
RCVS WORKFORCE SUMMIT 2021

A report of the day

30 November 2021

The View, Royal College of Surgeons



Workforce Summit 2021

30 November 2021

The View, Royal College of Surgeons



On Tuesday, 30 November 2021, the RCVS convened over 80 stakeholders from a wide range of veterinary backgrounds and organisations for a Workforce Summit. Held under the auspices of the RCVS ViVet innovation project, the Summit used the ‘design thinking’ method to generate innovative suggestions for potential solutions to the key workforce challenges facing the UK veterinary sector. Discussions on the day were informed by preliminary research carried out by the College before the Summit, and the thoughts and opinions of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses captured through a pre-Summit series of online insight sessions.

Preparing for the Summit

Research

To gauge the extent of the workforce challenges ahead of the Summit, the RCVS reviewed the most up-to-date data collected by itself and other organisations to inform preliminary reports focusing on current trends in recruitment, retention and return in the veterinary and veterinary nursing professions. Sources of data included the RCVS Registers and the Survey of the Veterinary Professions, as well as RCVS surveys on European veterinary professionals working in the UK and veterinary experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were also drawn from other studies on retention in the veterinary profession.

Insight sessions

A series of online insight sessions were also arranged to allow those at the forefront of the challenges facing the professions to make their voices heard and to conduct research to better gauge the extent of the problem on both a national and a regional basis.



The 75-minute sessions were held as a mixture of lunchtime and evening engagements, and were facilitated independently and externally to help participants share their views as freely as possible.

The College issued an invitation to all veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses and practice managers who were interested in taking part, with 500 individuals volunteering. Of these volunteers, over 100 were invited to participate in the insight sessions, with 43 eventually doing so. They included veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses from a range of backgrounds, including corporate and independent practice, and full- and part-time work; some participants were considering leaving practice and others were not in practice. Selection for each session was centred firstly

around availability and then by using the information captured when responding to the invitation signing up for the sessions, grouping key demographics to provide consistency, enabling us to compare and contrast. The sessions were held between 25 October 2021 and 5 November 2021.

The volunteers who were unable to take part in the insight sessions were asked to submit their thoughts in other ways, including via a survey; they also had the option of recording a short video. This allowed us to collect a further 135 contributions.

All feedback given during the insight sessions was confidential, with the information gathered being used to identify key 'pain points' and actual problems, rather than just a perception of the problems.

Six main themes emerged, as follows:

READINESS FOR WORK
WORK-LIFE BALANCE
WORKPLACE CULTURE
CLIENT INTERACTIONS
CAREER DEVELOPMENT
RETURN TO WORK

These themes were then taken forward for discussion by delegates attending the Workforce Summit.

Summit participants

The Summit was attended by veterinary professionals from a variety of backgrounds, including practice (both independent and corporate), food hygiene/production, government, academia and human resources/people management, as well as delegates from professional associations and representative bodies.



Framing the challenges

Welcoming the delegates, Lizzie Lockett, RCVS Chief Executive commented that all those attending were united in one common concern: namely, the sustainability of the veterinary workforce. A collaborative approach to finding solutions was needed, and the Summit would be focusing on developing ideas for potential solutions and looking for next steps and actions that everyone could embrace and take forward. The RCVS would consider the discussions and suggestions made at the Summit when drafting an action plan detailing steps to be taken to tackle the key areas identified.



Lizzie explained that the challenges around the workforce were affecting all areas of veterinary work and were not new, nor were they solely a UK problem. The RCVS planned to follow up the Summit with an online discussion with international regulators.

However, concerns about the sustainability of the UK veterinary workforce had been exacerbated recently by the UK's exit from the European Union and by the Covid-19 pandemic. The former had affected both the supply of veterinary surgeons and the demand for veterinary services, with decreased registration in the UK of veterinarians from the EU being compounded by vastly increased demand for export health certification services. The pandemic had resulted in staff being away from work for reasons of illness, or self-isolation, or caring responsibilities, or because they were shielding.

During the height of the pandemic-related restrictions, many practices had adopted different styles of working, including 'kerbside care', so that they could continue providing services while protecting public health. Workload had increased due to the unprecedented acquisition and breeding of pets during the pandemic lockdowns.

These challenges were occurring against a background of changing perspectives on work and careers in general. The concept of a vocation and a linear career progression was not one that people held today; instead, they wanted a more rounded life, with more time for friends, family and outside interests.

Lizzie set out the '3Rs' facing the veterinary workforce – recruitment, retention and return – noting that all three had to be considered collectively as well as individually.




Recruitment

Lizzie reported that, over the past 10 years, the number of veterinary students attending UK veterinary schools had increased by 54%, and there were now eight RCVS-accredited UK veterinary schools. Over the same period, the number of veterinary practices in the UK had risen by 17%. As of the end of 2021, there were 20,000 veterinary nurses on the RCVS Register of Veterinary Nurses. However, there was still a shortage of veterinary professionals to meet the increased demand for veterinary services.

Recognising these trends, the RCVS had been taking action to encourage greater recruitment of veterinary professionals.

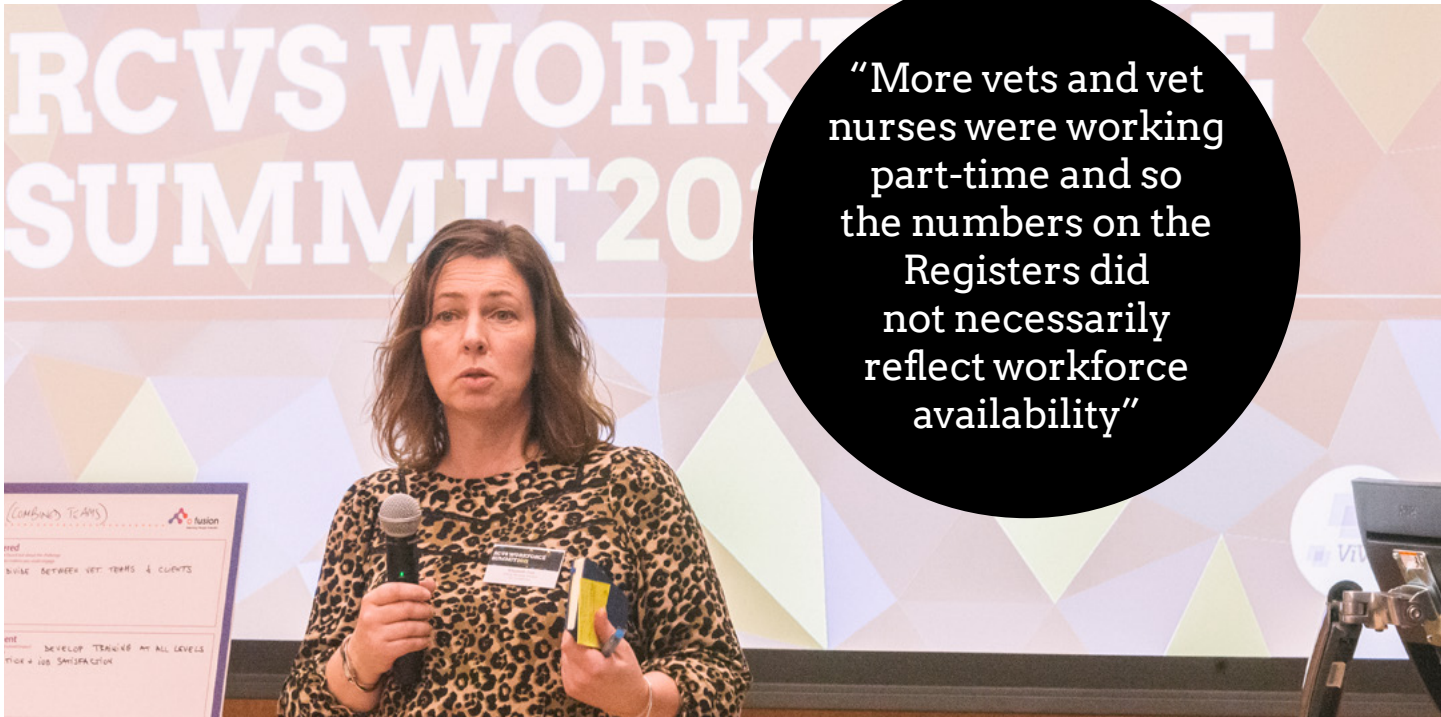
- To increase recruitment to veterinary schools and expand the pool of potential veterinary students, it was considering proposals for greater flexibility in professional licensure, and looking at ways of supporting



“Recognising these trends, the RCVS had been taking action to encourage greater recruitment of veterinary professionals.”

diversity and inclusion to increase the number of people considering veterinary careers. It had developed new careers materials, particularly for vet nurses as part of the VN Ambassador programme, and had increased its focus on supporting veterinary and veterinary nursing students. It had also published a Diversity and Inclusion Strategy, and had a Diversity and Inclusion Group that met regularly.

- To increase recruitment to the Register from overseas, the RCVS had introduced temporary changes to English language requirements to make it easier to recruit overseas vets for particular areas of work. It was also in discussion with overseas veterinary schools about the potential for direct accreditation and was working to strengthen links with overseas MsRCVS to encourage them to come to work in UK. For a number of years, the College had offered ‘An introduction to the



UK veterinary professions' course to overseas-qualified vets and vet nurses wanting to work in the UK, or recently employed in the country. It had also recently bolstered its support for refugee veterinarians who come to the UK.

- To increase recruitment to the profession, the RCVS had been focusing on support for early-career graduates and had introduced the Veterinary Graduate Development Programme (VetGDP) and reviewed Day-One Competencies.
- In partnership with the Refugee Council, It has established a scheme for refugee veterinary surgeons to access the Statutory Exam for free, and works with key membership associations who provide free membership to candidates in order to support their preparation for the exam process.

Retention

Many vets and vet nurses were leaving their profession, Lizzie continued, and were commonly citing issues such as working hours, work-life balance and stress. More vets and vet nurses (both male and female) were working part-time and so the numbers on the Registers did not necessarily reflect workforce availability.

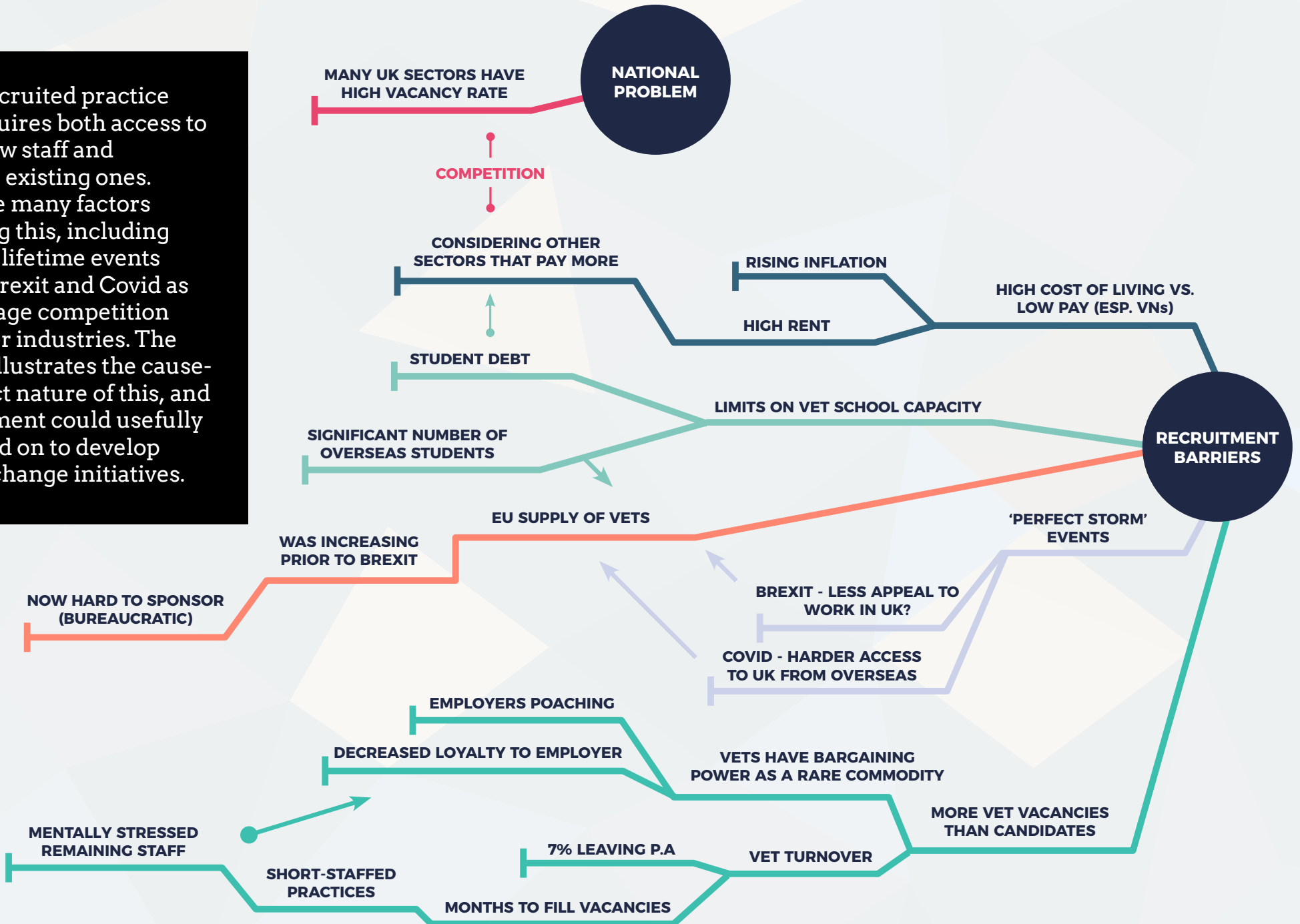


RCVS action on retention included:

- Adding modules on the practice team to the Practice Standards Scheme, including standards on workplace environment, HR protocols and policies, and support for staff wellbeing and health.
- Work by the Advancement of the Professions Department on leadership, mental health support, innovation, and diversity and inclusion.
- Looking at legislation changes to bolster the vet-led team to facilitate more efficient working.
- Looking at developing more diverse career pathways to encourage people to stay.

Lizzie commented that the 'magic bullet' had not yet been found for solving the challenges around retention. Although short-term solutions might appear more attractive, medium- and long-term solutions were also needed. Nothing was off the table, she added.

A fully recruited practice team requires both access to hiring new staff and retaining existing ones. There are many factors impacting this, including once in a lifetime events such as Brexit and Covid as well as wage competition with other industries. The graphic illustrates the cause-and-effect nature of this, and each element could usefully be worked on to develop positive change initiatives.



Return

Noting that people who had left the professions would not return if the culture did not change, Lizzie said there were specific hotspot areas that required greater attention.

She reported that RCVS data suggested that 40% of vet nurses and 70% of vets who were 'leavers' were taking a career break, but it was not known how many subsequently returned to their profession.

Approximately 45% of leavers were within the first four years of their career. Others were leaving after 10 years or more in their profession, but were not retiring.

A small number were leaving because they did not receive the support they needed; they were often from lower socioeconomic groups and had disabilities as well.

'Return' was being considered as part of the RCVS Strategic Plan.

Lizzie was keen for delegates at the Summit to look for solutions to the challenges rather than focusing on the problems. She concluded: "They say that action only happens when the risk of inaction is greater than the risk of action. I think we are there now – in fact, I think we are past being there now. The pandemic maybe took away a lot of our energy, but today is the day to take a deep breath and look to solutions. We have capability, we have motivation, we have opportunity, so let's do it."



"Today is the day to take a deep breath and look to solutions. We have capability, we have motivation, we have opportunity, so let's do it."

Time to be innovative



“The survey revealed that delegates were confident about their ability to create workable solutions and that their voices would be heard”

Delegates had been asked to start their day differently on the morning of the Summit to help them “get into the right mindset for the day”. Encouraging delegates to be innovative throughout the day, Dr Chris Tufnell, RCVS Innovation Lead, explained that the external facilitators wanted the day to be solution-oriented and focused on problem solving.

Chris reported the results of an interactive poll that delegates had completed while gathering for the Summit, which revealed that delegates were confident about their ability to create workable solutions and that their voices would be heard. They were reasonably confident about the control they had over the issues affecting the professions.

Word clouds created from delegates’ thoughts revealed that their greatest



hopes for the day included “progress”, “solutions”, “action”, “ideas” and “collaboration”. In contrast, their greatest fears included “inaction”, “negativity” and “reluctance”. Factors that they felt might prevent a positive outcome included “negativity”, “tradition”, “apathy” and “Covid”. Noting that people were leaving the professions “way before time”, Chris acknowledged that there were significant challenges ahead.

Thinking innovatively was very important – being innovative meant making changes to something established by introducing new methods, ideas or products.

Veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses were good at innovation and did it all the time, he said. He encouraged delegates to unlock their innovative potential.

Feedback from pre-Summit insight sessions

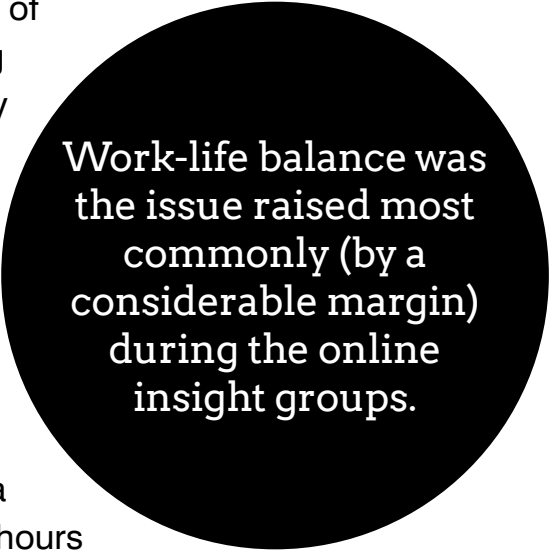
An external facilitator who had led one of the pre-Summit online insight sessions summarised some of the feedback received during the sessions, focusing on five of the six key themes identified, as follows.

Work-life balance and workplace culture

Work-life balance was the issue raised most commonly (by a considerable margin) during the online insight groups. Participants talked about the sheer volume of work that they faced, the length of the working day, out-of-hours work and how the pressures they faced at work spilled over into their home lives. They described the feeling of being on a treadmill, and how each working day involved them picking up work that they had not completed the previous day.

Work-life balance was often discussed in conjunction with workplace culture, but the two issues were considered to be separate. Many participants loved their job, but disliked the culture within the workplace. There was a feeling that the idea of working through breaks and doing extra hours (presenteeism) had become institutionalised and allowed to become the norm within the workplace, accepted in the name of hard work but without adequate returns.

More senior vets felt that, although this situation was not new, in the past there had been more “give and take”, and, if an individual had worked out-of-hours, then their colleagues “stepped up” the following day or week to give them a break. Younger vets no longer saw this happening, and there was real pushback against out-of-hours work. Individuals felt that they had had enough by the end of the working day, and did not want to take work back to their families, feeling that weekends on call, and so on, were more than they could cope with.



Work-life balance was the issue raised most commonly (by a considerable margin) during the online insight groups.

Work-life balance and workplace culture

“The mismatch comes from societal expectations of instantly getting a service, that we cannot meet. Vets consult until 7pm or 8pm at night, just to do booster vaccinations! These are not urgent! I miss my family life, I worked hard for a degree, and yet people think nothing of abusing our profession for their convenience. I don't mind doing ECC work OOH, but not for routine work. That time should be only to save lives - we need to train clients to accept this, and our own profession too.”
(Not F/T In practice)

“Out-of-hours is in a death spiral - where are the well-rounded vets that can cover all the bases? Practices are closing that service not because they want to, but because they physically can't get the cover - the 24/7 obligation isn't working, whole areas of the country are not covered.”
(Not F/T In practice)

“Vet nurses are so over worked now, there is a patient safety risk now - we end up doing 3 hrs overtime and hospitals taking that for granted, knowing we care about animals that much - but it's becoming too tick-box in Corporate, there isn't a tick-box for staff exhaustion and burnout.”
(Corporate practice)

“The profession has gone through huge change - if you're realistic to prospective vets about what life is like, you would scare a lot away. If you don't do that, they become unhappy in the early years, because the balance of pressures in practice now is not what they expect.”
(Independent)

Career development

“I thought I would have more options than I have
- the vet nursing certificate isn't a specialism
- it doesn't go anywhere, I'd like to do more
Emergency and Critical Care (ECC), but the
certificate doesn't change how I work, the hours,
the pay, nothing - qualification is a few letters,
whereas in veterinary, residency and courses - it
all helps progress you - not in nursing.”

(Vet Nurse)

“I find the vast majority of final year vet students
state they want to do a certificate like it's become
an expectation, but the hours involved only add to
the issue of long hours and no work-life balance.”

(Corporate practice)

“There is a good career path within corporates
when people want to deviate from clinical work,
but that does take away more people from
the clinical team. It is useful to have vets in
management roles and business development
roles, but there are not enough higher roles in
clinical practice on ground level.”

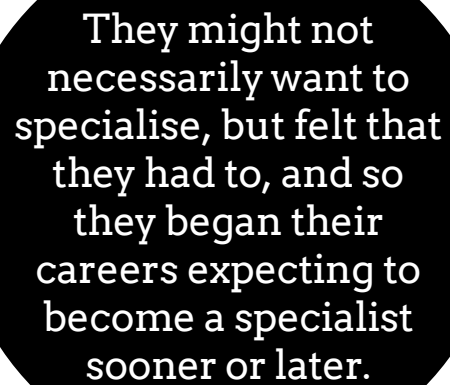
(Corporate practice)

“We need banding like the NHS has. Skills
development with an appropriate salary could
make a big difference to the current crisis.”

(Vet Nurse)

Career development

Younger vets reported being told – even before they entered practice – that if they wanted to make money from being a vet, then they would have to become a specialist. They might not necessarily want to specialise, but felt that they had to, and so they began their careers expecting to become a specialist sooner or later.



They might not necessarily want to specialise, but felt that they had to, and so they began their careers expecting to become a specialist sooner or later.

This gave rise to concern that if most new entrants to the profession were aiming for specialisation, it would be increasingly difficult to develop generalist vets. The veterinary profession appeared to differ from the medical profession, which did not seem to have the “specialist mindset”; rather, there were people who wanted to be generalists.

Vet nurses in the insight groups felt that, from a career development point of view, they were being held back and that they could do more in the practice setting if they were allowed to.

Return to work

Some participants in the insight groups commented that they had retired earlier than they had intended to. Many had hoped to gradually ease back from work, but found themselves doing more out-of-hours work than ever before, because they had the requisite experience and because no one else would do it. They felt that younger vets should do out-of-hours work for the benefit of their own growth and were frustrated that this desire to undertake out-of-hours was falling away as the younger generations came through. Many of these retired vets had returned to work as locums, which allowed them to work more flexibly and on their own terms.

Female vets who were leaving to have children said they intended to return, but did not want to get back on the treadmill, and instead would

Return to work

“The huge feminisation of the profession in the UK is real - so we must face up to the work-life balance that it brings - of maternity leave followed by re-entry, of childcare whilst offering long hours of practice opening hours.”
(Corporate practice)

“I’m back from maternity - I miss bedtime every day I work - I knew that, but I’m worrying about the next few years, childcare and grandparents. Can I afford to miss school pickup, taking days off when she’s sick? I love the job but not the culture.”
(Corporate practice)

“If I stayed full time, I’d never see my son - I’m gone before he goes to nursery (starts 0830), and asleep by the time I get home - my partner has gone part time too. Every vet I know who is a mother has gone part-time - and I’m conscious of the lost hours I’ve put on my colleagues. There is not enough flex in my practice.”
(Corporate practice)

“When I was a new grad, I believed in my role as a lifelong commitment, but when I got to my late 30s, I desperately wanted to have kids. I had to take a career break and consider other factors - my only route back is small animal and p/t, but that needed me to retrain, and only do basic stuff. To be back fully, I’d need to retrain for 6 months - I don’t have the cash, there are too many barriers for returning mums with young kids.”
(Not F/T in practice)

Client interaction

“People no longer want a discussion - clients want a result, even demand it. We are not magicians - we need to do our best, but I don't want to lose my licence if something goes wrong.”
(Corporate practice)

“A well-trained vet who has good client skills is worth their weight in gold and can avoid a complaint that might drag on for weeks - training is an investment.”
(Independent)

“Your training prepares you clinically, but not the client side of the profession - from talking to distressed people on the phone, to the moral issues of client financial constraints, at 2am when clients are desperate, you want to be empathetic - no one prepares you for that.”
(Vet Nurse)

“It's the soft skills that keep you grounded and happy - the ability to 'lean over the farm gate' - we are not giving ourselves time in the practice to develop these for new grads - they don't learn this academically.”
(Independent)

be seeking the opportunity to work part-time. However, they often questioned whether there would be the flexibility to allow them to do this; they also questioned their own confidence and financial ability to retrain to return to work after a career break.

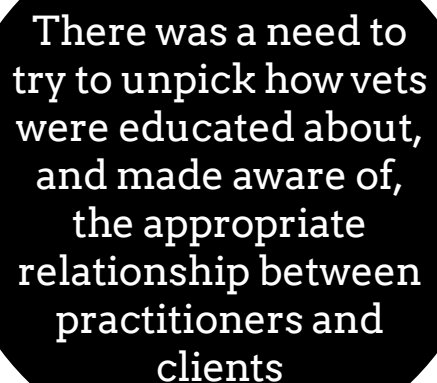
The facilitator referred to his experience with the financial sector, noting that, in this sector, a return-to-work programme began even before someone went on maternity leave. The sector acknowledged that it was much cheaper to support the return of a person who was already trained and knew a brand or business, than it was to recruit someone new. There appeared to be no similar programme in the veterinary field.

Client interaction

Client interaction was raised regularly in the insight groups, with vets commenting that their training prepared them clinically but not for the “client side” of working in the profession. “Customer service”, they felt, was not part of veterinary training.

Older vets noted that new vets learned “by doing” when it came to dealing with clients and, in the past, they would have helped ease a new vet into their first job by, for example, supporting them in early consultations, or selecting appropriate clients for them to see. However, the pressures of work meant that senior vets no longer had the time to do this – new vets now had to “sink or swim” and, sadly, many were sinking.

There was a need to try to unpick how vets were educated about, and made aware of, the appropriate relationship between practitioners and clients and to consider how to re-set this relationship to improve it.



There was a need to try to unpick how vets were educated about, and made aware of, the appropriate relationship between practitioners and clients

Interaction



The Summit was described by one of the facilitators as an unparalleled opportunity to set time aside to work on the challenges facing the veterinary workforce, promote constructive conversations and suggest potentially workable solutions. To help them embrace the opportunity, delegates took part in a series of interactive sessions before splitting into smaller groups to begin the process of developing their ideas for solutions to the challenges identified.

Assessing the mood

To evaluate how they were affected personally by some of the key challenges identified in the pre-Summit insight sessions, delegates were asked to rate how they perceived the impact of the challenge on them as an individual, and position themselves accordingly on a 1 to 10 scale laid out on the floor. For instance, when asked how current circumstances were affecting their work-life balance (with 1 representing no or very little effect and 10 representing a severe effect), most delegates selected a score of 7. Reasons given by delegates who had selected a rating of 10



included the pressure of working in public health and the stress associated with a job in human resources.

Asked about career development, delegates who selected a poor score gave reasons such as limited career development opportunities in practice, overstretched practice teams and difficulties in accessing the career development opportunities they wanted. Delegates who felt they had opportunities to progress in business ownership and leadership gave better scores for career development.

Rejecting negative thinking

Delegates also took part in an exercise in which they were invited to write down factors they felt were stopping them from innovating. These were then condemned to 'Room 101' (thrown into a rubbish bin) and included bureaucracy, entrenched/closed mindsets, tiredness/fatigue, protectionism, perfectionism, a feeling of not being heard and having preconceived ideas.



Delegates were told that expansive thinking means looking for “the thoughts on the edge of our thinking”

Encouraging expansive thinking

Veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses are natural problem solvers, but the day-to-day routine of practice can subdue innovative thinking. Also, the human brain excels at processing information: the more it does so, the more efficient it becomes at doing so. Stubborn, entrenched patterns of thinking emerge. Thinking more expansively is essential when trying to find solutions to difficult problems.

Delegates were told that expansive thinking means looking for “the thoughts on the edge of our thinking”. To encourage them to think more expansively, they were given the following ground rules for brainstorming:

- Look for quantity over quality
- There are no right/wrong answers
- Make no judgments or evaluations
- Do not think about budget constraints
- Look to build on others’ ideas

Delegates then took part in exercises to show how ideas could be knocked back or built upon.



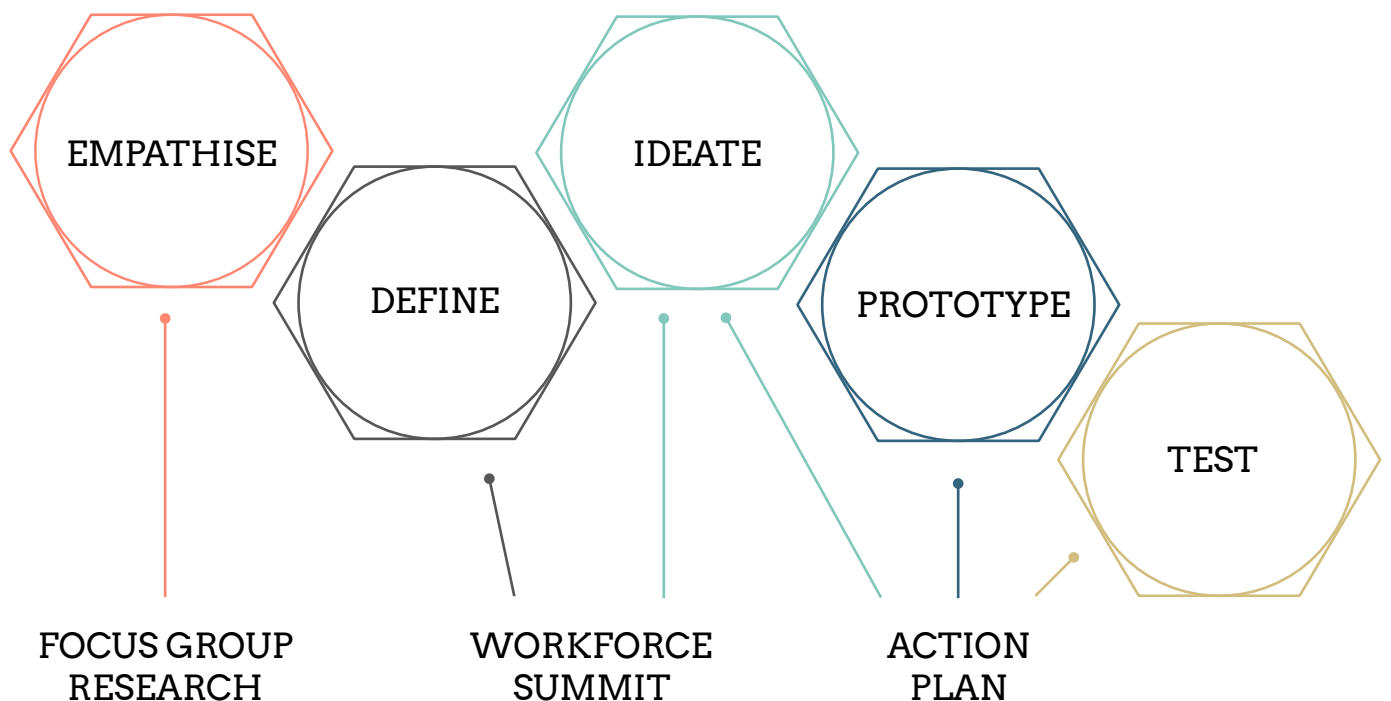
Delegates then took part in exercises to show how ideas could be knocked back or built upon. First, they paired up and were told to imagine that they were going to have a party to celebrate solving a tricky challenge. One partner was told to suggest multiple ideas for the party, while the other partner was told to respond to each idea with “No, because...”. This demonstrated how people begin to switch off if every suggestion generates a negative response.

In contrast, in a second exercise, the situation was reversed and every suggestion was greeted with the response “Yes, and...”, demonstrating how a positive response, sparking off another person and continuing to try to find more in every idea could lead to ideas being built on.

Finally, to encourage innovative thinking, delegates were split into groups and asked to come up with as many uses for an object as possible.

Design thinking and innovation

The main thrust of the day was based around the ‘design thinking’ method – an iterative process that supports creative problem solving, leading to innovative solutions for problems that have many interdependent factors that can make them appear impossible to solve.



What is design thinking?

Design thinking is a creative problem-solving process that can produce innovative solutions to challenges or so-called ‘wicked problems’ – problems that have many interdependent factors and no obvious solution. Design thinking is widely used across industries and sectors to tackle issues whether they relate to people, business or technology and can be used in all areas of veterinary practice to improve or innovate products, systems or processes. As design thinking is a human-centred approach to problem solving, it draws on human factors such as empathy, creative thinking and experimentation. Teams engaged in design thinking are encouraged to have an open mindset and to work collaboratively in order to co-create meaningful solutions for the end users.

Pitching for success

With the purpose of the Summit being to generate innovative suggestions for possible solutions to the challenges facing the veterinary workforce, the delegates were then introduced to the process they would be following. They were split into working groups with each of the six key areas being discussed by two groups. The ultimate aim was to pitch a suggestion for a 'Big Idea' for solving each challenge. However, the groups were also invited to capture 'small ideas' – those that did not become the Big Idea but were still worth recording – and to try to find some 'takeaway ideas that were immediately relevant or implementable in their own workplaces.



To develop their final pitches, the groups initially each spent some time on general brainstorming, following the ground rules given previously and trying to think expansively. They then had to pitch an initial Big Idea to the other group considering the same challenge. To help them structure their thoughts each group used a “6i” template in which they identified the challenge, recorded any insights gathered, listed ideas, assessed their impact, detailed the Big Idea, and considered ignition (how to make it happen).

Having pitched their ideas, the groups assessed each one against a 10-point checklist to identify positive aspects and aspects that might need improving. They then combined the best elements of each idea to create their final Big Idea, which they revised and refined before pitching it to everyone attending the Summit.



Key themes from the Big Idea pitches

Several suggestions on how to improve the workforce issues currently facing the profession emerged from more than one pitch. These were:

Creating frameworks and templates to guide practices and/or individuals in areas such as workload prioritisation, career progression and return to work.

Placing greater emphasis on non-clinical skills throughout the whole of the vet/vet nurse career pathway, from school onwards, including skills that can be gained outside the professional environment.

Requiring vets and vet nurses to undertake mandatory training/CPD in areas such as communications skills or leadership skills.

Encouraging greater delegation within the veterinary team and outsourcing of appropriate tasks.

Legislative reform to open up career pathways, such as a 'nurse prescriber' role within practice.

Pitch 1: Readiness for work

The challenge

This group's challenge was to look at how well prepared, or not, veterinary students/ graduates were for life in practice and how this might be improved. The discussion was framed around the fact that the role of a general veterinary practitioner was seen as the 'default' option for vets after vet school; however, 'general practitioner' suggested not much would change throughout a veterinary career. The group considered how the GP role might be made more enjoyable and aspirational.



Insights

The group felt that, currently, vet students were being trained for excellence in clinical and surgical skills that they might not use in general practice, often to the detriment of training for skills that would help them deal with and enjoy life in practice (for example, people skills, communication, teamwork). The group then tasked itself with working out how the profession could evolve the way people were trained throughout their university career to focus less on specialised skills and more on transferrable skills, including those acquired outside of the professional environment.

The group identified an opportunity to revamp both recruitment to the professions and the experience students had at vet school/in vet nurse training. There would be a trade-off in that, if students were taught fewer clinical and surgical skills, those in practice would have to step up and support new graduates in acquiring the clinical skills required for general practice. However, in return, practices would be employing new vets/vet nurses who were better equipped for life in general practice in the long term.

Pitch 1 cont...

Some ideas

The group considered ideas for enacting the changes that were needed, including:

- Allowing extra-mural studies (EMS) to be carried out in non-veterinary industries.
- Making the veterinary degree a second degree (although it acknowledged challenges around how degrees are funded currently).
- Not allowing students to enter vet school or vet nurse training straight from school.

The Big Idea

However, the key action identified by the group was to rebrand the GP role (for both vets and vet nurses) to emphasise its benefits and rewards, ensure the role was aspirational and appealing, and help people choose general practice as an active career choice that they wished to pursue long term.

Implementing the idea

In terms of implementing the Big Idea the necessary actions that were identified were:

- Defining the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards of the GP role.
- Communicating these rewards and benefits to vets and vet nurses at every stage of their career journey.
- Considering how vets and vet nurses are represented to school-aged children before entry to vet school/vet nurse training. Who do school students see representing the professions?
- Considering who is talking to and teaching students during vet school/vet nurse training and if they are representing general practice to them.
- Presenting general practice as a specialism to students and graduates, rather than the default career option, while emphasising the benefits and rewards of a GP career.

Pitch 2: Work-life balance

The challenge

The challenge for this group was to consider how work-life balance in the veterinary professions could be improved in order to stabilise retention rates. The group considered that, at present, demand was outstripping resource, resulting in an intensity to the working day that was not sustainable. Different practices were approaching this issue in different ways, resulting in mixed messaging to clients.



Insights

The group considered that tackling the work-life imbalance would require a give-and-take approach between clients and practices.

Covid-19 was making practices do things differently, so members of the group felt now was a good time to make changes to ways of working because society was more accustomed to such changes.

At present, practice was demand-led and reactive – more and more work was coming in, and practices were dealing with it because they had to. However, this left no capacity to think about how to get ahead of the curve. Practices needed to plan backwards to get ahead of the curve and therefore reset the old ways of doing things.

Without a coherent way of matching workload to available resources, the group felt nothing would change and practices would continue to take different approaches. This would result in mixed messaging to clients rather than a unified message from the profession as a whole.

Pitch 2 cont...

Some ideas

Ideas identified for tackling the work-life imbalance included:

- Prioritising activities – for example, deciding to say “no” to some clients or certain procedures.
- Creating a clear framework for guiding decisions on what work was immediately important versus what could be delayed. This would help to better structure rotas and shifts, see who was doing what and build some flexibility and slack into the system to protect break periods and ensure workloads were manageable.

The Big Idea

The key idea that the group developed was to help the professions achieve clarity on what was important now, and ensure that this workload was prioritised and tackled first. The professions should be clear on who should be doing what and make the most of the skills they had available.

Implementing the idea

The actions the group identified in order to implement the Big Idea were:

- Work as a team – the whole practice team had to tackle the challenges around workload rather than delegating the problem to only part of the team.
- An efficiency drive focused on delegation and outsourcing rather than on just working harder and longer. This would allow vets and vet nurses to feel more in control and less chaotic about their day, and allow practices to build in time for structured learning and career development, which, in turn, would offer greater reward on a day-to-day basis.
- Proceed with changes in veterinary legislation to allow nurses to take on greater responsibility; support and reward them appropriately for their work.
- Manage client expectations so that saying no to a particular request at a particular time would become a viable option, without fear that a client would seek out a competitor’s services instead.

Pitch 3:

Workplace culture

The challenge

This group considered how the professions could banish poor workplace culture in all veterinary sectors so that people would want to go to work. Improving workplace culture would empower a cohesive team and enhance the vet–client–animal relationship, leading to better animal welfare with good clinical outcomes.



Insights

In determining how to meet the challenge, the group first considered what was wrong with the culture of some veterinary workplaces. Identified problems included:

- Lack of clarity from management/leadership.
- Poor communication.
- A focus on problems rather than solutions.
- Poor understanding of available resources.
- Poor empowerment within teams.
- Fixed mindsets rather than growth mindsets.
- A lack of shared values, behaviours, responsibility and accountability throughout the whole practice team.

Some ideas

Ideas discussed on how to meet the challenge included:

- Continuing to offer a curriculum of leadership education.
- Developing a practice charter that all organisations could use, setting out the behaviours, responsibilities and expectations for all members of the veterinary team.

Pitch 3 cont...

The Big Idea

The Big Idea developed by the group was to introduce a compulsory curriculum for developing personal, interpersonal and leadership skills throughout the entire veterinary career, from vet school onwards. This would be built into the curriculum through the Day One Competencies for both veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses and made part of the RCVS Veterinary Graduate Development Programme (VetGDP). It was considered that continuing professional development (CPD) in these areas should be made compulsory and should be viewed as being just as important as clinical CPD. It was also suggested this requirement should be included within the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme (PSS).

Implementing the idea

In order to implement the idea, key actions that were identified included:

- Requiring all organisations to develop some form of specific workplace charter in this area, which should be team-led, rather than determined by management.
- Reviewing and reflecting on actions and behaviours individually and as a team, then feeding back and collaborating profession-wide to identify what worked and what was successful.
- Identifying leaders and champions with a passion for this work who could help others understand why it was important and engage teams in it.

Pitch 4:

Client interaction

The challenge

The group was tasked with looking at how the interaction between clients and veterinary professionals could be improved, with a particular focus on managing client expectations around costs, levels of service and feasibility. The group identified that there was a large divide between veterinary teams and their clients and that a “them and us” culture was emerging. They considered how clinical teams could be helped to understand the importance of non-clinical skills such as communication.



Insights

When considering how to meet the challenge, the group looked at some of the issues around communication skills, including:

- Communication skills could not be taught in a single lecture while in education. Instead, such training needed to be a lifelong process, beginning early on.
- Communication about the professions had to start at school and the veterinary professions had to consider how they could accurately reflect the world of veterinary practice through the media, through careers materials and so on.
- Communication skills in aspiring vets and vet nurses were very important, and so work experience outside of the veterinary world should be encouraged as it was valuable and could help in dealing with challenging situations. While qualifications were important when applying to veterinary education, work experience where softer skills had been acquired should also be valued.
- Within vet schools, monitoring the development of clinical skills was

Pitch 4 cont...

good, but communication skills might not be monitored as effectively.

- Lots of different resources should be developed and made available to help with acquiring these skills, for example, case studies, training, webinars and so on. It was also important to understand why people did not do non-clinical CPD – did they not want to do it or did they not realise it would count towards their CPD requirements?
- Improving interactions with clients would bring business and mental health benefits.

The Big Idea

The Big Idea identified by the group was to elevate and drive the status of communication skills within the professions through training and support throughout the entire career pathway, from school onwards.

Implementing the idea

In order to implement the Big Idea, identified actions included:

- Developing appropriate training resources.
- Making communication skills CPD a mandatory requirement. Concern was raised within the group that making it mandatory could alienate some people, although it was also noted that if it were not mandatory, people would not do it.
- Evaluating how communication skills could be measured as it would not simply be a matter of testing language skills; rather, communication was also about how someone used language and how they interacted with clients. Measuring this could be difficult.
- The group said consideration needed to be given to how quickly the idea should and could be implemented. Rapid implementation might help to reduce losses from the professions more quickly, but a slower, more considered approach might increase the likelihood of finding the most effective solution.

Pitch 5:

Career development

The challenge

This group was tasked with looking at how career pathways for both veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses could be improved, so they had the time to develop their careers, and had more of a structure of development to follow. At the outset, the group considered that members of the professions were often too busy and too frantic to undertake the career development that they needed and wanted, but that they should be part of a great profession, with an outstanding career.



Insights

In considering the challenge, the group considered some of the underlying issues hampering career development, such as:

- Feedback suggesting that members of the professions were too busy and practices were too short-staffed to find the time to train or teach people even if they were keen to do so. There was also a feeling that there was no incentive to progress clinically in a general practice setting as the more complex cases were referred.
- A shift in mindset was needed so that the non-clinical aspects of career development were recognised and valued and so individuals could develop well-rounded careers, enjoy their jobs and be better rewarded both financially and non-financially.

The Big Idea

The Big Idea identified by the group for improving career progression was the introduction of a profession-wide career framework to help everyone

Pitch 5 cont...

in the veterinary team achieve job satisfaction at the time they wanted it, at a salary that recognised their value and met their needs.

The framework should be visible to all and applicable across the whole veterinary industry. It should be flexible and beneficial to both individuals and businesses.

Implementing the idea

In order to implement the Big Idea, the following actions were identified:

- Systemic change would be needed across the professions in order to implement the framework.
- More effective delegation would be essential to free up time for career development across the veterinary team. The value of this delegation had to be demonstrated in terms of efficiency and job satisfaction.
- Commissioning research to look at best practice in career development within and without the veterinary sector.
- Implementing practical ideas, such as shared training between veterinary and veterinary nursing students at undergraduate level.
- Continuing the legislative reform process to unlock some of the more radical changes needed to open up new career pathways.
- Encouraging engagement and integration between the medium/larger employers and academia to work out how to better train students and the specialists of the future.
- A 'careers matching app' could be developed in which people could enter their skills and the type of role they wanted and be matched with a suitable job.
- The impact of the career framework would need to be measured; success would be evaluated through what people were doing 'on the shop floor' and how they felt about their working day. This would then feed through into improved retention figures.

Pitch 6: Return to work

The challenge

This group was tasked with looking at how to encourage vets and vet nurses who had left the veterinary industry to return and contribute positively to the workforce and to animal health and welfare again.



Insights

In considering the challenge, the group felt that the key was not to lose people from the veterinary family entirely once they left the professions. Implementing a solution would require different contributions from different people and different strategies would work for different people.

There were multiple stakeholders involved, but employers would implement any solutions.

Some ideas

The group came up with a number of ideas for how to encourage people back into the professions. These included:

- Increasing flexibility around work. Rather than reinventing the wheel, the veterinary professions should look to other professions for inspiration, such as the medical profession, which uses a system of 'session work' in general practice. A similar system could be adapted for the veterinary professions.
- Developing structured, clear, individualised return-to-work packages.
- Having variable and accessible models for return to work, including meeting physical and geographical requirements.
- Subsidised childcare services, holiday clubs.

Pitch 6 cont...

- Adopting a portfolio approach to careers.
- Using technology to support return to work.
- Developing a programme for those returning to the professions, similar to the VetGDP.
- Creating a template for a flexible working portfolio.

The Big Idea

The Big Idea developed by the group was to launch a nationwide, employer-supported, flexible return-to-work programme, in which returners could identify and access different packages of support and learning to help them get back to work.

Implementing the idea

In order to implement the idea, the group identified the following actions:

- Collecting data to validate these ideas.
- Being flexible and proportionate around the programme.
- Getting buy-in and cooperation from the professions.

Summit summary



Dr Kate Richards, RCVS President brought proceedings to a close. She thanked all delegates for their contributions, saying that the Summit had brought together people who had the agency, the influence and the ambition for change. It had proved that, when it came to significant challenges, the professions had the ability to come together to debate and collaborate, and be united in their desire to work to a common goal.

The all-encompassing challenge of the future of the professions and their ability to continue to provide a service that the public and the country's animals needed and deserved could only be solved through collaboration and cooperation, she said.

She felt confident that the Summit had sown the seeds for change and would contribute to the creation of a roadmap out of the crisis. This would not be quick or easy, and many factors and circumstances were outwith the control of the professions. However, she said: "We have a direction of travel and a sense of how we get there."

Kate concluded by challenging all those attending to be "ambassadors for change", encouraging them to "leave behind problems and challenges and start to speak about opportunities and solutions, with a focus on the future".

Going forward, an Action Plan

All of the ideas for potential solutions to the workforce challenges generated by the design thinking and pitching process will be reviewed and considered as a detailed action plan is developed. This will set out a roadmap of the actions that need to be taken, the maturity of any steps that have already made progress towards a solution, and will include commitments from a range of stakeholders responsible for implementing them.

Since the Summit, the College team have been working on multiple processes and activities that will enable an action plan to be created and shared. These are:

Mapping all the College's current and planned projects against the 'recruitment, retention and return' categories, noting the 'quick win' and possible 'sprint' projects, together with the expected outcomes and outputs of these activities.

Identifying further research opportunities, including into innovative business models, and the phasing of a new longitudinal study, starting in 2022, that will follow three cohorts of first-year and final-year vet students and newly-qualified vets.

Sharing insight and process with the International Veterinary Regulators Network (IVRN) with scope to collaborate on any continued outcomes.

Following up with delegates from the Summit who have offered to participate further.

Planning ways to continue to engage and seek feedback from the professions.

This action plan will detail the areas, the key stakeholders and expected impacts. This is not a fixed or closed process. If there are suggested ideas, solutions or methodologies that you or your organisation would like to propose then please contact ViVet. info@vivet.org.uk

Thank you...

Thank you to all those who came and contributed on the day, including representatives of the following organisations

Animal and Plant Health Agency

Association of Veterinary Students

Blue Cross

British Cattle Veterinary Association

British Equine Veterinary Association

British Small Animal Veterinary Association

British Veterinary Association

British Veterinary Chronic Illness Support

British Veterinary Locum Association

British Veterinary Nursing Association

British Veterinary Union

BVLGBT+ Society

Cats Protection

CVS Group

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Eville & Jones

Food Standards Agency

Food Standards Scotland

Harper Keele Vet School

Independent practices and practice groups

Innovia Technology

IVCEvidensia

Linnaeus

Medivet

PDSA

RCVS Council

RCVS Knowledge

RCVS Veterinary Nurses Council

Royal Veterinary College

RSPCA

SPVS

The Royal College of Pathologists

University of Cambridge

University of Liverpool

University of Surrey

Utrecht University

Veterinary Client Mediation Service

Veterinary Management Group

Veterinary Policy Research Foundation

VetPartners

Vets Now

Vets4Pets

VN Education Committee

World Horse Welfare

XL Vets



Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
The Cursitor
38 Chancery Lane
London
WC2A 1EN

T 020 7202 0735

E info@vivet.org.uk

www.vivet.org.uk