

The 178th Annual General Meeting of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, held virtually on Friday 9 July 2021, with senior staff and Council members present at Belgravia House

The President, Dr Mandisa Greene, chaired the virtual Annual General Meeting, and welcomed members of RCVS Council and Veterinary Nurses Council, in addition to other members of the profession and their guests who were in attendance. In her introduction she noted that the event was taking place mostly online again this year, and those present in person were in accordance with the government guidelines in place at the time regarding indoor events.

The Registrar, Eleanor Ferguson, reported that the notice of the meeting had been published on the website of the *Veterinary Record* from Wednesday 2 June 2021 onwards. The President also read a statement from Her Majesty the Queen as Patron of the RCVS.

1. Minutes of the last Annual General Meeting

The minutes of the Annual General Meeting, held on Friday 10 July 2020, which had also been made available online, were confirmed and approved as a correct record.

2. *Annual Report and Statement of Accounts for the year ending 31 December 2020*

The President formally presented the *Annual Report and Statement of Accounts* for the year ending 31 December 2020.

3. Questions about the *Annual Report and Statement of Accounts*

The President said that, due to the limitations of the online platform and time considerations, the College was not able to take live questions from members regarding the *Annual Report and Statement of Accounts 2020*.

However, they had encouraged members of the professions to submit questions about the *Annual Report* over the previous few weeks and had received two questions.

The first question received was from **Alastair Welch MRCVS**, which was as follows:

The recent exposé in the Veterinary Record regarding the woeful performance of the concerns department makes disturbing reading.

In brief, the concerns department has, for a number of years, failed to reach the targets that it sets itself. The Covid pandemic has not helped the situation but analysis of the data reveals this problem predates the pandemic by some considerable time. This is a failure of leadership over many years and responsibility falls squarely at the door of the executive.

Examination of the recent RCVS annual report reveals that the College is in rude financial health: against the background of the pandemic, when many veterinary surgeons have been struggling to cope, the College has received an increase in revenue of 5% and now sits with reserves of £21.3M. This is £13.3M in excess of the stated level of required reserves (and does not include the proceeds from the recent sale of Belgravia House which is not accounted for in the stated period).

Notwithstanding that the purpose of such a large unallocated reserve is obscured from the wider membership, when will the College recognise that the proper functioning (which includes the timely conclusion) of the disciplinary procedures is one of its core functions and allocate adequate leadership and resources?

This does not mean a solitary additional member of staff but instead is an understanding from the senior leadership team that the performance to date has been unacceptably poor and a commitment to solve the problems with significant additional resources and appropriate leadership (which may well include the removal of current underperforming members of staff).

The answer to Mr Welch's question, as read by the RCVS President, was as follows:

As a regulator, we are mindful of the stress that the concerns investigation process has for all involved, not least the veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse about whom the concern has been raised. This is why we have deliberately set ourselves exacting time scales for our key performance indicators, and this fact has been recognised by an independent reviewer who commented: 'the KPIs which the RCVS sets itself are quite challenging in anything other than relatively straightforward cases.'

The concerns investigation process itself involves input from many individuals other than RCVS staff members, for example, the respondent vets and vet nurses; additional witnesses including other members of the profession and well as members of the public; and outside agencies, committees and experts. All need to play their part when asked to respond if KPIs are to be met. Frequently, for a multitude of reasons, there may be delays in them doing so. However, it is our statutory duty as a regulator and investigate concerns that have been raised thoroughly and properly in order to obtain the necessary information we need to ensure that we are making robust, and this process may, unfortunately, sometimes take more time than we would like. While we are looking at adding additional staff to bolster our Professional Conduct Team, it should be stressed that it is not as simple as saying that extra staff resources will mean that our KPIs will always be met.

All RCVS staff and committee members are subject to regular appraisals, and overall performance of the Professional Conduct Department and the concerns investigation process is closely and regularly monitored by the PIC/ DC liaison Committee.

The College, of course, continually looks to find ways to improve and to make changes to its processes to assist in meeting those KPIs, but we can only do so within the limitations of the current Veterinary Surgeons Act. To this end, Council has recently agreed to introduce 'mini PICs' and to apply just one threshold test. It is hoped that this will assist in the amount of time taken to investigate concerns and give greater clarity about the process. With the adoption of the recommendations of the Legislation Working Party Report, we are also looking to the future and bringing in a new and comprehensive fitness to practise system in any future legislation.

The second question received was from **James Russell MRCVS, President of the British Veterinary Association (BVA)** and was as follows:

On behalf of BVA members I would like to ask the RCVS to set out more detail on its reserves strategy, further to our questions at the 2020 AGM.

We note in the Annual Report & Financial Statements 2020 that the RCVS reported £21.3 in reserves – £13.3m above the target of £8m. Since 2019 this is an increase in reserves of £2.6m, whilst at the same time the target for reserves has been reduced by £0.6m.

Specifically, I would like to ask the following questions:

- a. What is the justification or explanation for increasing the surplus above target from £10.1m to £13.3m (an increase of 32%)?*
- b. The report states that the difference "is being retained to provide funds for planned projects and the estate strategy." How much of the £13.3m is being earmarked for the estates strategy and what assessment has been made of the size and type of building that will be needed in light of changed ways of working established due to the pandemic?*
- c. What are the other planned projects referred to and how much is earmarked for these?*
- d. Will you consider using the substantial reserves to offer a reduction in annual renewal fees?*

The answer given by the President was as follows:

The RCVS has a reserves policy to provide resilience in the event of unexpected costs or financial losses and funding for future activities under the Strategic Plan.

As published in our Annual Report, we are currently holding reserves ahead of our usual formula, in order to fulfil our Estates Strategy and find a new base of operations for the RCVS.

As reported in March 2021, the RCVS has sold its Westminster headquarters and leased it back while we find a suitable property, thus allowing us maximum flexibility around both funding and timing.

The move is being overseen by our Estate Strategy Project Board headed by former RCVS President Barry Johnson and includes current and former RCVS Council members and staff.

We have been based at our current premises in Horseferry Road for 25 years and, due to the need for more up-to-date and modern facilities, and to house higher staff numbers, over the past few years we have had an Estate Strategy, which also forms part of our current Strategic Plan.

Alternatives, including maximising and improving the use of current space, as well as considering moving some functions out of Belgravia House, expanding the current premises by adding or expanding floors, had also been explored but none were deemed to be practicable.

We are now reviewing our needs in the light of the pandemic, taking into account new staff working patterns, hybrid meeting patterns and other likely future requirements, which will inform the size and type of space sought. However, while it is important to take account of current changes, we also want to future-proof our new building as far as possible so will also be taking a longer-term view.

Relocating involves many costs, including the sale and purchase costs of a new building, stamp duty, professional advisors, removal costs and refurbishment costs. Many of these costs have to be negotiated and, until agreed and approved, are commercially sensitive, therefore the amount of the current reserves that has been allocated for the Estate Strategy is confidential, as revealing it may affect our bargaining position and we are keen to get the best deal for our members.

With regards to members' fees, each year RCVS Council considers the level of the annual retention fees for veterinary professionals as part of the budget-setting exercise.

The annual retention fees for veterinary surgeons are laid down, by law, in a Statutory Instrument, which is approved by the Privy Council, taking into account advice from Defra.

Annual retention fees for vets are not increasing for the fee year 2021/2 and no increase is proposed for 2022/23. We would not propose to reduce the annual retention fees at the present time as the reserves have been built up for specific purposes.

The RCVS reserves policy also provides resilience in the event of unexpected costs or financial losses and funding for future activities under the Strategic Plan.

4. Council and VN Council elections: new members and retirements

The Registrar then turned to the results of the 2021 RCVS Council election.

The Registrar read the report of Civica Election Services relating to the election of RCVS Council members, as follows:

Order	Nominee	Votes
1	Dr Danny Chambers MRCVS	4,759
2	Dr Matshidiso Gardiner MRCVS	3,228
3	Dr Colin Whiting MRCVS	2,957
4	Dr Louise Allum MRCVS	2,368

The Registrar declared that those named were elected Members of Council for a period of four years. The Registrar congratulated Dr Chambers on his re-election and the three newly elected Council members.

Turning to university-appointed Council members, the Registrar confirmed that Professor Timothy Parkin from the University of Bristol, and Professor Christopher Proudman, from the University of Surrey, would join Council from the meeting. They would complete the terms of Professor David Argyle, who was acknowledged earlier in the year following his decision to retire from Council in March; and Professor Susan Dawson, who was retiring from Council.

Regarding the appointed members of RCVS Council, the Registrar confirmed that Mark Castle, Linda Ford and Judith Worthington had each been re-appointed for further four-year terms to July 2025.

Council retirements

The President bade farewell to the following retiring Council members: David Leicester (three years' service), Dr Caroline Allen (four years' service), Martin Peaty (four years' service), Dr Cheryl Scudamore (four years' service), Professor Susan Dawson (10 years' service) and Dr Christopher Tufnell (12 years' service). Professor Dawson's work on the Veterinary Graduate Outcomes project and as Chair of the Mind Matters Initiative was noted, as was Dr Tufnell's contribution as President immediately following the Brexit Referendum, and his work on innovation and international strategy.

VN Council election

The Registrar reported that as the only candidate who had submitted their application in time for the 31 January deadline, Susan Howarth, had been automatically re-elected to VN Council for a further three-year term. In order to fill the one remaining elected place, the candidate

deadline was extended until 28 February, with 14 candidates standing for one place. The person elected was Donna Lewis, with 404 votes.

It was reported that Belinda Andrews-Jones and Kathy Kissick had been re-appointed as VN members on VN Council for a further three-year term to July 2024. Alison Carr had been reappointed as a lay member for the same period.

VN Council retirements

Matthew Rendle, Chair of VN Council, then bade farewell to retiring VN Council member, Andrea Jeffery, who had served for 19 years, including as its first veterinary nurse chair from 2005 to 2009. He noted that she was also the first veterinary nurse to sit on RCVS Council, as an appointee from the University of Bristol, and her contribution to various College projects including the Practice Standards Scheme and *Code of Professional Conduct*.

Other retirements

Finally, the President also said farewell to Elizabeth Butler who had served as Chair of the College's Audit and Risk Committee since its inception in 2012. She added that Ms Butler had presided over changes to how the RCVS was run and governed as well as overseeing the development and evolution of the RCVS Corporate Risk Register. The Registrar then welcomed Janice Shardlow as the new Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee.

5. Date of next AGM

The next AGM was provisionally agreed to take place on Friday 8 July 2022, at One Great George Street, Westminster.

6. Meeting of the RCVS Council to elect President, Vice-Presidents and Treasurer

Apologies for absence

Apologies for absence had been received from:

- Professor Derek Bray.

Declarations of interests

There were no declarations of interest received.

Matters for Decision by Council

Approval of the Presidential Team and Treasurer for 2021/22

The Registrar asked Council to approve the appointment of the new Presidential Team and Treasurer for 2020/2021 as follows:

President:	Dr Kate Richards MRCVS
Senior Vice-President:	Dr Mandisa Greene MRCVS

Junior Vice-President: Dr Melissa Donald MRCVS
Treasurer: Dr Niall Connell MRCVS

The Presidential Team and Treasurer appointments were approved by majority vote.

Date of next meeting

The date of the next scheduled Council meeting was confirmed as Thursday, 9 September 2021 commencing at 10am.

7. Speeches and investitures

After a short break, the day's proceedings recommenced with addresses from the RCVS CEO Lizzie Lockett, and Chair of Veterinary Nurses Council, Matthew Rendle, followed by the outgoing President, Dr Greene. These were followed by some words of thanks about the retiring members of the Officer Team: the Treasurer, Professor Susan Dawson, and Senior Vice-President, Dr Niall Connell.

Dr Kate Richards was welcomed as the next RCVS President and was formally handed the Presidential Chain of Office. As her first act in her new role, she thanked Dr Greene for her hard work as President for the last year and stated that she looked forward to continuing to work closely together.

Thereafter Dr Connell was welcomed in his new role of Treasurer and Dr Melissa Donald was welcomed as the new Junior Vice-President.

Finally, Dr Richards gave a short address before thanking staff and Council and closed the day's proceedings.

Transcripts of all the main speeches of the day can be found at www.rcvs.org.uk/features