

UK veterinary profession simply not ready for 'no deal' Brexit

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The UK veterinary profession is simply not prepared for a 'No Deal' Brexit, warns the editor of *Vet Record*.

The journal has awarded Boris Johnson's government a 'red rating' for its lack of preparedness in key areas, should no agreement on the terms of withdrawal from the European Union be reached and approved by MPs.

The primary concern is workforce, because the UK is already facing a critical shortage of vets—so much so, that the government decided this month to put the profession back on the Shortage Occupation List, meaning that certain immigration criteria have been relaxed to boost the headcount.

And there are real fears that a No Deal Brexit would only worsen matters amid the increased red tape and checks required, points out editor Adele Waters.

There is no evidence that vets from Australasia or the US are keen to come to the UK to make up the numbers, she says. "And while there may be interest from overseas vets, such as those from India, there has been no serious programme of work to support these vets to get registered," she writes.

Getting vet nurses to take on some of vets' traditional work "offers a very real solution," she suggests, but warns: "We are years away from that being legitimised."

The British Veterinary Association (BVA) has been issuing alerts about the vet workforce for years, so it's not as if the government didn't know

there was a problem, she adds.

The sector where the shortfall is most critical is public health, where the UK is already heavily dependent on foreign vets. These vets, called official veterinarians (OVs), perform statutory functions, such as checking farm animals are fit for slaughter and certifying animal carcasses as safe.

"With the prospect of huge disruption to our trading transactions and a requirement for more checks [the government] has anticipated that the volume of certification work could rise by as much as 250 per cent," she writes, adding that Defra (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) has not given sufficient assurance that there is sufficient OV capacity to meet the new demands.

To gauge how prepared the veterinary profession is in key areas such as EU-UK trade, medicines, checks on the Irish Border, animal welfare, research and education, animal travel, and workforce, *Vet Record* spoke to a wide range of experts and sources close to these particular issues, to draw up a traffic light score, details of which are explored further in two feature articles.

Green indicates ready; red indicates not ready, and amber somewhere in between. Waters acknowledges that the rating isn't scientific, but it is "a barometer for how confident we can be in the UK coping if it doesn't strike a deal with the EU," she says.

Workforce gets a red rating as does the issue of checks on the Irish border; all the other areas get amber, leading the journal to award the government an overall red rating, particularly as the shortage of professionals will have a major impact on everything else.

Waters acknowledges that a great deal of work has gone into preparing

the UK for Brexit, and that the government department most affected—Defra—has met some major goals.

But the UK still isn't ready for a No Deal, she points out. "It doesn't matter which side of the Brexit debate your are on, this lack of preparedness is not good enough. No modern industrialised country has ever tried to do anything like Brexit and the stakes are too high not to be fully prepared for the worst-case scenario."

She adds: "If Johnson's cabinet is, or ever was, genuine about its threat to take the UK out of the EU within days, then it surely needs the UK to be business ready. No ifs and no buts. Anything shy of that is a gamble with people's livelihoods, our economy and established way of life."

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