



# It's time to be heard

Project Listen 2021

**Vets4Pets**

# Summary

**Project Listen 2021 was about connecting with colleagues and veterinary professionals, hearing their stories, learning and creating an agenda for change. We've had a great response from vets, nurses and support teams from across the profession who told us their views, from good to the not so good, on wellbeing, work/life balance and benefits.**

**We've seen how the profession has changed through the pandemic, and it's obvious there is still a great passion within teams across the UK.**

**This report will highlight the key outcomes and, importantly, outline the changes Vets4Pets and Companion Care Vets will try to implement as a result.**

**The goal was always to kick off a profession wide conversation to challenge the status quo and strive for a better working environment for all colleagues and veterinary teams within our profession. We hope that this is just the start of the conversation.**

Throughout the COVID pandemic, every one of us has had to deal with a huge upheaval and change like we've never seen before. Whilst we'd like to think we're out of the worst of the crisis, there has been lasting structural and social changes in the way we live our lives that will affect us all.

We've seen significant changes within our own profession and alongside the sharp rise in pet ownership, the numbers of UK-practicing veterinary surgeons leaving the RCVS register either entirely or by moving to a different category, has increased.<sup>1</sup>

A desire to rebalance lives in favour of family or other interests has encouraged many to look outside of first opinion practice, and to seek ways to use the valuable skill sets they've acquired. The rise in digital consulting and telemedicine has also added new opportunities for veterinary professionals.

The changes will have a lasting effect on how we as a profession, practise veterinary medicine, interact with our clients and manage our caseloads. With a reducing number of practising vets and nurses<sup>2</sup>, the workload of those remaining has increased significantly meaning the already strained workforce are put under growing pressure and increased demand from the public.

Whilst it's no understatement to say that both nationally and internationally the veterinary profession is facing challenges, there have been moments of inspiration over the last 24 months. The sector responded incredibly to the pandemic; it was agile, collaborative and rapidly adapted to fast-changing demands and requirements. We had practices in towns and cities across the country supporting one another to ensure pets got the care they needed, and resources were shared. Friendships were built and as lockdowns came and went veterinary teams continued to care for the nation's animals every day.

You should be rightly proud of the efforts you've made, and the sacrifices endured.

1. RCVS Workforce Summit 2021: Recruitment, retention and return in the veterinary profession - Preliminary Report. 29th November 2021. RCVS  
2. RCVS Workforce Summit 2021: Recruitment, retention and return in the veterinary nursing profession - Preliminary Report. 29th November 2021. RCVS



# Project Listen 2021

The issues you told us about affect all members of the profession, and as a major UK employer with over 440 practices, we believe we're in a unique position to act; to lead a change that can have a positive effect on the working conditions of both our colleagues and veterinary professionals outside of Vets4Pets and Companion Care Vets.

## What we heard...

Vets, nurses and support teams from across the profession were all evenly represented throughout the responses, with over 97% of responses coming from small animal practice in the UK.

The themes of the responses were consistent across both positive and negative opinions. Wellbeing was a key theme, and the benefits of working with a strong team and good leadership were clearly demonstrated. Work/life balance was better where teams worked collaboratively to manage the workload, and many comments were also submitted about working hours and client engagement.

Strikingly there was a huge amount of feedback on the impact that negative client behaviour can have on the wellbeing and stress levels of veterinary professionals, in particular the front of house teams.

Some nurses commented on being unable do the work they were trained to, instead covering other roles, and jumping between one task and another. Veterinary surgeons from across the profession were united in their concerns about the relentless pressure and workload they must deal with every day. Breaks, never leaving on time and pay were also high on the agenda of respondents. The verbatim comments also highlighted the huge passion felt across the profession. The dedication and energy veterinary teams have for caring for their clients' pets shone through and they chose to use this survey as a chance to showcase what made their working environments great.



# Results...

Stemming from increased demand and shortages of veterinary professionals<sup>1,2</sup>, significant numbers of colleagues in the veterinary profession claim to have a poor work/life balance resulting from overtime and a lack of breaks.

This has had an impact on the health and wellbeing of practitioners, which has been further exacerbated by increased demand for veterinary services from the public. Mental health support and flexibility within the role would help to better work/life balance.

The value of some benefits is not being seen by practitioners; better pension contribution, income protection and sick pay are the preferred benefits within the survey.

Base: total sample n=730; veterinarian n=255; veterinary nurse n=246; support seams n=227

1. RCVS Workforce Summit 2021: Recruitment, retention and return in the veterinary profession - Preliminary Report. 29th November 2021. RCVS

2. RCVS Workforce Summit 2021: Recruitment, retention and return in the veterinary nursing profession - Preliminary Report. 29th November 2021. RCVS

# Health and wellbeing...

We asked respondents why they think people are finding the profession tough right now...

High client demand, lack of resource and un-reflective pay which has resulted in practitioners feeling overworked and stressed were the top themes we uncovered.

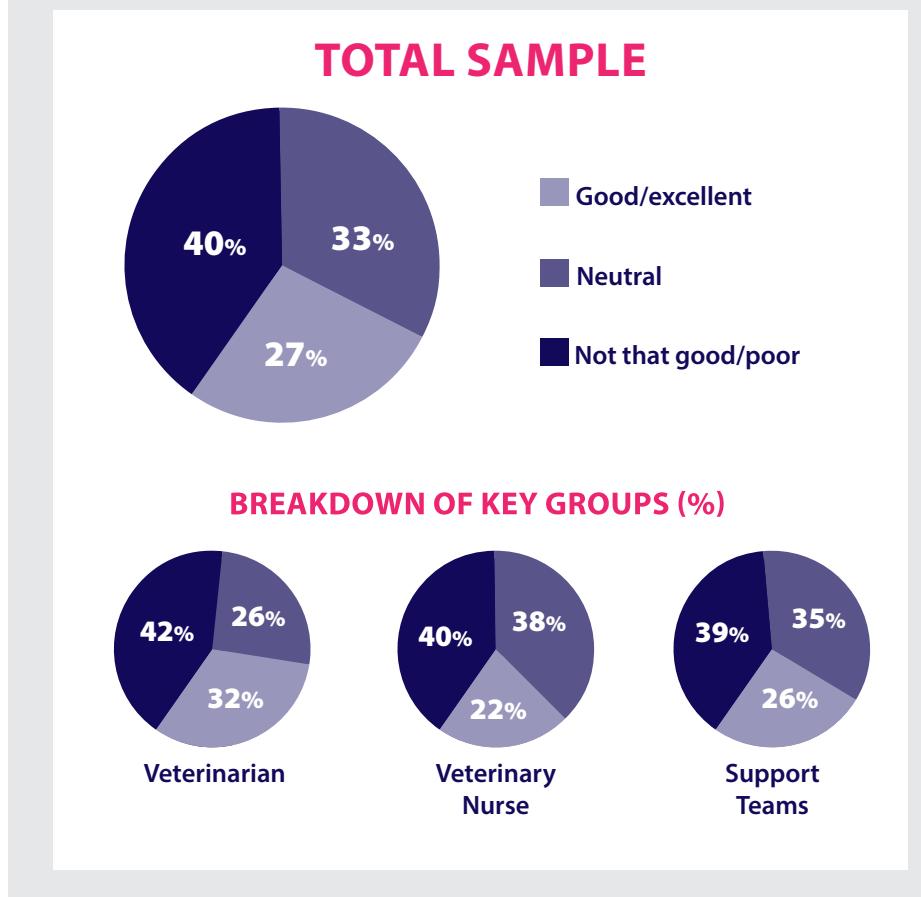
*"Overworked and understaffed, pay does not match the work involved leading to external and internal stress."*

*"I completed the MHFA\* training which was amazing support with tools to use and share with colleagues within the business as well as utilising the wellbeing services directory which again is a useful tool for me and colleagues"*

*"Client demands are higher and there are more patients around now due to covid puppies and kittens."*

We asked respondents to rate their current health and wellbeing...

60% rated their wellbeing as good, excellent or neutral with 40% saying either not that good or poor. This split was even across the different roles.

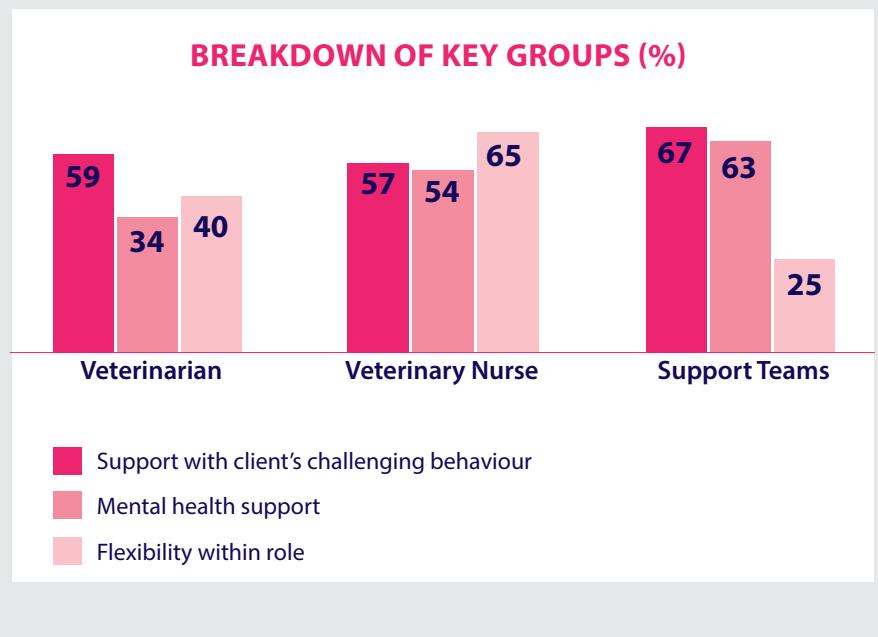


## We asked respondents what factors are most important to them for good health and wellbeing...

Top 3 Factors	%	(%) <sup>*</sup>
Support with client's challenging behaviour	61	(59)
Mental health support	50	(42)
Flexibility within role	44	(40)

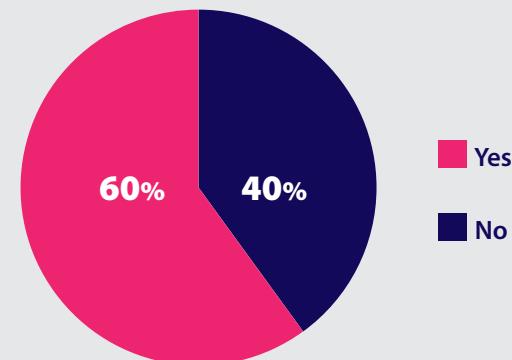
\*Similar themes are present among those who rate their health and wellbeing positivity, although mental health support is ranked lower

The top three answers were split differently across the roles.



## Do you feel confident knowing where to find mental health support?

60% said they did, yet still many do not know, suggesting more needs to be done to support practice colleagues.



## We asked respondents why support with challenging clients, mental health support and flexibility were key...

The top themes were similar to those rated for health and wellbeing.

### Top Themes

Lack of staff makes existing vets/nurses saturated with work

Physically and mentally demanding jobs = mental health support and counselling needed (Mainly seen among ages 25-34 and 35-44)

Not feeling adequately compensated for overtime and hours worked

Monotonous and intense working hours = need greater job variety/flexibility

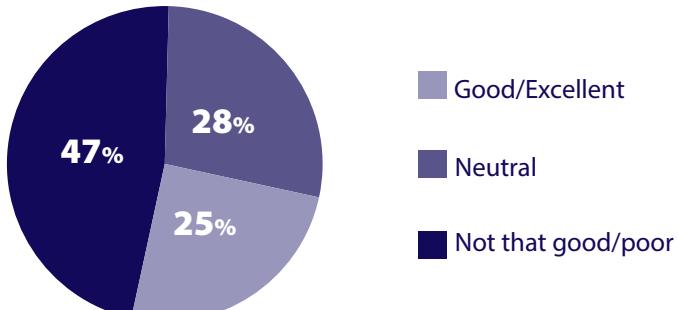
Challenging client behaviour has a direct impact on our health and wellbeing

# Work/life balance...

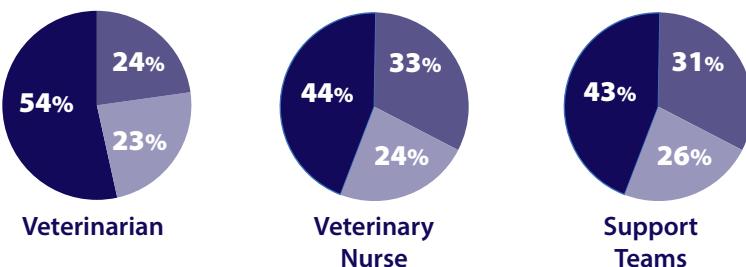
We asked people to rate their current work/life balance...

The majority rated their current work/life balance **not that good or poor**, a theme present across all roles, but particularly seen among vets.

## TOTAL SAMPLE



## BREAKDOWN OF KEY GROUPS (%)

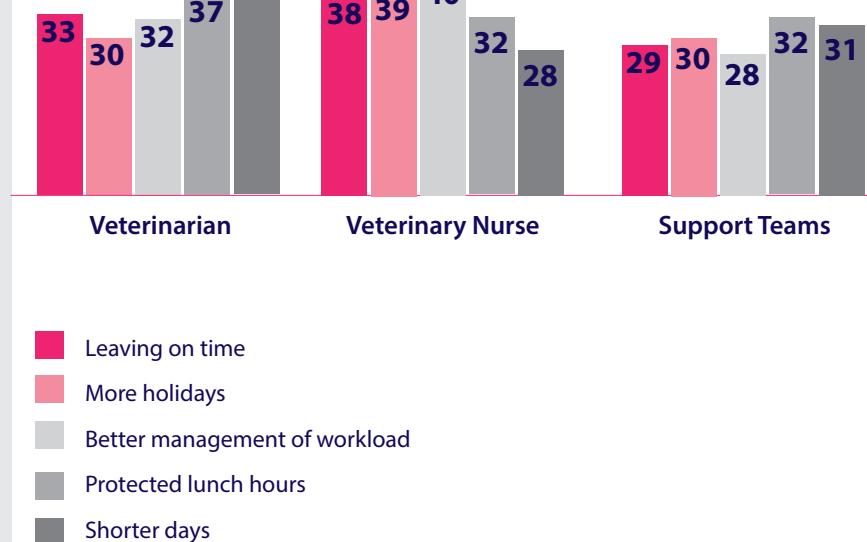


We asked people to identify the factors that would improve their work/life balance...

Leaving on time is seen as the #1 factor with 52% of respondents highlighting it. Better workload and more holidays were also identified.

Top 5 Factors	%
Leaving on time	52
More holidays	44
Better management of workload	43
Protected lunch hours	41
Shorter days	40

## BREAKDOWN OF KEY GROUPS (%)



## We asked those who specifically rated their work/life balance as good, what factors would improve their work/life balance...

The themes remained similar except for protected admin time which is seen as key among the group

Top 5 factors of those who rate their work/life balance positively	%
Leaving on time	44
Protected lunch hour	40
More holiday	39
Shorter days	37
Protected admin time	35

## We asked respondents the following...

### If you could change anything about your working day, what would you change to improve your work/life balance?

The structure of the day, ensuring lunch breaks are taken, overtime is reduced and flexibility in the role is increased were the top answers.

### In your current role, what are the key things that take up your time that you feel shouldn't? What would you like to spend more time doing?

With training coming out top followed by clinical tasks, spending more time with clients and working up cases as the top answers.

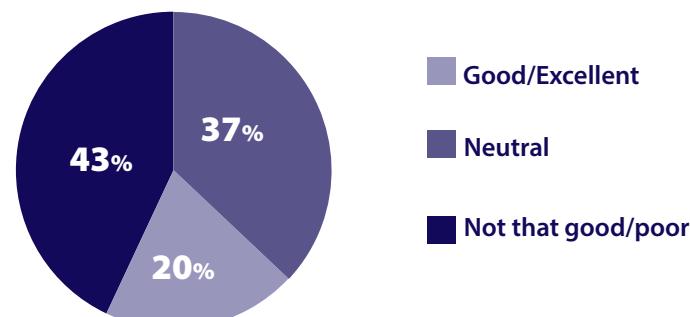
# Benefits...

We asked respondents to rate their current work benefits...

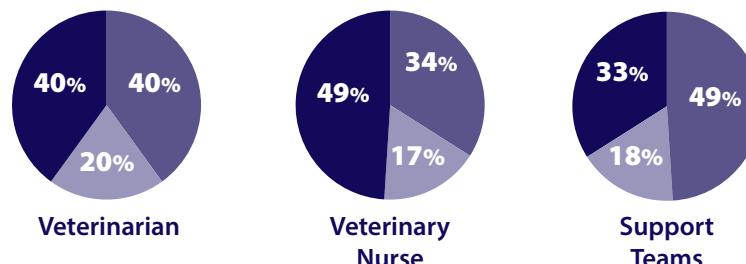
Overall 57% rated them good, excellent and neutral with 43% saying not that good or poor.

In contrast almost 50% of support teams rated benefits neutral and almost 50% of nurses rated them as poor or not that good.

## TOTAL SAMPLE



## BREAKDOWN OF KEY GROUPS (%)



We asked respondents how important a range of benefits were to them...

Better pension contribution, income protection and sick pay came out as the preferred benefits for all practitioners. The relative importance of each benefit was similar, but there were some differences between roles.

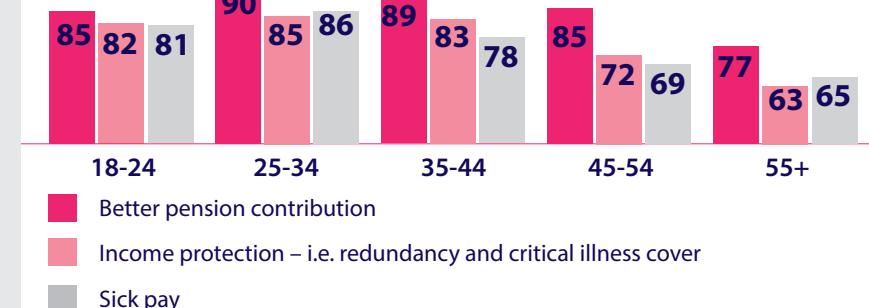
Top 5 Factors	%	(%) <sup>*</sup>
Better pension contribution	87	(90)
Income protection – i.e. redundancy and critical illness cover	80	(82)
Sick pay	78	(81)
Health care package – i.e. private health care	60	(60)
Performance related bonus	54	(59)

\*Similar themes are present among those who rate their benefits positivity.

## BREAKDOWN OF KEY GROUPS (%)



## BY AGE RANGE



Better pension contribution

Income protection – i.e. redundancy and critical illness cover

Sick pay

# Summary...

## Finally, we asked for any other comments...

These show practitioners **enjoy their roles** and have a **huge passion** for the profession, but would like **more support** and **appreciation of their value**.

### Top Themes

The perception of inadequate pay affecting day to day wellbeing

Feeling appreciative of colleagues

The challenges of working effectively as a team in a high stress environment

Feeling a lack of appreciation in role from a variety of sources

The positive impact of good structure and management on working days

*"We need a pay rise to reflect how hard we work."*

*"I would just like more support and training from our seniors, acknowledgement for jobs well done and encouragement to keep spirits high in an already high stress level job."*

*"It would be good if there would be more recognition for nurses and their role."*

*"To have time to speak to someone if work is getting on top of us."*

## **What we will do in response...**

There is a huge opportunity for us to continue changing how we work to better support our colleagues and partners, and by extension impact the working lives for all members of the veterinary profession. Whilst there are several issues highlighted in this data set, there were also significant numbers of colleagues and veterinary professionals who felt things were positive. It's from a combination of these two factors that we've started work on a change agenda that will see us listen to the best of what we heard and try to replicate it in areas that were less encouraging.



# Commitments...

What follows are the commitments we at Vets4Pets and Companion Care Vets, in conjunction with our Joint Venture Partners, aim to make in response to feedback we've seen from this survey. As an organisation we want to continue supporting our partners and colleagues and champion an environment that has, at its heart, the health and wellbeing of our colleagues.

The first change we're committing to is to align our working values and behaviours with those of the British Veterinary Association's (BVA) Good Veterinary Workplace Code (GVWC). Whilst some of our practices have already adopted the code, we aim to embed the code as the foundation for continually developing great cultures in each of our practices. We want to support the aims of the code to allow our teams to have a voice and to co-create what a great workplace is. There are specific modules that have been developed by the profession, for the profession, encompassing a lot of research. We are delighted to be working with Gudrun Ravetz who, as a past president of the BVA, was instrumental in creating this framework.

As well as embedding the GVWC into our business, we're making several other commitments to our colleagues that we hope will begin to address the concerns they have and challenges they face. We recognise that these changes alone will not fix the issues, but with a strong focus on change and a concerted effort from all of us to keep our veterinary colleagues at the heart of our business, we believe this can be the start of an ongoing dialogue to do the right thing.



## Code introduction

*Gudrun Ravetz BVSc, GDL, MRCVS  
Past President British Veterinary Association*

The BVA's Good Veterinary Workplace Code (GVWC) is a unique, veterinary specific resource and is the culmination of years of collaborative pan-professional work to tackle the crisis in veterinary professional recruitment and retention. The journey started with the Vet Futures project, continued with a collaboration between the BVA and University of Exeter focusing on retention, motivation and satisfaction as well as gender discrimination and culminated in a cross-sectional working group tasked with delivering a practical and applicable solution for veterinary workplaces.

Based around seven key areas, the GVWC provides the framework, the evidence, the resources and the focus for all veterinary practices to define and deliver their journey to creating a good workplace. Crucially the GVWC does not prescribe how you must do things rather it describes the evidence-based outcomes that can create a good veterinary workplace. Importantly it also reflects and emphasises the importance of duality between the employer and employee working together to co-create the desired culture and ultimately good workplace.

I am excited to be working with Vets4Pets and Companion Care Vets who have been courageous in their commitment to evidence and understand the needs of the veterinary workforce but most importantly to want to create a practice led solution. Adopting the GVWC as the foundation for positive progression across the organisation will bring focus, practicality and achievable outcomes that can lead to positive and enduring change; a Good Veterinary Workplace.

# Health and wellbeing...

The health and wellbeing of our colleagues is foremost in our minds when we come to committing to change. We are listening to our teams and the wider profession to ensure that their working environment is the best it can be. The following commitments aim to support the wellbeing of them all.

## **Leadership development programmes for our Joint Venture Partners**

Our colleagues work in practice teams led by a Joint Venture Partner. As the leader of those teams, they need to have a solid, practical background in leadership and management. Whilst many of our leaders have already taken the opportunity to engage with leadership programmes, we will develop, offer and support the uptake of an enhanced curriculum, tailored to the needs of our profession.

**Timing:** First modules released in Summer 2022

## **Wellbeing handbook for each practice**

Working with several external agencies, we will launch a wellbeing handbook for each practice that focuses on key ideas, tools and outreach services for our teams. This handbook will cover a huge range of areas to protect the professional and personal wellbeing of our colleagues including financial, physical and social wellbeing and mental health. We recognise that whilst there is a host of online material available for us all, having a handy guidebook within reach for each practice will offer value and help support our colleagues.

**Timing:** Spring 2022

## **Mental Health First Aider in each practice**

The role of a Mental Health First Aider is to become a competent and confident individual who can not only spot the signs of workplace stress and anxiety but engage in meaningful conversations and signpost where people might go for further help. Since March 2021 we've already trained over 300 CPD accredited Mental Health First Aiders within Vets4Pets and Companion Care Vets practices. We commit to having a trained colleague in each practice to support those who need it.

**Timing:** Completed by Winter 2022/23

## **Dealing with challenging situations**

While there is no easy fix to dealing with challenging situations, we're committed to supporting our practice colleagues and joint venture partners in several ways. Understanding how to best deal with challenging situations in practice is one area of focus, including the provision of specific client communication materials to support fairness and understanding, as well as ensuring our client policies all have the wellbeing of our colleagues at their heart. We will also introduce new training materials to support our teams on how to deal with challenging client behaviour.

**Timing:** Spring/Summer 2022

# Work/life balance...

## Flexible working

One of the themes of the survey results was around the structure of the days within practice. We received a lot of feedback referencing the constant demands of working 10-12 hour days, especially where they continued throughout the week. The challenge is how to better support our practices to balance the demands of clients and colleagues.

To address this we're making a commitment to define the flexible working options we will consider for all roles within our practices and make them available to our teams to embed into their workplaces. To do this we will be collaborating with the veterinary flexible working group, Flexee.

**Timing: Autumn 2022**

## Diary management

We have started to work on supporting our teams with better rota and diary management. We commit to roll out specific training to our colleagues on how best to run the rotas for practices where this is needed, including with the introduction of tools to support automation of bookings. This will work alongside a wider set of initiatives to introduce new innovative customer facing tools that aim to make booking and managing appointments easier.

**Timing: Autumn 2022**

## Innovative surgery model

Over the last few months, we've been developing a new operating model which is now live in a small number of our practices and will be the template for new practice openings in the future.

The model aims to offer a better client experience, whilst freeing up time for the veterinary team to concentrate on the more clinical aspects of pet care, by bringing in new roles focusing on the service and support provided to clients during their visit.

We believe that this new operating model, and increasing the specialisation of roles for team members in a practice, has the opportunity to revolutionise the standards of care offered by Vets4Pets and Companion Care Vets colleagues, whilst also increasing the focused time spent on clinical work.

We are committed to deploying this model, initially within our Group Managed practices and then in selected Joint Venture practices during the next 12 months where practicable and appropriate to do so.

**Timing: Roll out throughout 2022**

# Benefits...

There was detailed feedback on the overall benefits available to practice staff coming from both within and outside of the group.

Whilst we pride ourselves on being able to offer great benefits to all our colleagues, we will continue to ensure they are in line, or better, than that of the wider profession. On top of this, we are offering the following commitments:

## Sector salary benchmarking

We will continue to run annual sector pay reviews, and commit to ensuring that this information is made available to our Joint Venture Partners to support them in how they manage their teams.

**Timing: Annually**

## Benefits review

As part of the Pets at Home family, our Joint Venture Partners have an opportunity to offer extended and specific benefits to their colleagues from a broad available range. We commit to a review of benefits offered in each practice and anticipate these renewed conversations will address the needs of our veterinary colleagues to ensure they get the most suitable package.

**Timing: Summer 2022**

## Overtime policy

We will work with our Joint Venture Partners to update and amend our overtime policy to ensure it's fair and equitable for all colleagues whatever their role and working rota.

**Timing: Summer 2022**

## Total rewards statement

We are committing to introduce an annual rewards statement that clearly sets out the overall pay and benefits received by an individual during that period. The aim is to illustrate the overall package colleagues receive including pay, bonus, valued benefits, and pension contributions.

**Timing: Summer 2022**

## Reward Hub

We are committing to rolling out increased access to our Reward Hub that enables colleagues to benefit from a huge range of discounts, rewards, and unique opportunities to save money. The Reward Hub is also in place to allow colleagues to receive instant rewards and recognition for excellence in their work. We believe this innovation within the group will offer significant benefits for all our colleagues.

**Timing: Summer 2022**

# Our long term ambitions...

The aim of this survey was to listen to the profession, understand the insight shared and create change. This change isn't just for the colleagues within Vets4Pets and Companion Care Vets, this is change that could have an effect across the profession. By publicising the survey and importantly, this report, we hope to spark the conversation and lead change. We recognise we are not alone in seeing the changing shape of the profession and invite other employers to step back and reflect on the changes they need to make to ensure we can make an impact at all levels.

We will commit to working collaboratively with other parties within the profession to support the types of change needed to maintain the veterinary profession as a rewarding and supportive career choice. We will work to support initiatives at all levels that enhance the wellbeing of our colleagues and expand the conversation beyond our doors.

We also commit that this proposed set of changes will not end in 2022, that as an organisation we will strive to make our partner practices the best they can be, allowing all our colleagues to thrive in the workplace.

**Vets4Pets**  
*February 2022*