

Veterinary Resourcing Programme Update

INFO BC 24/03/01 - Report by Junior Johnson and Richard Wynn-Davies

1. Summary of issue

1.1 The Veterinary Resourcing Programme (VRP) aims to secure Official Veterinarian (OV) resources to deliver Official Controls in abattoirs in England and Wales from 2025, whilst creating greater political visibility and public awareness of the chronic shortage of vets in the UK, and the systemic issues and global conditions which significantly impact the recruitment and retention of OVs, who play a critical role in ensuring our food is safe.

1.2 There is an increasingly competitive domestic and international veterinary market, rising salaries in private practice and OGDs, and in this context, FSA's heavy reliance on an international OV workforce to deliver Official Controls is under increasing pressure. However, the steps to change the culture, working conditions and role to make OV work more attractive to domestically trained veterinarians requires a long-term strategy.

1.3 In June 2023 RCVS considered FSA's proposal to extend Temporary Registration (TR) and granted an extension until the end of 2024. The Vet Resourcing Programme was established to develop solutions to reduce reliance on TR on the likely scenario that no further extensions will be granted and mitigate risks that would likely lead to service delivery failure, reputational damage and higher costs to both FSA and industry.

1.4 The Business Committee is asked to note progress to date within the programme, specifically;

- the decisions and plans in preparation for exiting the Temporary Registration scheme;
- the activities being undertaken to deliver the FSADOC Retender;
- the planned delivery and execution of a strategic stakeholder, education, and engagement plan to support the programme and highlight broader systemic veterinary resourcing issues.

1.5 The Vet Resourcing Programme considers that all activities are on track to deliver to agreed time, cost, and quality.

2. Introduction of Scope and Workstream Activity

2.1 The Programme will prioritise three key delivery themes:

1) Delivery of work to secure full delivery of Official Controls from 2025, on the assumption that new entrants to the Temporary Registration (TR) scheme for OVs will no longer be permitted by the RCVS after December 2024.

2) Longer term activities to stabilise the future OV workforce.

3) Raising the visibility of the systemic issues impacting the stability of the OV and broader public health veterinary workforce.

2.2 The Programme has an agreed governance structure, with Junior Johnson, Director of Operations, as the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) and a Programme Board who provide challenge, guidance, and support to the SRO, who is the ultimate decision maker.

2.3 The scope of the VR programme relates only to the above delivery themes, with the below activity resulting from each. Further detail of progress to date within each can be found in section 3:

1) Tactical delivery of work to secure full delivery of Official Controls from 2025, on the assumption that new entrants to the Temporary Registration (TR) scheme for OVs will no longer be permitted by the RCVS after December 2024.

- **Recruitment and Retention** – Improving recruitment and retention of OVs to remove reliance on the TR scheme as well as improving analysis and forecasting of current and future required resources.
- **Contingency Planning** - assessing short term options for service delivery should this be needed if the withdrawal of TR means that veterinary resource levels are insufficient. SERD will support with the economic impact of any eventual service degradation that could occur which will provide supporting evidence for stakeholder engagement.
- **FSA Delivered Official Controls Retender (FSADOC)** - This project will design and deliver the retender for FSADOC with new contracts in place from April 2025. Working closely with Cabinet Office, the new contracts will be based on the existing outsourced delivery model but will seek to increase resilience in the marketplace by encouraging interest and bids from a wider range of potential suppliers.

2.4 The activities below are cross cutting across objectives 2 and 3 above and provide an enabling function to the Programme as a whole:

- **Stakeholder Insight strategy** - delivery and execution of a strategic stakeholder, education, and engagement plan to specifically support the programme and highlight broader systemic resourcing issues, including delivery of the Extra Mural Studies (EMS) pilot. More general engagement with vet schools and other important stakeholders will continue outside the programme as part of business-as-usual activity.
- **Economic impact analysis and Spending Review preparations**- includes full impact analysis on society and the economy of failure to deliver full Official Controls in meat, and a review of the financial viability for the insourcing of a proportion of OVs that was produced in 2022. This will form part of the FSA's preparation for the next Spending Review (SR).
- It is important to note that, outside a review of financial viability, any design or delivery of insourcing is out of scope of the programme's work over the next 18 months, as is the development of any other longer term strategic solutions to address OV or Veterinary Public Health (VPH) shortages, beyond any bid for funding through the next SR.

3. Progress to Date

a. Decisions and plans in preparation for exiting the Temporary Registration scheme.

3.0 The TR workstream is focussing on three key areas; collaboration with our Service Delivery partner on the development of alternative recruitment methods; exploring contingency options and impacts for the delivery of Official Controls with a potentially reduced workforce; and supporting work to assess the impact of RCVS changing the way they accredit overseas veterinary schools, ensuring that the FSA Service Delivery Partner (SDP) has mitigations in place

if required.

3.1 The collaboration between the FSA and our current SDP, has led to the establishment of several critical success indicators (CSIs).

3.2 We want our current SDP to improve the retention of their staff and to reduce their reliance on the Temporary Registered OV scheme. As the retention improves this will reduce levels of recruitment required and increase the quality of the workforce due to length of time in role. The programme CSIs are the measures used to demonstrate progress in terms of retention and alternative recruitment channels and provide assurance to Programme Board.

3.3 Current measures show that the SDP is currently on track to be able to provide enough qualified OVs without use of the TR scheme beyond December 2024. The SDP is reducing the number of OVs on the TR scheme, a figure which is currently below 20%, with alternative recruitment routes running in parallel also showing a positive forecast.

3.4 To assure the FSA's delivery confidence the SDP join an open section of the Programme Board, creating opportunity for them to update the Board on progress. This information is then used by the Ops delivery team to assess the likelihood of the FSA needing to implement contingency plans.

3.5 The agreed critical success indicators are:

- % of fully registered OVs vs temporarily registered OVs
- % of OV attrition
- **Vet track*** forecast vs actuals.
- Overall recruitment volume

**Vet track is the process whereby vets qualified from accredited European education establishments are recruited on a 2-year MHI visa to work whilst studying for the language qualifications required for full RCVS registration. This is a critical alternative recruitment route to the temporary registration scheme.*

3.6 The performance data also provides an oversight of the International English Language Testing System pass rates, where the RCVS state a Level 7 must be attained as part of full registration to the RCVS.

3.7 The RCVS meeting to discuss EAEVE* accreditation was held on 18 January 2024. The outcome confirmed that EAEVE accreditation will continue to be available for a maximum of 5 years, ending in January 2029. Whilst this removes the more immediate risk that withdrawal of EAEVE accreditation would exacerbate OV recruitment challenges, it is something that we will continue to monitor, specifically any proposed replacement proposals.

**the RCVS temporary policy whereby graduates of veterinary schools accredited or approved by the European Association for Establishments of Veterinary Education (EAEVE) and Level 7 IELTS could join the Register of Veterinary Surgeons without having to first take the Statutory Membership Examination*

3.8 Underpinning all the work within the TR workstream is the development of a strategic planning tool that will enable us to model various scenarios, to then inform different delivery models. This will take account of reductions in use of the TR scheme and attrition rates in various roles and will serve as a powerful tool for FSA Operations to predict pinch-points in advance so that pre-emptive action can be taken.

b. FSADOC Retender

3.9 Under the governance of the VR programme, and observing ARAC guidance, the FSA is running an open, robust, and transparent tender process for the Delivery of Official Controls contracts to be in place from 31 March 2025. To ensure appropriate assurance the FSA have changed their approach to market engagement, including key interested stakeholders, such as RCVS and meat industry representatives, as well as the incumbent and other potential suppliers. Due to the contracts criticality in ensuring food safety and animal welfare, a stable transition and maintaining service continuity is paramount.

3.10 Completion of a market health assessment confirmed that the market for delivering these services is complex and the supplier landscape limited. Therefore, as part of the retender the FSA is aiming to improve market resilience, focusing on attracting new and returning entrants and increasing the tender accessibility to SMEs (Small and Medium sized Enterprises).

3.11 Contracting options have been agreed, and a final Procurement Strategy developed and shared with Cabinet Office following EMT approval in early January. The Procurement Strategy supports the Outline Business Case, which was submitted to DHSC, Cabinet Office then HMT for approval. Work is continuing simultaneously to develop the contract specification and associated documentation for the Invitation to Tender (ITT) which is scheduled to go live in April.

3.12 The project has very little contingency as the critical path and milestones are very tight. The Programme and Delivery Boards continue to monitor and manage the associated risks and mitigations.

c. The planned delivery and execution of a strategic stakeholder, education and engagement plan

3.13 This part of the programme aims to increase the visibility and understanding of the broader systemic capacity challenges within the veterinary profession, particularly in public health. It will drive and influence cross government activity and create a platform for meaningfully influencing key policy/funding/political stakeholders. It will continue to build understanding of the importance of the role of the abattoir OV and how vital it is in ensuring food is safe for consumers and that animal health and welfare and international trade interests are protected.

3.14 It is also important to ensure that the potential economic and societal impacts, should the FSA fail to deliver Official Controls, are fully understood by those key stakeholders. As part of the successful FSA Annual Report of Food Standards (ARFS) launch, veterinary challenges attracted the attention of a broad range of stakeholders and other interested parties. It is also critical for stakeholder strategies that we retain our section in the ARFS 2023.

3.15 Recently, following a meeting between FSA Chair and Sir Robert Goodwill, a letter was sent to the EFRA Select Committee ([letter](#) published 23 January 2024). The Clerk of the Committee has since confirmed that a one-day hearing on [vet shortages](#) will take place on 12 March 2024. In preparation we are working with Defra on providing joint evidence on the systemic challenges, and the implications and impacts on the food industry, border controls, biosecurity, and animal health and welfare.

3.16 The FSA's Director of UK and International Affairs is working across departments, with Chief Veterinary Officers (CVOs) and the wider veterinary profession to develop a roundtable to influence industry to work together with a view to resolving the vet capacity issues. This is in very early stages and talks commenced mid-February.

3.17 The FSA will continue to nurture our relationship with the RCVS, particularly around the FSADOC retender, reducing our reliance on the TR scheme and potential replacements for the end of recognition of EAEVE accreditation, on which the OV pipeline approach currently relies.

3.18 Expanding on other established relationships with Veterinary Education Establishments, the programme successfully completed a pilot for the Extra Mural Studies (EMS) week in November 2023, an activity which Programme Board have permanently endorsed to continue, with an ambition to diversify cohorts in the future. The EMS week showcased FSA veterinary work to veterinary students providing insight into working in a public health role. EMS is widely recognised as one of the single biggest influences on veterinary career awareness and represents a relatively small investment for significant future gain.

3.19 Building on events already undertaken at Harper and Keele, and Surrey Vet Schools' "Transitioning into the Workplace" in January and February of this year, the vet team will also be delivering lectures at the Cambridge Veterinary School and Nottingham Vet School in May and June, respectively.

4. Risks to Programme Delivery

4.1 There are several external factors which may influence the landscape in which we are operating and create risks to delivery. There will be a General Election at some point in 2024, which could result in a period of instability and potential delays to programme deliverables, particularly engagement with political stakeholders. This instability may also influence suppliers when bidding for the new FSADOC contracts, with uncertainty around the political and the financial outlook reflected in the costs.

4.2 Changes to government policy announced in late 2023 relating to earnings thresholds for skilled overseas workers present a wider risk for the FSA to consider in terms of the cost of delivering Official Controls. This will need to be considered as part of the next Spending Review bid as well as our charging strategy for meat controls, to reflect the increasing costs of providing this critical regulatory activity.

4.3 Availability of resources and funding remains a constraint across the FSA and the programme will continue to assess and prioritise its outputs ensuring that resources are used optimally to ensure successful delivery of the programme's key objectives.

5. Conclusions

5.1 The desired outcome from the programme is that there is no, or minimal negative impact on our ability to deliver a full service to meat FBOs in the short to medium term, should Temporary Registration be removed in December 2024 as anticipated. This will be measured through our ability to be able to deliver 100% of standard resourcing requirements from industry through 2025 and 2026 without an over-reliance on contingency plans. Should we be unable to achieve this then we would be in a position where we would need to prioritise which meat plants to deliver our Official Control services to, and the FSA would leave itself exposed as they would not be able to legally operate. This will directly impact food supply, export and animal health and welfare, as well as the economic sustainability of wider food supply chain businesses, from farmers to retailers.

5.2 As a supplementary outcome, we also aim to provide evidence to encourage the government and the vet profession to find solutions to the shortage of public health vets in a bid to create a more long-term, cross-system approach to tackling the crisis facing veterinary public health.

5.3 Finally, through the retender of the FSADOC contracts, the programme aims to create more resilience in the delivery system through attracting new potential suppliers, considering alternative delivery models, and prioritising service reliability and market resilience over pure cost efficiency.

5.4 The Business Committee is asked to note progress to date within the programme, specifically;

- the decisions and plans in preparation for exiting the Temporary Registration scheme;
- the activities being undertaken to deliver the FSADOC Retender;
- the planned delivery and execution of a strategic stakeholder, education, and engagement plan to support the programme and highlight broader systemic resourcing issues.