

'Culture change needed to fix OV shortage'

Following criticism of how the supply of official veterinarians in England and Wales is managed, Josh Loeb talks to **Charles Hartwell**, CEO of OV provider Eville & Jones, about his view of the market and the company's business model

THE CEO of veterinary public health company Eville & Jones (E&J) has admitted that there is 'probably a grain of truth' in reports suggesting past dissatisfaction among the company's employees – but he insisted pay and conditions are improving amid a drive to boost retention.

Charles Hartwell, a chartered accountant who started in the role of CEO a year ago, said he was working hard to 'professionalise a number of processes' at the company and wanted to 'listen' and 'not take our people for granted'.

He added: 'I try and come at it from the perspective that if you look after your people, your people will look after you.'

Hartwell's decision to speak to *Vet Record* followed letters to this journal, and wider media coverage, critiquing arrangements under which the Food Standards Agency (FSA) subcontracts delivery of abattoir official veterinarians (OVs) to E&J in England and Wales.

The agency has a three-year contract with the company, worth around £84 million. At an RCVS

council meeting on 18 March, some council members criticised this outsourcing and E&J's business model (*VR*, 10/17 April 2021, vol 188, pp 240–241), accusing the company of paying staff too little and relying too heavily on labour brought into the UK from overseas.

However, Hartwell described as 'pretty solid' the package the company offers recruits.

'I think there's a perception that we pay dreadful salaries and give no benefits – that we just get people in and crack the whip – but that's not the situation,' he said.

He added that the minimum salary for an OV starting out with E&J was £30,000 per annum – although many vets working for the company earned 'significantly more' – plus a company car and a range of other benefits such as the company covering the cost of RCVS fees.

Since joining E&J, Hartwell has overseen the introduction of new measures aimed at increasing engagement with staff and providing better career pathways. He has helped launch forums for



CEO of Eville & Jones, Charles Hartwell

frontline staff to communicate directly with the company's management as well as fresh CPD opportunities and a financial recognition scheme.

Defra has said it anticipates a 'severe shortage' of OVs in abattoirs across England and Wales this year. The FSA recently announced it will be providing E&J with an additional £1.6 million in support payments, spread over 12 months (*VR*, 24 April/1 May 2021, vol 188, p 286). Hartwell said this money would amount to a 'temporary enhancement' to OVs' salaries.

'What's clear in the market at the moment is that, through Covid-19 and Brexit and everything else, there's a real shortage of vets in the system,' he explained. 'A lot of vets are being attracted into higher paid export health certification work.'

'The view – and I think it's a very logical view – is that a temporary enhancement for us for 12 months, while all this Brexit and Covid-19

WHAT IS THE SITUATION WITH OFFICIAL VETERINARIANS ELSEWHERE IN THE UK?

Food Standards Scotland (FSS) used to have a contract with Hallmark Meat Hygiene for the supply of official veterinarians (OVs) in Scottish abattoirs. That changed in 2019, when FSS took the decision to end outsourcing. Asked about rates of pay and job satisfaction under the new 'in-house' system, an FSS spokesperson said: 'OVs currently sit within the B2 civil service salary scale which ranges between £32,781 to £35,813... Since taking our OVs and meat hygiene inspectors "in-house" in 2019, our staff survey information suggests job satisfaction levels have improved steadily and remain high.'

The previous contract model had 'led to unacceptable levels of staff turnover and poor staff retention rates', the spokesperson added.

Sheila Voas, Scotland's chief vet, said the change 'hasn't completely solved problems of recruitment and retention – there are still a finite number of vets around to do all the required work – but it has helped to create a more stable workforce.'

In Northern Ireland, OVs are directly employed by the agriculture department, but some meat hygiene inspectors are employed via subcontractor Eville & Jones (E&J). Across abattoirs in England and Wales, E&J is the sole supplier of official veterinary controls and inspection to the FSA.

chaos is sorting itself out, is one tool in the armoury for trying to help with recruitment at this very difficult time.'

However, he warned that the underlying problems would take years to resolve and would require a shift in how veterinary public health work is viewed in the UK, alongside an increase in the capacity of the UK's vet school system.

'There is not enough capacity in the UK vet school system to provide the level of capacity that the market needs,' he said. 'We have a situation in the market where 49 per cent of all vets registering with the RCVS each year come from the EU, and we have full employment in the veterinary sector in this country, so

demand always exceeds supply.'

Issues including Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have 'massively reduced the supply of vets into the system', Hartwell said, adding: 'What's going to fix this is a root and branch cultural change to the perception UK graduates have of veterinary public health, and a significant expansion of capacity of the veterinary school system.'

He also lamented that the public were largely ignorant of the role played by OVs and meat inspectors, saying abattoir workers deserved praise. 'They [the public] take it for granted that there is meat on their plate and they take it for granted that that meat is not going to make them ill and that the animal that gave them that meat was looked

after and wasn't mistreated,' he said. 'The UK has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world. The people who work with the FSA are responsible for that, so should be applauded.'

Asked what more the government could do to avert predicted shortages of OVs, Hartwell called for the visa application process to be made smoother – for example through allowing applicants from overseas to sit an English language test either remotely in their country of origin or after arrival in the UK. At present, the Home Office insists that the test be sat in person at a local test centre in the country of origin before arrival in the UK. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has made this more onerous. ●



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