

## **VETERINARY SERVICES FOR HOUSEHOLD PETS MARKET INVESTIGATION**

### **Summary of hearing with Independent Vetcare Limited (IVC) held on 3 March 2025**

#### **Introduction**

1. IVC thanked the CMA for highlighting in its recent working papers the professionalism of vets in the industry. IVC said its role was to support its teams to do a great job, and IVC continues to look for ways to improve how it serves pets and pet owners across the UK.
2. IVC noted some of the factors that had prompted the market investigation and said the market had undergone an exceptional set of changes very quickly.

#### **Choice of care**

3. IVC noted some of the benefits to the sector of corporate ownership including improvements in the sector's approach to pay and career progression and said that these improvements had helped to recruit and retain staff. IVC also highlighted investment in research into pet outcomes, sustainability, and investment in its practices as other benefits of the presence of the LVGs.
4. IVC said that pet owners consider a number of factors when shopping around for a vet practice and that price plays a really important role.
5. IVC said that it recognised the profession could do more on price transparency but that this needed to be done consistently across the sector to avoid confusion for customers. IVC noted that it was also important to include some kind of consumer-friendly quality metric as price on its own would be an incomplete picture.
6. IVC told us that it used a number of quality measures internally but that without a common standard it was difficult to communicate quality distinctions to the public. IVC also pointed to its Net Promotor Scores (NPS) as a measure of its veterinary practices.

7. IVC said it saw great value in pet care plans both in allowing pet owners to budget and for preventative healthcare. On the issue of why IVC currently uses local brands, IVC said that 'there is a lot of goodwill in the local brands which it acquires'.

## **Out of hours and referrals**

8. IVC said that the profession had been on a journey as it modernised over the last 20 years and one area where this was particularly significant was out of hours services. IVC told the CMA that its out of hours offering, Vets Now, provided a specific defined out of hours provision with dedicated teams overnight and the provision was much more accessible for independently owned FOPs as well as other LVGs.
9. IVC said that more of its practitioners and clinicians wanted a different work / life balance and its dedicated out of hours provision fitted well into that and would not have been possible to develop if it was not for corporate ownership.
10. IVC told us that the economic incentives for entering into the OOH market were more challenging considering lower demand for OOH services and higher costs of staffing due to antisocial hours and because OOH clinics are open whether or not they had patients coming in during that shift.
11. On specialist referrals, IVC said that it wanted its referral surgeons and practices to be proud of what they do but that clients are offered a choice and its own referral services face competition from other alternative referral centres.
12. IVC noted that there were benefits from having referral clinicians and practices within its network and even if the pet owner did not opt for a referral, the referring clinician could support them through the next best treatments within the FOP.

## **Veterinary medicines**

13. IVC said that there was a lack of acknowledgement of the benefits and costs of dispensing within a FOP. IVC noted the shift to online and said that its online business operated separately with discretion to set prices.
14. IVC told the CMA that its vets must offer a prescription or make it available and noted that the profession could do more on transparency of pricing of medicines.

15. IVC told us that its own brand medication was a fairly recent addition to the business and the strategy in developing it was to provide some cost saving to the customers as it allowed IVC to pass on a discount. IVC also told the CMA that its own brand medication provided more security of supply and improved sustainability, for example through reduced packaging and transport.

## **Crematoria**

16. IVC told us that it recommended using its cremations provider (CPC) but that customers were offered a choice: did they want to take the pet home; did they want to look into their own choice of cremation services; or did they want to use IVC's crematorium.
17. IVC confirmed that CPC also provides cremation services for independently owned FOPs and other LVGs.
18. IVC told us that its practices set the prices for cremation services and the cost included vet time in offering bereavement support and meetings and calls with the client as well as the logistics of following up with CPC.

## **Regulation**

19. IVC said it was in favour of new legislation that was principles based, pragmatic and fit for the future. IVC also told the CMA that it was in favour of regulation of veterinary business as well as individuals.
20. IVC said that the PSS is a measure of quality, and it would support it being a mandatory scheme for all veterinary practices, alongside mandatory powers of entry into veterinary practices for the RCVS for monitoring purposes.
21. IVC said it was not right that the Registered Veterinary Nurse (RVN) title was not protected by law and that changes were needed to the provisions in Schedule 3 of the current legislation and to clarify what veterinary nurses can and cannot do.
22. IVC told the CMA that it has an in-house complaints process currently which is dealt with locally by its practitioners with support from their area directors and regional directors. IVC said its NPS scores reflect that they are doing a good job here. IVC said that clients are told that the Veterinary Client Mediation Service (VCMS) is available to them and that it would be keen to support the role of VCMS and how it could be more effective.