

First Rate Regulator Initiative Survey of Complainants

On behalf of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons



Sally Williams & Associates

February 2013

This research report has been prepared for the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) by Sally Williams and Andrew Smith of Andrew Smith Research. It is part of the RCVS First-Rate Regulator initiative, which seeks to deliver improvements across the organisation to ensure that it is regulating as effectively as possible.

The RCVS has sought to understand how it is perceived by the public. The RCVS receives around 800 complaints a year from members of the public, mainly about veterinary surgeons. This research, exploring the experiences of people who complained to the RCVS between 2011 and 2012, is part of a wider programme of multi-stakeholder engagement activity.

Key messages

Key findings at a glance

Most complaints are made by pet-owners

Two-thirds of complainants are female

Complaints are disproportionately high in the South East and South West

Most complaints are about poor or wrong treatment, or insufficient care

Complainants express frustration that many cases of negligence (as opposed to gross misconduct) are not dealt with

Few complaints lead to a full disciplinary committee hearing – for those that do, complainants find hearings intimidating

Complainants do not believe the RCVS investigates or examines the evidence sufficiently

Correspondence about the complaint is often too technical for the complainant, so they feel baffled by explanations and outcomes. Many are unclear about the complaints process

Most complaints are not upheld – causing the majority of complainants to feel let down

The RCVS is perceived as being biased towards protecting the professions (an 'old boys network', 'a closed shop')

Areas for improvement

1. The survey reveals a strong sense from complainants that the system is weighed against them. They believe that insufficient evidence is considered in investigating their complaint and that the RCVS is biased towards protecting the professions.
2. Comments and letters from complainants imply that the RCVS does not take a proactive approach to dealing with problems with veterinary surgeons – if a complaint is dismissed, the case is closed, even though a strong body of evidence may exist locally to suggest a competency issue.
3. The RCVS' powers are considered to be too narrow – complainants would like to see them extended to cover competence in addition to conduct, although they often do not distinguish these terms precisely.
4. Complainants do not feel sufficiently listened to or supported through the complaints process (particularly those that result in a hearing).
5. Complainants would like to see greater use of RCVS investigators so that they feel all evidence has been considered.
6. Other areas for improvement include swifter resolution of cases, possibly aided by more use of email and technology, and greater clarity about the complaints process.

Research objectives

Research objectives – as explained by letter to those asked for help

Ref: coms
Direct line: 020 7202 0735
Email: a.roberts@rcvs.org.uk
Website: www.rcvs.org.uk

11 December 2012

Dear

RCVS First-Rate Regulator Initiative

We understand that, during 2011 or 2012, you contacted the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) with a complaint about a veterinary surgeon.

We would be really grateful for your help with a short survey to understand how the RCVS handled your complaint, and what we could have done better. It will only take five minutes of your time.

This is part of our First-Rate Regulator initiative, which seeks to deliver improvements across the organisation to ensure that we are setting, and maintaining, veterinary standards as effectively as possible.

The survey is being managed independently by market research consultants working on behalf of the RCVS. Your answers will be completely confidential.

Please visit the link below to take part, and thanks for helping us to improve the way in which we handle complaints.

www.bit.ly/rcvscomplaints

Please note that the survey will close on 14 January 2013.

If you require any further information about the survey, or the First-Rate Regulator initiative, then please do not hesitate to contact Anthony Roberts, RCVS Policy and Public Affairs Officer, on 0207 200 0735 or at a.roberts@rcvs.org.uk.

Yours sincerely



Nick Stace
Chief Executive and Secretary

Main survey topics

1. Understand who complains and about what, and how they find out about the RCVS
2. Assessment of the complaint handling process
3. Satisfaction with the process, and the way the RCVS responds to and supports complainants
4. Understand areas for improvement
5. Understand variation by area, demographics of complainant, etc
6. Categorise answers by the stages the complaint went through

Method and sample

1. In total, around 1,440 people who had made a complaint to the RCVS within the last two years complainants were invited to complete a 5 minute online survey. The survey was emailed to 742 people and posted to a further 700 complainants (for whom no email was held)
2. The invitations were sent on 10 December 2012; the survey closed on 18 January 2013. One reminder email was sent
3. A total of **265 complainants completed the survey** (of which, about 10 returned paper copies), representing around 18% of all invited. This is a relatively good response rate for an online survey
4. About 90% of those starting the survey finished it, whilst 10% part completed it
5. Many respondents held strong opinions about their experiences. A total of 25 further letters and emails were received – almost all from those who declined to answer the survey because they had very negative views about the complaint handling process and/or the outcome.

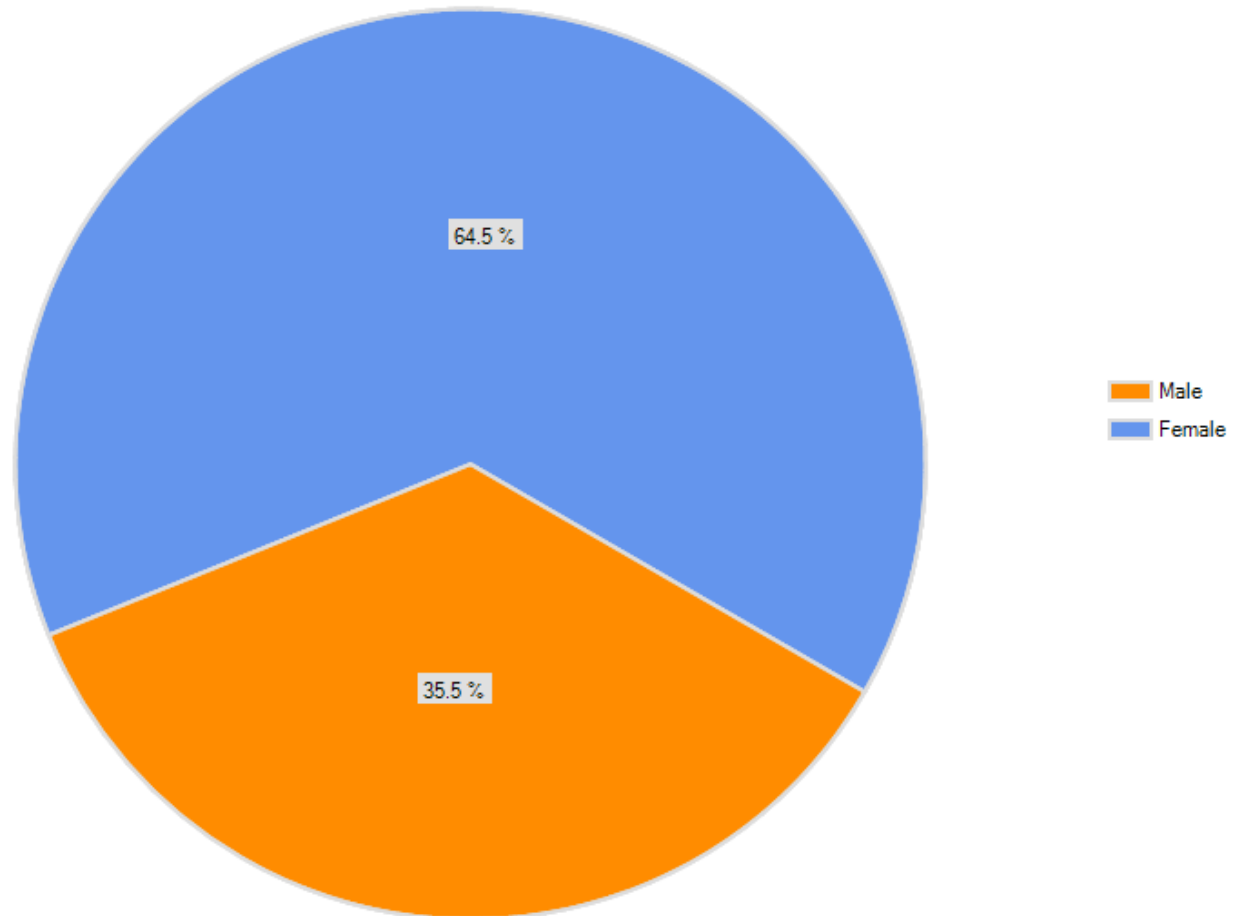
Survey outputs

1. This charted report – summarises the main findings
2. A total sample data and test answers report – containing detailed answers from all respondents
3. Emails (13) and letters (12) from complainants (redacted) – containing their feedback on the experience of making a complaint to the RCVS

Profile of complainants

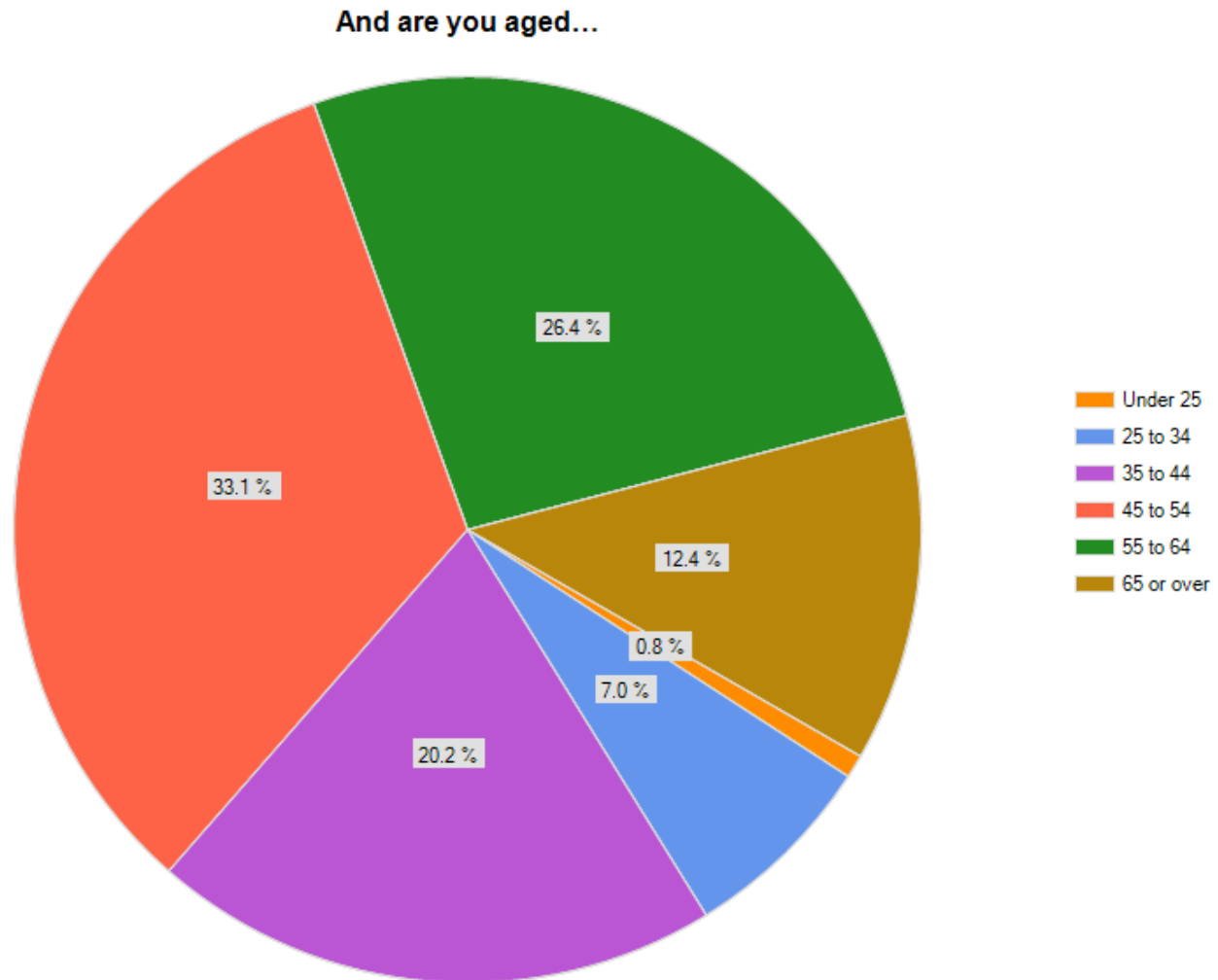
Two-thirds of complainants are female

To finish, please answer several quick questions so we can analyse the responses we receive to the survey as a whole. Are you...



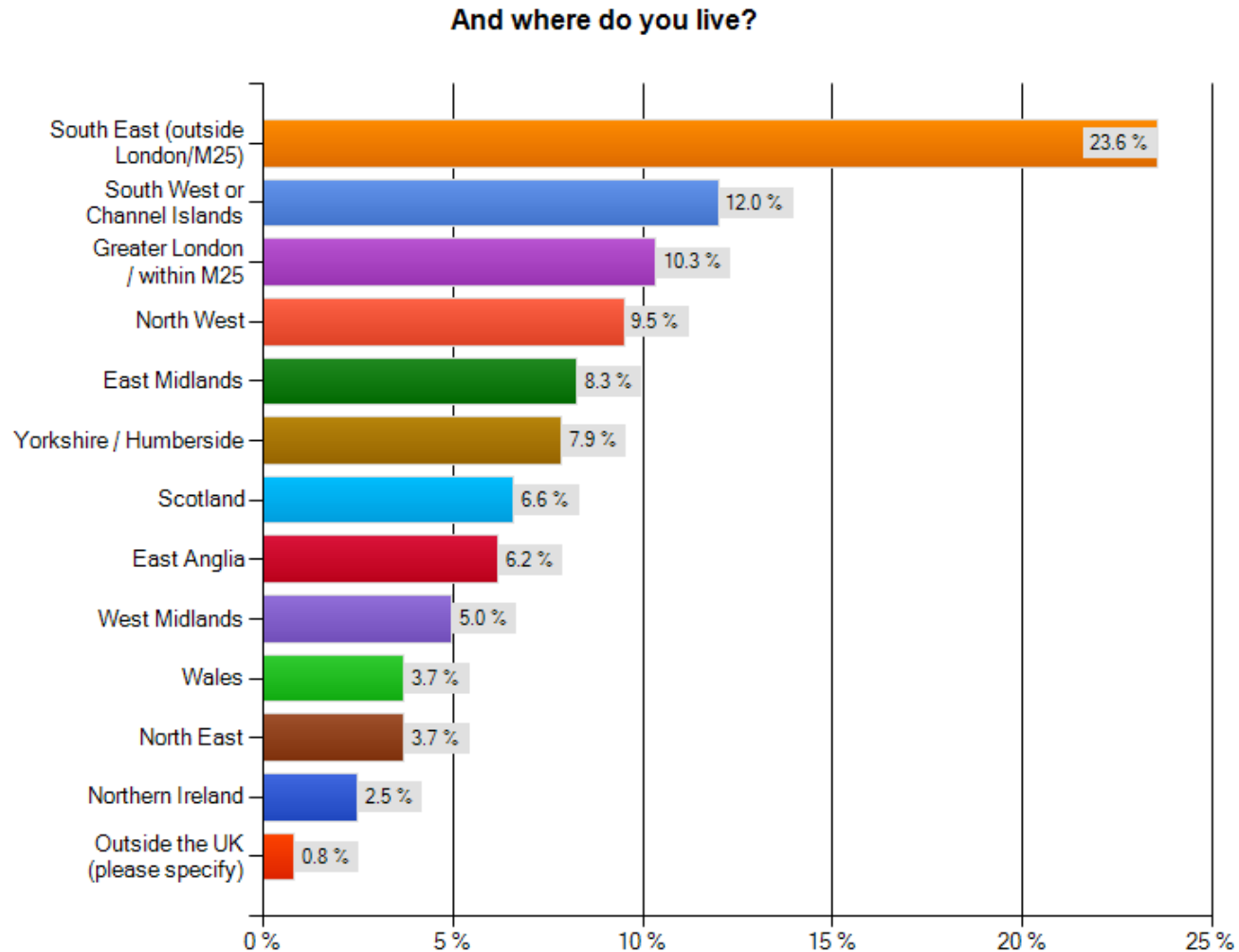
Most are aged 35-65; only around 1 in 8 are retired

NB older pet owners are likely to be under-represented (older adults are generally less inclined to complain and complete online surveys)

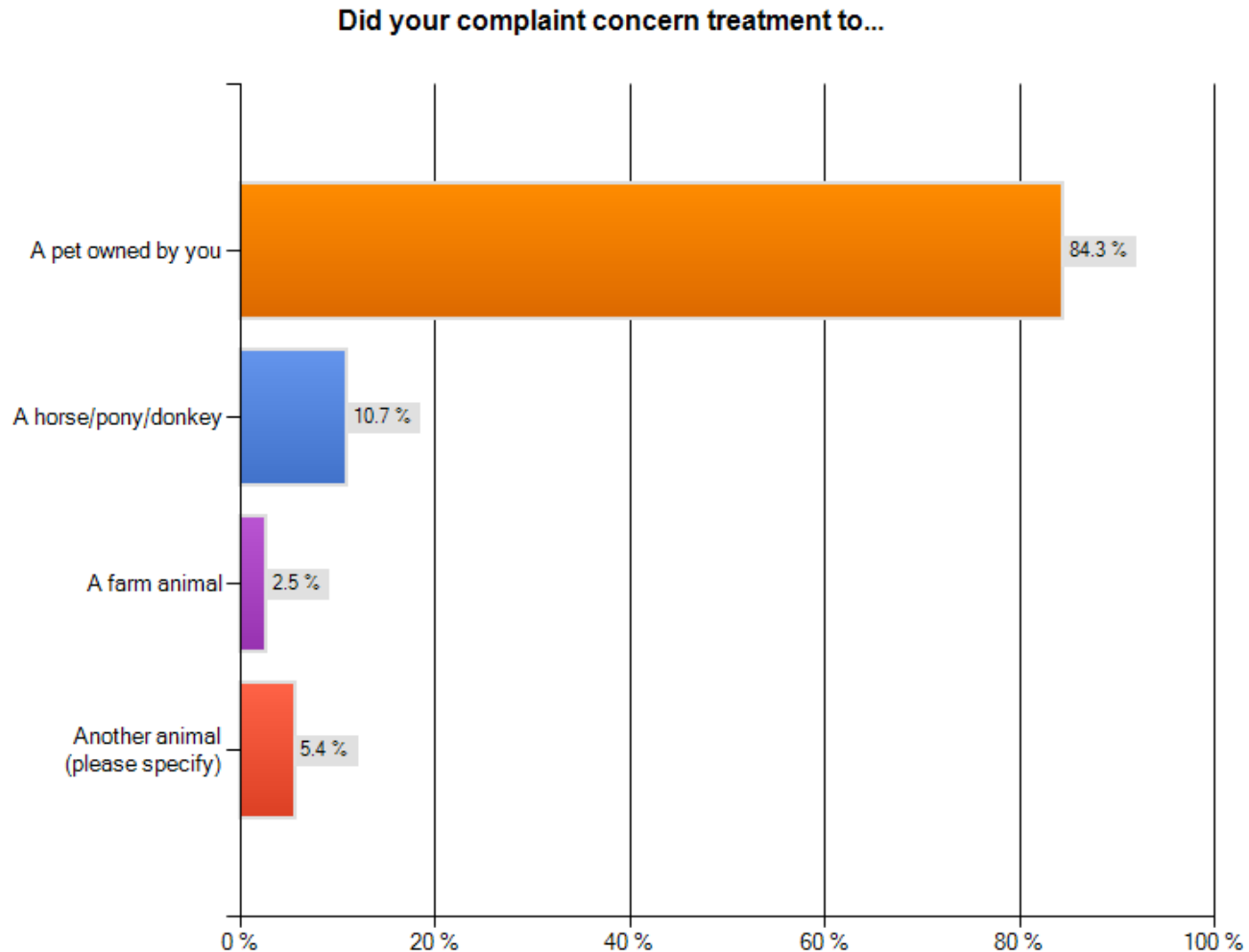


Regional spread of those making complaints

Relative to population, this data implies that complaints are higher than would be expected in the South East and South West



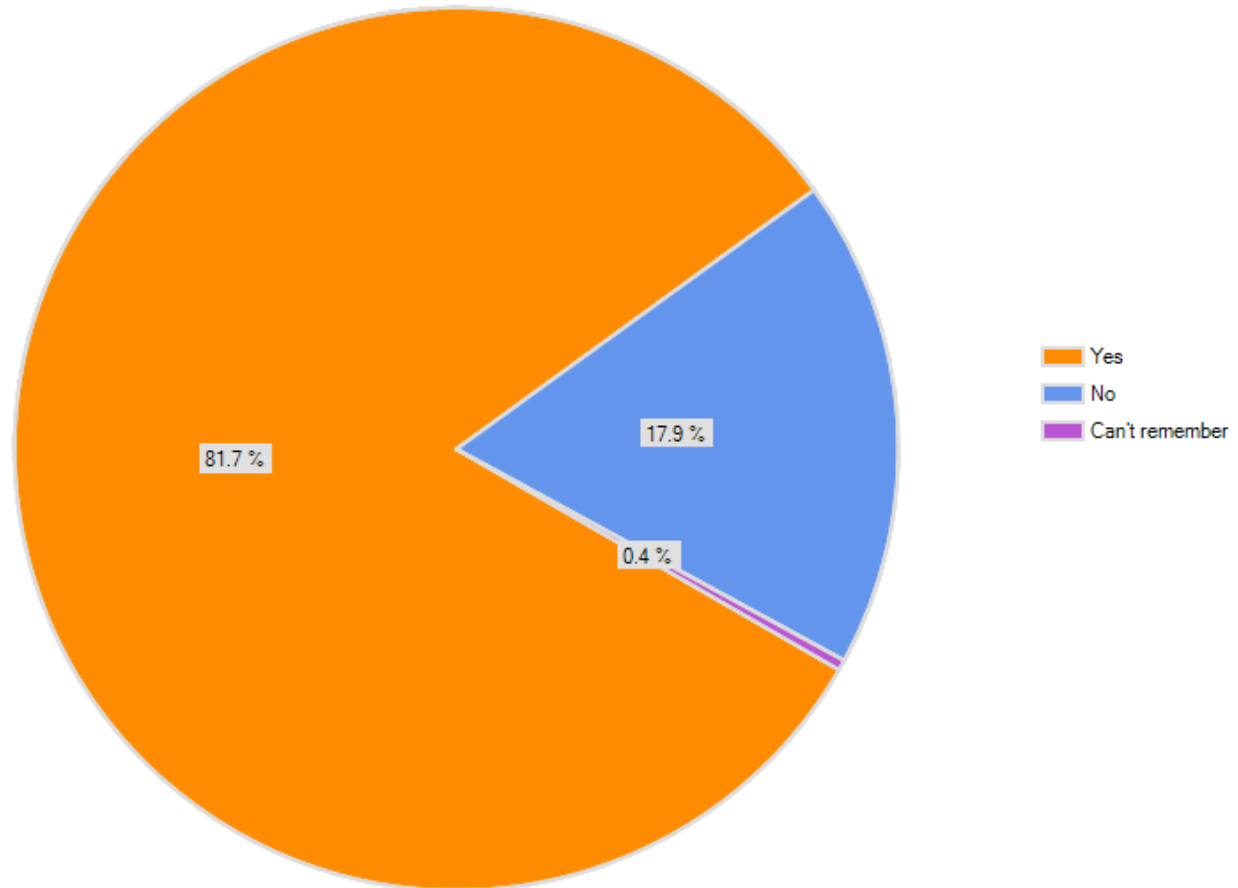
The vast majority of complaints concern the treatment provided to a household pet



Approaching the RCVS about a complaint

Over 8 in 10 are likely to have discussed the problem with their veterinary practice before turning to the RCVS

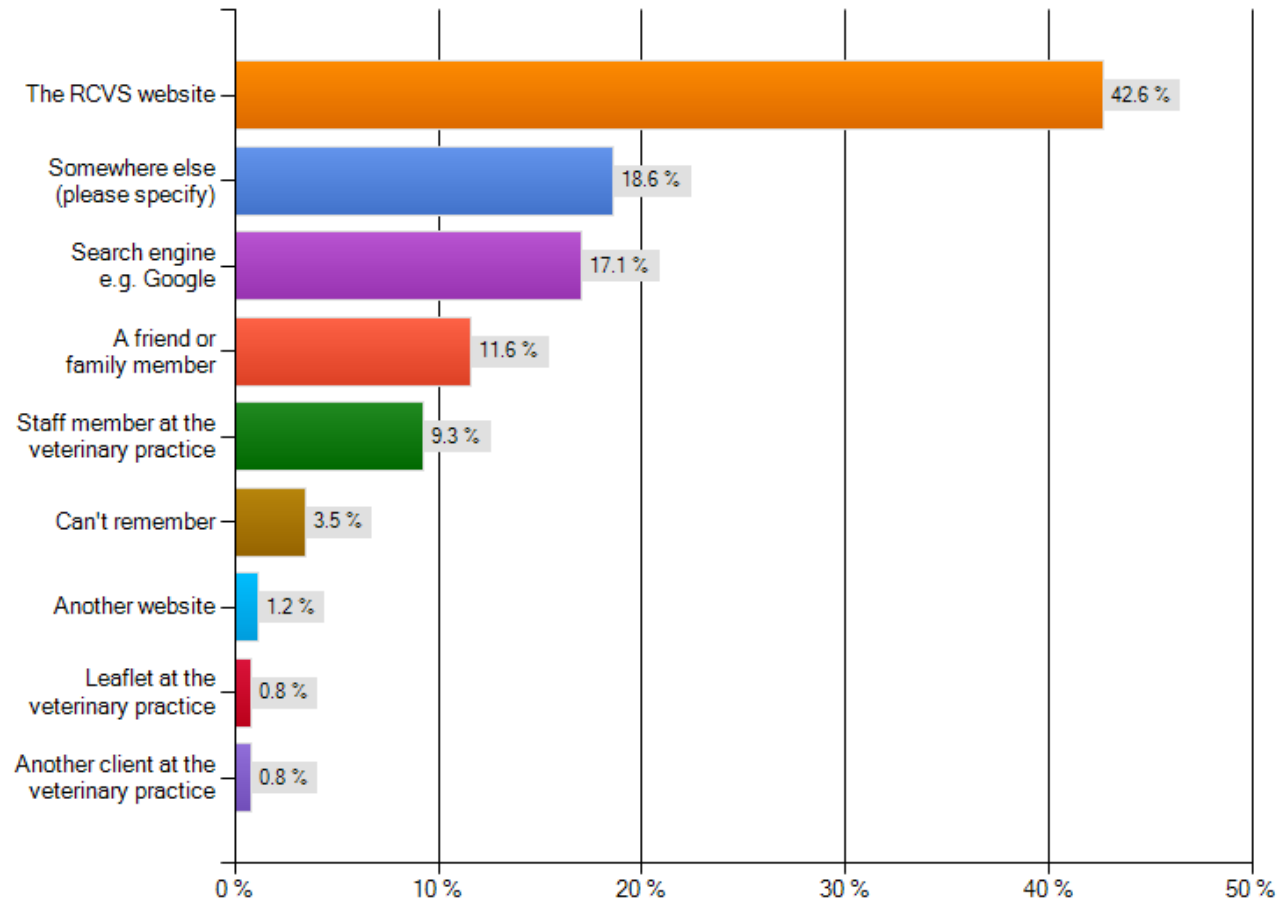
Did you discuss the issue or problem with your vet or the staff at your veterinary practice before contacting the RCVS?



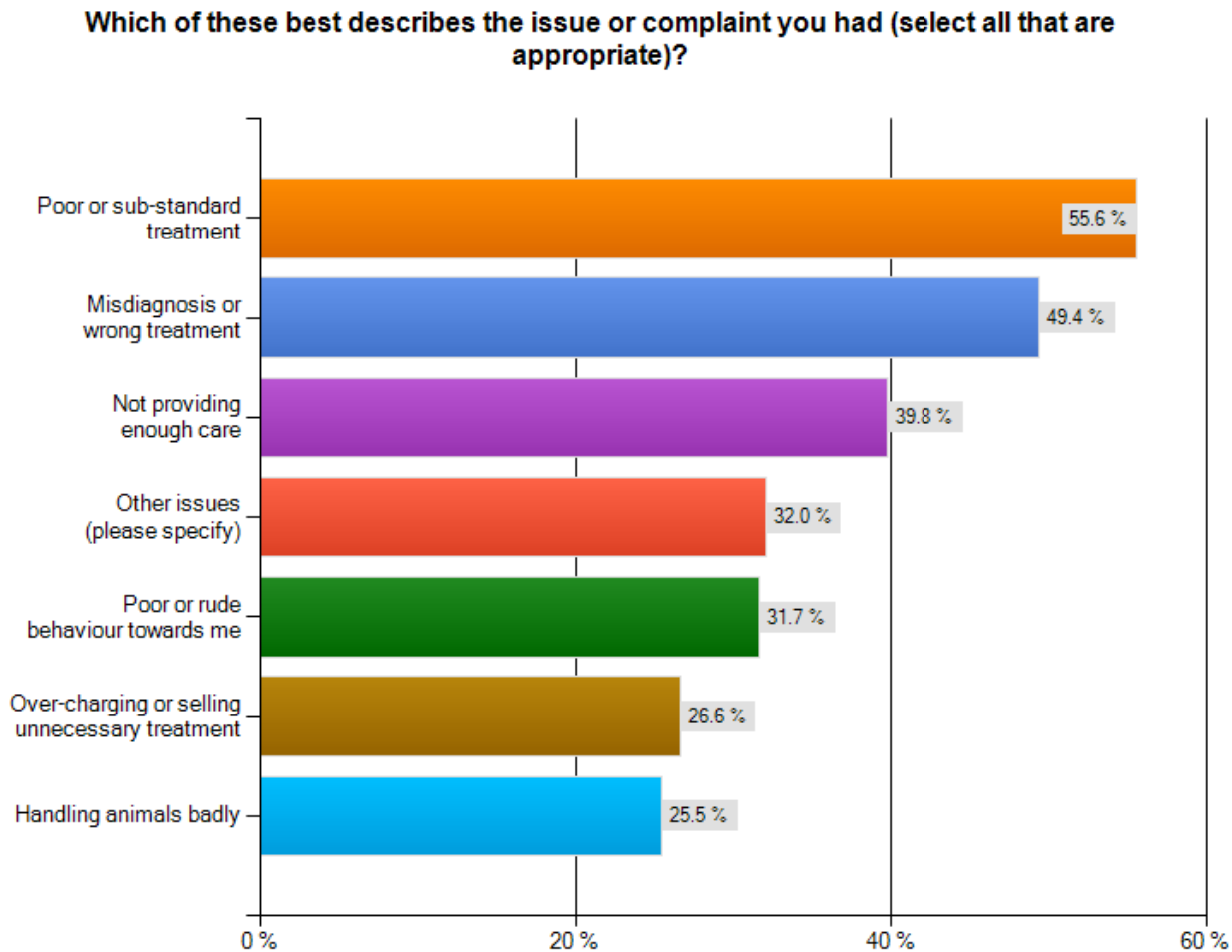
Most complainants come to the RCVS via its own website or a search engine

This underlines the importance of search engine optimisation, and the image/content quality on the website

How did you find out about the RCVS as an organisation that might help you?



Most have complained about poor or wrong treatment, or about insufficient care

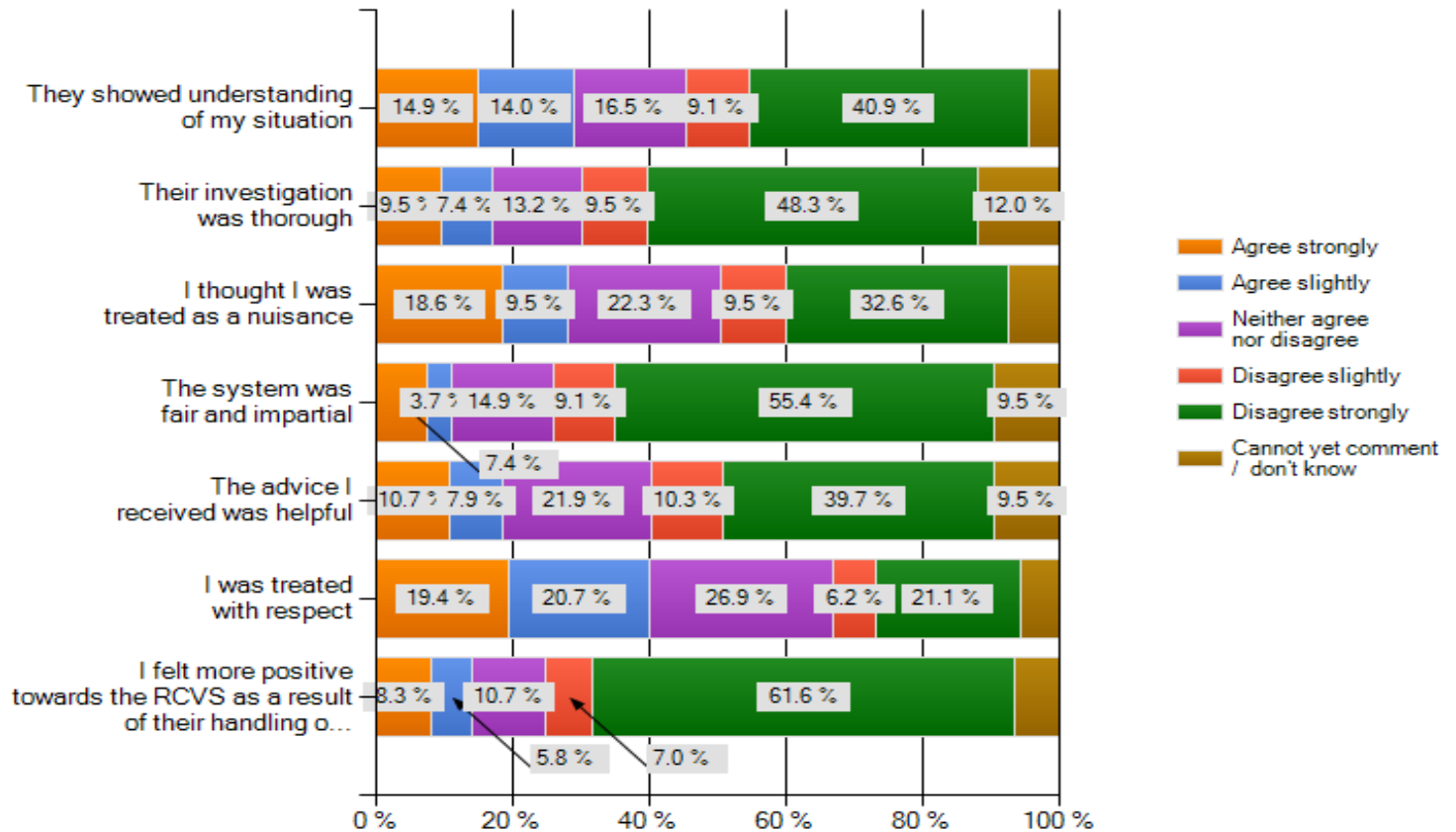


For 14% of respondents, their complaint to the RCVS was still open

Most complainants feel the RCVS treated them with respect

But this question reveals unusually high negative sentiment on most other measures

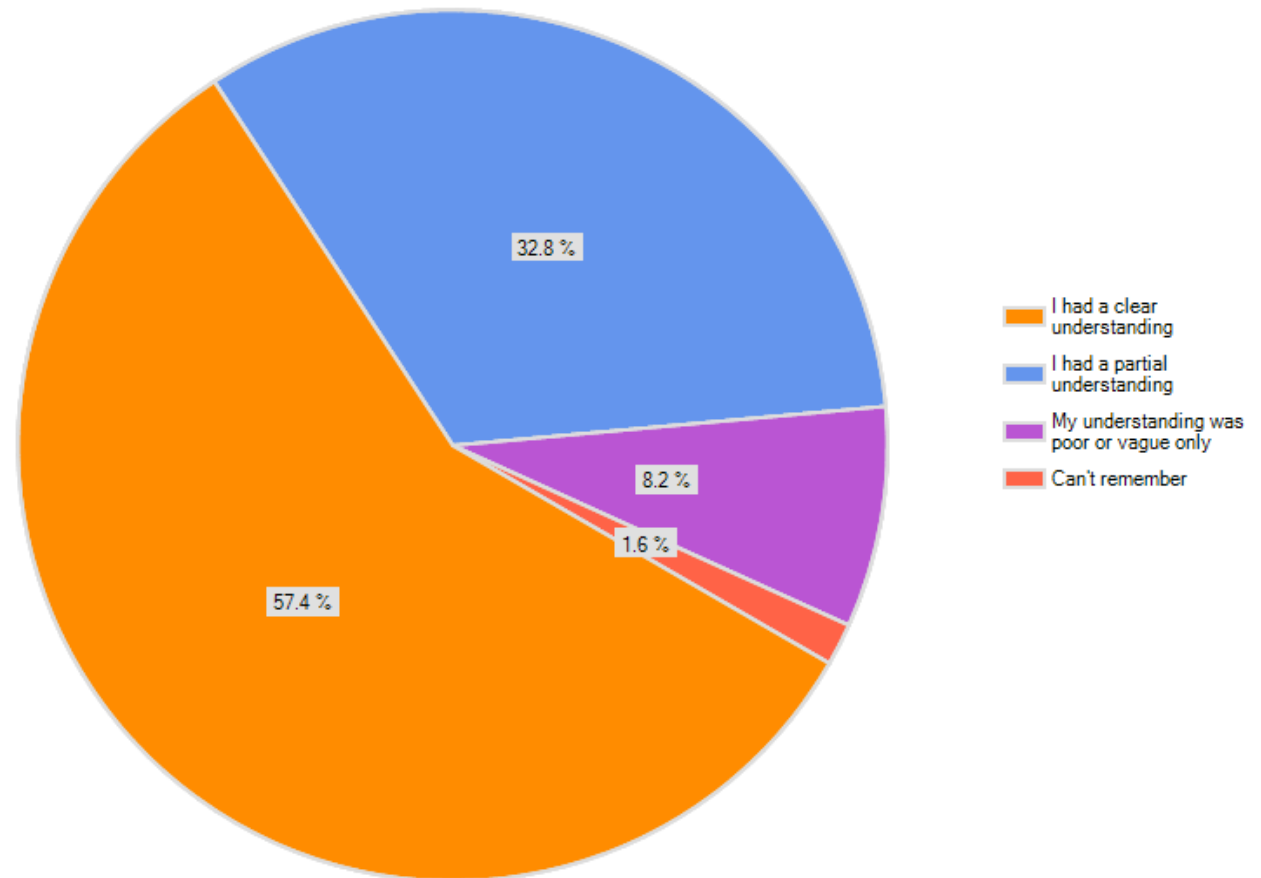
How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of these statements about how the RCVS handled your complaint / has handled your complaint to date?



The complaint handling process

More than 40% of complainants had only a partial or poor understanding of the complaints process

How clear was your understanding of the complaints process when you first made your complaint?

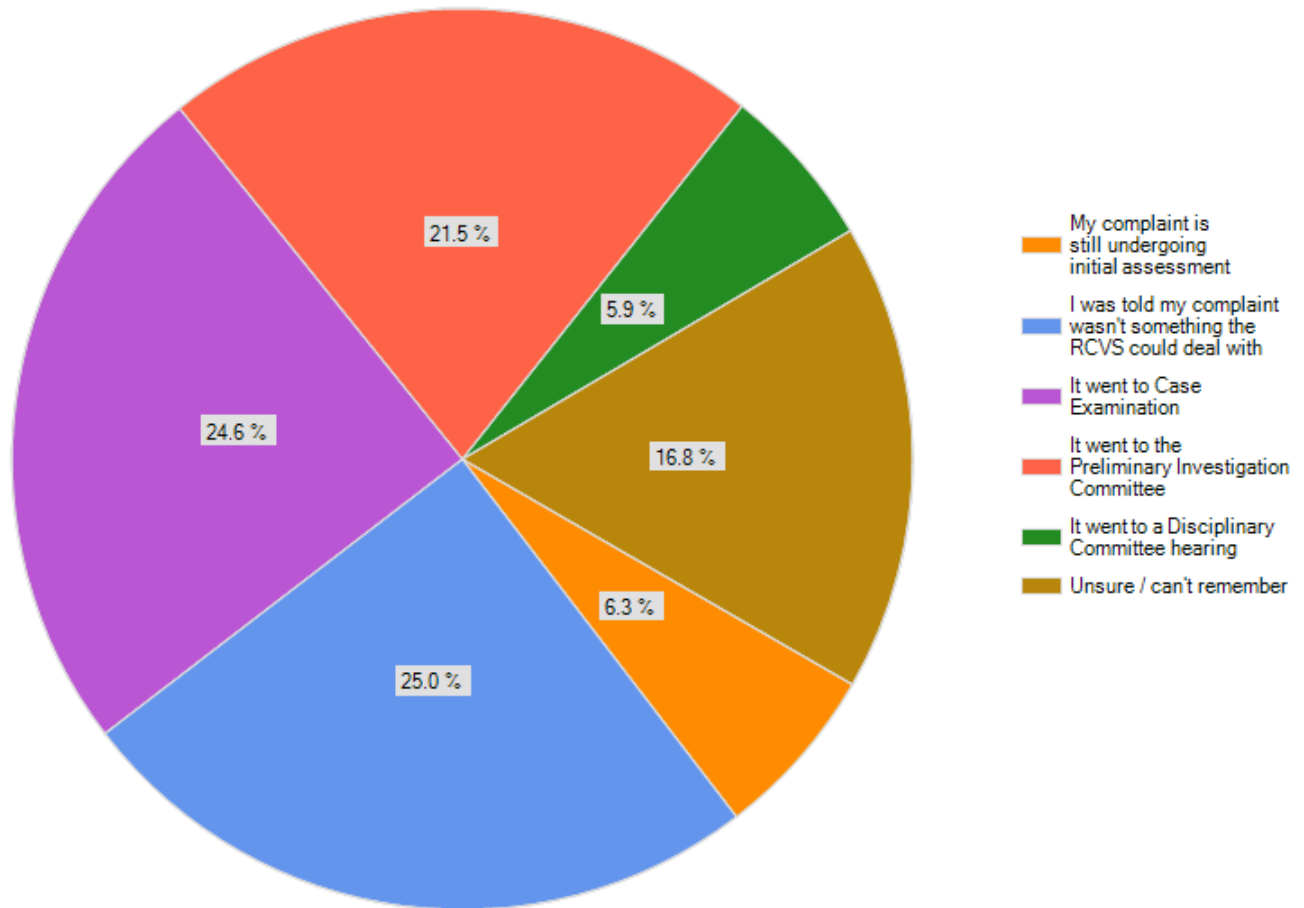


Only about 1 in 20 cases go to a disciplinary hearing

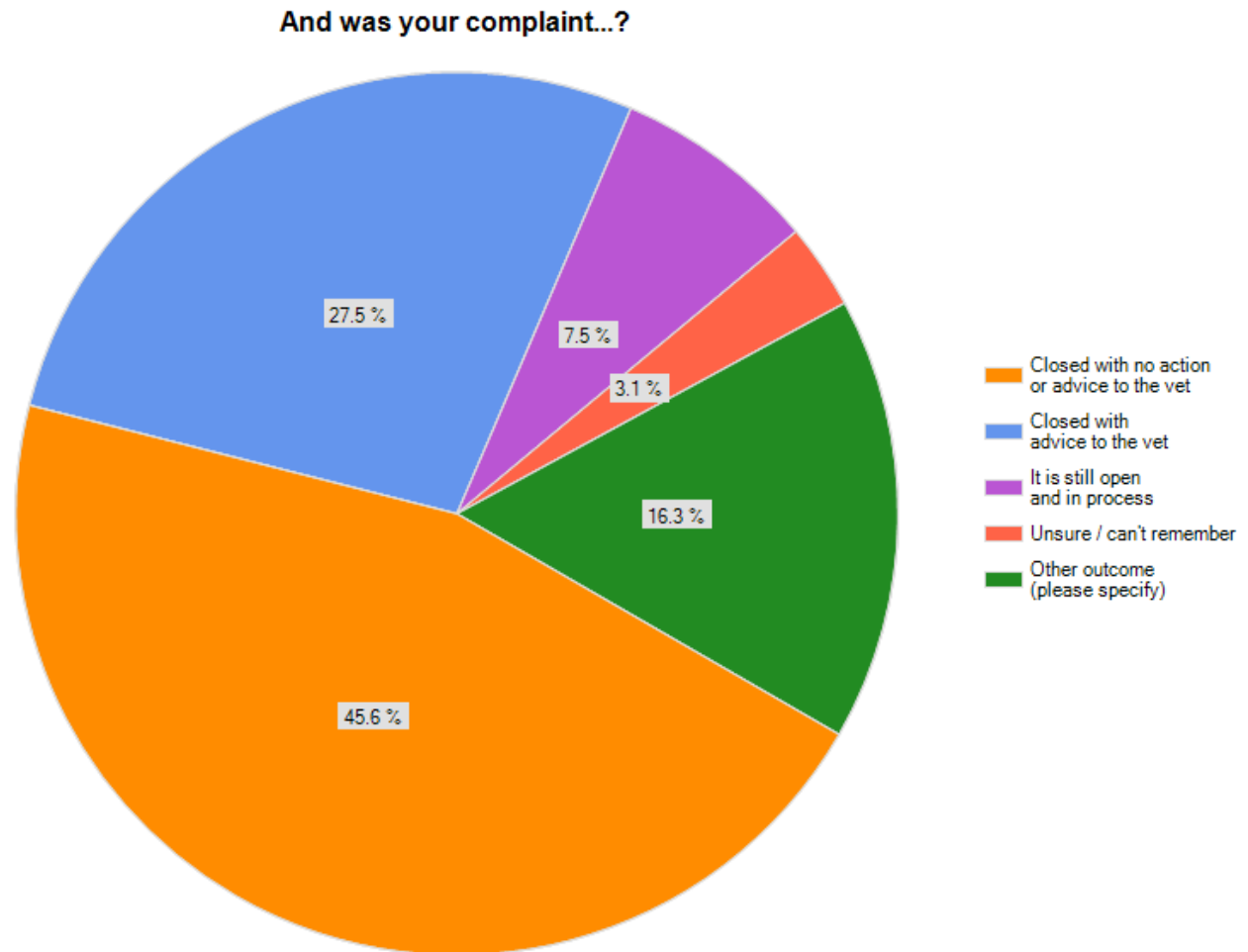
There is an even split between initial rejection, case examination only, and Preliminary Investigation Committee stage

Please note that RCVS data indicates that none of those surveyed had a case that went to a disciplinary hearing. This indicates significant confusion over the complaints process.

Whether closed or still open, how far did your complaint progress / has it progressed?



Almost half of complaints that went to case examination or Preliminary Investigation Committee were closed without action; 3 in 10 were closed with advice to the veterinary surgeon

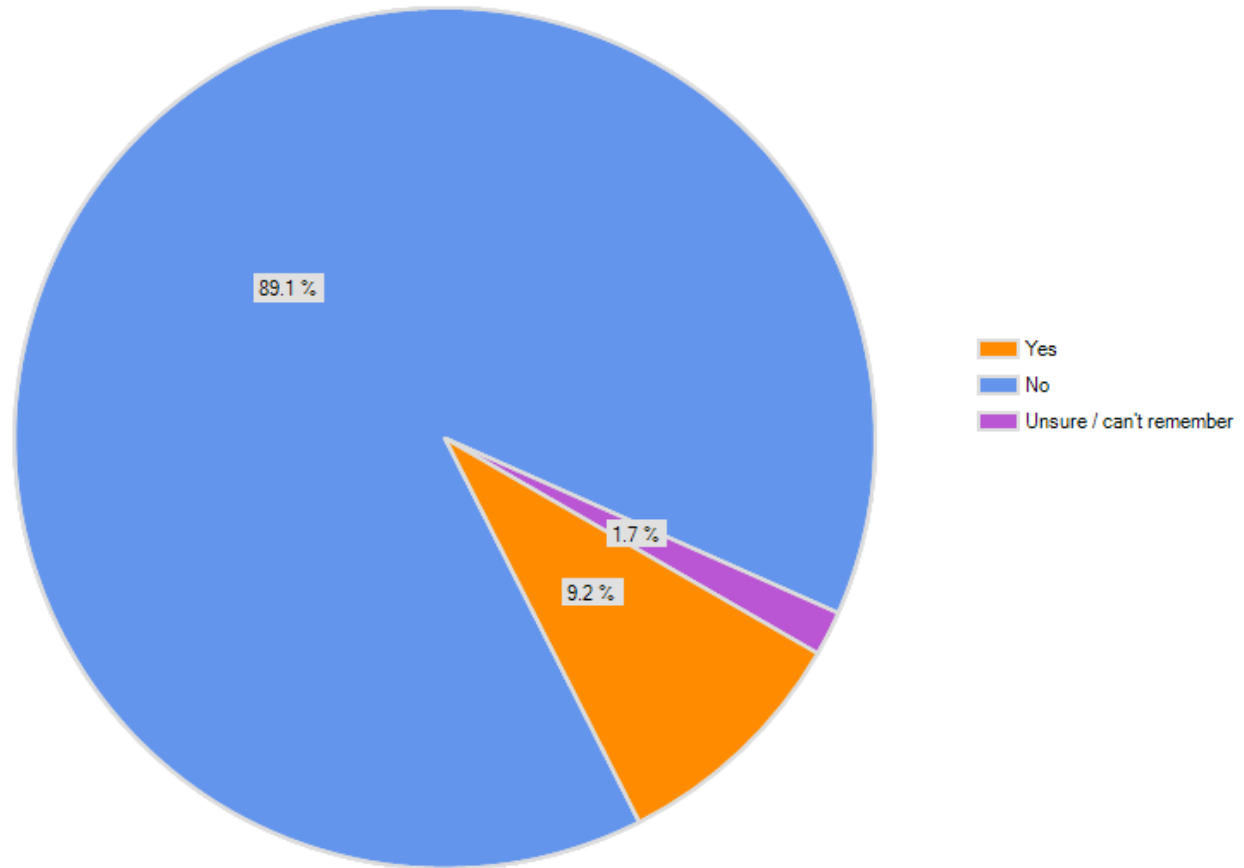


Very few complainants are visited by an investigator

Of those who are, most are satisfied with the visit.

Many thought the RCVS had not considered the full details of a case, implying that more investigations would be welcomed by complainants

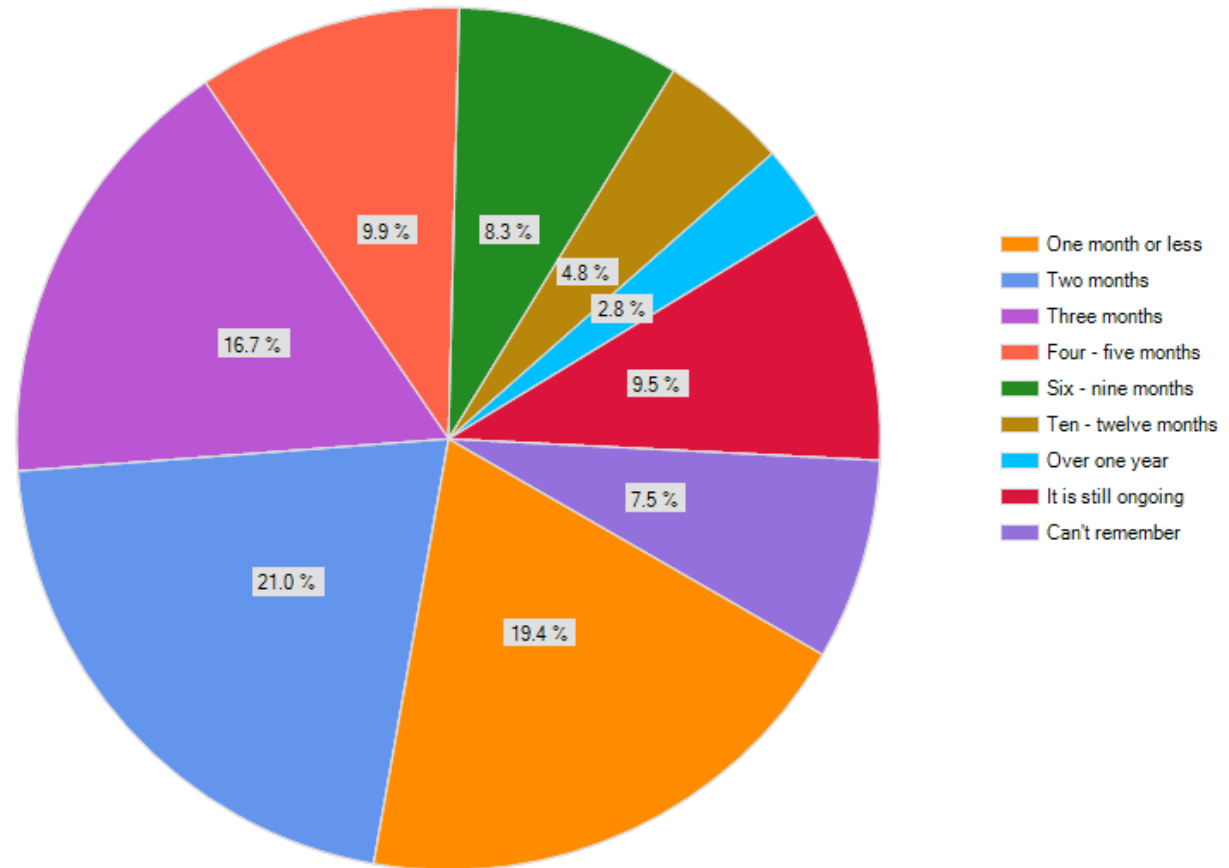
Has a veterinary investigator visited you to look into the complaint?



The time that the complaint process takes is a key concern

About half of closed cases take at least 3 months to process. This time-lag concerns both complainants and veterinary surgeons who have a complaint made against them

Roughly how long did it take for the RCVS to tell you the outcome of your complaint? Did the whole process take closest to...



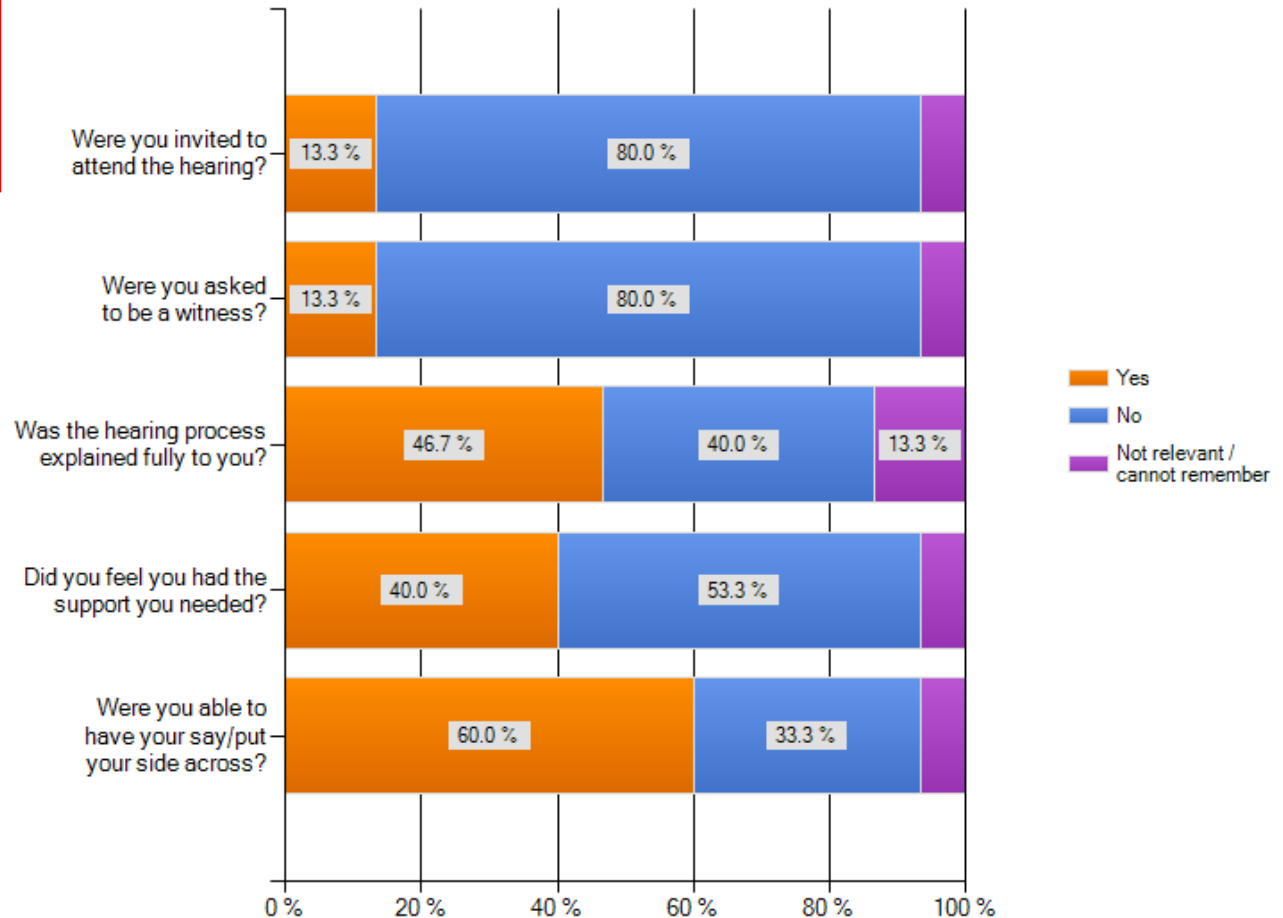
Complaints that lead to a disciplinary hearing

The experience of cases proceeding to a full disciplinary hearing

Note: internal data from the RCVS indicates that some of the 15 cases reported here may not have proceeded to a full Disciplinary Hearing, even though these complainants believed this to have been the case. This indicates some confusion over the complaints process.

And just thinking about the Disciplinary Committee hearing...

Please note that RCVS data indicates that none of those surveyed had a case that went to a disciplinary hearing.

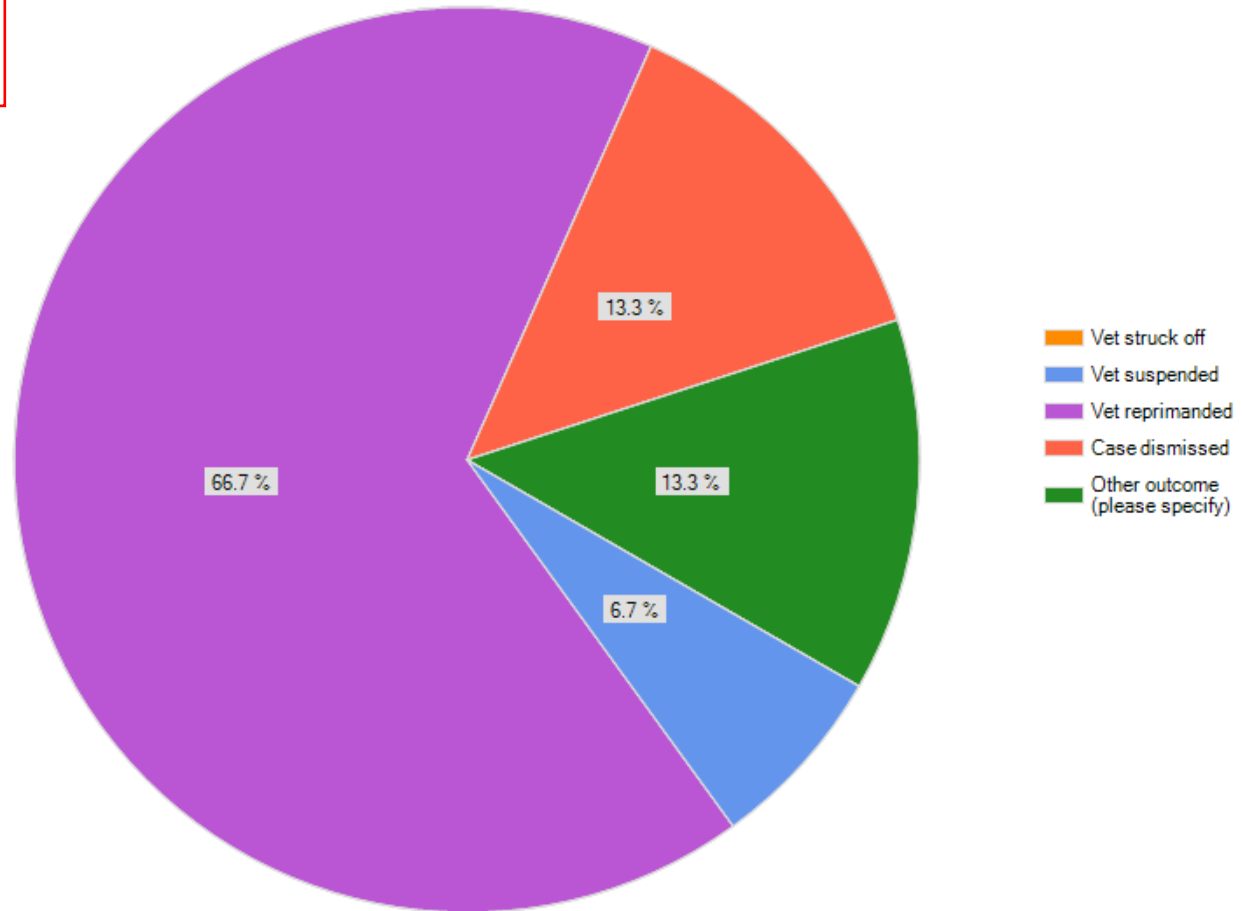


Cases that proceed to a full disciplinary hearing tend to result in a reprimand

NB sample size: 15 cases – data should be regarded as indicative only

Please note that RCVS data indicates that none of those surveyed had a case that went to a disciplinary hearing.

What was the result of the Disciplinary Hearing?



How could the hearing process or support be improved?

Some example answers (see full data report – Q11)

'The disciplinary procedure is a joke!!!! I was not satisfied, I believe the RCVS did nothing but support the vet practice in question. I never got any answers to my questions and my experience with the RCVS has been a very poor one. I also did not get any compensation which I deserved.'

'I believe the hearing process was fair and equitable.'

'I am satisfied with how I was supported by RCVS, they were empathetic and professional through out all procedures.'

'The RCVS was rubbish; they didn't help our cause at all. I would not say that they helped in any way. In fact I don't think they wanted to help us.'

'Both parties should be invited to put case forward and argue the case out.'

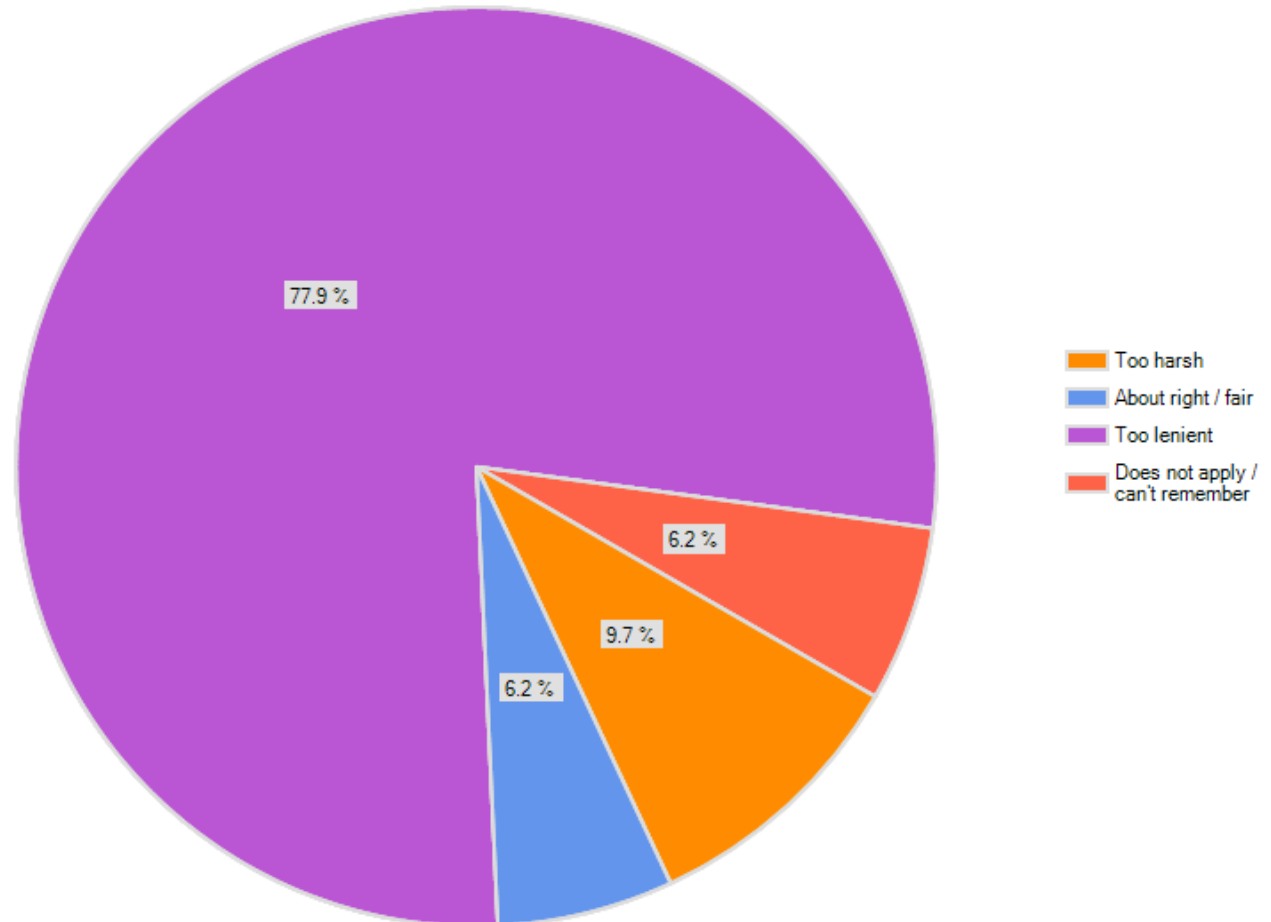
'I did not feel that all aspects of my complaint were taken into account by the RCVS nor the seriousness of it i.e. that my cat could have died. However, I was happy that the vet was reprimanded for his actions.'

Overall satisfaction

Most complainants regard the outcome as too lenient

Also see additional emails/letters that add to this picture of perceived injustice

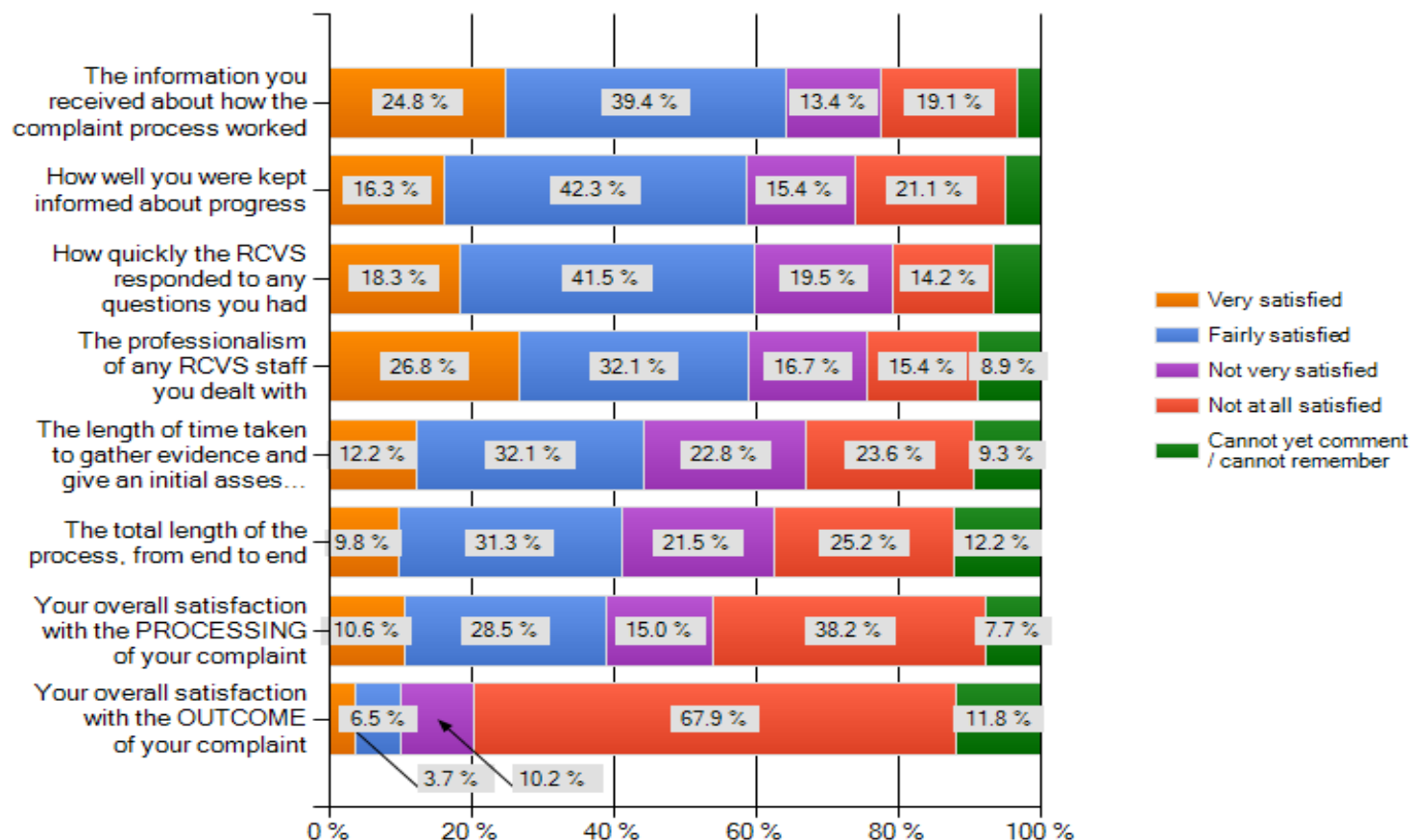
Do you regard the outcome of the complaint to have been...



Complainants have mixed views about the process, but most dissatisfaction is with the outcome

A detailed reading of their suggestions (see full data report) reveals why they feel let down

How satisfied were you with each of these aspects of how your complaint as a whole was handled (rate performance to date if still open, please)?



Summary concerns with complaint handling

This question continues the previous open text criticism of the evidence gathering process and perceived injustice felt about the outcomes (see full data report – Q19)

‘The complaint form had to be downloaded and it was difficult to type or write details of the complaint within the space provided which gave the distinct impression that complaints were being discouraged. It felt that the concerns raised in the complaint were disregarded and that RCVS was going through the motions as, to the best of my knowledge, the veterinary surgeon was not even contacted about the complaint and only advised that there had been a complaint once the case was closed.’

‘RCVS not fit for purpose. Incompetent case handlers, which included the solicitor who wrote the final letter who was either below average intelligence or purposely distorting information to avoid accepting the vet was grossly negligent.’

‘We felt that the Veterinary Assessor's comments were not fair or impartial, and there was no mechanism by which we could challenge them. Our letters were always acknowledged at least with a card initially, then a letter. We valued this. We were able to discuss matters on the phone, and treated courteously. We feel that the RCVS should deal with areas of vets' conduct other than only "serious professional conduct."’

‘Already stated. You close ranks as do other professions.’

‘I felt as though I was not taken seriously enough with the matters raised. Further investigations should have been carried out and more detail looked at.’

How the complaint handling process could be improved; many replies focus on evidence and outcomes

Some examples (see full data report – Q17)

‘I feel that the whole complaints process is a waste of time. I was told from the very beginning by someone from the Cats Protection Society that the whole process would be a ‘whitewash’, and that I was wasting my time. I said this to the veterinary investigator during his visit, and in the end that is exactly what it was - a whitewash!’

‘Make further investigations and actually arrange to speak with the complainant to establish all the facts not just base the outcome on written information.’

‘It was difficult for the RCVS to give the outcome we were seeking because your brief is to identify and prosecute gross misconduct but not negligence. So whilst you decided the claim was not gross misconduct, there was evidence of negligence which because of your mandate, you could not follow up.’

‘Thorough investigation of the veterinary practice under investigation AND one to one discussions with the family who are complaining.’

Appendix

The questionnaire

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) regulates veterinary surgeons and nurses, and accredits practices in the UK.

Thanks for helping with this short survey. We want to hear about your experience of making a complaint to the RCVS over the last two years or so, even if it is still in process. We won't be asking about the details of your complaint, just how it was or is being dealt with, and what might have been handled better.

The survey is being managed independently by market research consultants working on behalf of the RCVS, and we guarantee your confidentiality.

1. First, can you confirm that you have contacted the RCVS in 2011 or 2012 to make a complaint?

- Yes
- No / Can't remember

2. Did you discuss the issue or problem with your vet or the staff at your veterinary practice before contacting the RCVS?

- Yes
- No
- Can't remember

3. How did you find out about the RCVS as an organisation that might help you?

- A friend or family member
- Leaflet at the veterinary practice
- Staff member at the veterinary practice
- Another client at the veterinary practice
- The RCVS website
- Another website
- Search engine e.g. Google
- Can't remember
- Somewhere else (please specify)

4. Which of these best describes the issue or complaint you had (select all that are appropriate)?

- Misdiagnosis or wrong treatment
- Poor or sub-standard treatment
- Handling animals badly
- Not providing enough care
- Poor or rude behaviour towards me
- Over-charging or selling unnecessary treatment
- Other issues (please specify)

5. How clear was your understanding of the complaints process when you first made your complaint?

- I had a clear understanding
- I had a partial understanding
- My understanding was poor or vague only
- Can't remember

6. Has the RCVS closed your complaint, or is the case still open?

- Complaint is closed
- Complaint is still open

7. Whether closed or still open, how far did your complaint progress / has it progressed?

- My complaint is still undergoing initial assessment
- I was told my complaint wasn't something the RCVS could deal with
- It went to Case Examination
- It went to the Preliminary Investigation Committee
- It went to a Disciplinary Committee hearing
- Unsure / can't remember

8. And was your complaint...?

- Closed with no action or advice to the vet
- Closed with advice to the vet
- It is still open and in process
- Unsure / can't remember
- Other outcome (please specify)

9. And just thinking about the Disciplinary Committee hearing...

	Yes	No	Not relevant / cannot remember
Were you invited to attend the hearing?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Were you asked to be a witness?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Was the hearing process explained fully to you?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Did you feel you had the support you needed?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Were you able to have your say/put your side across?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

10. What was the result of the Disciplinary Hearing?

- Vet struck off
- Vet suspended
- Vet reprimanded
- Case dismissed
- Other outcome (please specify)

11. Please explain how the hearing process or support you had could be improved on.

12. Has a veterinary investigator visited you to look into the complaint?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure / can't remember

13. How would you rate your satisfaction with the investigator's visit?

- Very satisfied
- Fairly satisfied
- Not very satisfied
- Not at all satisfied
- Not sure / can't remember

14. Roughly how long did it take for the RCVS to tell you the outcome of your complaint? Did the whole process take closest to...

- One month or less
- Two months
- Three months
- Four - five months
- Six - nine months
- Ten - twelve months
- Over one year
- It is still ongoing
- Can't remember

15. Do you regard the outcome of the complaint to have been...

- Too harsh
- About right / fair
- Too lenient
- Does not apply / can't remember

16. How satisfied were you with each of these aspects of how your complaint as a whole was handled (rate performance to date if still open, please)?

	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Not very satisfied	Not at all satisfied	Cannot yet comment / cannot remember
The information you received about how the complaint process worked	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How well you were kept informed about progress	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How quickly the RCVS responded to any questions you had	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The professionalism of any RCVS staff you dealt with	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The length of time taken to gather evidence and give an initial assessment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The total length of the process, from end to end	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your overall satisfaction with the PROCESSING of your complaint	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Your overall satisfaction with the OUTCOME of your complaint	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

17. Do you have any suggestions for how the complaint-handling process could be improved?

18. How strongly do you agree or disagree with each of these statements about how the RCVS handled your complaint / has handled your complaint to date?

	Agree strongly	Agree slightly	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree slightly	Disagree strongly	Cannot yet comment / don't know
They showed understanding of my situation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Their investigation was thorough	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I thought I was treated as a nuisance	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The system was fair and impartial	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The advice I received was helpful	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I was treated with respect	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I felt more positive towards the RCVS as a result of their handling of my complaint	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. Please summarise briefly any concerns you had with the way your complaint was handled, or any other comments about the process.

20. To finish, please answer several quick questions so we can analyse the responses we receive to the survey as a whole. Are you...

- Male
- Female

21. And are you aged...

- Under 25
- 25 to 34
- 35 to 44
- 45 to 54
- 55 to 64
- 65 or over

22. Did your complaint concern treatment to...

- A pet owned by you
- A horse/pony/donkey
- A farm animal
- Another animal (please specify)

23. And where do you live?

- South East (outside London/M25)
- Greater London / within M25
- South West or Channel Islands
- East Midlands
- West Midlands
- East Anglia
- Wales
- North West
- Yorkshire / Humberside
- North East
- Scotland
- Northern Ireland
- Outside the UK (please specify)

24. That completes the survey. Before you finish, if the researchers (not the RCVS) wished to ask any further questions, may we have your permission to re-contact you?

- Yes
- No

25. Please provide your name and a contact telephone number and/or email address below, should we need to get in touch

Your name

Contact telephone number

Email address

On behalf of the RCVS, thanks for providing your feedback – it is very much appreciated.

Please click 'Done' to submit your response.