Comment

OVs need a bit more than love

THE UK’s future trading relationship with Europe is as uncertain today as it was on June 24, 2016, the day of the Brexit referendum result, and that is likely to remain the case for months. There are a range of EU exit scenarios available – anything from full single market access to third country status – but as Brexit negotiators began their fourth round of talks this week, prime minister Theresa May had already ruled out some options that already exist for non-EU countries (EEA membership, like Norway, or a free trade deal like Canada, for example).

Instead, she made it clear she wanted a bespoke or ‘creative’ solution – one that will forge a new economic relationship between the parties.

In all this uncertainty, one thing is clear – the role and value of official veterinarians (OVs) in supporting UK trade, is big and growing.

While this is recognised by most vets, it is less well understood by the public. But Brexit – in whatever form we eventually get it – will lead to a greater focus on government veterinary work, and it could also pave the way for an enhanced role – and, perhaps, status – for vets that carry out government work.

Last week the UK’s chief vet Nigel Gibbens told OVs at their annual conference in Swindon that now was a good opportunity for their sector, not just in scaling up operations but also in supporting companies to ensure regulatory compliance.

‘Whether you are a vet in government or a vet working with government, this (your work) is a growth area – inescapably a growth area. It is not going in the other direction,’ he said.

‘I think there is an opportunity here for us vets in that we might grow from not being the person who signs the export health certificate at the end of the line, but also the trusted adviser that understands exports and part of an exporting company’s ability to meet standards.’

The government’s ambition is for all food produced by the UK to be a trusted brand, synonymous with quality, safety and high welfare.

Under current export requirements, OVs have to certify all animal-based food products for export outside of the EU. Each certificate has its own specific requirements (there are around 1,400 different types) according to what is being exported and what country it is being exported to. Some countries have very particular demands, for example, China has very particular requirements for meat products. Even for an experienced OV, these forms can take two to three hours to complete. But without them, the export business and UK food trade would simply grind to a halt.

Defra officials have been working with colleagues in the Department for Exiting the EU to draw up ‘day 1 readiness’ plans in case there is no trade deal on March 29, 2019, the date in which the UK should, theoretically, leave the EU – two years after Article 50 was triggered.

In this scenario, the UK would be treated as a third country and export health certificates would be required for all exports to EU countries. It is estimated that this would equate to a 325 per cent increase in the volume of this certification work.

Such an increase in workload will demand a significant increase in OV capacity. But with many UK employers already struggling to recruit vets, where are these OVs going to come from?

For solutions, we return to less clear territory. New graduates aren’t an option – undergraduate training programmes don’t prepare UK-grown vets to do public veterinary work and there is no intention of introducing public veterinary management into the already packed undergraduate curriculum.

Significant numbers of UK recruits aren’t likely either – little is being done to attract them. OV salaries, though not as bad as is often claimed, do not seem to offer the necessary incentive to attract UK-grown talent to do the additional speciality training. Improving salaries isn’t even on the Food Standard Agency’s agenda.

It all adds up to a certain level of hope – some might say complacency – that we are heading for a soft Brexit and the UK will simply be able to continue employing its OV workforce from Europe, as it has done for many years.

But it is a risk, and the UK is exposed here. Our public veterinary services are heavily reliant on labour from non-UK European vets – the vast majority of vets working in abattoirs fall into this category, for example. And approximately 45 per cent of government vet posts are fulfilled by non-EU UK vets, according to the BVA.

Basically UK trade in animal products would stop if we couldn’t secure this vital labour. Hence Gibbens was pretty straight talking in his interpretation of the situation, telling non-UK European OVs they should feel reassured about their ability to stay in the UK post-Brexit.

‘We do love you, we can’t live without you,’ he told them. ‘If you look at it pragmatically, if we don’t have you we can’t do what we need to do without you. So somewhere in the end game there is a place for you. It needs to be a good place and that’s part of my job – to make sure it’s as good as it can be. But be confident – there is every reason to be confident.’

Love is always welcome, of course, but money is more persuasive in this context.

The UK’s agri-food sector is worth around £13 billion per year in exports. In terms of trade growth, we can’t compete with big global markets, such as Brazil when it comes to beef production for example, so we are very much in the realm of adding value. UK plc needs to build and sustain a reputation for quality and safety – for good animal health and welfare. For excellence.

Experts say the quality of OVs in the UK has increased in recent years and is on an upward trajectory. The speciality has been professionalised and OVs are systematically prepared for the world they do. Their error rate is pretty low – around 4-5 per cent per year but this includes minor errors and only one or two cases per year are subject to disciplinary review. So OVs are doing their bit.

But it’s easy to underestimate the complexity of their work – how difficult it is to certify export or to carry out TB testing, for example. And if their world is to get more complex and more demanding, investing in them is worth some serious attention.

The UK’s trading reputation is dependent on OV vigilance and diligence, so perhaps the government should show them a bit more than love.

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