

Disability and Chronic Illness in Veterinary Work and Education

A survey exploring experiences of disability, chronic illness, mental health and neurodiversity in the veterinary sector

Conducted by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) on behalf of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) and British Veterinary Chronic Illness Support (BVCIS)

The survey aimed to gain a better understanding of the experiences of those with a disability/chronic condition who are working in the veterinary sector or studying for veterinary qualifications. All veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses, veterinary students and student veterinary nurses were encouraged to participate in the survey, whether or not they had a disability/chronic condition.

Within the current research, a 'chronic condition' has been defined as: a health condition or disease for which there is currently no cure, and persists for an extended period of time, possibly for the whole of a person's life. For this reason they are often referred to as long-term conditions.

The survey ran for six weeks during May and June 2023 and elicited 3,411 usable responses. A profile of respondents can be found at the end of this report.

What are the disabilities/chronic conditions?

75% of respondents reported having at least one disability/chronic condition:



61%

Chronic condition



39%

Mental health condition



48%

Physical condition



30%

Neurodivergence

Respondents' role by condition type



Veterinary surgeon
Chronic condition 58%
Identify as neurodivergent 43%
Mental health condition 28%
Physical health condition 24%



Veterinary student
Chronic condition 65%
Identify as neurodivergent 44%
Mental health condition 27%
Physical health condition 39%



Veterinary nurse
Chronic condition 62%
Identify as neurodivergent 45%
Mental health condition 48%
Physical health condition 33%



Student veterinary nurse
Chronic condition 43%
Identify as neurodivergent 27%
Mental health condition 50%
Physical health condition 39%

Source: RCVS BVCIS Chronic Illness and Disability survey, 2023

Most common specific conditions



Anxiety and depression



Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)



Asthma



For around

4%

of respondents, their disability/ chronic condition was menopause-related.



Endometriosis



Chronic pain

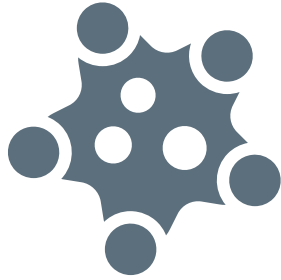


Crohn's disease

Respondents with one or more disabilities/conditions



One condition 12%

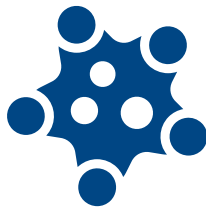


Two conditions 41%

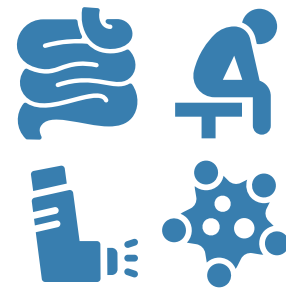


87%

of those with a disability/chronic condition reported having more than one condition



Three conditions 31%



Four conditions 15%

Source: RCVS BVCIS Chronic Illness and Disability survey, 2023

Comorbidity by condition type

Condition	% of respondents
Chronic and physical condition	39.8%
Chronic and mental health condition	29.6%
Chronic condition and identify as neurodivergent	21.4%
Mental health condition and physical condition	19.5%
Mental health condition and identify as neurodivergent	19.2%
Physical condition and identify as neurodivergent	14.5%
Chronic, physical and mental health conditions	18.4%
Chronic and mental health conditions and identify as neurodivergent	15.1%
Chronic and physical health condition and identify as neurodivergent	13.4%
Mental health and physical condition and identify as neurodivergent	9.8%

Source: RCVS BVCIS Chronic Illness and Disability survey, 2023

How does having disabilities/chronic conditions impact on the individual?

Almost 60% of participants are affected by their disability/chronic condition every day. The most frequently reported symptoms of respondents' disability/chronic condition were on:



Mental health



Pain



Learning, understanding or concentrating



Stamina or energy limitations

The table below gives more specific details

Symptoms experienced by respondents

Condition	% of respondents
Mental health (eg anxiety, depression, mood swings, emotional dysregulation)	45.2%
Pain (eg chronic pain or neuropathic pain)	36.4%
Learning or understanding or concentrating (eg brain fog)	33.8%
Stamina or energy limitations (eg fatigue)	32.3%
Memory (eg asking people to repeat things, trouble following instructions or remembering words/names, becoming confused about time/people/places)	28.1%
Digestion (eg vomiting, reflux, constipation, diarrhoea, incontinence, urgency to go)	22.0%
Social or behaviour (eg social interactions)	21.3%
Mobility (eg walking short distances or climbing stairs)	18.8%
Dexterity (eg lifting and carrying objects, using a keyboard)	18.4%
Sensory processing (eg sensibilities to smell, sounds and lights)	18.1%
Immune system (eg immunocompromised, over reactive immune system)	17.1%
Allergies or intolerances (eg food or environmental, animal allergies or intolerance)	16.8%
Menstrual or reproductive issues (eg dysmenorrhoea, infertility, pelvic pain/dysfunction, prolapse)	12.8%
Breathing or respiratory issues (eg asthma, COPD, sinusitis)	12.4%
Interaction with the environment (eg balance, proprioceptive deficits, vertigo)	11.8%
Cardiac and circulatory issues (eg heart disease, arrhythmia, Raynaud's, lymphedema, deep vein thrombosis)	8.7%
Urinary/renal issues (eg pelvic region pain, incontinence, urgency to go, prolapse)	7.7%
Verbal capabilities (eg verbal reasoning or speech)	6.4%
Hearing (eg deafness or partial hearing)	5.5%
Vision (eg blindness or partial sight)	4.3%
Other (eg hypoglycaemia or hyperglycaemia, extreme fatigue, migraines, issues related to executive functioning)	3.3%
Prefer not to say	0.4%
Don't know	0.0%

Negative impacts of having a disability/chronic illness and working in the veterinary sector

The majority of respondents cited negative impacts to working in the veterinary sector with a disability/chronic condition:

"I feel employers are less likely to take me on as other people can do the same work quicker and more efficiently. Other people have to take fewer breaks and days off."

Student veterinary nurse

"Chronic back pain means I am unable to stand for medium/ long periods of time, so surgery is limited."

Veterinary student

"Chronic anxiety and depression have left me with very low self-esteem/ confidence which holds me back in every aspect of life."

Veterinary student

"My illnesses mean I do have a fair amount of time off sick which can make it hard to maintain employment. Flexible working hours/part time options aren't readily available."

Student veterinary nurse

"Workplace pressure and stress can be very hard to bear. Trying to maintain a friendly and professional face can be very difficult at times and very tiring. I can come home from work and be exhausted and just zone out to try recover."

Veterinary surgeon

"I have trouble interacting with colleagues on a "normal" social basis which has been misunderstood or misconstrued by colleagues at times. In addition, it leads to my being overloaded or worn out by situations that neurotypical individuals have less or no trouble with."

Veterinary surgeon

Positive impacts of having a disability/chronic condition and working in the veterinary sector

Several positive benefits to having a disability/chronic condition were highlighted by respondents:

"My illnesses have made me more empathetic, kind, caring and patient with other people's struggles of all kinds."

Veterinary surgeon

"I think ADHD makes me an outside-the-box thinker, as well as being good with my hands."

Veterinary student

"...made me a very resilient person who works hard, challenges are common for me so I'm not put off when they come my way. Gives me the drive to always do better or as much as I can. I'm also very adaptable."

Veterinary student

"I enjoy mentoring/ teaching students and have been told I explain very well."

Veterinary nurse

"I am very good at pattern spotting and coming up with novel solutions to problems."

Veterinary surgeon

Impacts of treatment on work and work on treatment

Treatment for disabilities/chronic conditions had both positive and negative impacts on respondents' studies or work. Conversely, respondents' studies or work could affect their treatment:

"Improves my ability to undertake my studies"

Veterinary student

"I feel I'm unable to assess the true benefit of medication when constantly in a high stress state, overworked to exhaustion and unable to fully rest from the day's work before it all begins again."

Veterinary nurse

"Medication side effects can affect concentration and make me feel unwell."

Veterinary surgeon

"I sometimes miss doses of medication if I know it is going to have an impact on my ability to work and that there is no flexibility with my day."

Veterinary surgeon

"I can only attend appointments on certain days and am limited to how much time off I can take for treatments due to financial constraints."

Veterinary nurse

"My busy study week makes it harder to schedule talking therapy and medication reviews with my psychiatrist."

Veterinary student

Is there evidence of discrimination?

Around 25% of respondents felt that they had been treated differently during study and/or work, and the majority of these (79%) thought this was due to their symptoms, especially if their disability/chronic condition was visible. Others felt this was due to a lack of understanding from managers and colleagues.

"Some colleagues were kind and supportive, but many thought I was making it up and were unsupportive."

Veterinary surgeon

"People's misconceptions about the condition often mean they treat you differently."

Veterinary nurse

Disclosure

45% of those who felt they had been treated differently thought that disclosing their condition(s) had contributed to this:



The majority of respondents had disclosed their disabilities/chronic conditions



Three-quarters in education had disclosed



Over two-thirds of those in work had disclosed to their current workplace



Half had also disclosed to previous employers

Reasons for disclosing

Reasons for disclosing included accessing, getting time off, getting increased understanding from education providers and workplaces and self-protection (especially at work):

"I feel it is best to be honest so [as] not be put in difficult positions and [so] then others can be aware of limitations."

Veterinary nurse

"I felt that if I wasn't brave enough to declare, many others won't be empowered to do so. I want to role model when safe to."

Veterinary nurse

"For me, it is fair to the employer and the rest of the team to be open and honest when applying for any job role. That way, nobody is surprised by my limitations and any adaptations that are needed will have been agreed before we start... We are all one profession, working as a team and should be able to adapt to meet our professional responsibilities."

Veterinary surgeon

Reasons for not disclosing

Reasons for not disclosing included believing that disclosure would not be of benefit, not having a diagnosis, worry over being stigmatised, not feeling comfortable about revealing/talking about their disability/chronic condition, anxieties that there might be discrimination as a result:

"... being partially deaf is not preventing me from doing my job and I do not currently need allowances so seems like too much hassle to let anyone know officially."

Veterinary surgeon

"Prefer to be treated like everyone else."

Veterinary nurse

"Didn't go well when I disclosed it to a previous employer - it became simultaneously an excuse for them to use as a get out clause for any problem, and something to use to denigrate me."

Veterinary surgeon

Experiences of discrimination

18% of those in education and 36% of those in work had experienced discrimination due to their disability/chronic condition. Those who had a mental health condition, identified as neurodivergent or had multiple disabilities/chronic conditions were more likely to experience discrimination:

“Staff members making comments about not working hard enough or slacking off.”

Student veterinary nurse

“People exclude me from things... Little to no attempts were made to understand what was behind my behaviours. I was aware of people talking about me behind my back.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Bullying from senior members of staff including practice management and vet surgeons.”

Veterinary nurse

“I have been treated differently with very poor understanding or tolerance of neurodivergence.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Being called offensive nicknames, being told other colleagues are not happy to be ‘picking up the slack’ when I have had to have time off”

Veterinary surgeon

“When I have raised issues, I have been targeted by management and accused of poor performance to scare me into keeping quiet.”

Veterinary nurse

“I was bullied and pushed out of a role being told I wasn’t good enough when in fact they simply hadn’t made any attempt to work with me or my disability.”

Veterinary nurse

Barriers and enablers of support in different settings

Experiences in education, during work placements, and at work, varied considerably:



34%

of respondents overall reported barriers to support in education



31%

of respondents reported barriers during EMR/IMR or workplace-based training



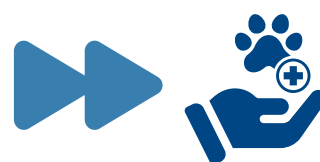
36%

of working respondents with a disability/chronic condition reported barriers to accessing support at work



39%

of respondents in education reported encountering enablers of support



22%

of respondents on EMS/IMR placements or work-based training had encountered enablers of support



23%

of those with a disability/chronic illness at work had experienced enablers of support

Barriers and enablers of support in education

A range of barriers in education were described by respondents: not having a diagnosis, a lack of understanding about their condition, feeling judged by others, the time taken to find support, and poor communication:

“Struggled to be able to afford to pay for proper diagnosis so couldn’t get the right help at first.”

Student veterinary nurse

“Waitlists for therapy are six months, it takes six months to get a diagnosis for ADHD and another six months to start trialling medication and then another 12 weeks to complete titration.”

Veterinary student

“The initial barrier was not understanding that I qualified for disability support: no one ever explained the definition.”

Veterinary student

“Consistently having to advocate for yourself without feeling supported and like you’re one person against an institution is exhausting and crippling.”

Veterinary student

Enablers included having supporters/advocates, a continuation of existing support, having a diagnosis, and access to funding:

“My personal tutor at university was excellent in fighting my corner and chasing up various different university staff members when I was ignored or refused help.”

Veterinary student

“Veterinary Support from disability charities, and friends who were further ahead at university who also had chronic illnesses and could provide me with advice and resources.”

Veterinary student

“I had already had a lot of support from my secondary school so they were able to contact my uni’s support team and transfer my notes etc which I think made the whole process a lot easier.”

Veterinary student

“Having diagnosis papers was incredibly useful as it meant I did not have to wait for long periods of time.”

Veterinary student

“The Disability Student Allowance allows me to access study support tutoring, a mental health mentor and transport.”

Student veterinary nurse

Barriers and enablers of support during EMS/IMR or workplace-based training

Reasons given for barriers were a poor understanding of their health issues, poor communication, and a lack of reasonable adjustments:

“Unable to schedule a time to put reasonable adjustments in place for IMR [intra-mural rotations] due to EMS/IMR hours”

Veterinary student

“You’re expected to get on with it and not complain. Chronic understaffing leading to unmanageable workload.”

Student veterinary nurse

“I have to hide my disability when applying for placements, otherwise I am turned away from farm EMS placements. This means I cannot access all the support I need.”

Veterinary student

“The general lack of understanding of these conditions means placement providers are not aware of them.”

Veterinary student

“Work doesn’t make any allowances even though struggling a lot. Get told ‘it’s a hard course’.”

Student veterinary nurse

“Scared to mention issues I have as I have known other students be called in for fitness to work if they do.”

Student veterinary nurse

“I contacted every provider prior to booking/starting to ensure they were aware of my conditions and to check reasonable adjustments could be made but many of them couldn’t even provide a chair/stool or rest breaks when I arrived.”

Veterinary student

Support during placements and work-based training came from individuals and groups such as university support staff, OH services, support groups and peer support, Vetlife, practice managers and coaches, and mental health first aiders. Others thought that being open about their disability/chronic condition helped them to access support:

“Most practices I went to were keen to get me involved and ensured that they followed OH [occupational health] reports to ensure this could happen in a safe way.”

Veterinary student

“Completing a pre-placement health/info form enabled me to open the discussion about my conditions.”

Veterinary student

“My workplace-based training practice has been brilliant at supporting me through this. They are happy to move things around if need be and always ask how I am doing if I have had to take a day off. They are always there for me.”

Student veterinary nurse

“University have created a letter to be sent to each of my placements to explain my conditions and what extra help I require.”

Veterinary student

“My practice and colleagues are very supportive and made adjustments.”

Student veterinary nurse

“My work allows me to attend my appointments and checks in on me to see how I am doing.”

Student veterinary nurse

Barriers and enablers to support at work

Barriers described included poor understanding, workplaces being slow or unwilling to provide support, a lack of signposting, not having a diagnosis, fears of being judged, and a lack of time to raise issues and discuss needs:

“Long delays, poor understanding from management about the disability itself and about the implementation of reasonable adjustments.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Employer not understanding conditions and how they affect my working life.”

Veterinary nurse

“Management didn’t believe me. Would actively use it against me and single me out in situations.”

Veterinary nurse

“Perceived barriers and previous enormously negative experiences and discrimination encouraged me to keep my head down and minimise any requests or need for support.”

Veterinary surgeon

“I have no idea who to contact, who to speak to get things sorted”

Veterinary surgeon

“Lack of an accurate diagnosis can be an issue, as well as long waiting times for tests/treatment. I appreciate if you don’t know what is causing the problem, it becomes hard to put the right support in place.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Hours were long and inflexible so hard to make appointments... I was scared as well as tired and unwell.”

Veterinary surgeon

Enablers included external charities and organisations, open communication, support from friends/family/colleagues, understanding managers, help from OH/medical professionals/therapists, and financial support:

“Employment advice charity who helped me write out a plan to hand in to work requesting reasonable adjustments.”

Veterinary nurse

“Support/advice from peers via BVCIS gave me a better understanding of chronic illness and the confidence to persevere with my requests to my employers re OH assessment.”

Veterinary surgeon

“The staff that I work with every day – nurses, animal care staff, reception – have been very supportive of me, as I am for them. The team ‘on the ground’ is great – no big deal about menopause, just asking the question – what do you need today?”

Student veterinary nurse

“Management put much effort to make facilities as accessible as possible and informed me about access to work scheme.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Once they understood I was dyslexic they stopped mentioning my poor spelling.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Having disabled friends who were very knowledgeable surrounding my rights.”

Veterinary nurse

Barriers to support experienced while on placement and at work by number of comorbidities

Respondents reporting barriers to support in workplace environments, either during placement or in employment, increased in line with the number of comorbidities:

Barriers to support on placement



One condition

10%

Two conditions

25%

Three conditions

42%

Four conditions

44%



Barriers to support at work



12%

(78% said No)

33%

(57% said No)

50%

(38% said No)

55%

(38% said No)

Source: RCVS BVCIS Chronic Illness and Disability survey, 2023

Occupational health

Use of the services was fairly consistent across disability/condition types. Experiences of OH services were very mixed:

“Excellent, caring and helpful, informative, and referring me to others as needed.”

Veterinary surgeon

“They were good at listening and useful suggestions were made as I was newly diagnosed and didn’t know what I needed.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Good for physical health, but terrible for mental health (stress) experienced in previous role.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Very negative. Occupational health services had zero understanding of my condition.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Useful in helping me to decide to focus on my health rather than career.”

Veterinary nurse

“Variable. The first assessment was not very informative. The latest assessments have been very thorough and showed a very good understanding of my situation.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Occupational health was brilliant and helped me get allowances at work.”

Veterinary nurse

“Superficial, poorly generalised, remote and only a stepping stone to advise to seek further support.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Okay but work didn’t accommodate for the change that would have helped the most.”

Veterinary nurse

Reasonable adjustments

52% of those with a disability/chronic condition had been offered reasonable adjustments by their education or workplace provider. Reasonable adjustments typically focused on the following:



Tasks



Physical work



Equipment



Financial support



Environment



Working hours

“Weight limits, adjusted working hours, shift buddies, no lone working.”

Veterinary nurse

“Allowed extra time during exams. Have had extended time with some assignments.”

Student veterinary nurse

“Allowed me to go part-time so I could better cope with the physical elements and allowed me to do solely office-based work one day a week.”

Veterinary nurse

“Help for specific jobs that I knew would cause pain eg second vet to help out.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Noise-cancelling headphones, quieter office, more predictable schedule, occasional working from home if possible.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Understanding when having to take time off. Flexibility with shifts/ breaks when needing to collect medication or have therapy sessions.”

Student veterinary nurse

“Noise-cancelling stethoscope, stool in consult rooms, team careful to help me lift, able to attend appointments, thermostatic radiator valve so I can control temperature in the consulting room.”

Veterinary surgeon

No provision of reasonable adjustments

Reasons given for not receiving reasonable adjustments included resistance to change and/or an unwillingness to make adjustments, lack of knowledge and understanding or a belief it was unfair to others. Lack of time, high workloads, and staff shortages was also an issue:

“Because they didn’t understand ADHD and didn’t take me seriously when I asked for adjustments to be made, instead I was faced with judgement and discrimination.”

Veterinary nurse

“They just wouldn’t change or adjust anything. Even though it was clear I was struggling with the workload, hours and studies.”

Veterinary nurse

“I was told [the examiner] would not make adjustments so I should learn to do things without.”

Student veterinary nurse

“Higher up felt it was unfair on other team members despite hiring me on a walking stick.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Lack of time in a busy practice.”

Student veterinary nurse

“They say they will but when it gets busy this is not adhered to.”

Veterinary surgeon

Positive good practice

Examples of good practice given about existing or previous workplaces included reasonable adjustments, environment and task adaptations, good communication and support, and access to resources:

“Allowing people to work less hours during flare ups of physical issues”

Veterinary surgeon

“A colleague with multiple sclerosis has had good support with working from home ... and then split clinical and admin work so she could return to the clinical work she loved.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Resources available on company site or within practice.”

Student veterinary nurse

“They have a mental health team that I’ve used a couple of times.”

Veterinary student

“I provide additional on-rota time for dyslexia students to help.”

Veterinary nurse

“A risk assessment carried out for all employees with health conditions, adaptations made and any equipment necessary bought.”

Veterinary nurse

“Ensure that there is an EDI [equity, diversity and inclusion] policy in place, that there is awareness of the Equality Act 2010 including reasonable adjustments, accessing each employee and reviewing at least on a yearly basis in case there are any changes.”

Veterinary nurse

“Regular 1-1s to ask how we’re feeling and what challenges we have faced to be able to improve.”

Student veterinary nurse

“Generally, the HR staff have good knowledge and are very supportive and as an organisation we make adjustments to working hours and the work-place where necessary eg adapted office furniture, reducing hours where necessary etc.”

Veterinary surgeon

“[University] had lectures at the beginning of the course where they highlighted all the resources available to students with disability.”

Veterinary student

“Colleagues’ support network, changed work duties to reduce the impact on my health, put measures in place to make work easier for my body.”

Veterinary nurse

“Current workplace is amazing. Understanding and supportive management.”

Veterinary surgeon

What else would help?

Respondents made several suggestions for further adjustments and additional support they would like their workplaces or educational institutions to provide:

“Education on disabilities and neurodivergent people and specifically how they can affect people in the industry, so that people are more considerate of others and know they may have a disability or condition and ways they can help or support their colleagues.”

Student veterinary nurse

“A quiet place I can go away from phones, clients and other staff that I can decompress when I’m overstimulated.”

Veterinary nurse

“More choice in how instructions/training are communicated, either in writing or videos, not just verbally.”

Veterinary nurse

“Reasonable adjustments for examination and assessments, even as simple as sufficient breaks during exams/appropriate exam length.”

Veterinary student

“There are many ways to demonstrate understanding/knowledge. It should be about demonstrating competence not the way in which you demonstrate it..”

Veterinary surgeon

“Adjust my hours to shorter and a five-day week.”

Veterinary nurse

“Adjustable height consult tables, sensibly heighted or preferably adjustable heighted workstations/computers/keyboards. A seat!”

Veterinary nurse

Practices to improve inclusion

Respondents felt that better awareness and understanding would make workplaces and educational institutions more inclusive for people with disabilities/chronic conditions. Other suggestions included clearer policies and routes to support, more open communication, involving people in decisions affecting them, making environmental changes, adjusting working hours, and greater openness to change:

“Having regular conversations with employees regarding their needs, which may change, and expectations. Reducing stigma by normalising provision for employees.”

Veterinary surgeon

“More understanding of the conditions. Accepting that the person who lives with the problems knows their own limitations better than anyone else.”

Veterinary student

“Clearer policies regarding these, including clear routes to access support.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Flexibility of role and hours for everyone recognising everyone’s strengths and weaknesses, the contributions they make and challenges they face.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Providing more information on the services accessible, less strenuous application processes to receive support”

Student veterinary nurse

“Working with the individual to make a tailor-made solution that fits the workplace, the individual, the team and the business needs.”

Veterinary nurse

Parting thoughts

47% of respondents stated that they were interested in participating in further research. Some provided further comments and observations:

“Difference is difference. It brings different strengths and challenges. If teams are balanced and inclusive then people can be appreciated for what they bring and supported in the areas needed.”

Veterinary surgeon

“Through being more inclusive, we can begin to gain more insights, and also start to understand some of our clients better.”

Veterinary surgeon

“I think things are improving, awareness is increasing, and we’re starting to have important discussions, but there is a long way to go yet.”

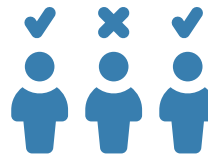
Veterinary surgeon

Emerging Themes

The experiences of people with a disability/chronic condition varied enormously across the profession. The research highlighted the following:



Poor knowledge and understanding of the impact of disability and chronic illness is a significant issue



Discriminatory behaviour and outdated attitudes around health, disability and working practices, suggest the need for culture change



A lack of consistent support experienced across education and employment was evident



Lack of flexibility, staff shortages and increased work pressures pose a further barrier for people with chronic conditions and disabilities



Comorbidity had a significant impact on experience, with views becoming less positive as the number of disabilities/conditions increased



There was an interest in improving the experiences of those with a chronic illness or disability and optimism around future changes in the veterinary profession

Suggestions made by respondents to address issues fell into these broad themes:

- Improved flexibility with working hours, tasks or role.
- Simple adjustments to the working environment, such as providing more chairs or different lighting.
- Better education, training and awareness across workplaces and education providers.
- Involvement of those with disabilities/chronic conditions in the design of education and training, to avoid assumptions and stereotyped views.