

VETERINARY SERVICES FOR HOUSEHOLD PETS MARKET INVESTIGATION

Summary of hearing with Linnaeus Veterinary Limited held on 6 March 2025

Introduction

1. Linnaeus runs a devolved business model; individual FOPs are run locally. They have local senior leadership teams who have oversight of local FOPs
2. Linnaeus said there was a shortage of trained veterinary professionals, and all vet firms were competing for talent. Vets want to work at a high quality practice, and this incentivises vet practices to be higher quality. As a result of staff shortages, salary costs have risen.

Choice of care

3. Linnaeus said that it encourages its vets to practice contextualised care and has recently rolled out some training on this. Linnaeus would be supportive of annual training for vets on contextualised care. It argued that high quality care did not necessarily mean offering alternative clinical pathways, rather it meant having high clinical standards.
4. Vet businesses compete for customers on reputation and recommendations. Linnaeus said that quality included the end-to-end customer experience as well as clinical care. The customer experience was important because it was difficult to communicate clinical quality to pet owners. Linnaeus said that there was limited data in the profession about clinical quality benchmarking, though it noted that RCVS Knowledge was doing important work in this area.
5. Linnaeus said that all of its practices were part of the voluntary RCVS Practice Standards Scheme (PSS), which it said helped ensure quality, though it noted that customer awareness of PSS was poor. It said that Linnaeus provided guidance to its practices to ensure clinical standards (for example on hygiene or avoiding hypothermia in anaesthetised pets) and measures to improve service levels.

6. Linnaeus said it had focused on acquiring high quality clinics. It then aimed to improve them with investment in equipment and training for staff. It said there was a voluntary internal reporting system for patient safety events, to help identify areas for improvement.
7. Linnaeus supported the mandatory take up of the PSS as a core standard, but said that it did not consider 'core' to mean 'basic'. Different qualities of care could be differentiated using a tiered system. Linnaeus said that it would support the PSS becoming mandatory.
8. Linnaeus said that a lack of switching did not indicate problems with the market but rather satisfaction with the service. Linnaeus had seen switching when the quality of service was bad. It cited an example where it had hired a vet with a good reputation in the local area to try and win customers.
9. Linnaeus said that there were no financial incentives or other targets for its vets to refer to a Linnaeus-owned referral centre and that its vets had clinical freedom over where to refer.

Veterinary medicines

10. Linnaeus said that purchasing medicines from vet practices was different to buying from online pharmacies, because the costs of the two business models were very different, as were the levels of service provided.
11. Linnaeus felt that customer awareness of the ability to purchase medicines online was higher than suggested in the CMA's working papers.
12. Linnaeus felt its prescription fee was reflective of the administrative costs needed to provide a prescription. It did not consider the fee to be a barrier to customers obtaining medication elsewhere. It said that more could be done to help pet owners understand the fees charged.

Potential remedies

13. Linnaeus supported having more price transparency. It supported publishing of a price list for consultations, vaccinations, neutering and microchipping but said that pricing information on more services might overwhelm pet owners.
14. Linnaeus said that current best practice was to include price estimates within the consent form and it suggested a remedy to formalise that. Linnaeus said that there could be some challenges in auditing whether several options had been given to a pet owner but that annual refresher training for vets on contextualised care would be helpful.

15. Linnaeus supported making corporate ownership clear on websites and in practices. Linnaeus supported having additional signage in consultation rooms telling pet owners that they could purchase medicines online, and to have this message clearly and consistently on websites, and add written wording to prescriptions for dispensed medicines.

Regulation

16. Linnaeus agreed that the regulatory framework needed reform. Linnaeus thought that the RCVS's remit should be extended to vet practices. It said that the PSS scheme should be made mandatory, and that it could be helpful to build on the current accreditation scheme to provide pet owners with a meaningful indicator of quality. Linnaeus said that vet practices should be required to participate in the Veterinary Client Mediation Scheme (VCMS).