

NSW GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Veterinary Workforce Shortages in New South Wales

Legislative Council – Portfolio Committee No.4

30 September 2024



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Introduction

On 9 June 2023 the Legislative Council of the NSW Parliament commenced an inquiry into the veterinary workforce shortage in New South Wales, and in particular:

- a. the shortage of veterinarians across the profession, including clinical (small and large animal practice), government, academia, research, industry, and pathology
- b. the challenges in maintaining a sustainable veterinary workforce, including recruitment and retention rates
- c. the burn-out and mental health challenges facing the veterinary profession
- d. the role of, and challenges affecting, veterinary nurses
- e. the role of, and challenges affecting, overseas trained veterinarians
- f. the arrangements and impacts of providing after-hour veterinary services
- g. the impact of the current legislative and regulatory framework on veterinarians
- h. the particular challenges facing the veterinary profession and the shortage of veterinarians in regional, rural, and remote New South Wales
- i. the role played by veterinarians in providing care to lost, stray and homeless animals, injured wildlife and during emergency situations
- j. the impact of the current veterinary shortage on animal welfare, including the impact on the economy, members of the public seeking veterinary care for animals, pounds and shelters, the animal agribusiness industry, companion animal breeders and others
- k. current barriers to accessing veterinary care for members of the public, particularly those with lower incomes or who live in regional, rural and remote locations
- l. strategies to support the current veterinary workforce, as well as ways to increase the number of practising veterinarians particularly in regional, rural, and remote New South Wales
- m. strategies to improve access to veterinary care
- n. any other related matter.

The Report of the Committee was tabled on 28 June 2024, making 34 recommendations for action to be taken by the government. Under Standing Order 240, a government response is required within three months of a report being tabled, specifically 30 September 2024.

The *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* is the responsibility of the Minister for Agriculture. Noting veterinary practice impact several other areas across the NSW Government, the government response has prepared by the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, in consultation with Department of Climate Change, Energy, Efficiency and Water; Office of Local Government NSW; NSW Education; NSW Health; Local Land Services; NSW Veterinary Practitioner Board; and NSW Transport.

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	3
<i>Response to Recommendations</i>	5
Recommendation 1.....	5
Recommendation 2.....	5
Recommendation 3.....	5
Recommendation 4.....	6
Recommendation 5.....	6
Recommendation 6.....	6
Recommendation 7.....	6
Recommendation 8.....	7
Recommendation 9.....	7
Recommendation 10.....	7
Recommendation 11.....	7
Recommendation 12.....	8
Recommendation 13.....	8
Recommendation 14.....	8
Recommendation 15.....	9
Recommendation 16.....	9
Recommendation 17.....	9
Recommendation 18.....	9
Recommendation 19.....	10
Recommendation 20.....	10
Recommendation 21.....	11
Recommendation 22.....	11
Recommendation 23.....	11
Recommendation 24.....	11
Recommendation 25.....	12
Recommendation 26.....	12
Recommendation 27.....	12
Recommendation 28.....	12
Recommendation 29.....	12
Recommendation 30.....	13
Recommendation 31.....	13
Recommendation 32.....	13
Recommendation 33.....	13
Recommendation 34.....	14

Response to Recommendations

Recommendation 1

That the NSW Government provide dedicated, ongoing funding for the provision of veterinary services to wildlife, including for: wildlife rescue organisations, existing wildlife hospitals, support the expansion of wildlife units at other hospitals, and private veterinary practices to contribute to reasonable costs for services.

Noted

The NSW Government has committed over \$8.5 million for wildlife hospitals and care facilities:

- \$2.0 million to Port Stephens Koala Hospital
- \$1.4 million to Northern Rivers Wildlife Hospital
- \$110,000 to Friends of the Koala
- \$110,000 to Byron Bay Wildlife Hospital
- \$4.5 million to the University of Sydney School of Veterinary Science, and
- \$0.5 million to improve koala rescue, rehabilitation, and conservation in the Georges River area.

The NSW Government funds and supports conservation activities at Taronga Western Plains Zoo, including a wildlife care facility in Dubbo NSW.

The NSW Government in response to recommendations 45 and 46 of the independent statutory review of the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* has commenced a priority state-wide review and consultation process to address issues facing the wildlife care and rehabilitation sector. This consultation will identify challenges faced by the wildlife rehabilitation and veterinary sectors and inform opportunities for future support and improvement.

While it is premature to commit to this recommendation at the current time, the matter will be further considered once the review is complete and funding requests can be considered through the ordinary annual budget process.

Recommendation 2

That the NSW Government consider amending the Companion Animals Act 1998 to: ensure local government authorities collect stray animals from licensed veterinary clinics and ensure that appropriate funding is provided to local government authorities to ensure that there is a consistent interpretation of the Act across all local government areas.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government made an election commitment to review the *Companion Animals Act 1998*. This matter will be considered as part of that review.

The NSW Government is currently undertaking a review of the Companion Animals Fund, looking at the most effective ways to utilise revenue from registrations and annual permits that best supports all NSW councils to meet their responsibilities in companion animal management.

Recommendation 3

That the NSW Government develop a clearer regulatory framework for the provision of telehealth veterinary services to complement the delivery of after-hours services and potentially help reduce the burden on the veterinary workforce.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will commit to reviewing the veterinary practice regulatory framework in consultation with the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board. This issue will be considered as part of that review.

Recommendation 4

That the NSW Government consider amending the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 and other relevant legislation to ensure that mobile veterinary clinics can be easily registered to deliver veterinary care, particularly in areas with no clinic within a reasonable distance. Any changes must ensure mobile clinics work collaboratively to ensure they can provide essential additional veterinary services without causing detriment to local clinics.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will commit to reviewing the veterinary practice regulatory framework in consultation with the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board. This issue will be considered as part of that review.

Recommendation 5

That the NSW Government consider reviewing the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 to ensure that the Veterinary Practitioners Board NSW complaints investigation process is updated to allow for a streamlined process, and to distinguish between substantial complaints and those which are frivolous or vexatious.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will commit to reviewing the veterinary practice regulatory framework in consultation with the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board. This issue will be considered as part of that review.

Recommendation 6

That the NSW Government advocate to the Australian Government to align visa requirements for veterinarians with those in the human medical field, amend working holiday visa requirements for veterinarians to enable longer stays with a single employer.

Support

The NSW Government acknowledges skilled migration can be an important tool to fill workforce shortages, and the role of the Australasian Veterinary Board Council in assessing veterinary qualifications for migration, and other related matters including assuring and promoting uniform educational standards through accreditation of veterinary schools, the Australasian Veterinary Examination, and assessment of specialists.

The Australian Government released the Migration Strategy in December 2023, and announced several supporting reforms, including a review of regional migration settings to ensure they support strong and sustainable regions. The NSW Government will advocate these matters as part of that process.

Recommendation 7

That the NSW Government prioritise a review of the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 and its associated regulation immediately following, or in conjunction with, the review of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act 1979 and associated regulations and codes.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will commit to reviewing the veterinary practice regulatory framework in consultation with the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board. This issue will be considered as part of that review.

Recommendation 8

That the NSW Government continue to work with the Australian Government to increase the availability of childcare places, particularly in regional and rural areas.

Support

The NSW Government is investing in the Childcare and Economic Opportunity Fund (**the Fund**) to increase participation in the State's workforce, particularly for women, by making quality childcare more affordable and accessible. Current programs under the Fund include the Flexible Initiatives Trial and the fee-relief for 3-year-olds in long daycare trial program. These test and trial programs seek to better cater for the needs of local families and increase the availability of places for children in NSW where and when they are needed most.

Recommendation 9

That the NSW Government provide grants to appropriate organisations to raise awareness and educate clients about the impact of their behaviour on veterinarians.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government recognises the opportunities and positive impact of increased awareness and understandings of the veterinary profession and the services they deliver by the community, and notes that this issue may span across numerous jurisdictions. The NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board works with the Doctors Health Advisory Services, the Australian Veterinary Association and charities, such as Sophie's Legacy, to address the impact of client behaviour on the profession. The NSW Government will consider, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, further options to raise awareness and education and consider alignment with national opportunities.

The NSW Government notes that this recommendation has financial implications that would need to be considered through the ordinary annual budget process.

Recommendation 10

That the NSW Government consider funding the Australian Veterinary Association to support its work developing mental health programs for veterinarians.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will consider funding options for mental health programs specific to veterinarians and consult with relevant stakeholders, including the Australian Veterinary Association, on next steps.

The NSW Government notes that this recommendation has financial implications that would need to be considered through the ordinary annual budget process.

Recommendation 11

That the NSW Government consider how it can support and promote the establishment of the field of Veterinary Social Work in New South Wales.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will consult with relevant stakeholders to explore the establishment of a field of Veterinary Social Work in New South Wales.

Recommendation 12

That the NSW Government, through the Agricultural Ministers Council, seek national support for a national veterinary workforce database, as proposed by the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government notes the absence of a national system for the collection and analysis of veterinary workforce data restricts the ability to build the evidence base needed to identify and develop targeted workforce strategies.

NSW participated in the Australian Government's Veterinary Workforce Data and Governance Roundtable in August 2024, which gathered veterinary professionals, academic institutions, industry stakeholders, and policymakers to explore alternative solutions for veterinary workforce data issues across Australia. A key outcome of this roundtable was the establishment of a taskforce tasked with presenting options for a nationally coordinated data collection approach. The NSW Government will continue to contribute to this nationally led effort to ensure a cohesive and effective strategy. The NSW Government will consider opportunities in collaboration with relevant stakeholders to improve the collection and publication of NSW veterinary workforce data.

Recommendation 13

The Minister for Mental Health, in conjunction with the Minister for Agriculture, take steps to ensure suicide prevention programs are made available which are specifically targeted at veterinarians.

Support in Principle

From 2024-25 the NSW and Australian Governments jointly fund Primary Health Networks for suicide prevention training via community collaboratives across all areas of NSW. "Community collaboratives" is a program where local stakeholders come together to support suicide prevention and postvention. The NSW Government is supportive in principle of taking steps to ensure suicide prevention programs, specifically targeted at veterinarians, are made available.

Recommendation 14

That the NSW Government examine data held by NSW government agencies regarding the suicide rate in the veterinary profession across the state over the last two decades, including all causal factors and develop a framework to better support mental health of veterinarians.

Support in Principle

The NSW Suicide Monitoring System holds information on suspected and confirmed suicides in NSW. The System utilises data obtained from "JusticeLink", the NSW consolidated justice information system, which comprises information provided when a death is reported to the coroner. This can include information on the deceased person's occupation and possible causal factors, when known, however this is not often the case at the time of reporting.

The NSW Government will consider greater use of this data.

Recommendation 15

That the NSW Government considers providing financial incentives for veterinarians who work with livestock, to ensure an adequate number of large animal practitioners are available to support primary producers in regional areas

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will investigate barriers and consider options to help attract veterinarians to private practices that focus on livestock, ensuring regional areas have sufficient large animal practitioners to support primary producers. Additionally, the NSW Government will continue to collaborate with the Australian Government to improve veterinary workforce data, with the aim of better tracking and addressing veterinary workforce supply challenges in rural and regional areas.

The NSW Government notes that this recommendation has financial implications that would need to be considered through the ordinary annual budget process.

Recommendation 16

That the NSW Government advocate for the Australian Government to trial incentives, including waiving HECS debt, to attract and retain veterinarians in New South Wales, and particularly in rural and in regional areas.

Support

The NSW Government, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, will consider alternative incentives to attract and retain veterinarians across the State, in particular regional NSW.

Depending on the outcome of these consultations, if appropriate, the NSW Government will advocate on these matters through the Education Ministers Meeting, in collaboration with other Australian, State and Territory government ministers.

Recommendation 17

That the NSW Government provide funding for targeted grants to enhance mentoring for first year graduates in private practice in New South Wales, and particularly in areas outside of large cities.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government, in consultation with relevant stakeholders, including the Australian Government, will consider opportunities to improve veterinary workforce data better understand these issues, and explore the merits of financial or non-financial incentives.

The NSW Government notes that this recommendation has financial implications that would need to be considered through the ordinary annual budget process.

Recommendation 18

That the NSW Government to consider providing incentives for veterinarians to take up NSW Local Land Service veterinary roles in regions where recruitment has been difficult.

Support

The NSW Government is currently conducting a review of the Local Land Services Award, which will specifically consider opportunities to address the uptake of veterinary roles in regional areas, such as the Western Division, where recruitment to date has been challenging.

Recommendation 19

That the NSW Government conduct an assessment of the capacity of the government veterinary diagnostic services workforce, in particular veterinary pathologists, to respond to an emergency animal disease outbreak and to also meet projected future demands for diagnostic services. This assessment should be publicly released.

Support in Principle

The veterinary diagnostics services workforce capacity to respond to emergency animal disease outbreak will be considered as part of the Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development Research & Development Review. Due to a lack of expertise available in Australia and internationally, efforts have focused on recruiting veterinary pathologists, virologists, microbiologists, and parasitologists. Strengthening university partnerships and investing in education and outreach have increased the pipeline of interested undergraduates. These efforts have provided enough specialist capacity to respond to emergency animal disease outbreaks. Ongoing efforts require training and succession planning, given the limited redundancy of specialists.

To further support these initiatives, more than \$60 million will be invested to deliver vital upgrades to seven research facilities and five emergency response sites across regional New South Wales, enhancing the capacity of staff working in critical areas such as animal nutrition, climate change, aquaculture breeding, and biosecurity surveillance and responses. Emergency response sites are regularly utilised as operation centres during times of emergency, including biosecurity outbreaks. Upgrades to these centres will improve the states capacity during these times of crisis.

The Government acknowledges the need for ongoing training, succession planning, and addressing career progression challenges for mid-career professionals, particularly against the higher earnings potential of veterinarians in the university and private sector.

Advocacy on these issues will continue through the Education Ministers Meeting and with other Australian, State, and Territory governments.

Recommendation 20

That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate that veterinary schools and the accreditation body work together to action the recommendations of Rethinking Veterinary Education, the recent review of veterinary education commissioned by the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand, which would help reduce the cost of course delivery.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will continue to work closely with the Australian Government and other State and Territory governments given the recommendations of Rethinking Veterinary Education have Australasian impacts. Separately to this, the NSW Government, will consider this proposal further in consultation with NSW Vice Chancellors, and relevant Deans of Veterinary Science.

Recommendation 21

That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for the Australian Government to increase its per student contribution to universities for students studying to become veterinarians.

Support

The NSW Government notes, as outlined in recommendation 18 above, that veterinary science is amongst the highest Australian Government per student contribution rate band amongst all units of study, including medicine. These are challenging issues and will need to be carefully considered so as not to inadvertently impose a barrier to entry into the workforce and therefore worsen skills shortages.

The NSW Government in consultation with the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board will continue to work with the Australian Government, and advocate on these matters through the Education Ministers Meeting.

Recommendation 22

That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for the Australian Government to provide funding for clinical training for veterinary students training in large animal practice.

Support

The NSW Government will continue to advocate on these matters through the Agriculture Ministers Meeting, in collaboration with other Australian, State and Territory government ministers.

Recommendation 23

That the NSW Government, through the relevant Ministerial Council, advocate for universities to continue to review their student admission processes, to ensure that suitable candidates are chosen to study veterinary science.

Support

The NSW Government notes the Australian Government has committed to an Australian Universities Accord to transform Australia's higher education system. Following the recently completed two-year independent review, the Australian Government announced funding in the 2024-25 Federal Budget to progress these reforms, including the establishment of an Accord Implementation Advisory Committee. University admissions practices are being considered as part of the Australian Universities Accord.

The NSW Government will continue to advocate on these matters through the Education Ministers Meeting, in collaboration with other Australian, State and Territory government ministers.

Recommendation 24

That the NSW Government seek to introduce a regulatory framework for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in New South Wales. The framework should encompass minimum qualification requirements, in line with those already in use, specifically the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician Registration Scheme, and the scheme in Western Australia, title protection, where only those who meet the minimum qualification requirements can use the protected titles, professional standards, including a code of professional conduct, oversight by a professional board, and appropriate rates of pay.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will commit to reviewing the veterinary practice regulatory framework in consultation with the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board. This issue will be considered as part of that review.

Recommendation 25

That any regulatory framework for veterinary nurses and veterinary technicians in New South Wales: be provided under the same legislation as the regulation of veterinarians, be consistent with the scheme already in place in Western Australia and aligned as much as possible with the Australian Veterinary Nurse and Technician voluntary scheme.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will commit to reviewing the veterinary practice regulatory framework in consultation with the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board. This issue will be considered as part of that review.

Recommendation 26

That the NSW Government advocate for a nationally consistent registration scheme for veterinary nurses and technicians through the Ministerial Council for Agriculture and other appropriate forums.

Support

See the NSW Government response at recommendation 24.

When appropriate, these matters will be advocated at the Agriculture Ministers Meeting, in collaboration with other Australian, State and Territory government ministers.

Recommendation 27

The NSW Government review the Veterinary Practice Act 2003 to determine whether some restricted acts of veterinary science could be extended to veterinary nurses and technicians who are regulated under the same legislative framework.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government will commit to reviewing the veterinary practice regulatory framework in consultation with the NSW Veterinary Practitioners Board. This issue will be considered as part of that review.

Recommendation 28

That the NSW Government provide support for the Australian Veterinary Association to develop educational materials for pet owners containing information about how veterinary clinics operate • how pet owners should budget for unexpected costs, how to create a positive relationship with the veterinary team, the potential benefits of pet insurance. This information should be available in a range of community languages.

Support in Principle

Educating the public on how veterinary businesses operate, and the costs of routine and emergency veterinary care will greatly assist animal owners in preparing and budgeting for future expenditure.

The NSW Government will consult further on these matters with the Australian Veterinary Association noting that this issue may span across numerous jurisdictions. The NSW Government will continue to advocate on these matters through the Agriculture Ministers Meeting, in collaboration with other Australian, State and Territory government ministers.

Recommendation 29

That the NSW Government consider using the NSW Pet Registry to provide educational material to pet owners.

Support

Further to the NSW Government response at recommendation 28 above, consideration will also be given to providing educational materials for pet owners through the NSW Pet Registry, where appropriate.

Recommendation 30

That the NSW Government advocate to the Australian Government for veterinarians to access the Translating and Interpreting Service for clients who hold Centrelink cards.

Support

The NSW Government will advocate for these matters with the Australian Government.

Recommendation 31

That the NSW Government investigate strategies to best ensure veterinary care for pet owners particularly low-income earners can be made more affordable.

Support in Principle

As noted in the response to recommendation 28, educating the public about how veterinary businesses operate and the costs associated with routine and emergency care will help pet owners better prepare and budget for these expenses.

The NSW Government will consult further on these matters with the relevant stakeholders noting that this issue may span across numerous jurisdictions. The NSW Government will continue to advocate on these matters through the Agriculture Ministers Meeting, in collaboration with other Australian, State and Territory government ministers.

Recommendation 32

That the NSW Government investigate providing subsidised vet care to low-income earners, pensioner and animal rescue groups.

Support in Principle

The NSW Government has previously provided one off funding that has provided veterinary care to community groups through various programs, including those for education, training, and desexing.

Recommendation 33

That the NSW Government provide funding to animal rescue organisations and the university sector to increase subsidised treatments at their veterinary hospitals and provide increased training opportunities for veterinary science students and others.

Support in Principle

The Government is actively supporting the welfare of wildlife and companion animals, as demonstrated by recent investments. A recent example of the Government's commitment is the \$5 million investment for koala care in south-western Sydney, announced on 29 April 2024. This funding includes \$4.5 million to establish a new Koala Care Centre at the University of Sydney's Camden campus, part of the Wildlife Health and Conservation Hospital. The facility will treat a significant number of koalas from the Macarthur region,

expanding the hospital's capacity to support koala rescue, rehabilitation, and conservation efforts. Additionally, \$500,000 will be made available through a grant program to support the region's dedicated wildlife rehabilitators. The Government will continue to investigate opportunities to expand support for this recommendation.

The NSW Government notes that this recommendation has financial implications that would need to be considered through the ordinary annual budget process.

Recommendation 34

That the NSW Government consider options for trialling companion-animal friendly public transport.

Support

The NSW Government notes animals are currently allowed on buses, ferries and light rail with the permission of the driver.

In considering whether or not pets should be allowed on trains, the benefits for pet owners must be carefully weighed against the needs of passengers with disability and transport workers. The NSW Government will develop a plan to consult on options for a limited trial, commencing with transport workers and organisations who represent people with disability.

Assistance animals and police or security dogs may travel on all forms of public transport services. It is noted that to be accredited as an assistance animal, specific training is required so that the animal can assist the person with a disability, will not react to distractions and is toilet trained.