

P-06-1291: Hold an enquiry into the corporate takeover of the veterinary profession in Wales

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 17 October 2022
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Reference: SR22/3596-4

Petition Number: P-06-1291

Petition title: Hold an enquiry into the corporate takeover of the veterinary profession in Wales

Text of petition: In 1999 legislation was changed by the UK Government which allowed veterinary practices to be owned not just by qualified veterinary surgeons. This paved the way for private equity stakeholder corporates to buy into this market.

These profit driven organisations have changed the profession so that it is barely recognisable. In many parts of Wales, it is virtually impossible to find an independently run veterinary practice.

The corporate buyout now extends to out of hours provision, referral practices as well as general practice. The corporates also own laboratories, drug companies, pet crematorium as well as shares in many pets' food companies. Such a monopoly make the few remaining independently run practices presence virtually untenable. From vet school to recruitment through to practice the corporates have the advantage. Set in this context their influence on bodies such as the RCVS and BVA is predictable.

For those of use with companion animals this monopoly has had devastating consequences. From lack of choice in finding an independent practice, seeing the same Veterinary Surgeon for continuity of care trough to cost. But



most of all clinical decisions being made with the policies of the corporate's taking centre stages.

My experience with My Cat Rosa sadly means I will always mistrust some within the profession. Companion animals are part of people's families. Covid, the isolation and mental health issues have made these relationships even more precious. I dread to think (but have been informed) how the animal rescue sectors in Wales copes. Because they must deal with some of the most abuse and clinically challenged animals who have significant and often complex medical needs.

Despite numerous petitions to the UK Government, Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs etc have failed to take any action whatsoever. Cymru has led the way before on animals and their welfare, so we ask our Senedd to do so again.

1. Background

A change in law relating to the [Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966](#) was introduced in 1999, allowing persons who are not vets to legally own veterinary practices for the first time in the UK. Prior to this, only qualified and licensed veterinarians were able to own practices.

According to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), the change in law was as a result of the [Competition Act 1998](#). This Act was a harmonisation with European competition policy as restricting ownership to vets would have been seen as an anti-competitive or a restrictive action. Section 17.14 of the [RCVS Code of Professional Conduct](#) states that veterinary surgeons provide services through a variety of entities, including limited companies and partnerships and may be managed by non-veterinary surgeons. However, the RCVS expects organisations to appoint a senior veterinary surgeon to provide appropriate professional direction.

The majority of veterinary practices in the UK (over 53%, RCVS) are now owned by seven companies. Of the 343 veterinary practice premises in Wales, 151 are owned by seven companies (44%). The [2019 RCVS Survey of the Veterinary Profession](#) found that 40% of respondents work in practices that are part of a corporate or a joint venture with a corporate group. The same survey also found that some respondents were concerned with the rise in corporate ownership, particularly

about the impact on patient care, younger veterinary surgeons' development and support for smaller businesses.

The British Veterinary Association has a neutral view of corporate ownership and welcomes competition and choice for pet owners. Stakeholders say the positives of corporate ownership include improved employee benefits, professional training and access to new graduate schemes. -However they argue this could be offset by restricted clinical choice, delayed decision making and outsourcing of out of hours services.

On 18 February 2022, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) found that the purchase of Quality Pet Care by the CVS Group (which owns 467 vet practices in the UK) raised competition concerns in five local areas, in which the combined businesses would provide over 30% of veterinary services. CVS Group ultimately agreed to divest Quality Pet Care, a decision accepted by the CMA on 27 June 2022.

The RCVS Code of Professional Conduct prohibits veterinary surgeons or groups of veterinary surgeons from entering any agreements that may have the effect of fixing fees.

In the Republic of Ireland, the Veterinary Practice (Amendment) Bill 2021 is currently at the Third Stage in the Houses of Oireachtas. The purpose of the Bill is to amend the Veterinary Practice Act 2005 to prohibit the ownership of veterinary practices by persons other than those persons who are veterinary practitioners and to provide for related matters. The Bill was considered by the Select Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine, which recommended it proceed to Third Stage consideration.

2. Welsh Government action

The Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd's ('The Minister') letter on this petition states the provision of veterinary services in Wales remains a non-devolved issue and as such is unable to comment or engage with the matter. The Minister said:

[The petitioners] comments regarding general standards of care and charging are a matter of some concern as I feel strongly that the same professional standards should be expected of all vets who practice and

offer services to the public, regardless of the model of ownership and operation.

3. Senedd action

On 17 March 2022, during Ministerial scrutiny, the Senedd's Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee raised concerns regarding private, large veterinary companies buying up smaller vets practices in rural areas and not being able to offer full provision of vet services.

In response to the question of whether the Minister was aware of this or whether it was an isolated incident, Dr Christianne Glossop, the Chief Veterinary Officer for Wales, replied:

Of course, veterinary practices are commercial businesses and they're going to make their own commercial decisions, but there has been a trend over the last few years of large corporate practices being established, and, indeed buying some of the independent practices. [...]. We are watching it carefully. Obviously in itself it doesn't have to be a bad thing. So, as long as the services that we need to be provided are still being provided to the right standard, then it is a matter for the veterinary profession to make its own judgement on that. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons sets the standards, so it's not a question of standards being diminished, although certainly, I've been seeing this happening – for example, practices now quite often don't offer the 24-hour cover; there are night services. So, if you're trying to get your dog or cat seen out of hours, you might find yourself having to go to an alternative practice. So, that's an issue. But in terms of provision for the services that we need vets to provide, that's still happening across Wales, but it is something that we are watching very carefully.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

