

Opening Statement of The Veterinary Council of Ireland to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Opening Statement by Mr. Peadar O'Scanaill, President of the Veterinary Council of Ireland and Ms. Niamh Muldoon, Registrar and CEO of the Veterinary Council of Ireland to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Tuesday 21st May 2019

Chairperson, Deputies and Senators, I am Niamh Muldoon, Registrar and CEO of the Veterinary Council of Ireland and I am joined today by Mr. Peadar O'Scanaill, President of the Veterinary Council. On behalf of the Veterinary Council, I welcome the opportunity to discuss this important issue of corporate ownership of veterinary practices with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food & the Marine, and I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak before you today.

I will say a few brief words about the role of the Veterinary Council, as this is very relevant in the context of the discussion today.

Independent Statutory Regulator

The Veterinary Council is the statutory body responsible for the regulation and management of the veterinary professions, being veterinary practitioners and veterinary nurses in Ireland.

The Veterinary Council of Ireland is a statutory body set up under the Veterinary Practice Act 2005, as amended, and is under the aegis of the Minister of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The principal function of the Veterinary Council is to regulate the practise of veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing in the Republic of Ireland, in the interest of animal health and welfare and in the interest of veterinary public health.

The functions of the Veterinary Council include protection of the public through the supervision of veterinary education, the maintenance of the register of veterinary practitioners and nurses, the registration of veterinary premises, and through disciplinary action in cases of professional misconduct.

Registration

The Veterinary Council ensures that all registered persons meet the necessary standards in terms of education, skill, competence and professional conduct, to perform their duties, in accordance with the prescribed codes of professional conduct and ethics and in accordance with legislative requirements. Any practitioner must be registered with the Veterinary Council to practise as a Veterinary Practitioner or Veterinary Nurse. The Veterinary Council safeguard access and maintenance of the Register, with 2842 Veterinary Practitioners and 935 Veterinary Nurses currently registered.

Education

The Veterinary Council sets standards for all undergraduate education programmes and works to ensure veterinary education and training remains up to date and is benchmarked to

the highest international standards. The Veterinary Council also require that all veterinary practitioners and veterinary nurses fulfil ongoing professional education requirements to ensure they keep their knowledge and skills up to date throughout their professional lives.

The Veterinary Council provides guidance to veterinary registrants on matters relating to conduct and ethics through their Code of Professional Conduct registered Veterinary Practitioners & Veterinary Nurses. The Code of Professional Conduct consists of the rules and principles which govern veterinary practitioners and veterinary nurses, in the exercise of their profession.

Disciplinary

The Veterinary Council is also the designated body to which members of the public may make a complaint against a veterinary practitioner or veterinary nurse. One of the functions of the Council is to take disciplinary action in cases of professional misconduct. In 2018, the Veterinary Council held 5 Fitness to Practise Inquiries, following consideration of 21 complaints.

Corporate Ownership of Veterinary Practices

As the Committee will be aware, the topic of corporate ownership of veterinary practices is a very divisive one and has been the subject of much debate in recent times.

Since January 2018, there has been significant ongoing work in the Veterinary Council to progress consideration of the regulation of the practice in regards to corporate ownership. This is a very divisive and challenging matter for the profession. Nevertheless, the Veterinary Council must continue to ensure the highest standards of veterinary medicine in the regulation and management of the professions.

Background

Historically, section 54 (2) of the Veterinary practitioners Act 2005, was interpreted to prevent a body corporate from owning a veterinary practice, and this understanding was reflected in the Code of Professional Conduct, published by the Veterinary Council. However, legal advice received by the Veterinary Council advised that the legislation does not speak to the ownership of practices, and thus the Council has no legal authority in determining the ownership of practices.

The Council has no legal powers over the regulation of the market in relation to corporate ownership of veterinary practices. The parameters of our powers as established under the Veterinary practitioners Act 2005 simply do not extend to this area.

In light of this, in December 2017, the Veterinary Council amended the Code of Professional Conduct to explicitly state that corporate ownership of veterinary practices was not prohibited.

Following reaction from the veterinary professions and farming bodies, citing a lack of consultation on the matter of corporate ownership, the Veterinary Council at a meeting in January 2018, decided to put the proposed amended section of the Code of Professional

Conduct on hold, and carry out an extensive consultation process of stakeholders on the subject of ownership of veterinary practices. Consultations conducted to date include:

- a survey of the general public conducted by market research company Behaviour & Attitudes
- a consultation process whereby any interested parties could submit their views
- a survey of the veterinary professions conducted by market research company Behaviour & Attitudes
- research and analysis on other Veterinary Regulators internationally
- research and analysis on other regulated professions in Ireland

The Veterinary Council has also benefited from legal advice on the matter, and all of these inputs, together with the results of a consultation process and survey of the public, are to be consolidated into a report by Grant Thornton.

It is hoped this report will be available shortly for consideration by the Veterinary Council.

In Conclusion

The Veterinary Council is the statutory body responsible for the regulation and management of the veterinary professions, being veterinary practitioners and veterinary nurses in Ireland.

It is worth noting that as an independent regulator to the veterinary professions, there is no express legislative role for the Veterinary Council to determine the ownership of veterinary practices.

The Veterinary Council is also about to embark on the development of a new Strategy for 2019-2023. The Council will look to work with partner bodies to shape the professional lives of Veterinary Registrants to ensure that the development and oversight of the Veterinary professions continue to foster best professional practice, in the best interests of animal welfare and public interest.

We will continue to work to ensure that the high standards expected in the veterinary industry are upheld, and that quality of veterinary care is continuously improving into the future.

Finally I would like to thank the Chair and the Committee for the invitation to address you today. Both the President of the Veterinary Council, Mr. O'Scanaill and I are happy to address any questions the Committee may have.