

Access to veterinary services in Norway

Report by a working group established by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Oslo, March 10. 2023.

1. Summary

The working group has reviewed the status and challenges regarding access to veterinary services, with a particular focus on veterinary services for food producing animals.

Many parts of the country report satisfactory access to veterinary services. However, the challenges with availability for veterinarians to perform clinical veterinary practice on food producing animals, i.e., livestock, have increased noticeably in recent years. A number of municipalities report challenges in recruiting full time or temporary practitioners of clinical veterinary emergency services. Many municipalities also find it difficult to recruit veterinarians for daytime service for livestock. The challenges are not limited to any particular part of the country but are markedly greater in areas where livestock herds are few and farther apart.

There are various factors which accumulate to make recruitment a demanding task. Basically, Norway has a general shortage of veterinarians. Recent trends have also led to the majority of practising veterinarians now applying for positions in companies or clinics, which provide a professional and collegial community and organized working hours. Such benefits are not always available for clinical veterinary practice in livestock, among which operation under self-employment are still quite common. The income base for veterinarians working basically with livestock is also declining in large parts of the country as there are fewer farms with livestock herds, and an overall improvement of animal health. This reduces business for livestock veterinarians, increases travel distances per visit and reduces time spent on medical work. A reduced income basis in livestock care then reduces the need for daytime veterinarians below the numbers required to staff an adequate on-call duty system outside normal working hour. General social trends, including the fact that an increasing proportion of young people grow up in urban areas and have limited experience with or little family ties to rural districts, can also contribute to the challenges regarding veterinary coverage for livestock.

The complex aspect of the understaffing problem means that there are no quick or easy ways to remedy the situation. However, in line with its mandate, the working group has assessed various

measures that individually or collectively would aid in reducing obstacles to recruiting and retaining veterinarians in clinical practice in the districts. Proposed measures are not prioritized but must be regarded as a menu of possible measures that decision-makers may apply.

The working group has sorted possible measures under the following main headings

- Recruitment measures, mentoring schemes etc.
- Alternative or additional tasks for the veterinarians
- Changes in on-call duty areas and on-call duty organization
- Restructured or increased government grants
- Administrative improvements
- Legislative changes

Recruitment measures, mentoring schemes etc.

1. Launch campaign(s) to recruit more people from rural areas to veterinary education.
2. Consider changing the admission criteria for admission to studies in veterinary medicine (introducing a quota system), so that a proportion of college openings are reserved for applicants from rural districts.
3. Establish a system to organize and coordinate external internships during education, as well as employment under temporary licence, with assistance from municipalities, regional commissioners, veterinary offices/veterinary clinics, Norwegian University of Life Sciences (NMBU) and the Norwegian Veterinary Association. The Veterinary Association has offered to operate the scheme.
4. Expand the educational capacity in veterinary studies at NMBU.
5. Continue developing a mentoring system in the districts, within the framework of coordinating internship positions during education, cf. proposal 3). The Veterinary Association has offered to coordinate the effort. Use of government stimulus funds to support the measure may be relevant.
6. NMBU and the Veterinary Association are considering developing an offer of comprehensive courses adapted to different target groups of livestock practitioners.
7. Allow partial cancellation of student loans for veterinarians practising in certain municipalities.

Alternative or additional tasks for veterinarians

8. Municipalities with an insufficient market for veterinary services will consider whether it might improve veterinary access to appoint veterinarians to positions in municipal

administration, where the terms of employment include meeting the need for daytime clinical veterinary services and/or participating in on-call duty outside normal working hours. The municipalities may consider furnishing veterinarians in on-call duty with equipment/car/residence, for newly graduated/newly employed/shorter working periods. It may also be relevant to use government stimulus grants for such measures.

9. The Norwegian Food Safety Authority is encouraged to continue – and if possible, to an even greater extent – to enable private veterinary practitioners to perform tasks such as blood sampling, issuing health certificates etc.
10. The agricultural organizations will consider working to ensure that GENO (the breeding organization of Norwegian Red cattle) lets veterinarians be first in line to offer artificial insemination (AI) technician services when AI technicians quit/retire, either throughout the country, or focused on areas that are not economically viable for full time veterinary services.

Changes in on-call duty arrangements or organization

11. The regional commissioners are to assess whether the current on-call duty areas are the most expedient and, if necessary, to carry out a closer review. They should consider the possibility of transferring the responsibility for determining the county on-call duty district to the regional commissioner, as well as the possibility of more cooperation and flexibility between on-call duty districts.
12. The Norwegian Food Safety Authority is encouraged to facilitate, to a greater extent, the participation of its own employees in veterinary on-call duty.
13. Arrangements should be made to establish a general rule that receiving stimulus grants imparts an obligation to participate in veterinary on-call duty.
14. It is being considered to ask the regional commissioners to survey whether there are veterinarians who are willing - and have the opportunity - to participate in a regional substitute system - and to determine which prerequisites must be met for such participation.
15. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food considers whether there will be an opportunity to negotiate a collective agreement for veterinarians to take part in on-call duty among self-employed veterinarians, possibly in limited geographical areas, and if that is the case, to consider reintroducing regulations to be able to order such veterinarians to participate in the on-call duty system.

16. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food is considering providing an updated overview of the number of night-time outcalls to emergency cases. This will provide data-based knowledge, in circumstances where at some point it may seem advisable to limit the obligation to have on-call duty night shifts in place.

Restructured or increased government grants

17. Measures are being considered to ensure that a greater proportion of grant funds are allocated to areas that are less economically viable for veterinary services.
18. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food is assessing whether there is financial scope to propose an increase in the level of state subsidies that contribute to veterinary accessibility.
19. Agriculture agreement parties are considering whether the scheme of grants for reduction of veterinary travel costs can be improved regarding long, time-consuming, and expensive journeys in economically vulnerable areas.

Administrative improvements

20. Establish administrative support and digital solutions for municipal veterinary coverage programs.

Legislative changes

21. The Ministry of Agriculture and Food is considering proposing changes to the Act relating to Veterinarians and Other Animal Health Personnel to establish legal basis for regulations on defining satisfactory veterinary coverage and what is expected of the on-call duty service. At the same time, one should consider making provisions in the act for a supervisory function.

The measures and their rationale are explained in more detail in chapter 13. This chapter also provides an overall assessment of which measures are regarded as feasible within existing budgetary limits and which are assumed to trigger increased costs/require expanded budgetary limits.

2. Working group mandate and methodology

On August 26, 2022, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food gave the following mandate for the activity of the working group:

Background

Concern is being expressed from various quarters about veterinary coverage in parts of the country. According to the Act relating to Veterinarians and Other Animal Health Personnel municipalities must ensure satisfactory access to services from animal health personnel. The municipalities also have a statutory responsibility to organize a veterinary on-call duty outside normal working hours.

The government contributes financially to veterinary coverage through an earmarked grant to municipalities to facilitate organizing a veterinary on-call duty outside normal working hours throughout the country (NOK 140.3 million in 2022). In large parts of the country, there is sufficient coverage of 24-hour veterinary services for companion animals as offered by private animal clinics. The government subsidy for veterinary on-call duty is therefore primarily designed to ensure that there is access to a veterinarian for livestock in agriculture, but in parts of the country the on-call duty system is also important to veterinary access for companion animals.

The government will also contribute additional NOK 33.4 million in 2022, which municipalities with a reduced income base for veterinary services can use in addition as stimulus measures to improve access to daytime veterinary care. The Directorate of Agriculture and the regional commissioners manage the state grants.

Purpose and mandate of the investigation

The purpose of the investigation is to give decision-makers the best possible basis enabling them to implement effective/targeted measures to achieve satisfactory access to veterinary services for livestock throughout the country.

The investigation shall, among other things, highlight:

- Status of access to veterinary services for livestock in different parts of the country
- Causal factors and, if possible, the relative importance of various factors that cause impediments to veterinary coverage (e.g. trends in livestock production, alternative employment opportunities for veterinarians, increased degree of specialization, strength of collegial community, on-call workload, income basis in clinical veterinary practice, changes in veterinary regulations, career opportunities for spouses/partners, agreement of on-call duties and measures to stimulate access to veterinary services, etc.)
- Are there any common factors in districts/areas where access to veterinarians is a challenge?

- Can a different arrangement than the present state funding of municipalities impel municipalities to act more readily on their responsibilities and provide better solutions for adequate access to veterinary services?

- What measures is it possible that
- municipalities
 - business and professional organisations
 - the government
 - other parties

would consider helpful in order to reduce the challenges regarding veterinary coverage?

The investigation must propose a list of specific measures. The working group is also encouraged to investigate alternatives one can implement within the current budgetary framework.

The working group has included the following members:

- The Municipal Union: Stian Skjærvik, leader
- The Norwegian Veterinary Association: Ellef Blakstad
- Norwegian University of Life Sciences, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine: Anne Storset
- Norwegian Farmers' Association: Bodhild Fjelltveit
- Norwegian Association of Farmers and Smallholders: Per Helge Seltveit
- Directorate of Agriculture: Hilde Haug Simonhjell
- Representative from the regional commissioners' offices: Magne Totland

Camilla Lysvåg and Gunnar Hagen from the Ministry of Agriculture and Food have served as the secretariat for the working group. The working group has had a total of eight meetings.

At the November 15. working group meeting, PhD candidate Helene Seljenes Dalum from the Department of Basic Medical Sciences, University of Oslo, gave a briefing on the NORVET project, which investigates themes relating to work and mental health among Norway veterinarians.

In addition to contributions from the members of the working group, the working group has obtained information from the Norwegian Food Safety Authority and GENO. Via the regional commissioners, information has also been obtained from the municipalities about the status of veterinary coverage. Furthermore, as part of the investigation The Municipal Union has carried out a survey among the 155 administrative municipalities for the veterinary standby duty system.