Discussing the challenges of Brexit with Chris Tufnell

We interviewed the RCVS senior vice-president to find out what he thinks lies ahead for the veterinary profession in the UK.

How has the RCVS been preparing for the UK’s exit from the EU?
The RCVS and the BVA have been working on Brexit since just after the referendum result. In early summer, Defra expressed an interest in having a joint project with RCVS and BVA – the Veterinary Capability and Capacity Project (VCCP). The main element of the work so far has been forming the response to the Migratory Advisory Committee.

The project is split into three workstreams; the first is on resourcing. We need to emphasise the need to get resourcing right – this is the most important stream at this stage. Of the practising vets on our register, 23% are non-UK EU and 50% of the new vets we register each year are non-UK EU vets. Those figures alone give you an idea that, were we to lose the immigrant vets, we would have problems recruiting.

Some sectors are at much greater risk from a reduction in non-UK EU vets – the meat industry, for example, where 95% of the vets are non-UK EU. Around 30% of Official Vets are non-UK EU, and this figure is considerably higher in government roles. In academia, around 22% of vets are non-UK EU. In our last survey, about 65% of all vets were working full-time, and 87% of EU vets were full-time. Vets from non-UK EU countries may therefore have an even higher contribution than the numbers initially suggest.

How are you calculating what the UK’s workforce needs will be after Brexit?
Recruitment was becoming a problem before Brexit, and there are elements of this project that were there before the Brexit vote. A recent survey showed that about 20% of practices were finding it much harder to recruit, and no practices at all told us it was getting easier.

It’s really difficult to know exactly what the shortfall is, but we’re trying our hardest to survey and get a good idea. Since 2009, EU-graduated vet registrations have been growing year on year. And there’s a suggestion that things are plateauing, if not dropping off.

You could say “we need to make sure the expectations are realistic”, but we probably need to make the reality more favourable too. That sort of thing is going to take a long time.

We did a survey with the Institute of Employment Studies into non-UK EU vets registered with us working here; we got a 55% response rate and a third were thinking of going back to mainland EU.

We already needed more vets; with Brexit, are you confident we will be able to meet the demand?
I’m not remotely confident we’ll meet the demand.

What can be done to reduce the impact of potential shortfalls?
In terms of the three streams of the VCCP, the resourcing stream is number one, and we’ve asked the Home Office to put vets back on the occupation shortages list. This would make it easier to recruit from abroad – it would smooth regulatory barriers. In the short to medium term, we’re asking that we can retain the current level of veterinary