

Rates relief campaign gains momentum

Rates relief for vets

By Matthew Limb

PRESSURE is mounting on ministers to boost financial support for struggling vet practices and avert potential closures linked to the Covid-19 lockdown.

Hundreds of vets and around 50 MPs so far are backing a campaign by the BVA to ensure vet practices, like pet shops, can access business rates relief.

Ben Lake, Plaid Cymru MP for Ceredigion, who is collecting support for an early day motion in parliament highlighting the issue, said the government must act so vets can 'weather the storm'.

Vet practices are not eligible for business rates relief, despite the fact that many are high street businesses and derive a significant proportion of their income from retailing medicines, treatments and other pet products.

Lake, who is a BVA honorary associate, said vets were doing what the government asked of them – protecting animal health and welfare and maintaining the food supply chain – but were suffering income losses from the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions.

He said many vets could not furlough themselves or their staff because they were needed to conduct TB tests and perform other vital functions.

Nor could many access grants because of income thresholds applied under the self-employed income support scheme.

Calling for more flexibility, Lake told *Vet Record*: 'If there was movement on any one of these aspects – business rates relief, the furlough scheme, or self-employed income scheme thresholds – that would go some way to helping lots of vet practices in my own constituency and across the UK to weather the storm.'

Alistair Cliff, clinical director of Crown Vets in Inverness, also called for more support and outlined the problems practices are facing.

'We're running at somewhere in the region of 50 per cent loss of revenue, which happened overnight. We are in a better situation than many others – about 25 per cent of practices in the UK have seen a hit to baseline of 75 per cent and over. But it's still unsustainable unless we get the support we need.'

Cliff said the government did not seem to appreciate the significant 'baseline costs' that vet practices had to shoulder in merely providing a 24/7 emergency or essential care service.

He said the vet profession was a protective 'shield' for animal health, animal welfare and human health, and closure of practices for lack of government support would leave 'gaping holes'.

'The risks in the short term are significant and in the long term are completely incalculable,' he said.

The BVA has called for an urgent meeting with environment secretary George Eustice to discuss the issue.

It has also written to the Treasury with other healthcare bodies affected by the business rates relief 'anomaly', including the British Dental Association with which it is supporting an e-petition to parliament that is expected to go live this week.

BVA members have been contacting parliamentarians across the UK using a template letter created by the association.

A BVA spokesperson said: 'The letters have been downloaded several hundred times from our website and we're aware that some vets have also written their own personal letters.'

Most MPs who have responded have offered to help, the spokesperson said.

'In most cases, this involves writing to the Treasury, but some have also written to other government departments, some have liaised with local councils, several have tabled parliamentary questions and

“

The risks in the short term are significant and in the long term are completely incalculable

some have invited the vet that wrote to them to a virtual surgery to discuss the issue further.'

The chancellor, Rishi Sunak, announced a package of support measures when the nationwide lockdown was first introduced in March.

Businesses in the retail, hospitality, leisure and childcare sectors are eligible for a 100 per cent business rates holiday for a year in England, Scotland and Wales.

But 'medical services' such as vet practices, dentists, doctors, osteopaths and chiropractors are not eligible for business rates relief.

In Northern Ireland, all businesses are eligible for a three-month business rates holiday covering April, May and June.

Lake told *Vet Record*: 'At the very beginning the chancellor said he didn't expect anybody to be punished for doing the right thing for public health.'

'We expect businesses that have followed government advice and tried to do their best to preserve and promote the wellbeing of the community not to be punished. I don't think it's unreasonable.'

A Treasury spokesperson said: 'The chancellor has made an unprecedented package of measures available to protect vets as part of the national effort in response to the coronavirus. This includes covering 80 per cent of furloughed workers' wages, up to £2500 per month, 100 per cent government-backed loans

worth up to £50,000 and more time for vets to pay their tax bills, with no interest or late penalties.'

A Defra spokesperson said it was working closely with the veterinary sector 'during this challenging time' and government help was available.

'We have received the letter from the BVA and are engaging with them further around support for the veterinary sector.' ●

