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# RCVS WORKFORCE SUMMIT 2021

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**Recruitment, retention  
and return in the  
veterinary profession**

Preliminary Report  
V2 May 2022



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# 1. Introduction

1. This report brings together existing data on the current trends in recruitment, retention and return in the veterinary profession. Please note the report focuses solely on veterinary surgeons, and a separate companion report presenting the relevant data for veterinary nurses is also available. A previous version of this report included data up to 15 November 2021, however this version of the report includes all data for 2021.
2. Workforce shortages are a key challenge facing the veterinary profession. While this is not a new phenomenon, the issue has been exacerbated significantly by recent events, including the additional pressures on the profession brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, changes to the situation of EU vets caused by Brexit, and an increase in demand for vets driven by a surge in pet ownership in the UK.<sup>1</sup> The RCVS's recent survey of the veterinary profession on their experiences of the pandemic found that during this time many had to take on additional responsibilities (54%) and alter their working patterns (71%), while the increased demand has been widely felt with 80% saying they personally saw an increase in their caseload due to an increase in animal ownership. Many felt this took a toll on them personally, with 65% experiencing conflict between their wellbeing and their professional roles. Meanwhile, among veterinary surgeons from the EU surveyed in 2018,<sup>3</sup> over half (54%) said they felt less welcome in the UK since the Brexit vote, and 37% said they were now more likely to leave the UK. Some were contemplating leaving the UK; a third (31%) said they were considering a move back home, while a fifth 20% were actively looking for work outside the UK.<sup>4</sup>
3. In this report we explore recent changes to the levels of veterinary surgeons entering and exiting the profession, as well as investigating the factors behind these trends. In Section 3 of the report we describe the annual numbers of veterinary surgeons joining and leaving the profession, as well as the changing working patterns within the profession. Sections 4 and 5 delve deeper into these figures by looking at the key characteristics of those joining and leaving the profession, and how these have changed over recent years. Section 6 looks at the reasons why people decide to leave the profession, and explore the underlying factors associated with intending to leave the profession. In Section 7 we look at those returning to the profession after a break. Finally, Section 8 aims to identify the areas where further research is needed to understand the issues of recruitment, retention and return to the veterinary profession.

4. In examining these trends, we draw on data from a range of sources:
- **The RCVS Register** holds current and historical data on all registered veterinary surgeons, including some key demographic information. Veterinary surgeons on the Register are divided into various registration categories. In this report, we are interested in understanding the shortages currently being experienced in the UK veterinary workforce, for example, in clinical practice and official controls, and therefore we have focused on those registered as UK-Practising, and not, for example, those registered as Non-Practising or Practising outside of the UK.
  - **The Survey of the Veterinary Profession<sup>5</sup>** is a long-running survey of vets registered with the RCVS, conducted by the Institute for Employment Studies, most recently in 2019. Here we use the findings to look at long-term workforce trends, reasons people give for intending to leave the profession, and the factors associated with intention to leave the profession.
  - Other sources in this report include the RCVS surveys on European Veterinary Professionals Working in the UK and Experiences of the Covid-19 Pandemic, and several other studies on retention in the veterinary profession.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.pfma.org.uk/news/pfma-confirms-dramatic-rise-in-pet-acquisition-among-millennials](http://www.pfma.org.uk/news/pfma-confirms-dramatic-rise-in-pet-acquisition-among-millennials)

<sup>2</sup> The RCVS Covid impact survey of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses was conducted in July and August 2021 by the Institute for Employment Studies. The final report will be published on the RCVS website.

<sup>3</sup> Robinson, D., Edwards, M. and Williams, M. (2019), European veterinary professionals working in the UK: the impact of Brexit (second survey), Institute for Employment Studies, available at: [www.rcvs.org.uk/document-library/institute-for-employment-studies-european-veterinary/](http://www.rcvs.org.uk/document-library/institute-for-employment-studies-european-veterinary/)

<sup>4</sup> These findings are taken from the second RCVS Brexit survey conducted in 2018. A third survey was conducted in October and November 2021, and the corresponding report will be published in due course.

<sup>5</sup> Robinson, D., Edwards, M., Mason, B., Cockett, J., Arnill Graham, K., and Martin, A. (2019), The 2019 survey of the veterinary profession, Institute for Employment Studies, available at: [www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/publications/the-2019-survey-of-the-veterinary-profession/](http://www.rcvs.org.uk/news-and-views/publications/the-2019-survey-of-the-veterinary-profession/)

## 2. Executive summary

5. Figures from the RCVS Register show a marked decline in joiners to the UK veterinary profession in the past two years, from 2,782 in 2019 to 2,119 in 2021, following a steady rise in joiners from 2013 to 2018. Meanwhile, there has been an increase in veterinary surgeons leaving the UK-Practising category of the Register since 2018, either by leaving the Register entirely or moving to another registration category. As a result of these changes, the net number of vets joining the UK-Practising category (that is, the total number joining minus the number who have left) has fallen substantially since 2019, from 1180 to 268.
6. Data from the Survey of the Veterinary Professions shows an increase in the proportion of veterinary surgeons working part-time since 2006, both among women (from 28% in 2006 to 33% in 2019) and among men (from 7% in 2006 to 17% in 2019). There has also been a decrease in vets personally doing their own out-of-hours work, and increasingly practices are using dedicated out-of-hours service providers to cover out-of-hour work and moving away from covering their own.
7. There has been a decrease in new UK-Practising registrants from overseas, particularly from the EU, over the past four years. In 2018 over half (53%) of new registrants were EU-qualified, but in 2021 this was true of less than a quarter (23%). This reduction in new registrants from the EU explains much of the fall in overall numbers of new registrants.
8. There has also been a change in the age profile of new registrants. In the years leading up to 2020, around half of new registrants were 25 and under, while around half were older, but in 2020 and 2021 the proportion in the youngest age group increased, reaching 65% in 2021. It is possible that this change is linked to the fall in registrations from the EU resulting in a higher proportion of registrants being UK graduates.
9. The proportion of new UK-Practising registrants who are women has increased overall, and specifically has increased since 2017; from 67% to 77% in 2021. There has also been an increase in new veterinary surgeons from minority ethnic backgrounds, from 5% in 2019, to 11% in 2021. At the same time, there has been a decrease in the proportion of joiners identifying as 'White other', (which includes all who identify as white and not 'White British' or 'White Irish'), likely a result of the reduced EU-qualified registrant numbers.

10. Overall, there has been little change in the last decade in the gender and age profiles of those leaving the profession. The majority of leavers are women (62% in 2021) and are in the younger age groups (53% in 2021 were aged 35 or younger). There has been an increase in the proportion of leavers identifying as 'White other' from 46% in 2015 to 57% in 2021. This likely reflects an increase in leavers from the EU.
11. The proportion of leavers who qualified in EU countries has been steadily increasing, from less than a third (30%) of leavers in 2012 to 46% in 2021; overtaking the proportion of leavers who are UK-qualified (42%).
12. The four most common countries leavers moved to in 2021 were Spain, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. Of those relocating overseas, a relatively small proportion were UK graduates. In 2021, 25% of those moving from the UK-Practising category to the Practising outside of the UK category were UK graduates, although note that this was higher in the years before 2020 (38% in 2019, for example), while of those leaving the Register completely and going overseas only 6% were UK graduates.
13. In 2021, 45% of leavers had been in the profession for four years or less, including 21% who had less than one year of experience. There is, however, a sizeable proportion of leavers who have considerable veterinary experience; in 2021, 37% of leavers had been on the Register for 10 or more years, including 24% that had been on the Register for 20 or more years. There has been little change in the length of time leavers have been on the Register over the past decade.
14. In 2021, a fifth (20%) of UK-Practising leavers held a postgraduate qualification, while the majority (80%) did not.
15. The most common destination of those voluntarily leaving the Register, and those leaving the UK-Practising category, was relocating or returning overseas (41% in 2021). Around 1 in 10 (11%) who leave are retiring, and a similar proportion are taking a career break (9%) or taking parental leave (9%). The most common reasons given by those stating they intend to leave the profession in the Survey of the Veterinary Profession were poor work-life balance (60%), not feeling rewarded or valued (55%), chronic stress (49%), long or unsocial hours (48%), and pay (44%).



16. The key driver found to be associated with intention to leave the profession among respondents to the Survey of the Veterinary Profession was job satisfaction; half (50%) of vets who strongly disagreed with this statement planned to leave within the next five years (including 34% who planned to leave within two years), as did 42% of those who disagree. Other factors found to be significantly associated with increased leaving intentions were low satisfaction with salary and support from employer, seldom or never getting minimum rest periods, working part-time, not having Advanced Practitioner, Specialist status, or holding additional qualifications, qualifying outside of Europe, working in small animal practice, working as a locum, not having dependent children, having a disability, being in a younger age group, having four or five of the social mobility characteristics, having concerns about personal safety in the past year, and finding veterinary work stressful.
17. Previous studies have cited a range of reasons associated with leaving the profession, including long hours and work-life balance, stress and pressure, and other complex personal reasons. Some studies noted gender-specific factors. Others highlighted the issue of disillusionment, particularly among early-career vets.
18. In 2021 so far, restorations (ie those returning to the Register) have increased and are at the highest point since 2012 (making up 11% of UK-Practising joiners). However, in 2021 a high proportion of those being restored had been off the Register for a short time of three months or less (67%, compared with 43% in 2020). Only around a quarter (23%) had been off the Register for more than 12 months, including 7% who had been off for four years or more.
19. In the Survey of the Veterinary Profession 2.4% of those surveyed were taking a career break, most of whom were women (79%). The most common reason was parental leave or looking after children (48%), followed by illness (13%) and travelling (13%). A small proportion of those surveyed (4.5%) worked outside or mainly outside the profession in a job that did not need a veterinary qualification. A majority of this group either do not intend to return to the profession (54%) or are unsure whether they will return (32%), leaving a small group of individuals who have left but do intend to return.

20. Four key areas have been identified as needing further research; the reasons why individuals decide to leave the profession and what their future plans are after leaving, the characteristics of those joining and leaving the veterinary nursing profession, career lengths and the trajectory of veterinary surgeons' careers, and finally the ways in which leavers can be encouraged to return to the profession or to remain in the profession if they are considering leaving.

## 3. Workforce trends

21. This section outlines the overall trends in the number of veterinary surgeons entering and leaving the profession, and the changes in how the profession is working.

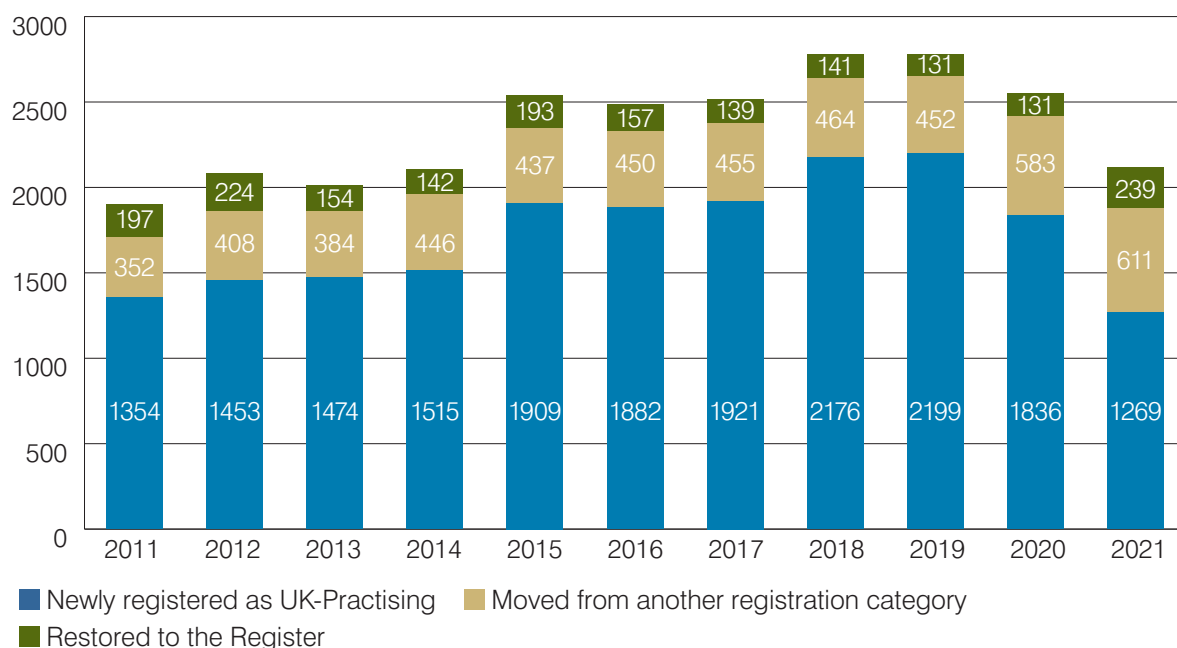
### 3.1 Numbers joining and leaving the UK-Practising category

22. Understanding the number of veterinary surgeons joining and leaving the UK veterinary profession requires more than presenting the number of registrations and removals from the RCVS Register. Here we are specifically interested in those registered as UK-Practising, and there are several avenues into, and out of, this category. Figure 1 shows the number of veterinary surgeons joining the UK-Practising category through the following routes:

- joining the Register for the first time,
- moving from another registration category, most commonly from the Non-Practising or Practising outside of the UK categories,
- being restored to the Register after some time away.

23. The figures show a steady rise in joiners to the UK-Practising category between 2014 and 2018, driven by an increase in new vets to the Register, however, there was a clear drop in new registrations in 2020 and 2021, resulting in a marked decrease in the number joining the UK-Practising category (from 2,782 in 2019 to 2,119 in 2021), and taking the 2021 figures back to 2014 levels.

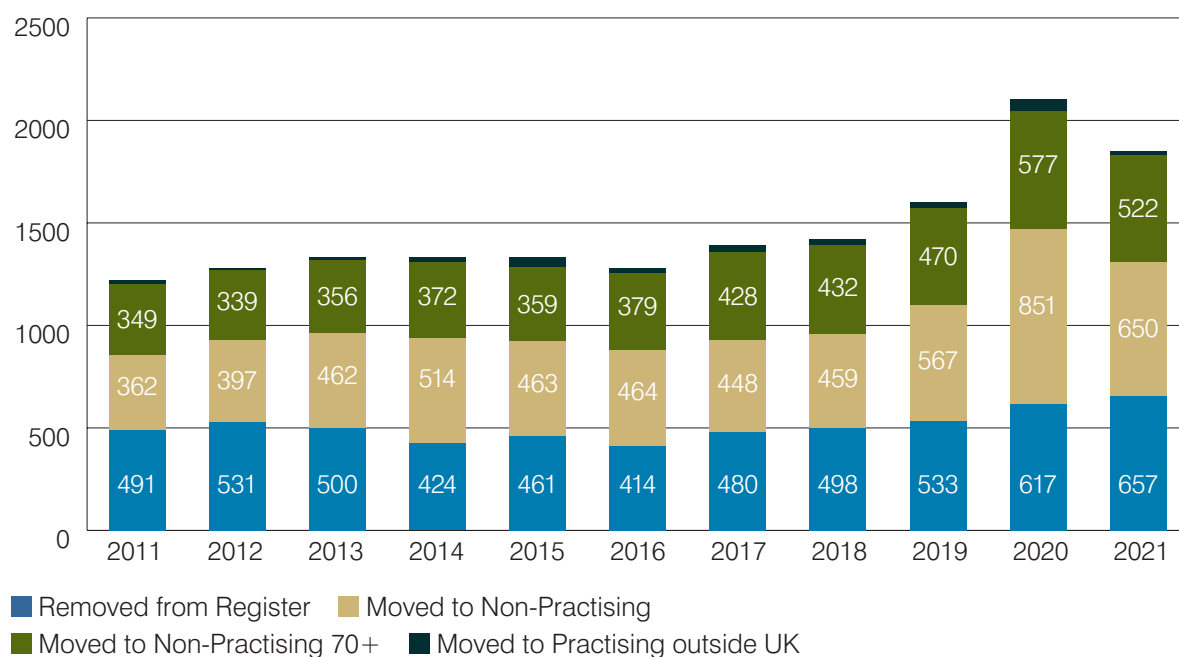
**Figure 1. Number of veterinary surgeons joining the UK-Practising category, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

24. Meanwhile since 2018, there has been a notable increase in vets leaving the UK-Practising category. Figure 2 shows the number of veterinary surgeons leaving the UK-Practising category, either by leaving the Register entirely, or moving to another registration category. The increase in leavers is the result of both a gradual increase in those leaving the Register entirely, and an increase in movement to other categories; 2019 and 2020 saw a large increase in veterinary surgeons moving to the ‘Non-Practising’ category, and in 2020 there was a smaller but notable spike in moves to the ‘Practising outside of the UK’ category. The 2021 figures indicate high levels of leavers from the UK-Practising category, although numbers have fallen from the peak in 2020.

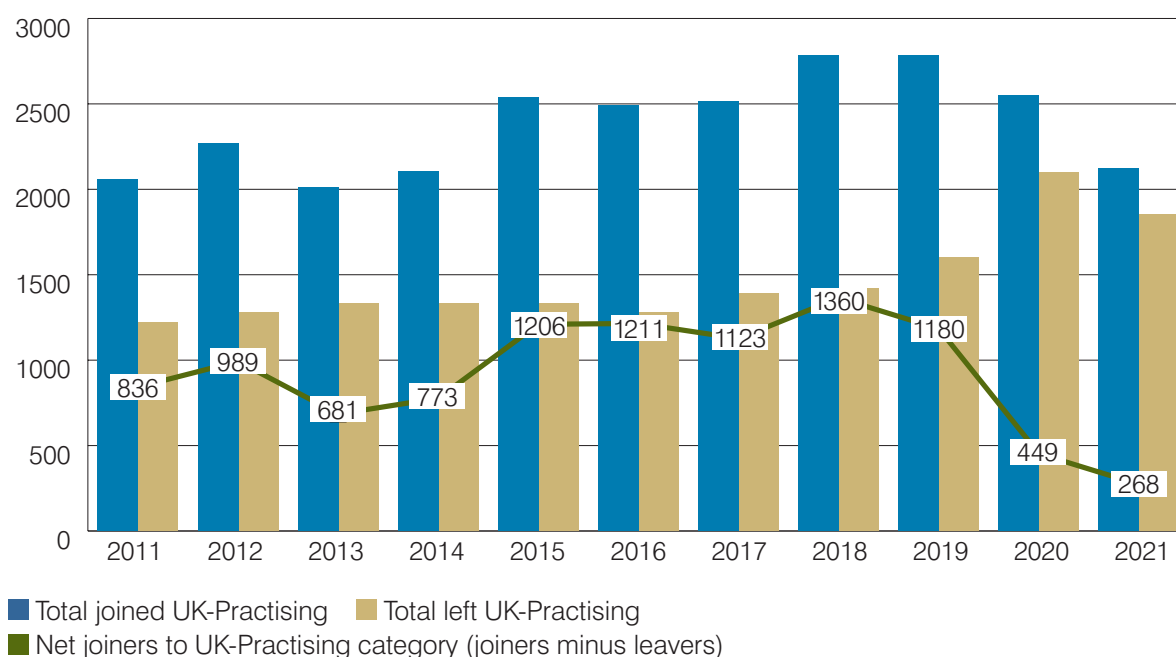
**Figure 2. Number of veterinary surgeons leaving the UK-practising category, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

25. As a result of these changes to the numbers joining and leaving, the net number of vets joining the UK-Practising category (that is, the total number joining minus the number who have left) has fallen substantially since 2019 (Figure 3).

**Figure 3. Numbers joining and leaving the UK-Practising category, and annual net number joining UK-Practising category, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

### 3.2 Changing working patterns

26. While looking at the overall numbers of professionals practising in the UK is vitally important, the available capacity of the workforce is also affected by other factors, such as changes in individuals’ working patterns and areas of work.
  
27. One key shift in working patterns over the past 15 years has been an increasing trend for veterinary surgeons working part-time. This is partly due to an increasing proportion of the workforce being women; according to the Survey of the Veterinary Profession, 58% of veterinary professionals were women in 2019, compared with 34% in 2000. However, as Table 1 shows, while part-time work is higher among women and has increased slightly among this group since 2006 (28% in 2006 to 33% in 2019), the proportion of men working part-time has also increased in the same time period (from 7%, to 17% in 2019).

**Table 1. Full-time and part-time work among veterinary surgeons in paid work, by gender, 2006–2019**

	2006			2010			2014			2019		
	Women	Men	All	Women	Men	All	Women	Men	All	Women	Men	All
Working pattern	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Full-time	72	93	83	70	92	80	71	86	77	67	83	73
Part-time	28	7	17	30	8	20	29	14	23	33	17	27
Base	3873	4022	7895	3874	3163	7037	3321	2473	5842	6738	4389	11281

Source: Survey of the Veterinary Profession, 2019

28. Table 2 shows the area of work reported by respondents to the Survey of the Veterinary Profession, and how this has changed over time. While the proportion working in clinical practice has remained stable overall, there has been an increase in the proportion working in small animal practice, and a decrease in those working in mixed practice.

**Table 2. Veterinary surgeons' area of work, 2010–2019**

	2010	2014	2019
	%	%	%
Small animal only (including exotics)	48.9	53.6	56.4
Mixed practice	22.1	15.8	13.4
Equine practice	7.6	5.5	6.3
Farm animal practice/production animal practice	3.8	3.7	3.7
Other first opinion practice	1.0	0.9	0.9
Referral practice/consultancy	6.7	8.1	9.5
Zoo/wildlife/conservation	-	-	1.7
DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)	1.6	0.5	0.4
Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA)	2.4	2.4	-
Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA)	-	-	1.7
Food Standards Agency (FSA)	-	-	1
Food Standards Scotland (FSS)	-	-	0.2
Food Standards Scotland (FSS)	-	-	1.5
Other UK government	3.6	2.5	-
Scottish Government	-	-	0.1
Welsh Government	-	-	0.1
Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs (DAERA), Northern Ireland	-	-	0.7
Home Office	-	-	0.3
Ministry of Defence	-	-	0.2
Overseas government	1.6	0.1	0.8
Veterinary school	5.9	7.2	6.6
Other university/educational establishment	1.2	2.2	2.2
Commerce and industry	3.9	4	3.6
Charities and trusts	2.7	4.2	3.1
Research Council	0.2	0.2	0.1
Portal (contracted or employed)	-	-	0.2
Telemedicine vet-to-vet	-	-	0.3
Telemedicine vet-to-client	-	-	0.3
Tele-triage	-	-	0.1
Other	2.3	2.3	3.6

Source: Survey of the Veterinary Profession, 2019

Note: Respondents were able to select more than one area of work, therefore responses sum to more than 100%.



29. The Survey of the Veterinary Profession data also indicates that there has been a decrease in vets personally doing their own out-of-hours work. Table 3 shows that practices are increasingly using dedicated out-of-hours service providers to cover out-of-hour work and moving away from covering their own. A separate question asked respondents to say whether they personally did out-of-hours work in their role; in 2019 a little over half (52%) did, notably lower than in 2014 (65%) and in 2010 (66%).

**Table 3. Practice out-of-hours provision, 2010 – 2019**

	2010	2014	2019
	%	%	%
Practice covers its own out-of-hours work	61	56	51
Practice covers its out-of-hours work with the help of a locum	1	1	2
Practice uses a dedicated out-of-hours service provider	26	35	35
Practice cooperates with other local practices	6	4	4
Practice is primarily or wholly an out-of-hours provider	-	-	2
Don't know	-	-	2
Other	4	4	4

Source: Survey of the Veterinary Profession, 2019

30. Taken together, the data in this section paint a stark picture of a slowed growth in the workforce, and decreasing full-time equivalent workers, at a time of increasing demand. In the following sections we look in more detail at changes in who is joining the profession, and who is leaving the profession, to understand these trends further.

## 4. Who is joining the profession?

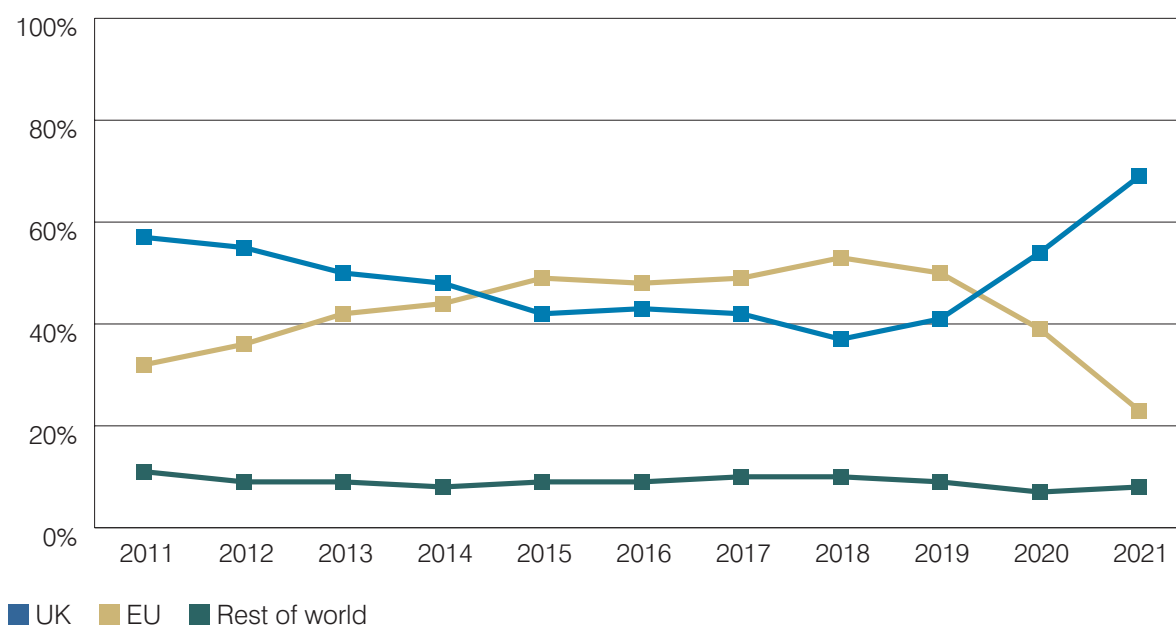
31. This section uses data from the RCVS Register to explore the characteristics of the different groups joining the veterinary profession and whether these are changing over time. Here we have defined 'joiners' as those being added to the Register in the UK-Practising category.

### 4.1 Region of qualification

32. The most significant change in the characteristics of new UK-Practising registrants over the past four years has been the marked decrease in new registrations from overseas (Figure 4). There has been a fall in registrants from both the EU and the rest of the world, however the fall in EU joiners is the most striking; in 2018 over half (53%) of new registrants were EU-qualified, but in 2021 this was true of less than a quarter (23%). To put this another way, in 2018, 1,159 new UK-Practising registrants qualified in the EU, but in 2021 there was only 329. The number of registrants from the UK has increased slightly since 2018 (from 810 in 2018, to 998 in 2020, and 970 in 2021), but not by enough to make up the large shortfall left by overseas registrants. It is likely that this reduction in new registrants from the EU explains much of the fall in overall numbers of new registrants that we saw in Figure 1 in the previous section.

33. This considerable drop in new EU registrants followed a period of rising new registrations from EU countries, which had overtaken the UK as the most common region of qualification for new registrants in 2015 and reached a peak in 2018.

**Figure 4. New UK-Practising registrants, by region of qualification, 2011–2021**

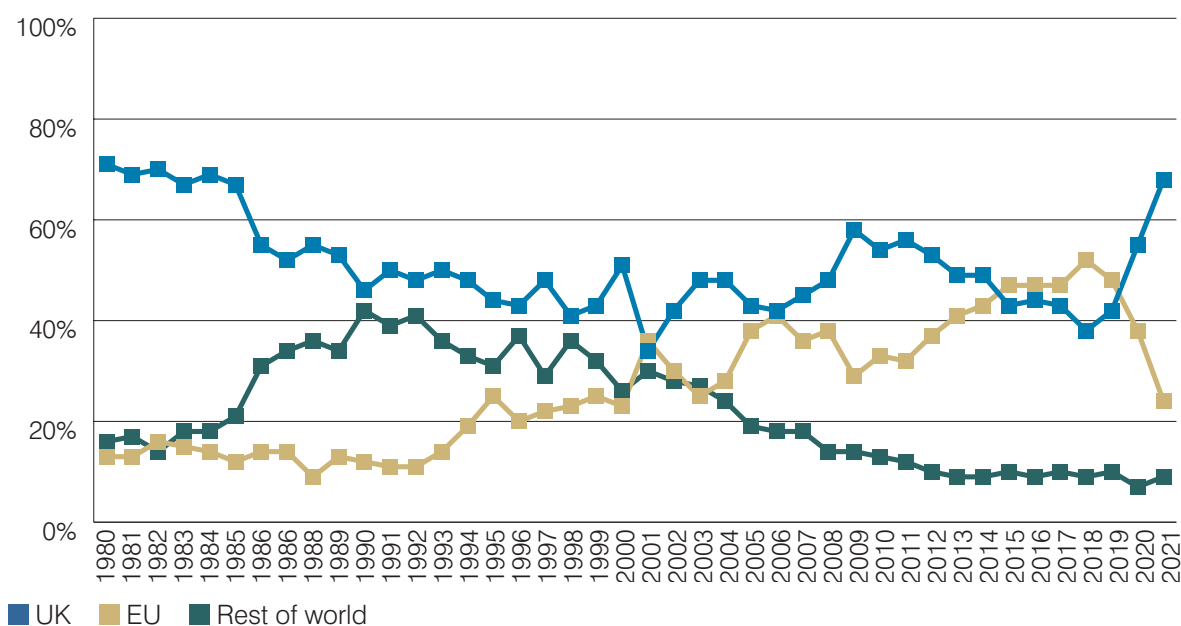


Source: RCVS Register

34. Figure 4 does not include data earlier than 2011 because we are not able to identify those who joined the Register into the UK-Practising category in years prior to this<sup>6</sup>. To put this data in context we can look at the total new registrations (including all registration categories) since 1980 (Figure 5). This shows that until 2018, the proportion of individuals joining the Register who qualified in EU countries had been increasing since the early-1990s. The recent fall in EU-qualified registrants brings the proportion back to levels not seen since 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Before 2011, the Register did not hold data for an individual's registration category at different points in time, therefore it is not possible to accurately identify what an individual's category was, for example, when they first entered the Register, or when they left the Register. From 2011 onwards it is possible to identify an individual's registration category at any stage while they were on the Register.

**Figure 5. New UK-Practising registrants, by region of qualification, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

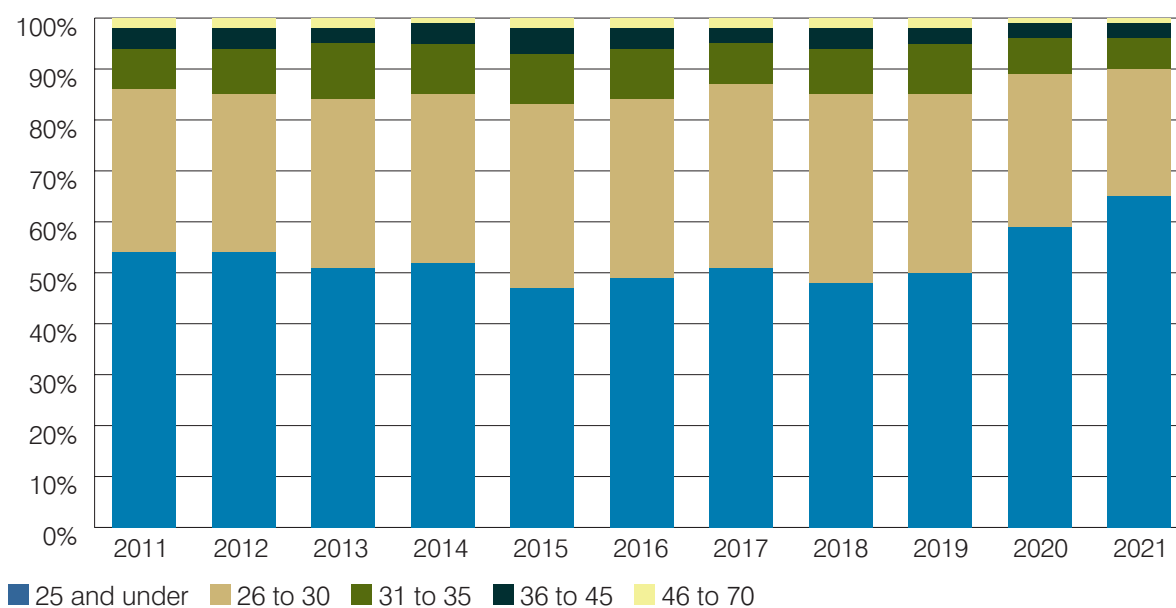
## 4.2 Age, gender and ethnic background

35. Although the shifting proportions of EU vets may be the most dramatic change in characteristics, there are other areas where we have seen some modest change.

36. Figure 6 shows the age breakdown for new UK-Practising registrations between 2011 and 2021. In the years leading up to 2020, around half of new registrants were generally 25 and under, while around half were older, but in 2020 and 2021 the youngest age group increased, reaching 65% in 2021. It is possible that this change is linked to the fall in registrations from the EU resulting in a higher proportion of registrants being UK graduates. This is evidenced by the fact that there has been little change in the age profile of new UK graduate registrants over the past two years, and that among new EU graduate registrants a consistently lower proportion (38% in 2021) are aged 25 and under compared with UK graduates (79% in 2021)

37. In the next section (Section 5), we explore the age profile of those leaving the profession, which has shown little change over time.

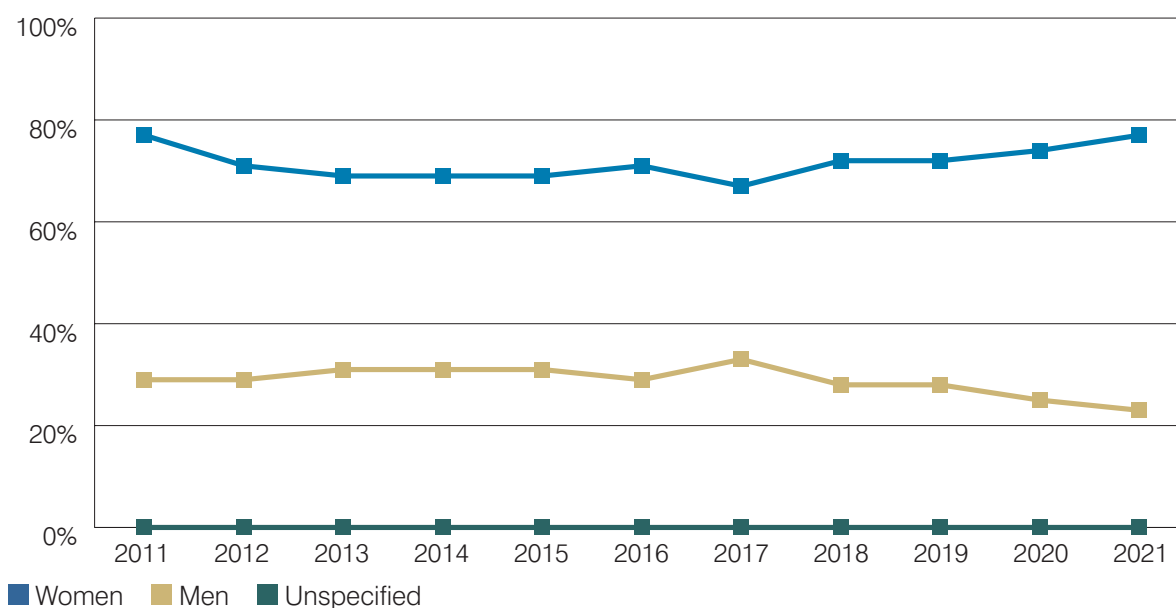
**Figure 6. New UK-Practising registrants, by age group, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

38. There has also been a change in the balance of men and women among new registrations. The proportion of new UK-Practising registrants who are women has increased overall, and specifically has increased since 2017; from 67% to 77% in 2021 (Figure 7). This is part of a well-established longer-term trend towards higher proportions of women compared with men in the veterinary industry. Between 2011 and 2017 there was a small decrease in the proportion of women compared with men, from 71% in 2011 to 67% in 2017. It should be noted that while the proportion of women dipped slightly during this period, the overall number of women registering as UK-Practising increased from 967 in 2011, to 1,294 in 2017. However, at the same time there was also an increase in the number of men, from 387 in 2011 to 625 in 2017, resulting in the proportion of men increasing overall.
39. The proportion of women joining the profession is higher among UK graduates compared with those qualified elsewhere; 80% of UK graduates joining the Register as UK-Practising in 2021 were women, compared with 70% of EU graduates and 66% of graduates from the rest of the world.

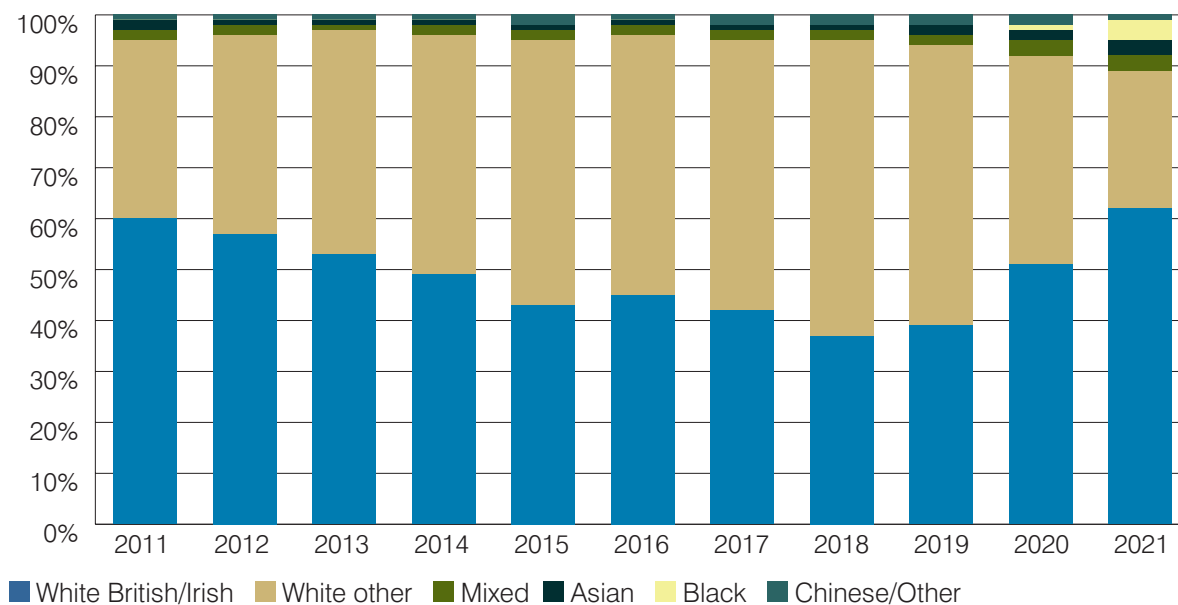
**Figure 7. New UK-Practising registrants, by gender, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

40. Figure 8 shows the new UK-Practising registrants by ethnic background. The data indicate an increase in the proportion of veterinary surgeons from a minority ethnic background from 5% in 2019, to 11% 2021. Looking at UK graduates only we see a similar, although longer-term, increase in minority ethnic groups joining the profession; from 6% of new UK-Practising registrants in 2016 to 15% in 2021.
41. At the same time there has been a notable reduction in the group 'White other', which includes all who identify as white and not 'White British' or 'White Irish'. Further analysis has confirmed that this change is likely a result of the recent drop in EU-graduate registrations; among UK graduates, only a small proportion come from this group (7% in 2021).

**Figure 8. New UK-Practising registrants, by ethnic background, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

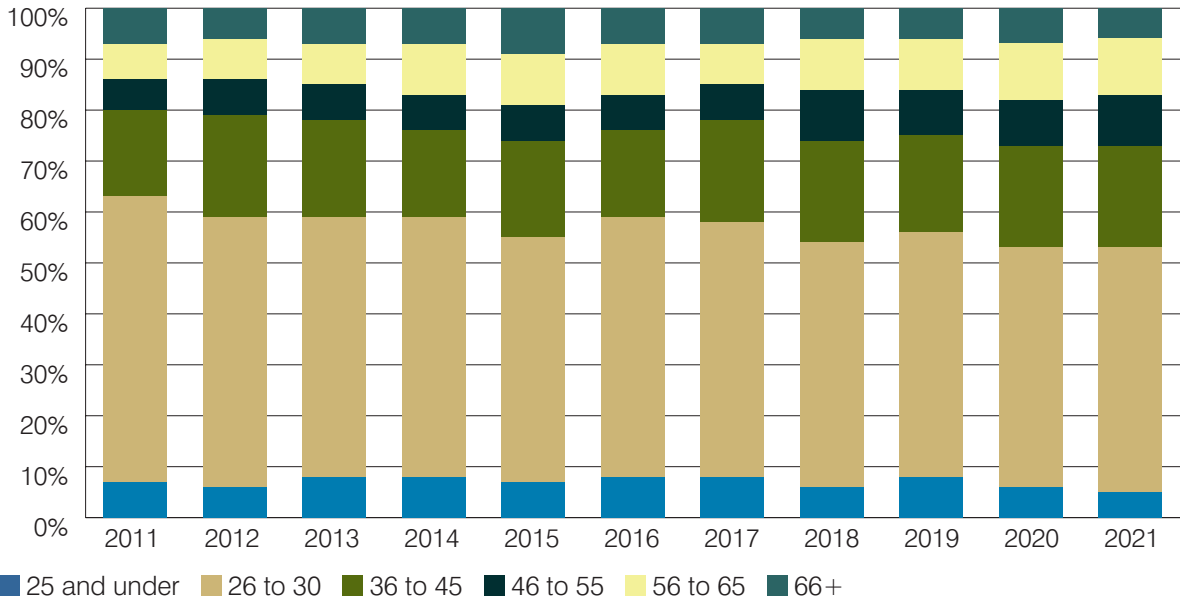
# 5. Who is leaving the profession?

42. In Section 3 we identified an increase in the number of veterinary surgeons leaving the UK-Practising category of the Register since 2018. This section explores this trend further by presenting the characteristics of veterinary surgeons leaving the profession, including key personal demographics, region of qualification and country of destination, and level of experience and qualifications. The ‘leavers’ group analysed in this section is defined as UK-Practising vets leaving the Register, and vets moving from UK-Practising to other categories.

## 5.1 Age, gender and ethnic background

43. While there have been changes to the numbers of people leaving the profession in the past three years (see Figure 2), overall, there has been little change over the last decade in the gender and age profiles of those leaving the profession. The majority of leavers are women; 62% of leavers in 2021 were women, a similar level to 2011, when 61% of leavers were women and 39% men. This reflects the higher proportion of women in the veterinary profession compared with men. Leavers also tend to be in the younger age groups; in 2021 over half (53%) of leavers were aged 35 or younger, (including 48% aged 26–35), a fifth (20%) were aged 36–45, 10% were 46–55, 11% 56–65 and just 6% were 66 or more (Figure 9), with little change in this pattern over time since 2011.

**Figure 9. UK-Practising veterinary surgeons who left the Register or moved to a different category, by age, 2012–2021**

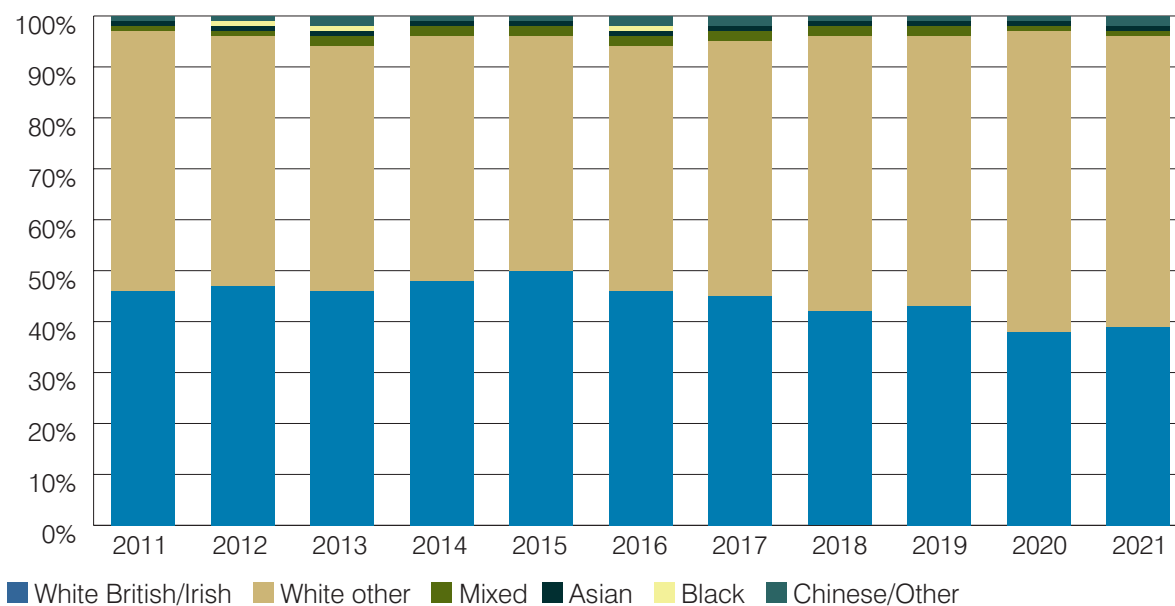


Source: RCVS Register



Figure 10 shows the proportions of leavers by their ethnic background. Here we see an increase in the proportion of leavers identifying as ‘White Other’ from 46% in 2015 to 57% in 2021. This likely reflects an increase in leavers from the EU over this time period (see Section 5.2).

**Figure 10. UK-Practising veterinary surgeons who left the Register or moved to a different category, by ethnic background, 2011–2021**

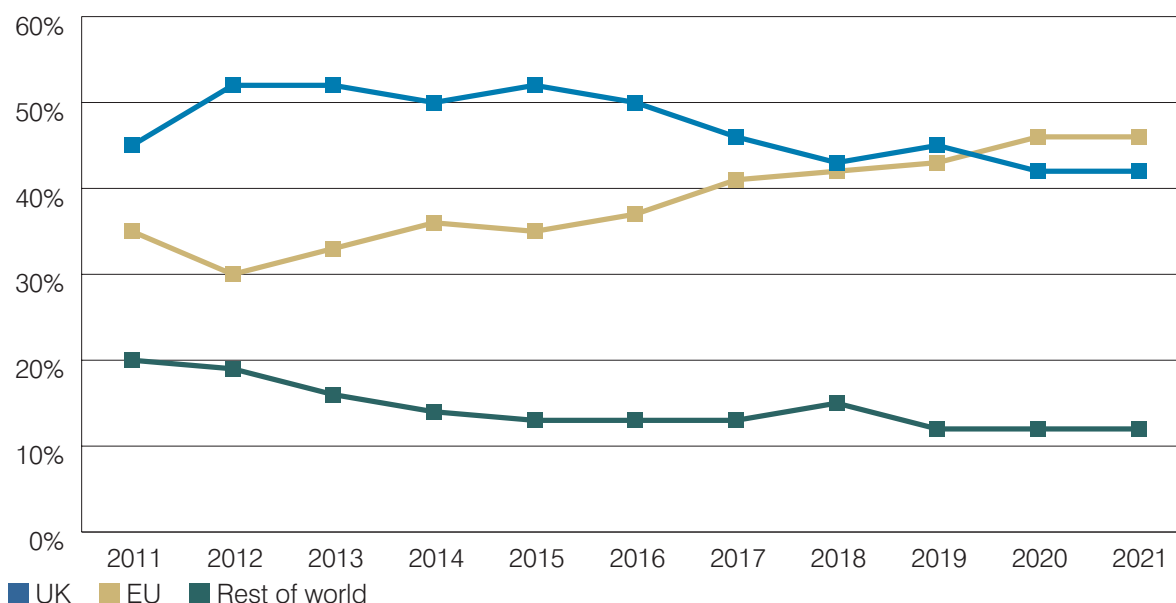


Source: RCVS Register

## 5.2 Region of qualification and country of destination

44. Figure 11 shows that since 2012, the proportion of leavers who qualified in EU countries has been steadily increasing. In 2012 30% of leavers qualified in EU countries, while just over half (52%) qualified in the UK. In 2021, the proportion of leavers who were EU-qualified (46%) was higher than the proportion who had qualified in the UK (42%).

**Figure 11. UK-Practising veterinary surgeons who left the Register or moved to a different category, by region of qualification, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

45. Those who leave the Register voluntarily to move overseas, and all who move out of the UK-Practising category to the Practising outside of the UK category, are asked to give details of their country of destination. Note that those who are removed from the Register because of non-payment are not asked these questions, which represents a large proportion of those who leave the Register each year (e.g. 34% in 2020, and 49% in 2021), therefore this is an area where further research would be useful.
46. The five most common countries leavers moved to are shown in Table 4. From 2018 to 2021, Australia was the most common country that leavers moved to. In 2020 and 2021 the list of destination countries grew, reflecting the higher number of veterinary surgeons relocating overseas in these years. Other common countries were New Zealand, Ireland, Italy and the USA.
47. Overall, in 2021 55% of those reporting where they were going overseas left to go to EU countries, while 45% went to countries outside of the EU. This represents a slight shift from 2018, when 47% went to the EU and 53% went to the rest of the world.

**Table 4. Top five most common destinations for leavers going overseas, 2018–2021**

	2018	2019	2020	2021
Most common	Australia (23%)	Australia (20%)	Australia (22%)	Australia (15%)
2nd	Spain (13%)	New Zealand (13%)	Spain (11%)	Spain (14%)
3rd	Ireland (10%)	Spain (11%)	Ireland (9%)	New Zealand (8%)
4th	New Zealand (8%)	Ireland (7%)	New Zealand (8%)	Italy/Ireland (6%)
5th	USA (6%)	Italy (6%)	USA (6%)	USA (5%)

Source: RCVS Register

Note: this table includes data from those leaving the Register and moving overseas, and those changing their registration category to Practising outside of the UK.

48. Of those relocating overseas, a relatively small proportion were UK graduates. In 2021, 26% of those moving from the UK-Practising category to the Practising outside of the UK category were UK graduates, although note that this was higher in previous years (38% in 2019, for example). Of those leaving the Register completely and going overseas only 13% were UK graduates.
49. Among UK graduate leavers, the four most common destination countries were Australia, New Zealand, USA and Canada. EU countries such as Spain and Italy that are common destinations overall, were far less common when looking at UK graduates only.

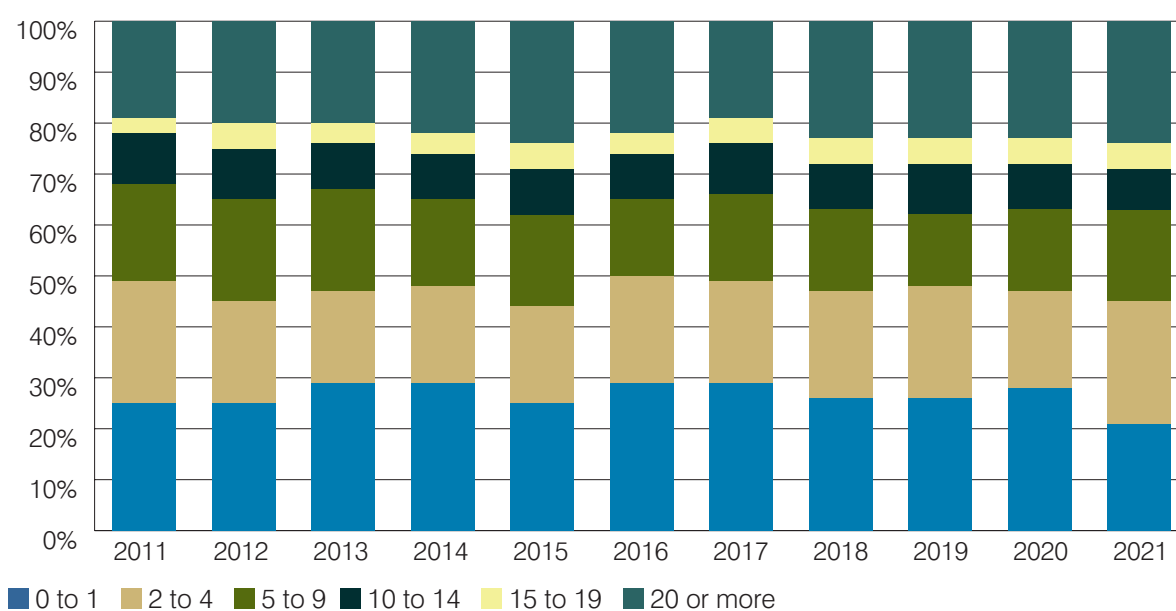
### 5.3 Experience and qualifications

50. As highlighted in the previous section, leavers are disproportionately from younger age groups. Figure 12 shows that, likewise, many leavers have been in the profession for less than five years. In 2021, 45% of leavers had been in the profession for four years or less, including 21% who had less than one year of experience. There is, however, a sizeable proportion of leavers who have considerable veterinary experience; in 2021 37% of leavers had been on the Register for 10 or more years, including 24% that had been on the Register for 20 or more years. This last group is larger than the ‘retirement age’ leavers; only 6% of leavers were aged 66 or more (see

Figure 9), indicating that many leave the profession before retirement age and with significant experience in the profession.

51. While there have been some fluctuations from year-to-year, overall, there has been little change since 2011 in the length of time leavers have been on the Register.
52. Length of time on the Register varies between UK graduates compared with overseas graduates. UK graduates stay on the Register for longer than their overseas counterparts; in 2021 so far, 43% of UK graduate leavers had been on the Register for 20 years or more, and only 22% had been on the Register for four years or less. Meanwhile just 8% of EU graduates and 18% of graduates from the rest of the world stay on the Register for 20 years or more, and 61% of EU graduates and 59% of graduates from the rest of the world leave after four years on the Register.
53. In 2021, a fifth (20%) of UK-Practising leavers held a postgraduate qualification, while the majority (80%) did not. Those with a postgraduate qualification have become less likely to leave over the past decade compared with those without. In 2011 29% of leavers from the UK-Practising category held a postgraduate qualification.

**Figure 12. UK-Practising veterinary surgeons who left the Register or moved to a different category, by number of years since registered, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

## 6. Reasons for leaving the profession

54. This section explores the reasons why individuals leave the profession, using data from the Register on leavers' plans, and information from the Survey of the Veterinary Profession on reasons given for intention to leave. This section also includes a more in-depth analysis of the Survey of the Veterinary Profession question on intention to leave the profession to explore the factors associated with wanting to leave.

### 6.1 Destinations of those leaving the profession

55. When veterinarians leave the Register voluntarily or move from UK-Practising to another category (such as Non-Practising, Non-Practising 70+ or Practising outside of the UK), they are asked to record a reason for this. It is important to note that a sizeable proportion of those who leave the Register are removed for non-payment rather than notifying the RCVS that they wish to leave the Register voluntarily, and this 'non-payment' group are not asked for their reasons for removal because they are not in communication with the College at this point. Because of this, there is further work that needs to be done in understanding what leavers plan to do after they exit the profession.
56. Table 5 shows the plans of those voluntarily leaving the Register, and those leaving the UK-Practising category, combined for 2018 to 2021. Consistently the most common destination for leavers is relocating or returning overseas (41% in 2021). Around 1 in 10 (11%) who leave are retiring, and a similar proportion are taking a career break (9%) or taking parental leave (9%).

**Table 5. Plans after voluntary removal from the Register or changing category from UK-Practising, 2018–2021**

Destinations of leavers	2018		2019		2020		2021	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Relocating/returning overseas	427	42	527	44	608	35	573	41
Retiring	125	12	127	11	186	11	151	11
Career break	93	9	115	10	187	11	122	9
Maternity/ paternity leave	117	12	116	10	171	10	120	9
Starting a non-clinical role	57	6	73	6	77	4	58	4
Medical reasons	26	3	39	3	67	4	36	3
Leaving the industry permanently	11	1	28	2	30	2	27	2
Missed payment instalment*	0	0	0	0	70	4	104	7
Other category change reasons	4	0	9	1	1	0	0	0
Other	153	15	154	13	353	20	215	15
Total (excludes 'rather not say' and 'not responded')	1013		1188		1750		1406	

Source: RCVS Register

\*Note: the “missed payment instalment” category was introduced in 2020 during the pandemic as payment by instalment was introduced as a temporary measure at that time.

## 6.2 Reasons for intending to leave the profession

57. In a slightly different measure, the Survey of the Profession asks respondents whether they intend to leave the profession in the future, and if so, their reasons for intending to leave. While the Register question elicits responses about what individuals will do following their departure from the profession, this survey question asks about the causes for an individual intending to leave the profession.
58. Overall, 9% of respondents intended to leave the profession in the subsequent five years for reasons other than retirement. Most of these had longer-term intentions to leave the profession, 6% said they intended to leave in 3–5 years, 2% in 1–2 years, and just 1% in the next year.

59. Table 6 shows the most common reasons given for intending to leave the profession. The most common reasons relate to work conditions and experiences, such as poor work-life balance (60%), not feeling rewarded or valued (55%), chronic stress (49%), long or unsocial hours (48%), and pay (44%). Reasons relating to life circumstances such as caring for dependents and health issues, were less commonly cited.

**Table 6. Reasons for intending to leave the veterinary profession**

	2019
	%
Poor work-life balance	60
Not feeling rewarded/valued (in non-financial terms)	55
Chronic stress	49
Long/unsocial hours	48
Pay	44
Career change/new challenge	44
Dissatisfaction with career opportunities	38
Lack of flexibility in hours	33
Burden of bureaucracy/legislation	17
Health issues (mental)	17
Care of dependants/to have family	10
Brexit	9
Health issues (physical)	8
Discrimination	5
Travel	5
Study	5
Emigration	3
Other	7

Note: Percentages sum to more than 100% as respondents could select more than one category  
 Source: Survey of the Veterinary Profession, 2019

## 6.3 Factors associated with intention to leave the profession

60. In this section we present the findings from analysis of the Survey of the Veterinary Profession to identify the factors associated with intending to leave veterinary surgery. This analysis focused only on respondents registered as UK-Practising, and of these respondents, 10 per cent planned to leave the profession within the next five years, for reasons other than retirement (in the previous section we noted that it was nine per cent when looking at all respondents rather than just UK-Practising). A multivariate logistic regression analysis was used to explore which underlying factors were found to be predictors of intending to leave the profession in the next five years.
61. The key driver of leaving intentions identified by the analysis was attitudes towards the statement “Veterinary work gives me job satisfaction”. Half (50%) of vets who strongly disagreed with this statement planned to leave within the next five years (including 34% who planned to leave within two years), as did 42% of those who disagree. Only 2% of those strongly agreeing that veterinary work gave them job satisfaction had intentions to leave the profession. When all other factors were controlled for, those who strongly disagree were 20 times more likely to have intentions to leave as those who strongly agree with this statement. Note that those strongly disagreeing or disagreeing with the statement account for seven per cent of respondents. The findings also show that the impact of job satisfaction on leaving intentions was much stronger among female vets than among male vets.
62. Other factors found to be significantly associated with leaving intentions when other variables were controlled for, were:
- a. **Satisfaction with salary:** as well as satisfaction with their job overall, satisfaction with salary was independently associated with intention to leave. Those who strongly disagree that they are satisfied with their salary were significantly more likely to plan to leave (25%) than those who strongly agreed that they are satisfied with their salary (3%).
  - b. **Satisfaction with support from employer:** similarly, those who strongly disagreed that they were satisfied with the support from their employer were more likely to plan to leave (32%) than those who strongly agreed that they are satisfied with the support from their employer (3%).



- c. **Minimum rest periods:** veterinary surgeons who seldom or never had their minimum rest periods (15%) were more likely to plan to leave than those who always had them (7%).
- d. **Working patterns:** part-time veterinary surgeons (12%) were more likely to plan to leave than full-time (9%) veterinary surgeons.
- e. **Further status:** having Advanced Practitioner status or Specialist status was associated with lower intentions to leave. Seven per cent of those holding Advanced Practitioner status intended to leave, compared with 11% of those not holding or working towards the status. Similarly, five per cent of those holding Specialist status planned to leave, compared with 11% of those not holding or working towards Specialist status.
- f. **Holding additional qualifications:** vets with no additional qualifications (11%) were less likely than those with additional qualifications (9%) to plan to leave.
- g. **Country of qualification:** vets who qualified outside of Europe (13%) were more likely to intend to leave in the next five years than those qualifying in the UK or Ireland (10%), or in Europe (9%).
- h. **Area of practice:** in comparison with vets in small animal practice (12%), those in mixed practice (7%), referral practice or consultancy (4%), and outside clinical practice (7%) were significantly less likely to plan to leave.
- i. **Position in practice:** locums (20%) and those outside clinical practice (9%) were found to be significantly more likely to plan to leave than sole principals/directors (6%).
- j. **Family:** those without children were more likely to plan to leave than those with dependent children; 11% of those without child dependants reported that they were likely to leave in the next five years, compared with eight per cent of those with.
- k. **Disability:** individuals with disabilities were more likely to intend to leave in the next five years (17%), compared with individuals without disabilities (10%).
- l. **Age and year of qualification:** younger vets aged under 50 were significantly more likely to plan to leave than those aged 50 and over. Independent of age, year of qualification was also found to be significant, with those qualifying before 1980 being least likely to plan to leave. Note that those planning to retire were not included in the 'intending to leave' category in the analysis.
- m. **Socio-economic background:** veterinary surgeons with four or five of the five identified social mobility characteristics<sup>7</sup> were more likely to intend to leave than other groups (17%, compared with 11% of those with none of

the social mobility characteristics). Those with less than four characteristics, or who lived outside the UK, are not significantly different to those with no social mobility characteristics in terms of their likelihood to plan to leave.

- n. **Concerns about personal safety:** vets working in clinical practice who have had concerns about their personal safety in the last 12 months were more likely to plan to leave (18%) than those who had not had concerns (8%) or who worked outside clinical practice (9%).
- o. **Stressful work:** vets who strongly agreed that vet work is stressful were more likely to plan to leave than those who did not strongly agree (although the difference is not significant for those who disagree with the statement).

## 6.4 Evidence from previous studies

- 63. This section presents findings from various previous research studies relevant to retention in the veterinary profession. The studies fall roughly into two categories, first, the factors associated with leaving the profession or leaving specific areas of practice, and secondly the experiences and expectations of students and recent veterinary graduates.
- 64. A recurring theme among studies looking at retention in the veterinary profession is the issue of long hours and work-life balance. For example, Hagen et al (2020)<sup>8</sup> identified work-life balance as a key element of working in the veterinary profession that respondents disliked, and working-hours as an area they would ideally change, while Begeny et al (2018)<sup>9</sup> found that endorsement of the “long work hours culture” was associated with retention. One qualitative study of farm vets (Adam et al, 2019<sup>10</sup>) found that many leavers believed the lifestyle and work-life balance of the work “unattainable”, and this was linked to a difficulty in balancing work and family life particularly with establishing part-time or flexible working patterns.
- 65. Another issue identified by several studies was stress and pressure experienced by those in the veterinary profession. “Less stress” was identified as a top priority among respondents to the British Veterinary Association (BVA) Panel study in 2015<sup>11</sup>, and selecting this option was associated with intention to leave. One qualitative study of professionals moving out of clinical practice and into laboratory work (Anderson and Hobson-West, 2021<sup>12</sup>) found the pressure of the general practitioner role to be a key push factor, including the business and financial requirements of the role as well as difficult working environments.

On the other hand, working in positive environments where individuals feel supported, have available role models, and feel valued in their work are all associated with retention (for example, Adam et al 2015<sup>13</sup>, Begeny et al, 2018). Similarly, graduates have been found to value supportive management as one of the key influences on their choice of career path (Vet Futures, 2015<sup>14</sup>).

66. Several studies have reported gender differences in retention, with women more likely to leave the profession or express an intention to leave the profession compared with men (for example, Begeny et al, 2018, Hagen et al, 2020, the Survey of the Veterinary Profession, 2019). However, regression analysis of the Survey of the Veterinary Profession (presented in section 6.3) found that gender was not significant in predicting intention to leave once other factors were controlled for, and it should be noted that older age groups are both less likely to express intention to leave and have a higher proportion of male veterinary surgeons. Nevertheless, previous studies have found gender differences in how certain factors affected intentions to leave. For women specifically, gender differences in their views of their working hours and having been more likely to have experienced gender-based discrimination at work, had an effect on their intention to leave the profession (Begeny et al, 2018). Other studies have found evidence of gender-based discrimination and/or prejudice in the profession, for example Adam et al's qualitative study of veterinary surgeons in the farming sector (2019)<sup>15</sup>.
67. Other complex personal reasons may be involved in individual decisions to leave the profession, such as personal life changes, or physical or mental health issues (Adam et al, 2015). The latter of these reflects the finding in section 6.3 above that those with disabilities were more likely to have intentions to leave the profession.
68. Young veterinary surgeons early in their career are a group of focus for some previous studies on retention in the veterinary workforce; a notable proportion of those leaving each year have been on the register for four years or less (46% in 2021), and as already noted, several studies have highlighted an increase in intention to leave among younger individuals. This may be the result of a 'disillusionment' with the profession experienced by early-career vets. The Vet Futures BVA Panel Survey (2015) found that while many (59%) felt their working life matched their expectations from the beginning of their career, this left 41% who felt their expectations had not been met, and this second group were more likely than the first to say they intended to leave the profession.

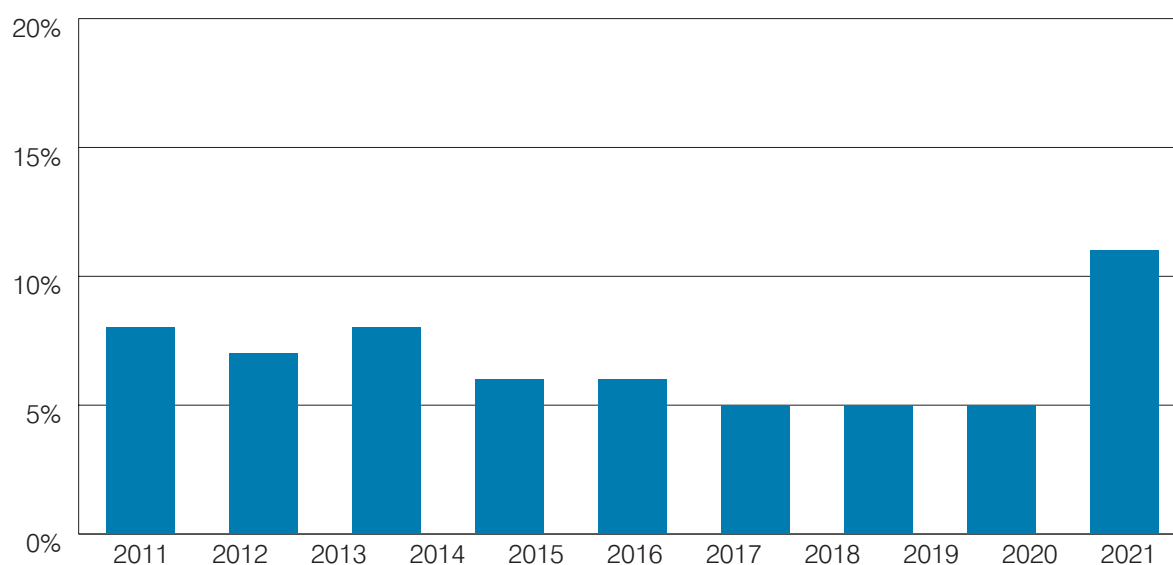
The same question was asked of recent graduates in the Vet Futures survey of vet students and recent graduates, with half (50%) of this group saying their expectations had not been met. This survey also highlighted a certain level of disillusionment among graduates compared with students; 34% of students said their veterinary degree was preparing them for their chosen area of work “very well”, while only 18% of graduates said the same. Note, however that a majority of graduates said their veterinary degree had prepared them “quite well” (57%). The Graduate and Employer Survey (2019)<sup>16</sup> found that 50% of graduates said their degree had ‘not at all’ or slightly’ contributed to their current business skills, highlighting a particular area where some graduates do not feel prepared.

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- <sup>7</sup> The characteristics were: whether their parents attended university, type of school attended, receipt of household income support during school years, receipt of free school meals during school years, and whether or not they attended an Access course.
- <sup>8</sup> Hagen, J., Weller, R., Mair, T.S. and Kinnison, T., (2020), Investigation of factors affecting recruitment and retention in the UK veterinary profession, *Vet Record*, Volume 187, Issue 9, 354-354.
- <sup>9</sup> Begeny, C., Ryan M. and Bongiorno, R. (2018), Motivation, satisfaction, and retention Understanding the importance of vets’ day-to-day work experiences, the British Veterinary Association and the University of Exeter, available at: [www.svf.se/media/ognjno14/motivation-satisfaction-and-retention-bva-workforce-report-nov-2018-1.pdf](http://www.svf.se/media/ognjno14/motivation-satisfaction-and-retention-bva-workforce-report-nov-2018-1.pdf)
- <sup>10</sup> Adam, K. E. , Baillie, S., & Rushton, J. (2019), ‘Clients. Outdoors. Animals.’: Retaining vets in UK farm animal practice-thematic analysis of free-text survey responses. *Veterinary Record*, 184(4).
- <sup>11</sup> Vet Futures (2015), Report of the survey of the BVA ‘Voice of the profession’ panel, available at: [www.vetfutures.org.uk/resource/report-of-the-survey-of-the-bva-voice-of-the-profession-panel/](http://www.vetfutures.org.uk/resource/report-of-the-survey-of-the-bva-voice-of-the-profession-panel/)
- <sup>12</sup> Anderson, A. and Hobson-West, P. (2021), “Refugees from practice”? Exploring why some vets move from the clinic to the laboratory, *Vet Record*, available at: <https://bvajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/vetr.773>
- <sup>13</sup> Adam, K., Baillie, S. and Rushton, J. (2015), Retaining vets in farm animal practice: a cross-sectional study, *Vet Record*, 176(25):655.
- <sup>14</sup> Vet Futures (2015), Voices from the future of the profession: survey of vet students and graduates, available at: [www.vetfutures.org.uk/resource/voices-from-the-future-of-the-profession-july-2015/](http://www.vetfutures.org.uk/resource/voices-from-the-future-of-the-profession-july-2015/)
- <sup>15</sup> Adam, K. E., Baillie, S., & Rushton, J. (2019). ‘Clients. Outdoors. Animals.’: Retaining vets in UK farm animal practice-thematic analysis of free-text survey responses. *Veterinary Record*, 184(4).
- <sup>16</sup> Veterinary Schools Council (2019), Veterinary Schools Council Graduate and Employer Surveys 2019, Veterinary Schools Council and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, available at: [www.vetschoolscouncil.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/VSC-Graduate-Employer-Surveys-2019.pdf](http://www.vetschoolscouncil.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/VSC-Graduate-Employer-Surveys-2019.pdf)

## 7. Returning to the profession

69. This section looks at the veterinary surgeons who choose to return to the profession after some time away from the Register.
70. Each year, a proportion of those who have left the Register have their registrations restored. Restorations make up a relatively small proportion of the veterinary surgeons entering the UK-Practising category; in 2021, 239 restorations have been made to the UK-Practising category, equating to 11% of UK-Practising joiners (Figure 13). This compares to 29% coming from other registration categories and 60% who were newly registered.
71. The proportion of joiners to the Register that are restorations is higher in 2021 than at any point in the past decade (Figure 13). However, this is likely to be, at least in part, due to a higher than usual number of restorations from individuals who had been off the Register for a short period of time of three months or less. Sixty-seven per cent of restorations in 2021 were for people who had been off the Register for three months or less, while 10% had been off for four months to a year, and 23% had been off for a year or more (including 7% off for four years or more). This compares to 43% of restorations in 2020 being for those off the Register for three months or less, and just 17% in 2019.
72. A majority of restorations to the Register are individuals who had previously been removed for non-payment. In 2021, three-quarters (75%) of restorations were previously removed for non-payment, up from 55% in 2020. The remaining restorations were for individuals who had voluntarily removed themselves from the Register (25% in 2021), with a very small proportion of restorations being individuals who had previously been suspended from the Register or had disciplinary action.

**Figure 13. Individuals being restored to the Register as ‘UK-Practising’, as a proportion of UK-Practising joiners, 2011–2021**



Source: RCVS Register

73. In the 2019 Survey of the Veterinary Profession, 2.4% of those surveyed were taking a career break, most of whom were women (79%). The most common reason for taking a career break was parental leave or looking after children (48% of those currently on a career break). A further 13% cited illness, and 13% were travelling, while 8% were studying. Reasons for taking a career break differed by gender; among men the top reasons were illness (27%), study (14%), sabbatical (13%) and travel (13%), while for women, by far the most frequent reason was parental leave/looking after children (59%), followed by travel (15%) and illness (12%). The median length of career break reported was 25.5 months.
74. A small proportion (4.5%) of those in work responding to the Survey of the Veterinary Professions worked outside, or mainly outside the profession, in a job that did not need a veterinary qualification. Most of these (85%) have worked within the profession at some point in their careers, and a small number (11%) still do some work in the veterinary profession, although main area of work being outside. A majority of this group either do not intend to return to the profession (54%) or are unsure whether they will return (32%), leaving a very small group of individuals who have left but do intend to return.

## 8. Future research

75. The preceding sections have presented the available information on recruitment, retention and return in the veterinary workforce. There are four key areas, however, that have been identified as needing further research.

- a. First, further investigation is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons why individuals decide to leave the profession, and what their future plans are after leaving. Current data from the Register can tell us about the planned destinations for those who choose to leave the Register voluntarily, but a large proportion of individuals who leave the Register are removed for non-payment and are therefore not asked this question. Related to this is understanding better the movement of professionals from clinical into non-clinical roles, which is not an area the Register data can currently shed light on. Due to GDPR rules, contacting those who have left the Register is not possible, and therefore there are complexities around conducting further research in this area.
- b. A second area for further research is additional information about the characteristics of those joining and leaving the veterinary profession. This is an area covered in some detail in this report, but there are several areas of interest that we do not have available data to explore. For example, the Register does not include information about the areas of practice that veterinary surgeons are joining and leaving from, or whether those leaving and joining work full-time or part-time, which has an impact on the capacity of the workforce. As well as these professional characteristics, there are a number of personal characteristics we do not know about those joining and leaving the profession, such as socio-economic background. The analysis presented in section 6.3 above using the Survey of the Veterinary Profession data on intention to leave can shed some light on how these characteristics are related to leaving the profession, but this does not give us detailed information about those who take action to leave the profession, as well as those entering the profession.
- c. A third area where more information would be useful is the career lengths of different groups within the profession, and a better understanding of the trajectory of veterinary surgeons' careers. For example, how many jobs do individuals hold over their careers? Do professionals generally stay in one area of work, or move between different specialisms?
- d. A final avenue for further enquiry is exploring ways to help leavers return to the profession and identifying warning signs so that interventions or mitigations can be developed before individuals leave the profession.

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