Linda Smith looks at some of the options available

ABOUT 800 vets are employed in the public sector by government departments and agencies in the UK. This amounts to about 5 per cent of practising vets. The umbrella organisation, Government Veterinary Surgeons (GVS), is led by the head of profession, the Chief Veterinary Officer, and it links the government vets spread throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Some of the GVS member organisations are listed in the table opposite.

As a general rule, jobs fall into two categories: operational and policy-based.

Operational work
The biggest veterinary employer in the country, Animal Health, is the executive agency responsible for implementing notifiable disease control, farm animal welfare, import and export control, and a variety of surveillance programmes.

With over 270 vets, you join a GB-wide community, and a similar number of technical staff are employed to support you. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (DARD) performs a similar, but slightly wider, function, incorporating meat hygiene and policy development roles too. The Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) also falls into the operational category, giving the option of working in a variety of pathology, research and epidemiology jobs.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) Operations Group (formerly the Meat Hygiene Service) employs official veterinarians (OVs) in slaughterhouses and other types of premises producing food for human consumption. OVs enforce public health, animal health and animal welfare policies, and are involved in import and export controls, as well as surveillance programmes.

The Home Office employs a small team of vets to oversee the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. This involves inspecting premises that hold licences under the Act, to ensure licence conditions are being met, and therefore supports and polices the research community.

Policy advice
Not everyone is suited to the outdoor life, but don’t be fooled: even those jobs that appear to be completely office-based can still involve trips and visits. Working for organisations such as Defra, the FSA, the Welsh Assembly Government or the Scottish Government tends to involve providing veterinary policy advice. This type of work can be very demanding, but rewarding, and you get to work with a wide variety of other professionals, including lawyers, economists, statisticians, sociologists and politicians. Policy jobs also offer, in some cases, travel abroad.

Pros and cons
The variety of work in government service is immense, and changes all the time. GVS encourages interchange between member organisations, so you can get an idea of other work areas too. Working hours are generally fixed, and out-of-hours work is often more limited than in practice. As a general rule, working terms and conditions are well defined and secure. In most cases, you could have the opportunity to apply for promotion at an appropriate time in your life, and take on more managerial tasks. On a wider scale, working in the public sector is, for many
Ten-minute chat

Tom Ogilvie-Graham, MBE, is commanding officer of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps (RAVC) – a unit of highly motivated soldiers that cares for the ceremonial horses and the growing team of dogs deployed in operational units.

What made you become an Army vet?
I took an Army bursary when I was in my second year at Edinburgh, partly as I wanted to join the Services, and partly as I needed cash to cover my point-to-point expenses!

How did you get to where you are today?
I was always keen on horses, hunting quite a lot as well as racing, hunter trials and so on, and this helped me secure postings to both the King’s Troop Royal Horse Artillery (whose horses pull the guns that fire Royal salutes), and the Household Cavalry. I took a doctorate in equine behaviour when I was at the Household Cavalry, and also studied during a Fulbright scholarship at Cornell.

On other academic development, I qualified as a barrister from the Inns of Court and took a Masters at Reading.

Along the way, I’ve also taken a number of military courses: the one that gave me the most satisfaction was qualifying as a paratrooper (the parachuting bit is relatively easy but the selection beforehand is quite challenging!).

How do you spend a typical day?
As with most vets, I try to avoid routine. That said, as an old man (at least in military terms, being in my very late 40s), my life is inevitably much more predictable than before, especially since I am unlikely to go on overseas deployment again. I deal with people’s careers, I plan which way my small part of the Army is going, I write lots of letters and make my own coffee (cutbacks!).

What do you like about your job?
The satisfaction of working with really highly motivated soldiers, which almost all RAVC soldiers are (we select only one in 10 who apply to join us). This never goes away. The time I have spent on active service has given me a great deal to look back on. My first posting in Northern Ireland was formative – and serving with the Royal Engineers in the first Gulf War, then with the Airborne Brigade in Rwanda, with the RAVC in Bosnia and with the US Army in Baghdad have all presented different challenges. The animals themselves are great, constantly surprising, and, at its best, the Army can have a fantastic team spirit.

What do you not like?
Being in the Army is primarily a young person’s game, and, as you get more senior, you inevitably find yourself less part of a team and more bound down with procedure and paperwork rather than dealing with people.

Why is your job important?
No one in the Army is – or should be – indispensable. That said, I’m proud to be in charge of several hundred really good soldiers and a pretty good bunch of veterinary officers, while knowing that the RAVC has doubled in size in recent years as the service we provide in areas such as mine detection, finding hidden weapons, assisting the infantry and other operational tasks has become better recognised by the wider Army.

Why is your job important?
My job is to manage this, but also to provide direction and, I suppose, the main thing is that quite a few other people are counting on me to get things right at my level so they can get on with doing their job – with their animals, out on the ground.

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?
Don’t think about doing this as a full-time career, but look at it initially only as something for four or so years. Check it out by visiting a unit and getting a bit more background (Google ‘Army officer jobs’ to get started) and, if you think you’ve got something to offer, consider it as something quite different from how you will probably spend the rest of your veterinary career, and give it a go.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
If you can’t take a joke, you shouldn’t have joined!

What was your proudest moment?
On a professional level, probably setting up and running a ‘hearts and minds’ veterinary project in northern Kenya that provided a significant and lasting benefit.

What was your most embarrassing moment?
There have been quite a few, but when the vet’s dog is sick in front of a whole lot of senior officers in the General’s office (as happened last week), that’s not ideal. I’m still trying to find the person who fed her so many chocolate Bourbons!