over competition
- Open communication is encouraged
- Vulnerability is recognised as strength
- Failure is understood as a natural part of growth
- Seeking support is normalised and embedded in daily operations
- Reflective practice becomes the norm
- Work-life balance is respected rather than sacrificed

“In other helping professions, we acknowledge the emotional load and have supervision. We need to develop a structure in veterinary medicine where it is not seen as a weakness to talk things through with a supervisor.”

Veterinarian interview

Building psychological safety and team cohesion

To achieve this vision, it is imperative that veterinary workplaces are psychologically safe for all employees e.g. spaces where team members feel that they can speak up, seek help and contribute ideas without fear of judgement or reprisal.

34.3%

Only 34.3% of vets we surveyed feel that there are structures in their workplace that support their wellbeing. Only 28% feel supported by practice managers and colleagues.

Practices with high levels of satisfaction and low turnover consistently demonstrate cultural characteristics that support psychological safety. Staff feel valued. Team collaboration and cohesion is promoted. When practitioners feel heard and valued, overall wellbeing and workplace satisfaction improves.

“In practices where there are high levels of satisfaction and wellbeing, the staff feel heard by leaders. They have team building exercises and the staff socialise together.”

Veterinarian interview

This collaborative approach to workplace management doesn’t just improve wellbeing. Cooperation enhances the efficiency and clinical performance of teams, by reducing communication barriers and conflicts that may contribute to errors. “Interprofessional education, defined as two or more professionals learning with, from and about each other can improve collaboration and quality of care” (Russell et al., 2021).

78%

of graduates cite communication breakdowns with colleagues as contributing to mistakes (Russell et al., 2021).

Ultimately, workers who are happier and feel more valued and supported in their role are more likely to be more productive, have less sick leave or presenteeism, and stay longer in role (Bellet et al., 2019).

Structured support systems for professional growth

Unlike other care professionals, such as therapists, teachers or healthcare professionals, veterinary medicine has been slow to adopt formal structures to underpin professional development and emotional processing. Mentorship programmes, peer support networks, clinical supervision and reflective practice are standard practice in other care fields and remain inconsistently implemented across the veterinary sector. “Key initiatives such as MentorVet... help facilitate guidance and support for veterinary professionals and continue to play a crucial role in fostering a supportive environment within the industry” (Rahway, 2024).

36%

of recent graduates were not assigned a mentor (Robinson et al., 2019).

These developmental structures are particularly important for creating inclusive environments where different working styles and perspectives can thrive. They help bridge generational and demographic differences and promote interpersonal learning, while fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

“I am very in favour of a mentoring program... with an experienced veterinarian that you can WhatsApp or call.”

Dr Nienke Endenberg, Former Chair of the WSAVA Professional Wellness group & Associate Professor in Veterinary Medicine at Utrecht University

Through these mechanisms, veterinary teams could consider the following:

- Shared and collaborative problem solving would allow exploration of new ways to manage and distribute workloads across the veterinary team.
- Open communication channels would allow questions and concerns to be raised without fear or judgement.
- Reflective practice would allow mistakes to become shared learning opportunities rather than sources of shame, with sustainable working patterns measuring effectiveness by quality rather than quantity of work.
- Inclusive leadership would allow diverse perspectives to be actively sought and incorporated.

This cultural shift would recognise that sustainable workforces emerge from supportive environments where practitioners can thrive throughout their careers, rather than burning out after a shorter period of unsustainable effort.

Leading veterinary bodies worldwide are pioneering structured accreditation and training programs designed to transform workplace culture and enhance professional wellbeing.

Best practice: Great Workplaces by BVA Best Practice

Great Workplaces by BVA is an innovative accreditation scheme which recognises and rewards positive workplace cultures across both clinical and non-clinical workplaces. It assesses workplaces against a framework, and provides individualised support, to understand what they are doing well and what they could improve, in order to create a professional environment where team members feel valued, supported and empowered to succeed.

“This accreditation is fantastic for celebrating positive workplace culture, but it’s also a great tool for tackling challenges” Burghfield and Goring Veterinary Practice (BVA 2024A)<sup>1</sup>

“The feedback gave us clarity on our ‘Working Towards’ status and how it’s a sign of our commitment to building a great workplace. We were able to discuss ideas on how to tackle the areas needing attention, with a clear plan for moving forward” Vets for Pets Blackwood (BVA website)<sup>2</sup>

**RCVS’s Veterinary Graduate Development Programme** delivers targeted support during the critical early-career transition, helping new graduates develop the clinical confidence and professional resilience needed to become competent, resilient members of the veterinary team.

**AVMA’s Workplace Wellbeing certificate** equips veterinary teams with foundational knowledge and practical tools to systematically build psychologically safer practice environments from the ground up.

Transforming veterinary structures through leadership

The cultural and structural transformation required to make veterinary workplaces fit for a modern workforce demands genuine evolution and innovation. Creating sustainable and flexible working environments cannot be achieved through incremental change or simple workarounds. Instead, it requires a reimagining of how veterinary practices operate, both structurally and culturally.

The catalyst for this transformation lies in leadership and practice management. “Managers in particular can play an important role in supporting reduced work hours and confronting beliefs that an employee’s value rests on their ability to work long hours” (Begeny et al., 2024). The technical expertise that propels veterinary professionals through clinical ranks doesn’t automatically translate into the organisational and people management capabilities needed to create thriving workplaces. These leadership skills are, however, essential for translating these necessary workplace adaptations into daily reality.

Where effective leadership exists, even seemingly simple interventions can transform workplace environments. These leaders create institutional permission for sustainable practices, which can tackle normalised cultures and enable new modalities to arise.

This requires leaders to step out of the restrictive mindset that keeps many practices trapped in cycles of firefighting, that in turn inhibit imagination and innovation.

Examples from some regions and countries demonstrate the transformative power of strategic leadership development.

“Denmark is one of the European countries doing best... In the last four or five years there has been a lot of focus on improving happiness. Many managers are doing leadership courses and there is a lot of progress in onboarding programmes.”  
Veterinarian interview

The challenge ahead is as much cultural as it is structural. It requires a comprehensive rethink of how modern veterinary practice can facilitate improved work-life balance while maintaining adequate staffing levels. This reexamination raises crucial questions.

- How might the veterinary sector strategically evolve to meet the demands of a modern workforce?
- How might veterinary workplaces maximise clinical time while effectively delegating non-clinical tasks?
- How can veterinary workplaces evolve beyond celebrating individual endurance to fostering sustainable collaboration and service delivery?
- What structures and strategies could embed collective responsibility within daily operations?
- How might practice structures evolve to support work-life balance without compromising care quality?
- What role might support staff and technology play in creating more sustainable working patterns?

Some practices are already exploring how support structures could create more sustainable working environments (BVA website, 2024). This involves moving beyond traditional hierarchies to consider how different skills and capabilities can play a part. The goal is to reduce veterinary workload and simultaneously create structures where every professional can work optimally while feeling supported and valued within the vet team.

Best practice: Great Workplaces by BVA Best Practice

Westport Veterinary Clinic stands out for its animal-centred, staff-focused culture, with leadership placing a high priority on recognition, empowerment and wellbeing within the workplace.

The team at Vets for Pets Blackwood found the detailed feedback report extremely valuable. Management’s efforts to offer flexibility, both formally and informally, were highlighted as a strength. The team found positive role models in their leaders, particularly their manager, and credited their leadership skills and caring approach as pivotal to workplace culture.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bva.co.uk/great-workplaces/great-workplaces-case-studies/great-workplaces-case-study-burghfield-and-goring-veterinary-practice/>  
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bva.co.uk/great-workplaces/great-workplaces-case-studies/great-workplaces-case-study-vets-for-pets-blackwood/>

# Chapter 7

## Adapting to Meet Modern Service Demands

### Summary

The veterinary sector finds itself navigating a cultural transformation where in the emotional dynamics of veterinary services have intensified. Veterinarians once operated as trusted community figures, whose expertise went largely unchallenged, but today's practitioners navigate an increasingly complex and pressured landscape of client expectations, digital information and evolving societal values around animal care. However, while this environment contributes to the retention issue facing the profession, technology can also provide answers to meeting evolving client expectations, while sustaining practitioner wellbeing. Existing innovations in customer care show great potential for helping new entrants navigate this difficult terrain. Remembering the overwhelmingly positive public perception of veterinarians and the profession is crucial and will support continued evolution of constructive veterinarian–client relationships that centre animal welfare.

# Professional disillusionment in spite of public support

Our research highlighted a disparity between how veterinarians perceive client relationships and actual public sentiment. While practitioners report feeling undervalued and over-scrutinised by the public, expert feedback suggests that this perception may not align with reality.

“The public perception of vets is a lot more positive than vets’ perception of themselves. We should remember that this profession is hugely supported by the public in general... We should not focus on the negatives.”  
Dr John Dinsdale, IVC Evidensia

This perception gap creates a paradoxical situation where veterinarians feel embattled and underappreciated despite the generally positive public sentiment. This disconnect feeds professional disillusionment, undermining collective morale within practices and potentially contributing to early-career exodus.



There is a risk of the veterinary profession creating a negative feedback loop, where perceived client antagonism leads to defensive practice cultures that can inadvertently fuel genuine tensions. Our roundtable discussions gave clear feedback that a focus on antagonism with clients could create unnecessary and unhelpful battle lines. The generally positive relationships between veterinarians and clients need to be centred to avoid exacerbating tensions within daily interactions.

This discrepancy suggests not just a client communication issue but also a professional identity challenge. The sector needs to refresh its self-narrative and public image.

“We’ve got a barrier between us and the public, which we put up ourselves to a great extent.”  
Expert roundtable discussion

# Evolving client relationships

The changing context of veterinary care creates new pressure points in client relationships that contribute to practitioner stress and, ultimately, retention issues.

## The emotional complexity of modern pet care

The cultural evolution of pet ownership has fundamentally altered the emotional terrain of veterinary practice. Animals are increasingly viewed as family members rather than possessions, transforming clinical interactions into emotionally charged discussions about a beloved family member’s care.



“Now is the era of “involve me”. Clients want to be involved in everything.”  
Veterinarian interview

This shift elevates client anxiety around pet health and places extraordinary emotional demands on veterinarians, who must navigate complex feelings alongside clinical care. “Pet owners frequently reported a degree of anxiety in making sure that they were doing the right thing for their pet’s wellbeing. (Kubi Kalloo, 2024).

“A client cried because I took her dog to be vaccinated in the back... it’s mentally hard to deal with that stress. Clients just seem so much more anxious than they used to be.”  
Veterinarian interview

Best practice:  
“One practice provided therapy to clients... then opened it to staff and was inundated. Normalising support can help everyone.”  
Expert roundtable discussion

# The economics of care: a delicate balance

In this emotionally charged environment, the economics of modern veterinary medicine creates an increasingly complicated dynamic. As medical advances expand what is possible in animal healthcare, associated costs exacerbate tensions in client interactions.

Rising costs of veterinary care come against a backdrop of broader societal economic pressures, where inflation impacts both practice expenses and clients’ financial reserves. Clients expect the best treatment for “NHS prices” and feel morally let down by the veterinary profession if forced to choose between opting for treatments they can’t afford or watching their beloved family member suffer.

“Pet parents expect human-grade care for their pets but often can’t afford it. Managing these expectations is complex.”  
Veterinarian interview

## Shifting authority dynamics

Modern veterinary practice operates in a transformed information landscape where traditional professional authority has given way to more collaborative decision-making dynamics. While this shift reflects broader societal trends, it creates particular hurdles for a profession trained primarily in scientific expertise rather than collaborative communication.



“One massive change across society is around views on trusted authority, a lot of that has broken down.”  
Veterinarian interview

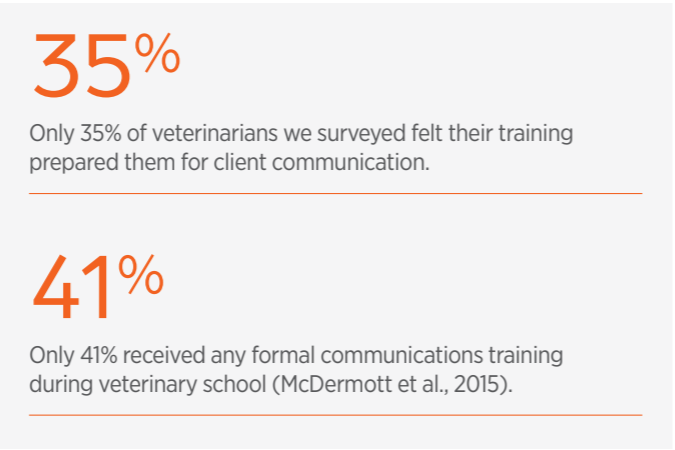
Veterinarians increasingly find themselves having to validate, correct or contextualise information that clients have sourced online, creating more complex and potentially contentious clinical conversations.

“People come in with preconceived information from Google... they challenge my advice to my face.”  
Veterinarian interview

These shifting dynamics demand a new approach to client communication, one that many veterinarians feel unprepared to navigate effectively.

## Skills gaps: communication capabilities for modern practice

The combination of heightened emotional stakes and transformed information landscapes creates demand for communication capabilities that many veterinarians lack. Despite these skills being essential for modern practice, they often remain underemphasised in veterinary education and continuing professional development.



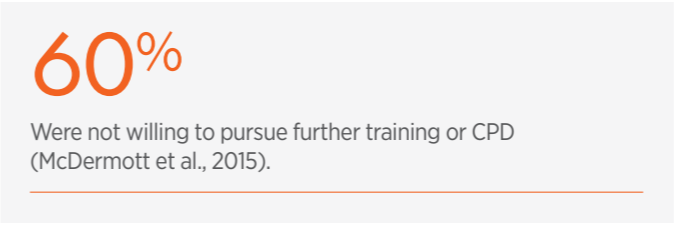
While many veterinary schools have begun integrating communication training, these skills are often ranked secondary to clinical knowledge and students can see these as “non-examinable” extras rather than crucial components.

“We did only a couple of fake consults with actors. That’s it. A lot of the communication training just feels like lip-service rather than really helping you develop that skill.”  
Veterinarian interview

The lack of emphasis on communication skills creates particular vulnerability around difficult conversations with clients, whether discussing financial constraints, ethical dilemmas or lifestyle factors affecting pet health.

These issues could be addressed with continuing professional development (CPD). However, studies indicate substantial numbers of veterinary staff are either unwilling or unable to take time to improve their skills, due to financial constraints or time pressures (Caple, 2019).

The consequences of this skills gap manifest in workplace stress, diminished job satisfaction and increased likelihood of leaving the profession entirely.



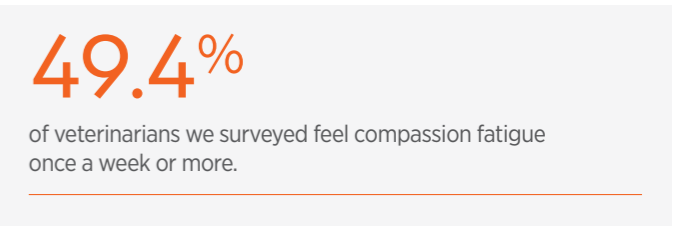
## Ethical strain and moral injury

The confluence of client expectations, financial realities and shifting practice models creates a particular form of professional distress: ethical strain and moral injury. Veterinarians routinely face situations where financial constraints or client preferences clash with their professional judgment about animal welfare.

Our research found that 44.9% of veterinarians report frequently having to provide care that falls short of best practice. 28% of veterinarians report delivering care they do not agree with. A 2018 survey of veterinarians found 19% of respondents reported that they sometimes or often acceded to inappropriate euthanasia requests and 79% report being asked to provide care that they consider to be futile (Moses et al., 2018). The same survey found 62% of respondents said that they sometimes or often could not “do the right thing”. According to Crane et al., (2015), the repetitive nature of acting against their own belief system over time, creates a unique class of workplace stress, called moral injury.

“Ethical dilemmas are a strain and a stress. You are being asked to do something that may not be ethically right, but it is their animal. That weighs on you and your conscience.”  
Veterinarian interview

The emotional toll of these ethical compromises accumulates over time, contributing to compassion fatigue and professional disillusionment.



“Euthanasia is part of the job... taking a life does something to you.”  
Veterinarian interview

Over time, these emotional issues can accumulate, creating secondary trauma and chronic stress.

58.9%

The AVMA Census of Veterinarians survey of 5,020 veterinarians found that 58.9% had high secondary traumatic stress scores e.g. negative feelings associated with prolonged exposure to work-related trauma such as caring for and euthanising suffering animals (Ouerdraogo et al., 2021).

These challenges are amplified by the trend towards corporatisation, which may have inadvertently altered how some clients perceive clinical recommendations.

47.5%

of veterinarians we surveyed think corporatisation has increased conflict with pet owners..

“The worst impact of corporatisation has been the fact that clients think you’re just in it for the money. That makes difficult conversations about the care they can afford to give their sick pet particularly complex and straining.”  
Veterinarian interview

This tension creates a painful irony. Practitioners who chose their career out of dedication to animal welfare find their motives questioned in moments when they’re trying to advocate for best care.

The combination of feeling ethically compromised, compassion fatigue and an erosion of professional status creates a perfect storm for disillusionment. What begins as individual instances of moral injury can accumulate into profound questioning of professional identity and purpose. This could contribute to contemplation of early-career departure from the profession.

Adapting practice to modern expectations

Meeting evolving client expectations, while sustaining practitioner wellbeing, demands innovation in service delivery models. Modern consumers expect 24/7 accessibility, personalised service and digital engagement across all service sectors, veterinary medicine included.

“There are a small group of pet owners who just expect you to be available to them 24/7.”  
Veterinarian interview

This creates tension in traditional practice structures, where work-life boundaries are already strained. However, thoughtful technological and structural innovations offer potential pathways to better meet client needs while protecting practitioner wellbeing.

Expert feedback emphasised the need for veterinary practices to adopt more sophisticated business approaches, particularly around client service. For example:

- “Veterinary medicine needs to shift to being more business oriented – and adopt a stronger customer-service perspective – balancing client needs and financial viability with staff wellbeing.” Expert roundtable discussion
- “Every business has customers. Those customers have to be happy and I think there’s some reticence in practices to think of themselves as putting the customer first.” Expert roundtable discussion

Technology as a bridge

Digital platforms and telehealth services present opportunities to extend availability while managing in-person demands. Early digital engagement allows for better expectation setting, triage of urgent versus non-urgent needs and more efficient allocation of veterinary expertise. For example, offering clients opportunities to engage with the practice in a more informal way, such as submitting a question or query, can improve trust and enable clients to make informed decisions about whether they need to come into the practice to seek care.

Best practice:

Hello Vet is pioneering a new model for communicating with pet owners, allowing them to Whatsapp their questions to the veterinary team and receive answers to their pet health questions in a convenient and accessible manner. They also offer a “stay with your pet” service, so that owners have the opportunity to remain with their pets during procedures, reducing their anxiety and helping owners to feel more connected to their pet’s wellbeing as they undergo surgery.

Client segmentation and personalisation

Forward-thinking practices are implementing systems to better understand, support and respond to different client communication needs.

“We use a color coding system, based on the psychological profiles of our clients. If they’re a red patient, you know they need lots of evidence and they want to be involved intimately in the decision making. If you train your youngsters to look into that, it makes it easier for them to understand how to adapt their responses.”  
Expert roundtable discussion

This approach allows practices to tailor communication styles to individual client preferences, reducing stress for both clients and practitioners.

The path forward: improving dynamics in client relationships

The transformation in client-vet relationships reflects broader shifts in how society values and engages with animal healthcare. What emerges from our analysis is a story of increased service demands, rising costs and an evolution in how veterinary care must be conceptualised and delivered in the modern era.

Adapting to modern service demands requires a multifaceted approach that addresses perception gaps, skill deficits and innovation needs simultaneously.

Several key questions emerge that warrant deeper exploration.

- How might the profession reshape its public narrative to bridge the perception gap between practitioner experience and public sentiment?
- How can veterinary education evolve to place greater emphasis on the emotional intelligence and communication skills needed for modern practice?
- How might practices implement technologies and service innovations that meet client expectations while protecting practitioner wellbeing?
- What systems can help practitioners navigate ethical dilemmas and avoid moral injury?
- How can leadership development better equip practice managers to create environments where both client service and staff wellbeing thrive?
- What innovations in practice structure could help balance optimal clinical service delivery with financial accessibility?
- How can the profession rebuild trust and articulate value in an age of democratised knowledge?
- What role might technology play in managing expectations and reducing anxiety?

The answers to these questions will help define how veterinary medicine adapts to meet modern service demands while addressing the retention issue that threatens the profession’s sustainability. By engaging thoughtfully with these questions, the profession has an opportunity to evolve in ways that preserve its core values while meeting the demands of a changing world.

# Chapter 8

## Broadening the Professional Pipeline

### Summary

With mounting pressure on retention and increasing demands for flexible working patterns, the veterinary sector faces a strategic challenge of cultivating a professional pipeline capable of sustaining the profession. Given the numbers of veterinarians considering leaving the profession and practices consequently struggling to maintain adequate staffing levels, the sector needs a more expansive and inclusive talent recruitment strategy.

The issue with demographic homogeneity

The veterinary profession currently draws from a limited pool of candidates with less demographic diversity than society at large e.g. the workforce is predominantly white, female and from higher socioeconomic segments.

The 2024 RCVS survey of the veterinary profession found 61% of the UK veterinary workforce were female, 96% of those who specified ethnicity identified as white and 29% had attended independent or fee paying schools, significantly above the UK average of 7.5% (Rosolin et al., 2024).

“There is a lack of diversity, equity and inclusiveness in the veterinary profession... diverse role models are rarely visible and many vet students come from a less diverse background than society as a whole.”  
Dr Wiebke Jansen, Policy Officer, FVE

This lack of diversity creates both operational challenges and potentially impacts workplace culture. Research consistently shows that diverse workplaces are more innovative and collaborative (Christopherson, 2024), more productive (Dixon-Fyle et al., 2020) and have higher rates of employee wellbeing and greater psychological safety (Mattina, 2025).

“The more diverse a workplace is, the greater the sense of psychological safety, by encouraging a broad range of perspectives and open dialogue. Take the veterinary sector, for example, which often attracts individuals who are highly driven and dedicated, whose strong work ethic is a great asset. A diverse workplace can complement this commitment by introducing a variety of perspectives and approaches, fostering balance, collaboration, and sustainable professional growth.”  
Dr Wiebke Jansen, Policy Officer, FVE

Conversely, those from underrepresented backgrounds who do enter the profession may face additional difficulties that impact their wellbeing and retention. “Minority groups and LGBTQIA+ veterinarians were significantly more likely to exhibit worse outcomes, and report experiencing discrimination and isolation, which further contributes to burnout” (Steffey et al., 2023). This can create a cycle of exclusion, where potential talent from more diverse backgrounds do not see the profession as a legitimate career option.

“The statistics show that those from minority backgrounds or those who have disabilities report lower wellbeing. There’s a vulnerability that comes from being at the margins”  
Veterinarian interview

Lack of diversity can also amplify certain professional characteristics within veterinary workplaces. The veterinary profession attracts and cultivates a distinct psychological profile i.e. individuals who combine exceptional academic achievement with deep emotional investment in animal welfare. These traits can create a cultural tendency towards perfectionism and overwork, creating cultural vulnerabilities within the veterinary workplace that impact wellbeing and retention rates over the longer term. “Culturally the profession tends to view [excessive workplace stress] as normal, which contributes to the perpetuation of the problem” (Steffey et al., 2023).

“We have very, very high expectations for ourselves... The perfectionism, I think that is the number one issue... It’s easy to feel like a failure.”  
Veterinarian interview

Financial barriers limiting access

The economics of veterinary education create significant barriers to entry. The intensive nature of veterinary training makes concurrent employment virtually impossible, creating a two-sided financial barrier. Prospective veterinarians must be able to finance significant educational costs and do so without the ability to earn money at the same time. “Veterinary degrees are known to have significant time commitments and rigid structures that may largely dictate the personal life of the student” (McArthur at al., 2019).

“There’s also a lack of socioeconomic diversity because veterinary school is so expensive and you are unlikely to be able to work on top of your engagement at school.”  
Veterinarian interview

This financial burden continues to shape career choices after qualification, particularly with rising costs of living and stagnating incomes in many regions. Rising debt-to-wage ratios for veterinary students, particularly in the UK and US, are also likely to deter potential entrants. This makes being a veterinarian a viable career choice only for those privileged enough to be able to focus on motivations beyond financial remuneration.

“We are missing out on the huge potential that would come from perfectly suited, high achieving students... leading to this retention problem.”  
Veterinarian interview

Best practice:

Several experts suggested exploring apprenticeship models or other alternative pathways that would make veterinary education more financially accessible. These models could potentially reduce the financial burden while maintaining quality standards through on-the-job learning.

“It would be really interesting if there was an apprenticeship model for becoming a vet... a mix of being in a placement and getting a college education.”  
Veterinarian interview

Expanded funding models, including support for second-degree entrants, visa assistance and industry sponsorship could help reduce financial barriers and expand participation.

Work experience as a social barrier

Beyond academic requirements, gaining the necessary work experience for veterinary school applications presents an additional hurdle for many potential candidates. This is particularly difficult for those without existing connections to the veterinary world.

“Try getting that [work experience] from a council estate... It’s difficult for people, when you’re outside that [social] bubble.”  
Expert roundtable discussion

Selection criteria overlook potential talent

Academic rigour will always be a necessary prerequisite for a veterinary career but current selection criteria may inadvertently prioritise a narrow set of skills, at the expense of a broader, more holistic set of capabilities. Competition for places at veterinary schools means high entry requirements (VSC, 2025). This tends to favour certain demographic groups e.g. those from private schools and those from more privileged socioeconomic classes who tend to do better in exams (Thomson, 2018).

“I was desperate to be a vet. It took me years to get into vet school. I applied to 14 places and only got into one, just because I had one grade that didn’t quite fit the bill.”  
Veterinarian interview

The objective for the profession is to maintain necessary standards while recognising that the skills that make an excellent veterinary student may not perfectly align with those that create an effective practitioner. “Veterinary schools and colleges can and should begin selecting students with the personality and interest profile characteristics of successful veterinarians, expose them to realistic previews of career options, and help them develop nontechnical skills identified as important to a successful career” (Lewis & Klausner, 2003).

Best practice:

The School of Veterinary Medicine and Science at the University of Nottingham doubled its number of entrants each year to 150, removing some of the emphasis on academic excellence and enabling a broader profile of students onto the course.

Evolving economic structures in the profession

The economic landscape of veterinary practice has shifted considerably in recent years. The traditional pathway of eventually owning a practice has become less common, changing the long-term financial prospects for many in the profession.

Our research found that 50% of veterinarians believe this structural change has reduced the financial incentives to becoming a veterinary professional. “In previous generations, most vets entered the profession with a reasonable expectation they would one day own... a veterinary practice. For today’s crop, however, that expectation has changed” (Vet Times, 2018).

The shift away from the traditional practice model to an employee model has implications beyond ownership structure. The transformation erodes the “entrepreneurial” side of veterinary practice where practice owners are autonomous and accountable for business outcomes. The employee model is less risky; professionals can trade autonomy for greater predictability and stability. This may impact the sectors’ ability to draw a more diverse talent pool of ambitious people into the sector, those stimulated by incentives beyond the clinical experience.

“While I loved a lot of being a vet... it was rewarding, it satisfied my need for achievement, I actually found my “thing” was the energy you get from owning and growing your own practice. I took it from four employees to 50.”  
Veterinarian interview

Against this backdrop of structural transformation, the profession’s economic rewards often do not justify the outlay. Entry into the profession demands extraordinary investment with years of intensive education. Veterinarians increasingly struggle to earn proportional rewards given the external context of cost-of-living increases, economic downturns and stagnating incomes.

The financial rewards of a veterinary career vary significantly across regions and practice types. This creates professional disincentives and strategic vulnerabilities in service provision and workforce sustainability.

The average European veterinarian typically earns €48,000 but there are significant regional variations. Veterinarians in Switzerland and Ireland can expect earnings exceeding €85,000 while their colleagues in Serbia and Romania earn less than €14,500. Low wages are more pronounced within livestock and food systems

veterinary practice, where a government wage in places such as Croatia only commands around €900 a month, barely enough to cover living expenses (FVE, 2023).

Veterinarians work long and antisocial hours with financial rewards that are unlikely to match peers within the medical profession (Laycock, 2013). This means a veterinary career must increasingly be chosen for its promise of meaningful work with animals and love of the job rather than financial gain.

“For me it’s never been just a job. It has to mean something more. If it was just about money, I would have chosen something else.”  
Veterinarian interview

The changing nature of veterinary practice

The shift in practice focus also presents challenges for workforce distribution. Large animal and rural practice areas often struggle to maintain adequate staffing, creating potential vulnerabilities in food system resilience and rural animal healthcare coverage.

Livestock work demands a distinct set of capabilities and tolerances. Beyond pure economics, the role often requires being comfortable with isolation and autonomous decision-making.

“You have to make decisions without consulting with colleagues. Some may love cows, but it is a really lonely life on the farm.”  
Veterinarian interview

Modern livestock practice increasingly diverges from traditional notions of individual animal care, shifting toward data-driven, preventative approaches that may attract those with different skills and interests. A profession increasingly concentrated in urban, companion animal practice may struggle to provide the veterinarians needed to meet the complex demands of modern food production and biosecurity.

“A shift from individual animal treatment to preventive herd health management is needed.”  
Dr Nancy De Briyne, Executive Director, FVE

Best practice:

In recognition of recruitment issues facing the rural veterinary economy in Wales, Aberystwyth university has explicitly begun a recruitment drive within rural Wales to incentivise local adults to go into a career in livestock and/or rural practices. This geographically-focused approach recognises that practitioners are more likely to work in regions where they have personal connections or cultural ties.

“Aberystwyth have gone to the rural areas in Wales, as it’s going to be difficult to get people from around the country to come and work in rural practices. If they’re already settled there, they’re more likely to be open to living and working there.” Expert roundtable discussion

The sector risks creating strategic vulnerabilities in food system resilience if it cannot maintain adequate veterinary coverage across all practice types and innovations.

Redefining professional mythology

The veterinary profession still contends with a gap between its traditional image and modern reality. This identity crisis lies at the heart of the sectors’ ability to inspire and attract diverse talent.

The powerful image that once drew generations into veterinary medicine, epitomised in the UK by James Herriot’s romantic archetype, of a respected rural vet embedded deeply in community life, has given way to a more complex and often contradictory reality.

“There is a part of the culture, with societal values and role models such as James Herriot, that students expect. This is far from the reality today. Vets don’t have the same social capital they used to.”  
Veterinarian interview

A disconnect between professional mythology and modern reality creates two related issues. Firstly, those who enter the profession expecting one experience and encountering another may become disillusioned.

“We’re taught to do everything at the gold standard but not how to manage real-life constraints.”  
Veterinarian interview

Secondly, the absence of a clearly defined contemporary veterinary identity creates uncertainty. “No true definition of veterinary professionalism exists, and the teaching of the values and behaviours expected of veterinary professionals may not be explicit” (Mossop, 2012).

In order to attract diverse talent into the profession, this identity needs to be redefined and the incentives to becoming a veterinary professional reviewed. Realistic expectations about the rewards and challenges of veterinary life also need to be encouraged.

Reimagining pathways and incentives in practice

The veterinary sector’s ability to meet evolving service demands and embrace modern working patterns depends on expanding and diversifying its talent pipeline. The path forward requires a focus both on how to attract talent to veterinary medicine and how we define and value veterinary excellence itself. Alternative pathways to practice, more inclusive selection criteria and new models of professional development could all help broaden access, while maintaining standards. Creative solutions will be essential.

The profession must grapple with fundamental questions, such as:

- How might veterinary education become more financially accessible without compromising quality? Could the government incentivise participation by subsidising education costs of vets intending to go into key food system services?
- What would encourage more diverse participation across different practice types?
- How can training balance technical expertise with emotional intelligence?
- How might veterinary professionals shift from perfectionism and fear of failure, to a culture of sustainable fulfilment?
- How can the profession’s cultural identity evolve while preserving its core values?
- What new models of practice could create compelling pathways for diverse talent?

The future sustainability of veterinary practice depends on attracting more practitioners and on cultivating a professional pipeline that reflects and serves the full spectrum of society.

# Chapter 9

## What Comes Next: A Vision for the Future

The veterinary profession stands at a pivotal moment of opportunity. While the issues outlined in this white paper are significant, they also represent a chance to reimagine a profession that will thrive in the 21st century. Insights from experts and practitioners across the sector point to a future where veterinary medicine is continually evolving as a profession that balances clinical efficiency with workplace wellbeing, which is able to attract and retain diverse talent and which meets the demands of its contemporary workforce.

“There is a lot that’s changing in the veterinary profession and we need to make sure that we embrace that change and we’re part of that change rather than being led by it... As we look forward, we can see AI is coming along. How can we think about getting that to support us in our work rather than it being something we’re fearful of?”

Expert roundtable discussion

Addressing the subject of retention requires the veterinary sector to embrace imagination, innovation and bold collaboration. Too often, established norms and traditional approaches constrain thinking about what’s possible, rather than asking “how might we make that work?”

Moving beyond this mindset demands courage to step outside comfort zones, re-examine longstanding assumptions and ask open questions about practice structures, work distribution and professional culture. The most promising pathways forward will emerge not from incremental tweaks to existing systems but from reimagining what veterinary work could look like, if designed around the needs of both contemporary practitioners and the clients they serve. This innovative spirit must be matched with genuine cross-sector collaboration, where educational institutions, practice owners, professional bodies and industry partners unite around a shared vision of sustainable delivery rather than working in isolation.

Central to this transformation is the need to collectively define “what good looks like” for the modern veterinary workplace. Rather than focusing exclusively on the difficulties, the sector must shine a spotlight on progress where it already exists. We can celebrate innovative practices, effective leadership and successful cultural transformations. By systematically identifying, documenting and sharing these positive examples across the profession, practices can learn from each other’s successes rather than reinventing solutions in isolation. This approach also serves to reinvigorate professional pride and passion, reminding practitioners of why they love their chosen career.

“We do have the most beautiful profession in the world. And this is a message I really want to spread more... We need to have fun and a passion for what we do. We are vets and we have to be proud of that... This is what young colleagues should feel when they come to work.”

Dr Ann Criel, President-elect, FECAVA

Our research has illuminated three key areas where transformation could create meaningful change. These areas offer a framework for collective action across the profession.

“Things don’t have to be the way they are, we can ask questions and understand why something is done in a certain way. In my experience, a lot of the time, things are done because they haven’t been questioned. So all we can ask is why, and could we do this differently?”

Richard Casey, Executive Director WSAVA & Former President at Veterinary Management Group UK

Reimagining the Veterinary Workplace

The sector has an opportunity to rethink how veterinary practice operates, moving beyond traditional structures to create more sustainable working environments. This transformation will include reexamining workload distribution, embracing technological innovation and fostering cultures of collective resilience.

“I think we’re guilty of looking back and we’re guilty of thinking the past was perfect. The past wasn’t perfect. The future may well not be perfect, but we’ve got an opportunity to actually walk into that and discuss it and prepare for it.”

Dr John Dinsdale, Country Medical Director and Senior Veterinary Advisor, IVC Evidensia

Forward-thinking practices are already exploring innovative approaches to flexibility, leveraging technology to reduce administrative burdens, empowering veterinary nurses to take on more responsibility and creating psychologically safe environments where teamwork is valued. These measures don’t compromise clinical reliability, they enhance it by creating sustainable pathways for delivering quality care.

Adapting to Meet Modern Service Demands

Modern veterinary practice requires balancing clinical expertise with effective client communication in an increasingly complex service landscape. The sector has a chance to redefine veterinary professionalism to encompass both clinical and interpersonal skills.

This means developing innovative service models that meet client expectations while maintaining practitioner wellbeing, leveraging technology to extend accessibility without compromising work-life boundaries and fostering more transparent communication about the economics of veterinary care. By embracing client service as a core professional skill rather than a distraction from clinical work, the profession can bridge perception gaps and build stronger relationships with the communities it serves.

Broadening the Professional Pipeline

The long-term sustainability of veterinary practice depends on cultivating a more diverse and adaptable workforce. The profession has an opportunity to nurture multiple pathways into veterinary medicine that will make the career accessible to more people, while maintaining high standards.

From apprenticeship models to expanded funding opportunities, from more inclusive selection criteria to geographically-focused recruitment efforts, innovative approaches will help ensure the profession reflects the society it serves. Diversity delivers social benefits and strategic advantages, creating workplaces with broader perspectives and greater psychological safety.

The profession has an opportunity to meet this moment with creativity, collaborative spirit and a shared commitment to building a sustainable future for veterinary medicine, one that serves both animals and the dedicated professionals who care for them.

# Conclusion

## A Blueprint for Collective Transformation

The challenges facing the veterinary profession are complex, multifaceted and systemic. They cannot be solved through individual resilience strategies or isolated interventions alone. Instead, they require coordinated action across the entire veterinary ecosystem, from educational institutions to practice owners, from professional bodies to industry partners.

“No one person or organisation is going to be able to fix this.”  
Veterinarian interview

This white paper has outlined a vision for transformation that balances short-term practicality with long-term ambition. Some changes can begin immediately within individual practices, such as implementing lunch breaks, creating mentoring programs and fostering more open conversations about wellbeing. Others require sustained commitment and collaboration across the sector, such as redefining selection criteria, creating new educational pathways and developing innovative practice models.

At the heart of this transformation lies a common goal: defining what 21st century veterinary professionalism looks like. This requires moving beyond outdated archetypes to envision a modern profession that values both clinical competence and emotional intelligence, that balances dedication to animals with sustainable working patterns and that embraces both technological innovation and human connection.

“We have an opportunity to refocus and reimagine what practice could be and what the working lives of vets, nurses, receptionists and the whole practice team could be. It gives us a huge opportunity to have more positive outcomes for people working in veterinary practice.”

Dr Rob Williams, MRCVS & Junior Vice President at BVA

As a long-standing partner to the veterinary profession, Zoetis recognises that addressing retention requires looking beyond individual wellbeing to understand and transform the systemic factors that contribute to it. This white paper represents our commitment to facilitating deeper conversations and collective action toward a more sustainable future for the profession.

“A career in veterinary medicine should be as fulfilling as it is demanding. Yet, we know the pressures on veterinarians continue to grow. At Zoetis, we are committed to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of the profession, recognising that real change requires both systemic shifts and everyday actions. By fostering workplaces that prioritise both clinical excellence and emotional resilience, we can help ensure that a career in veterinary medicine is not just rewarding but also sustainable. Together, we can shape a future where passion for animal care leads to long-term fulfilment and a stronger profession for all.”

Dr Stephanie Armstrong, Regional President, Zoetis

We are deeply grateful to all who contributed to this research: the veterinary professionals who shared their experiences; the experts who provided their insights; and the roundtable participants who engaged so thoughtfully with these complex issues. Their collective wisdom forms the foundation of this white paper and points the way towards meaningful change.

The path ahead will not be simple or straightforward. It requires imagination, collaboration and a willingness to question established norms. Without transformation though, the profession risks continued workforce shortages, heightened stress for those who remain and, ultimately, compromised animal care.

With thoughtful evolution however, veterinary medicine can emerge stronger, more sustainable and better equipped to fulfill its vital role in society. By working together to create environments that support rather than strain talented veterinarians, the profession can ensure a future where passion for animal care becomes a pathway to fulfillment and societal impact.

The moment for transformation is now. By embracing the challenge with the same dedication, intelligence and care that defines the best of veterinary practice, the profession can create a future where clinical achievements and practitioner wellbeing exist not in tension but in harmony, a future where veterinary medicine truly thrives.

# Appendix 1

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