



The RCVS Mind  
Matters Initiative:  
**the next five years**



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## Introduction from the chair

While we can take a moment to pause and look back over more than eight years of success, impact and learning through the Mind Matters Initiative, we are more than aware that there is always more work that the project can do. We can always reach more people, cover more ground, impart more information, but we can only do this well if we have a sense of overall purpose, combined with a clear plan on how we will deliver for the veterinary professions.

This Strategy aims to fulfil this by presenting an overview of what we have planned for the next five years, taking stock of all our achievements so far, and looking ahead to how we can build upon the successes while learning from the challenges. It is an ambitious document that takes into account the evolving – and widening – conversations around mental health, research and development around prevention and treatment, and our own learning earned through experience.

This Strategy outlines the core objectives that act as our guiding star, and the underpinning principles that shape how we work and deliver for the professions. This reflects the ongoing commitment of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) to support the mental health and wellbeing of the veterinary professions via MMI, and the other organisations it helps to fund such as Vetlife and Vet Support.

We are grateful to all of those who responded to our various surveys about veterinary mental health and wellbeing over recent years, to those who help guide and advise the initiative via the MMI Taskforce, to those who have shared their lived experience with us so that we could work collaboratively to build an accessible plan for the benefit of our diverse audience and to all those researchers who are bettering our understanding of veterinary mental health. We are particularly grateful to those who responded constructively to our Strategy consultation and whose invaluable feedback has shaped the document you're reading.

Best wishes



**Kate Richards**  
RCVS Senior Vice-President and MMI Chair



“This Strategy outlines the core objectives that act as our guiding star, and the underpinning principles that shape how we work and deliver for the professions.”



# 5 The next five years: Our objectives

All of our work to date, and all of our plans for the future, have been shaped by our specific aims and objectives in relation to veterinary mental health.

## MMI's core objectives are:

- a. To raise awareness of mental health and mental illness within the veterinary professions;
- b. To name, challenge and take steps to address mental health stigma and discrimination in all its forms, wherever it occurs;
- c. To support employers and leaders in creating supportive and healthy workplace culture, where help-seeking is normalised, encouraged, and safe;
- d. To encourage discussion and collaboration between key stakeholders – both within and outside of the veterinary sector – on topics relating to workplace mental health;
- e. To champion and promote awareness of other organisations doing good work in this field, and to support providers of direct, accessible help for members of the professions; and
- f. To provide accurate and evidence-based information about mental health and mental illness.

When deciding on future activities, projects or budget allocation, these objectives are what guide us, ensuring we stay aligned to our goals, and focus our impact where it is most needed.

# 5 The next five years: Our workstreams and areas of focus

Since its launch, we have delivered our work through three workstreams; Prevent, Protect and Support. Our workstreams have played a key role in helping us to communicate the scope and breadth of our work. They reflect our commitment to a multidimensional approach that is responsive to the complex and multifaceted reasons why people within the veterinary professions are at risk of poor mental health, including an elevated risk of suicide.

Informed by our ongoing interactions with the professions, what we know from research, and our recent strategy consultation, we have gone

through a process of defining and refining our workstreams. Each of our existing workstreams has now been allocated an overarching theme that reflects one of our strategic priorities for the future. Within each workstream, we have identified core areas where we will focus our activities. While not exhaustive, the examples given in this plan give a taste of some of our planned activities for the years ahead, and how we will be measuring progress. Some of these were chosen because they are areas of specific challenge for the veterinary professions, while others reflect some of the approaches and interventions we will employ in responding to these challenges.

“Each of our existing workstreams has now been allocated an overarching theme that reflects one of our strategic priorities for the future.”



## Prevent:

Systemic and organisational approaches to mental health

Our wide range of projects and interventions aimed at individuals - like resilience training and campaigns to encourage seeking help for mental ill-health - have played a crucial part in equipping people with the mental health awareness, skills and knowledge they need to remain well at work.

These activities have allowed us to start important conversations, raise awareness of mental health and wellbeing in the professions, and begin to break down some of the barriers and stigma to seeking help and talking openly about tough times. However, we recognise that the biggest changes can be made by addressing the reasons people are becoming unwell in the first place.

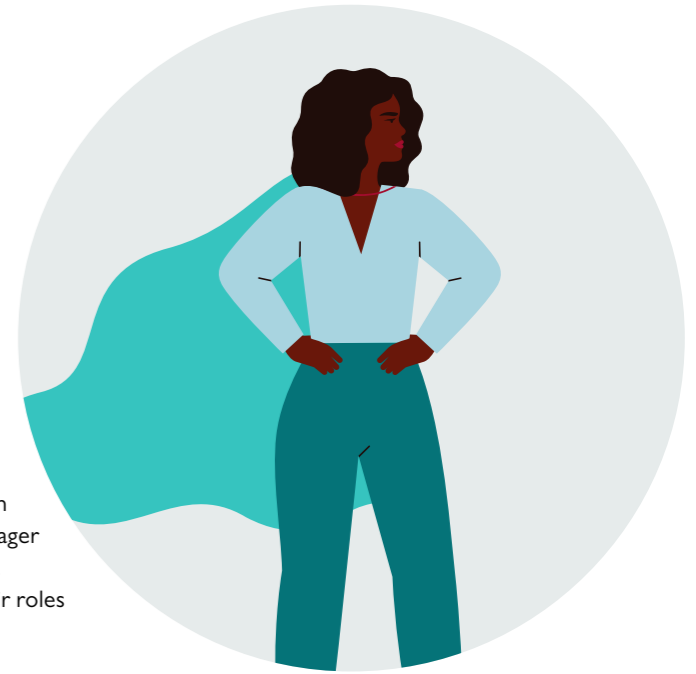
We know that intersecting systemic issues - whether within or outside the workplace - play a major role in poor wellbeing and mental ill-health. It is these factors that we must begin to address if we are to have real impact. For this reason, MMI's prevent stream will be focussed on 'systemic and organisational approaches to mental health'.

Within this wider workstream, we have identified three core areas of focus that reflect our commitment to developing our understanding of, and responses to, the organisational, systemic and societal contributors to mental ill-health in the professions.

## Leadership

Leaders and managers play a vital role in supporting, shaping and protecting workplace mental health. They define workplace culture and serve as role models for the kinds of behaviours that impact on others' wellbeing - for better or worse. We want to ensure veterinary leaders are equipped with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to have conversations about mental health and wellbeing, and to support their teams to do the same. Equally, we need to support those in leadership to look after themselves, so that they can lead effectively while remaining well.

Many of the people who filled in our consultation survey told us that there was a need for mental health training aimed at line managers. In response to this we will be continuing our mental health for line manager training, building this into other workstreams so that we can support leaders and managers at all stages of their careers to understand their roles and responsibility with regard to the mental health of their teams.



### What will we do?

Mental health for line managers to be incorporated into our core training programme ready for 2024.

Our new veterinary mental health grant programme will support researchers at all stages of their career to make a tangible impact with research that makes a difference in practice as well as enhancing our understanding of the theory around mental ill-health in the veterinary professions.

### What will 'good' look like?

We want at least 500 people with line management responsibilities to receive our training over the next five years.

Of those who receive our training, we hope more than 90% will rate the training 'good' or 'excellent'.

We want 100% of delegates to report increased understanding of the Equality Act 2010, as it relates to mental health in the workplace.

We will have launched a new grant programme to build upon the work of our Sarah Brown Mental Health Research Grants.

At the launch, we will announce ambitious targets, not only for number of grants awarded, but for how impact is delivered, measured and communicated by our grant recipients.

Grant recipients will be required to demonstrate a plan for impact measurement and knowledge sharing, both at the point of application and at regular intervals throughout the project.



## Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Civility

Inequality, discrimination, workplace bullying, and incivility all contribute to mental ill-health. Likewise, people suffering from mental ill-health are disproportionately likely to face these types of injustices. With these key themes being so inextricably linked, it is appropriate and important for MMI to make it an explicit priority to fully engage in these issues, and to be a vocal champion for equity, diversity, inclusion, and civility. This needs to start with our own behaviours and we are committed to making sure all our events are fully inclusive. This reflects the wider RCVS commitment to inclusion and diversity and the work carried out by the Diversity and Inclusion Group.

We have already started embedding these principles across our events, launching our first series of training on Inclusive Leadership, Confronting Incivility, and Inclusion in spring 2022. Moving forward, we will expand and build upon this foundation, introducing Active Bystander Training and developing resources on mental health and the Equality Act.



## Widening the conversation

Raising mental health awareness has been vital in allowing us to challenge stigma, encourage individuals to seek help for mental ill-health and increase understanding of mental health within the professions. However, we recognise the need to go further, to have wider conversations, and challenge ourselves to have an even greater impact.

Many of those who completed our consultation survey told us they would like us to do more to raise awareness of issues like climate anxiety, the continuing impact of Covid-19, the menopause, neurodiversity, and to talk more about how they interact with mental health. Some requested we provide more support and guidance around wellbeing at key life stages and events including retirement, infertility, and bereavement. In the coming years we will be creating more resources for some of these issues.

### What will we do?

While continuing to raise awareness, we will challenge ourselves and our audiences to have more nuanced conversations around mental health, and mental ill-health.

We will continue to collaborate with other professions, to facilitate transfer of knowledge and best practice.

We will continue to deliver relevant, timely, and high-quality training on a range of topics.

### What will 'good' look like?

We will develop a suite of recorded webinars on a full range of mental health conditions, including those that are severe and enduring.

Our Campfire Chats will continue to run, covering a wide range of topics with a target of welcoming at least 200 people to these each year.

Our MMI symposia will platform contributors from other sectors, as well as leading voices within the veterinary professions.

While platforming veterinary voices and experiences, we will aim to include contributors from a wide range of sectors as well as veterinary (eg for our Campfire Chats and congress events). Where we are addressing clinical topics, we will ensure there is somebody present with relevant professional expertise.

We will aim for all our training to be fully booked, with minimal drop-out rates.

Delegates will be issued with pre-, immediately post- and three-month post-training questionnaires.

We will aim for at least 90% of delegates rating training as 'good' or 'excellent'.

We will aim for at least 90% of delegates to be able to articulate one thing they will change, implement or introduce following attendance at our training.

We will aim for at least 75% of delegates reporting that the things they learned in our training continue to be relevant and useful, three months later.

### What will we do?

We will seek out input from and collaboration with lesser heard voices- both in society and in the professions.

All of our training and events – by default – will be for all members of the professions, including students and those from non-clinical backgrounds.

We will actively seek out and represent the voices and knowledge of people with lived experience of mental ill-health – and will expect the same of subject matter experts who work with us.

We will carry out an audit of existing training providers and collaborators to ensure they are learning from those who are experts by lived experience.

We will continue to develop our suite of online resources on these topics, to include written booklets, 'hubs' and webinars.

### What will 'good' look like?

Attendance at our events and training will be monitored, with the aim of seeing an increase in the number of veterinary nurses, student and non-clinical team members attending our events. Where we fall short of this, we will undertake targeted outreach.

We aim to exemplify true diversity in the panels, speakers, event chairpeople and those with whom we collaborate. This will be actively monitored and considered for every MMI event.

By 2025, we will make it a formal requirement for anyone delivering training on behalf of MMI to provide us with a statement on how they incorporate lived experience into their training.

From 2024, we will release at least two new online resources each year, for example recorded webinars, booklets, guides and hubs.

We will publish a guide on reasonable adjustments for mental health in the workplace.



## Protect: Increasing our reach

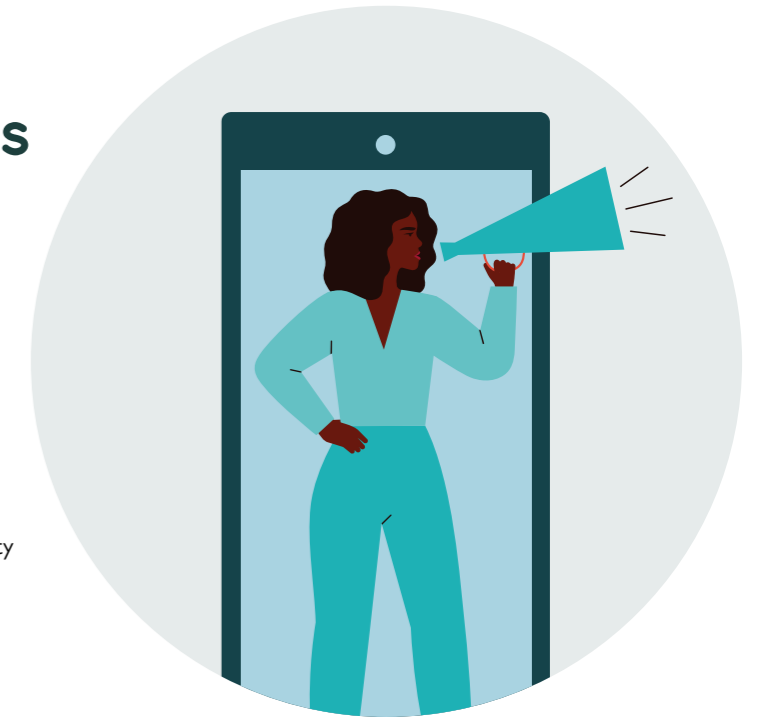
Through our protect stream, we deliver a varied programme of training, resources, collaborations and events designed to equip the veterinary professions with the tools and knowledge to stay well, even in challenging circumstances. MMI exists for anyone working or studying in the veterinary professions, and our wide range of activities, projects and training have always been aimed at individuals from all parts of the community. However, we know from our consultation process, that MMI is not recognised as widely as we would like. Nor is everyone aware that we support all members of the veterinary team, not just veterinary surgeons. While many issues around mental health and wellbeing apply universally both within and outside the veterinary professions, we know that, for some groups (for example, locums, or those working in rural or equine practice) there are specific stressors, factors and concerns that require a more tailored approach that is sensitive and responsive to these nuances.

We have listened to this feedback and are working to address these differing needs to be inclusive and accessible to all.

We have already made strides towards more targeted outreach and projects aimed at specific sectors of the professions – for example, working with the British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) to develop an animation on mental health for equine vets, and our joint research with student veterinary nurses with the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA). However, we are aware there is more to be done. Our protect stream has been allocated the overarching theme of 'Increasing our reach'. While continuing to strive for widespread engagement both in the UK and internationally, we are also committed to further developing our focused, targeted projects for groups whose voices are often less heard, and whose specific needs can sometimes go unmet by whole-profession approaches.

## Lesser heard voices

MMI is for all members of the veterinary professions, but we are mindful that some may think we are only here for vets, or those working in small animal general practice. We have worked hard to increase engagement with veterinary nurses, and veterinary and vet nursing students, by holding events, supporting student activities, and delivering research and projects tailored to veterinary nurses and students. Moving forward, we are keen to do more to support the wellbeing of rural, farm and equine vets, who often face specific challenges. We will continue to listen to the professions, maintaining the flexibility to develop and grow our projects to meet emerging needs.



### What will we do?

We will continue to provide targeted projects for veterinary nurses, in collaboration with other initiatives such as VN Futures.

We will continue our work with rural veterinary teams, who often experience specific challenges.

We will build relationships with non-clinical members of the veterinary team, for example, receptionists, animal care assistants and practice managers.

### What will 'good' look like?

We will release at least one project each year that is specifically aimed at veterinary nurses.

We are aiming for a diverse audience at all of our events and training.

We will ensure there are voices from the veterinary nursing community in all of our panels, group sessions and events.

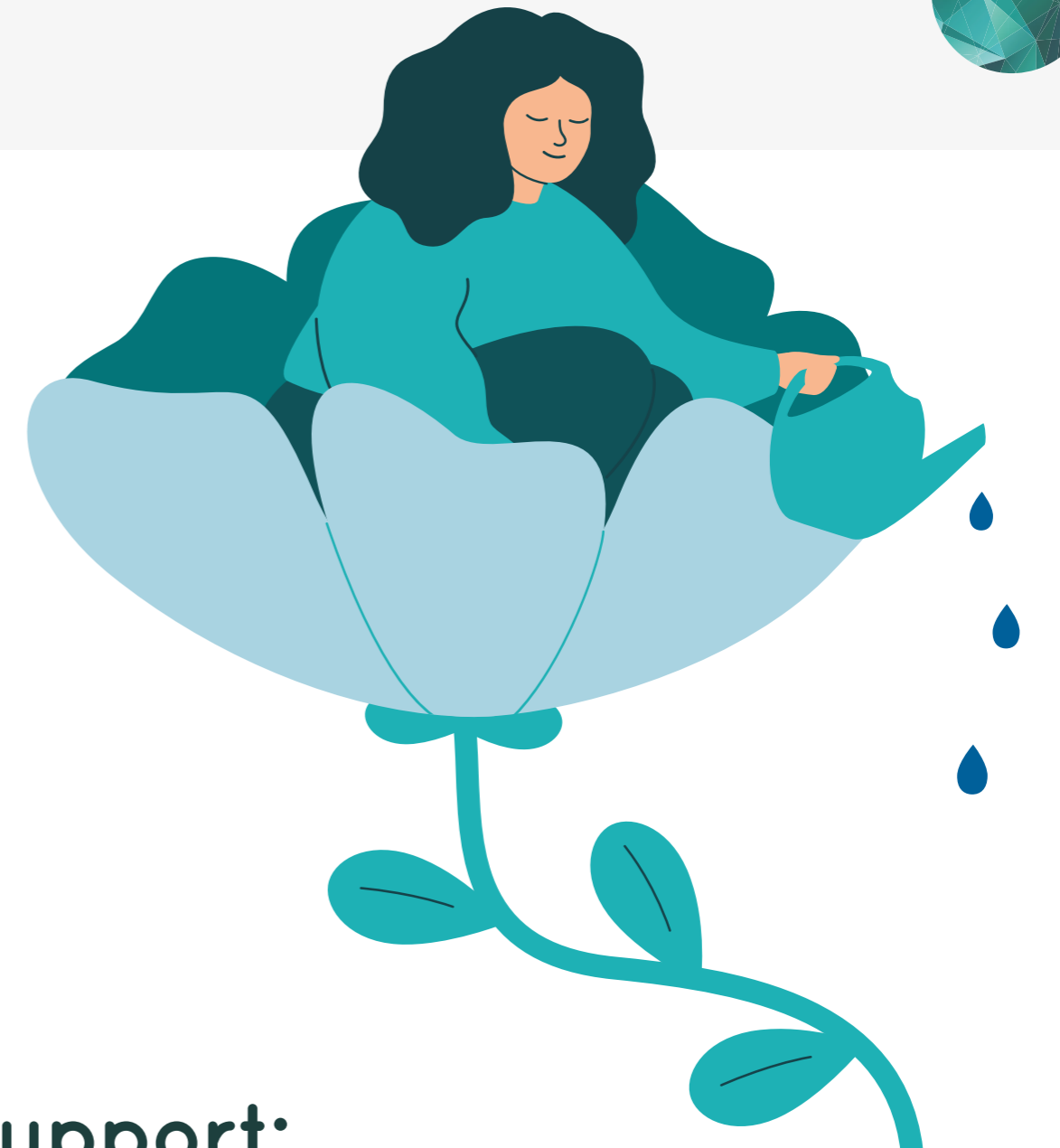
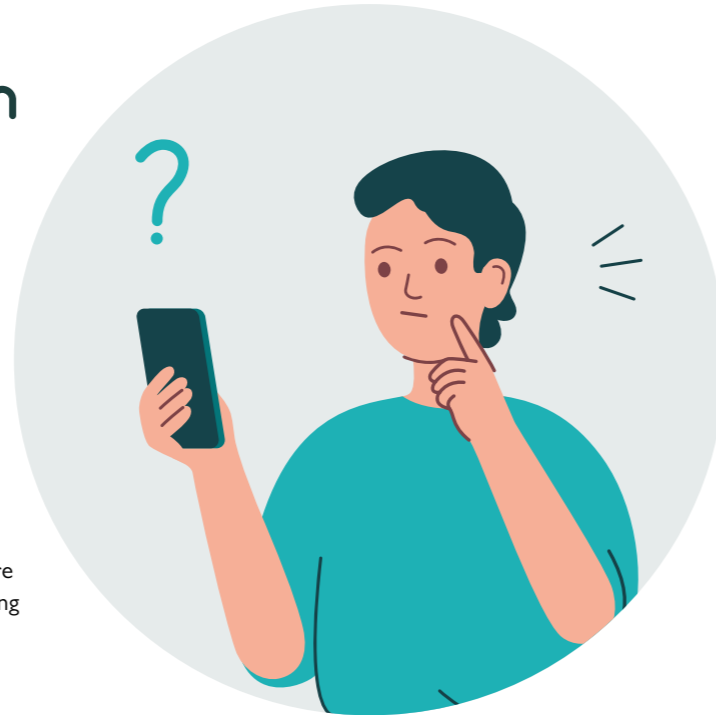
We will build our rural network of mental health first aiders to 250 vets, vet nurses and support staff by 2025.

We will commit to communicating with those in roles we don't regulate, for example, practice managers, receptionists, and the wider practice team.

We will carry out targeted research with non-clinical staff to better understand the issues they face. Following this, and in consultation from those who work in these roles, we will develop a programme of support, resources and/or training for this group.

## A trusted source of accessible information

Training remains an integral part of MMI's activities. Since our launch, we have been committed to delivering a varied training programme, alongside resources and information on a wide range of topics. Feedback from the professions tells us that the veterinary community value these, and trust us to deliver in a safe, evidence-based and accessible way. Our audience has welcomed online training, the development of new online hubs and the introduction of new engagement activities (eg Campfires), but there are those who we are still not reaching – and these are often the groups who need us the most. As we move into the next phase of MMI, we will build upon the work we have done so far, and look at ways to ensure our content, resources, training and events are accessible, welcoming and inclusive for all.



### What will we do?

We will continue to deliver training on a range of topics relating to mental health and wellbeing.

We will continue to prioritise accessibility in everything we do. This includes carrying out an audit of our existing content - for example to ensure online written resources are compatible with screen readers.

Moving forward, we will specifically consider accessibility implications for all future MMI resources, events and training, and take steps to improve wherever possible.

### What will 'good' look like?

We aim to deliver training to at least 150 people each year, across all our courses.

We will continue to conduct pre-training, immediately post-training and 3 month post-training surveys. We will assess success based on pre-defined and clearly stated learning objectives for each course, as well as collecting qualitative feedback from delegates.

All MMI training will remain heavily subsidised, to ensure cost is not a barrier for attendance.

Each of our training courses will have at least one online version.

We will continue to work with other experts – eg our web team regarding online accessibility, specialist organisations, and experts by lived experience – to ensure our work remains accessible and that our approach to inclusion and accessibility continues to evolve, based on the needs of our audience.

## Support:

### Innovation and the evidence base

MMI does not itself offer direct mental health support, instead supporting a range of organisations, including Vetlife, ProfCon Investigation Support and Vet Support, who are best placed to provide this kind of specialist help directly to the veterinary community, alongside national charities and services, such as the Samaritans. When planning our own projects, campaigns and interventions, we aim to make sure that they will have the greatest possible impact on the professions, addressing the issues that affect them most, and supporting them in ways that meet their varied needs. We aim to not replicate, but to signpost, disseminating knowledge of existing resources.

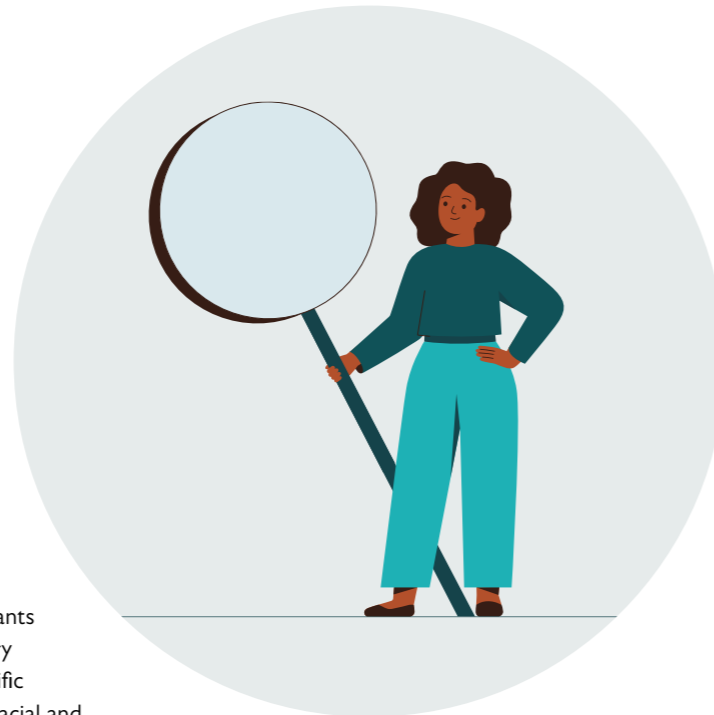
Through our support workstream, we will combine our commitment to learning from the existing evidence base, with our drive to innovate and further our understanding of what the problems are, what helps mitigate them, and what barriers are preventing change. In this way, we will continue to address some of the most complex and difficult issues around veterinary mental health. We will also continue to be mindful of the impact our concerns investigation and disciplinary processes can have on veterinary mental health, and take steps towards continual improvement.



## Research

Our support of, and engagement with, mental health research – both within and outside of the veterinary sector – will enable us to make sure our work and guidance remains high-quality and evidence-based. In order to make a positive difference, we need to have a firm grasp on where the problems lie, what interventions and approaches work, and what the barriers are. It is only through engaging with timely, high-quality and relevant research that we can achieve this. Until now, our research work has sat within our prevent stream, allowing us to build on our understanding of what the challenges and risk factors are within the veterinary professions. Our next step is to build on that understanding of the problems and look towards solutions and approaches that can begin to address them.

Launched in 2019, our Sarah Brown Mental Health Research Grants have enabled research to further our understanding of veterinary mental health through supporting research that focuses on specific themes, including rural veterinary practice, neurodiversity and racial and ethnic discrimination in the professions. We are committed to continuing our support for veterinary mental health researchers, including the development of a research hub on our website to feature guidance on methodology and ethics. We will continue the work we do to share learning at our biennial Veterinary Mental Health Research Symposium, providing a supportive space for vet mental health researchers to talk about their work.



## Hope for tomorrow; somewhere to turn right now

We know that, sadly, veterinary professionals are at increased risk of mental ill-health and suicide compared to the general population. We all have a role to play in addressing this. We will continue our support of specialist organisations providing direct help for people in crisis. The causes of veterinary suicide are multifaceted and there is no one solution, but working in collaboration with others, we will dedicate resources to exploring innovative and evidence-based interventions that will help us to better understand the risks, so that we might support more people to be safe.



### What will we do?

We will continue to deliver a Veterinary Mental Health Research Symposium every other year.

We will develop a 'hub' of resources for those interested in veterinary mental health research.

### What will 'good' look like?

We aim to deliver an event with true diversity (of all kinds) in terms of delegates, speakers, chairpeople and topics.

We aim for the symposia to be recognised as a supportive and welcoming space for students and early career researchers to share their ideas.

We will seek post-event feedback and aim for at least 90% rating the event as 'good' or 'excellent', and at least 90% reporting they had learned something of value.

MMI aims to be recognised as a source of accurate, encouraging, and accessible information and guidance for aspiring veterinary mental health researchers.

### What will we do?

We are committed to continuing our support for Vetlife, allowing it to continue to deliver its vital services for the professions.

We will continue to work with organisations, both within and outside the veterinary professions, to identify and address issues that contribute to veterinary suicide.

We will work to better understand settings and circumstances that increase risk of heightened distress, self-harm, or suicidality. We will collaborate with experts to develop guidance around these.

### What will 'good' look like?

Vetlife continues to be there, 24/7, for anyone in the profession who needs to talk.

All MMI merchandise, events and publications to clearly signpost to Vetlife.

As understanding develops, we will work alongside other expert organisations to deliver interventions aimed at reducing suicide, for example, developing drugs cabinet stickers and resources for those in crisis.

Guidance on creating psychologically safe events and congresses will be released in 2024.

We will produce resources on specific key 'life stages' where stress can be heightened – for example, exams, menopause, retirement, returning from parental leave.



# 5 The next five years: Our values

Focusing on our objectives helps us to decide what we do, while our core values are integral in shaping how we do it.

**Some of the values and principles that guide our activities and behaviours are:**

## Collaboration. This means we...

- Work with other veterinary organisations and regulators, both in the UK and internationally;
- Learn from other professions and their insights into mental health;
- Function as part of the wider Advancement of the Professions Department, which includes workstreams on leadership, inclusion, innovation and sustainability; and
- Don't try to do it all ourselves. We get further, together.

## Innovation. This means we...

- Are open to new ideas and new ways of doing things;
- Will learn from our experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic, making use of technology to keep our content and training accessible online;
- Continue to stay abreast of new developments, research and innovation in mental health; and,
- Challenge ourselves to come up with new solutions and approaches, while celebrating what already works.

## Inclusion and accessibility. This means we...

- Are unapologetic about our commitment to equity, diversity and inclusion;
- Ensure our resources, events and training are accessible to all sectors of the veterinary community;
- Value, and actively seek, input and participation from lesser-heard voices;
- Talk about mental illness, as well as mental health and wellbeing;
- Remain sensitive to power imbalances in our interactions with the professions, and particularly with those who are from marginalised groups; and,
- Don't shy away from important topics just because they might be difficult.

## Evidence. This means we...

- Support, engage with and learn from both veterinary mental health research and global mental health research;
- Ensure that any information we share is accurate;
- Build impact assessment and evaluation into all of our plans for future activities; and,
- Acknowledge when we haven't got things right and then strive to do better.

## Conclusions from the CEO

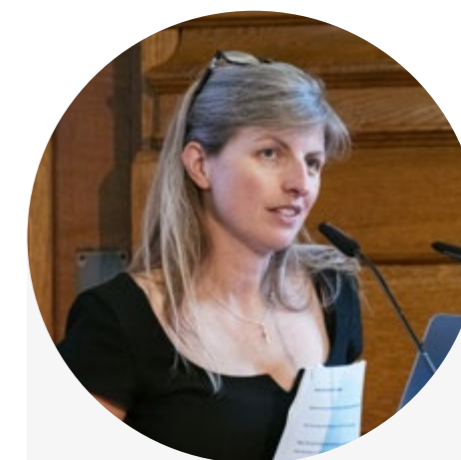
Since its launch by the RCVS in 2014, MMI has played a leading role in starting conversations about mental health within the veterinary professions. What was once rarely spoken about is now more widely acknowledged, with mental health and wellbeing streams featuring at all major congresses and increasing numbers of individuals speaking openly about their own experiences – some of them for the first time.

We are proud of all that the RCVS has achieved through its founding and continued funding of MMI, while still recognising there is still more to be done. Covid-19, the rising cost of living, Brexit and workforce challenges have all had an enormous impact on the professions, animal owners and keepers, as well as wider society. We are heartened to know that more people than ever are taking the important step of seeking help, but we recognise that NHS mental health services are stretched and often inconsistent in terms of accessibility, and that the right help is not always easy or timely to come by. This makes voluntary services such as Vetlife, Vet Support and others all the more vital, and we remain committed to supporting their excellent work.

This plan has outlined MMI's key priorities for the coming years, the groups we need to hear more from, some key areas that we will be addressing, and how it aligns with the overall RCVS strategy to become a compassionate regulator. We recognise that the statutory role of the RCVS in investigating complaints made about veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses can be a contributing factor to stress and anxiety in the professions, and through both MMI and the core remit of the RCVS we will continue to work towards mitigating this impact.

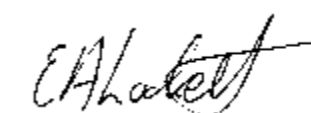
The Strategy also sets out ambitious targets for what we hope to achieve and for how we will be measuring and reporting on our impact. We will continue to be here for every member of the veterinary community, and will keep listening when people tell us what they need, which will feed into future activities. While being clear on our proposed direction of travel, we know that MMI must also remain flexible and responsive to new challenges that arise for the veterinary professions.

We would ask that you, your organisation and the wider veterinary community consider how you can get involved with the work of the RCVS through MMI. Whether that is through



“The Strategy sets out ambitious targets for what we hope to achieve and for how we will be measuring and reporting on our impact”

attending our training, sharing our resources, applying for our research grants or displaying a poster signposting to Vetlife. All of our progress to date has been made through collaboration with the community we are here to serve. We look forward to working with you and supporting your teams in the coming years, as we continue to develop responsive, accessible and inclusive content for the benefit of the professions.



**Lizzie Lockett**  
RCVS CEO





mind matters

The Mind Matters Initiative is run by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons  
[www.vetmindmatters.org](http://www.vetmindmatters.org)  
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