



The Future of Veterinary Practice in Ireland

WORKFORCE AND SKILLS
STRATEGY TO 2035



Helping to shape
the future of
veterinary practices
in Ireland.

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Sustaining independent veterinary practice in Ireland over the coming decade

1. Foreword

Ireland's veterinary profession plays a critical role in safeguarding animal health and welfare, supporting food safety and export credibility, sustaining rural communities across the country. It is a profession that has long been defined by high clinical standards, deep commitment and strong community connection.

However, like many sectors, veterinary practice is experiencing significant structural change. Demographic shifts, evolving workforce expectations, regulatory expansion, technological advancement and sustainability obligations are reshaping the context in which veterinary services are delivered. These changes present both challenges and opportunities.

XLVets Skillnet commissioned this research to better understand the future skills and capability requirements of the profession through to 2035. The objective was clear: to move beyond anecdote and short-term pressures and instead develop an evidence-informed workforce strategy capable of supporting independent veterinary practice in Ireland over the coming decade.

This report provides that foundation. It identifies six strategic themes that together define the structural transition underway across the profession. It highlights emerging capability gaps in leadership, succession planning, business resilience, rural sustainability, team-based care, digital and environmental literacy. Importantly, it sets out practical actions for XLVets Skillnet and for the wider ecosystem to strengthen adaptive capacity across the sector.

The findings reinforce that the profession is not in crisis, but it is at an inflection point. Proactive investment in skills, leadership and workforce design will determine whether the sector remains resilient, competitive and attractive to the next generation.

We would like to thank all those who contributed to this research, including veterinary practitioners, educators, regulators, representative bodies and policymakers who shared their perspectives openly and constructively. Their insight has ensured that this strategy reflects the lived realities of practice across Ireland.

XLVets Skillnet remains committed to working in partnership with Skillnet Ireland, member practices and sector stakeholders to deliver coordinated, practical and measurable workforce development initiatives. The future of the profession will depend not only on clinical excellence but on collective leadership and strategic capability.



Séan Coffey,
Chairman, XLVets Skillnet

2. Executive Summary

Ireland's veterinary profession is entering a period of significant structural transition. While clinical standards remain high and commitment to animal welfare is firmly ingrained, the context in which veterinary services are provided is changing rapidly.

Workforce expectations are evolving. Regulatory demands are increasing. The agri-food system is modernising. Digital technologies are advancing. Environmental accountability is becoming more critical. Simultaneously, a substantial

number of practice owners are nearing retirement, raising concerns about leadership succession and the continuity of rural services.

This research, commissioned by XLVets Skillnet in collaboration with Skillnet Ireland and XLVets Ireland and conducted by Ipsos B&A, examines the workforce and skills implications of these changes through to 2035. It is based on a structured literature review and qualitative engagement with practitioners, educators, regulators and students.

Six Structural Shifts Identified

1. Leadership, Ownership and Workforce Sustainability

The profession's demographic profile is evolving, with increasing female participation and generational shifts in expectations regarding work-life balance, leadership and ownership. Traditional progression and succession models have not always kept pace with these changes.

2. Talent Attraction, Retention and Career Development

Early career attrition, mid-career strain and underutilisation of veterinary nurses are exposing weaknesses in mentoring, workplace design and structured progression pathways.

3. Rural and Large Animal Practice Sustainability

Ireland's agri-food system is becoming more data-driven and sustainability-focused, yet fewer graduates are choosing roles in large animal practice. Without targeted intervention, gaps in rural veterinary services may arise.

4. Business Resilience and Competitiveness of Independent Practices

Veterinary practices function as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within an increasingly complex regulatory and economic environment. Inconsistent financial management, human resource practices and governance capabilities create structural vulnerabilities.

5. Modernising Clinical Delivery through Team-Based Practice

Sustainable care models increasingly depend on structured delegation, effective team-based practice and optimised utilisation of veterinary nurses.

6. Digital Transformation, Sustainability and Future Ready Skills

Skills in artificial intelligence, data analytics, telemedicine and sustainability obligations are becoming baseline expectations across the profession. However, the level of adoption and confidence varies significantly among practices.



The Central Challenge

The research highlights a challenge related to adaptive capacity rather than a lack of clinical competence. The sustainability of the veterinary profession relies on several key areas, including strengthening leadership pipelines, formalising graduate transition supports, modernising rural advisory capabilities, reinforcing the resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), embedding team-based care models and enhancing digital and sustainability literacy.

Without a coordinated, skills-led development approach, structural pressures may increase, leading to potential retention challenges, delayed succession planning, gaps in rural services and diminished competitiveness. However, with strategic investment and collaboration, the profession can remain resilient, independent and nationally significant.

A Coordinated Workforce Response

XLVets Skillnet is ready to take the lead in developing structured workforce capabilities within independent practices. This report presents a comprehensive skills strategy focused on:

- Leadership and succession development
- Graduate transition and retention support
- Rural and large animal practice sustainability
- Business resilience and competitiveness of SMEs
- Modernisation of team-based clinical delivery
- Digital transformation, sustainability and future-ready skills

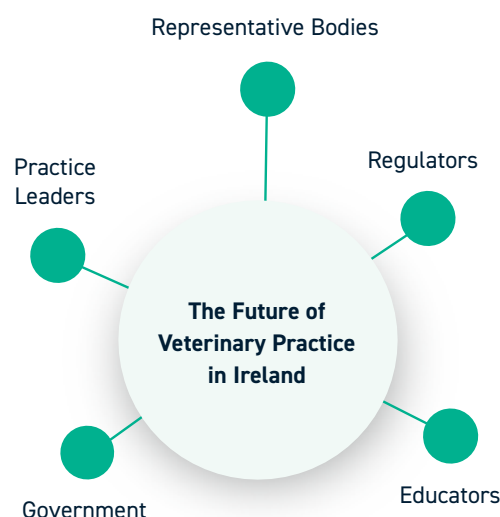
Achieving long-term impact will necessitate collaboration among veterinary schools, regulators, representative bodies, agri-food stakeholders, government entities and Skillnet Ireland. Investing in veterinary workforce capability aligns with broader national priorities, including food security, export credibility, climate responsibility and rural sustainability.

Looking to 2035

The future of veterinary practice in Ireland will not solely depend on advances in clinical science. It will also rely on the effectiveness of the profession in strengthening its leadership structures, workforce design, business capabilities and adaptive skills.

With intentional alignment and sustained investment, Ireland's veterinary profession can confidently modernise and continue to serve as a cornerstone of national resilience through 2035 and beyond.

Stakeholder collaboration ecosystem



This report is intended for practice leaders, educators, regulators, representative bodies, policymakers and Skillnet Ireland partners who play a role in shaping the future of the veterinary profession. It is not an academic review but a sector-facing workforce strategy designed to inform practical action, guide investment decisions and support coordinated capability development across the veterinary ecosystem.

3. Strategic Framework: Veterinary Workforce to 2035

This strategic framework illustrates how external pressures are reshaping veterinary practice in Ireland and outlines the coordinated skills response required to ensure the profession's sustainability through 2035. It provides a clear line of sight from environmental change to workforce action, aligning with national policy frameworks and Skillnet Ireland's enterprise-led approach to skills development.

External Change

Ireland's veterinary profession is operating within a rapidly evolving environment shaped by:

- Ownership transition and demographic change
- Changing workforce expectations
- Digital transformation and AI integration
- Rising client expectations
- Modernisation of the agri-food system
- Expanding regulatory and compliance obligations
- Environmental and sustainability accountability

Six Structural Shifts in Practice

These external pressures are reshaping the profession through six interconnected structural shifts:

- Leadership, Ownership and Workforce Sustainability
- Talent Attraction, Retention and Career Development
- Rural and Large Animal Practice Sustainability
- Business Resilience and Competitiveness of Independent Practices
- Modernising Clinical Delivery through Team-Based Practice
- Digital Transformation, Sustainability and Future Ready Skills

The Core Challenge: Adaptive Capacity

The research indicates that the long-term sustainability of the veterinary profession depends not on clinical competence alone but on its ability to adapt. Strengthening leadership structures, workforce design, business systems and professional capabilities is essential to ensuring resilience, competitiveness and national relevance.





Skills Framework 2035

The structural shifts identified in this research translate into a clear set of priority capability areas:

Strategic Theme	Emerging Capability Needs
Leadership, Ownership and Workforce Sustainability	Succession planning, HR governance, ownership literacy
Talent Attraction, Retention and Career Development	Graduate transition, mentoring capability and people management
Rural and Large Animal Practice Sustainability	Advisory communication, data analytics and sustainability literacy
Business Resilience and Competitiveness of Independent Practices	Financial planning, pricing strategy, governance
Modernising Clinical Delivery through Team-Based Practice	Delegation design, nurse CPD, workflow optimisation
Digital Transformation, Sustainability and Future Ready Skills	AI confidence, data literacy and One Health integration

A Coordinated Workforce Response: Skills Strategy to 2035

To address these priorities, XLVets Skillnet, supported by Skillnet Ireland and industry partners, will deliver a thematic workforce development strategy focused on:

- Leadership and succession development
- Graduate transition and retention support
- Rural and large animal advisory capability

- Business resilience and competitiveness of SMEs
- Team-based practice optimisation
- Digital transformation, sustainability and future-ready skills

These priorities establish the foundation for the detailed findings and recommendations presented in the sections that follow.

4. Background



Veterinary practice in Ireland operates within a changing social, economic and technological environment, yet it remains a highly trusted and valued profession. Across both farm and companion animal settings, veterinary teams provide essential clinical care, practical advice and continuity of service, often through long-term relationships built on trust, compassion and professional responsibility. A notable strength of the Irish sector is its strong community orientation: vets and veterinary nurses are embedded in local communities, collaborate closely with clients and allied professionals and continue to sustain demanding out-of-hours services despite increasing pressure on teams. This combination of clinical quality, ethical commitment and local presence provides a strong foundation for the profession's future.

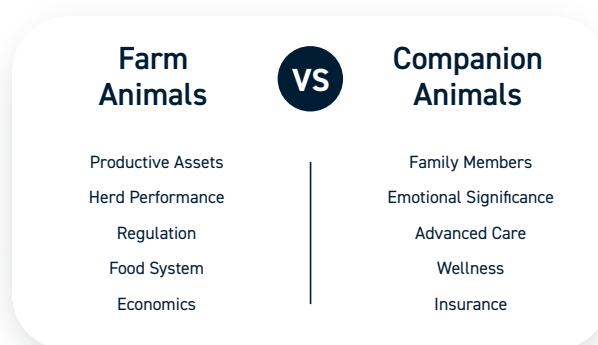
At the same time, the profession is shaped by wider economic conditions and the performance of adjacent industries. In large animal practice, viability is closely linked to farm economics, including milk price volatility, the value of livestock and the structure of Department of Agriculture payments. Rural and remote farm animal practice can be especially difficult to sustain, with limited appeal for new entrants and little interest from corporate investors. More broadly, rising housing and living costs may reduce the attractiveness of practice ownership for younger vets and influence clients' ability to pay, particularly in companion animal care. These pressures create an uneven economic landscape across practice types and regions.

Client expectations are also evolving. Companion animal owners increasingly regard pets as integral family members and are more willing to invest in advanced diagnostics, surgery, wellness products and insurance. At the same time, public exposure to veterinary medicine through media and online content has raised expectations around what practices can offer. Farmers and pet owners alike now arrive better informed, having accessed information online and through peer networks. This has shifted the role of the vet from sole expert to trusted advisor and interpreter: veterinary professionals are increasingly required to validate, challenge

and contextualise client-gathered information, while guiding decisions in the face of both better-informed clients and widespread misinformation.

Technology is accelerating these changes. Improved access to herd data, remote monitoring and referral options for advanced procedures has expanded what veterinary practices can do, while also increasing the level of service clients expect. As a result, the profession is becoming more data-enabled, consultative and specialised. These trends are especially significant as Ireland's population grows and companion animal ownership continues to rise, a pattern strengthened since the pandemic. The sector must therefore respond to two distinct but equally important client mindsets: farm animals as productive economic assets within the food system and companion animals as emotionally significant members of the household.

Client mindsets:



Internally, however, the profession faces important tensions that will shape its future workforce and skills needs. A clear generational divide exists between older practitioners, who often regard veterinary medicine as a vocation requiring total dedication and younger professionals, who are more likely to view it as a career that must allow for work-life balance. This difference in outlook affects expectations around workload, availability and career design. Gender biases

also persist in some parts of the sector, particularly in relation to large animal practice, despite changing workforce demographics. In addition, hierarchies between practice types continue to create division, with large animal work sometimes regarded as more authentic or socially important than companion animal practice.

One of the sharpest stress points is out-of-hours provision. Farm animal vets often carry a disproportionate burden, including expectations that they will support companion animal out-of-hours care, sometimes without reciprocal arrangements. This creates frustration and risks accelerating burnout in parts of the profession already under the greatest strain. Other tensions include differing views on corporate versus independent practice, resistance to technological and cultural change and the integration of internationally trained vets, who are important to workforce supply but may still encounter subtle discrimination.

Overall, veterinary practice in Ireland remains resilient, trusted and socially important, but it is under growing pressure from shifting client expectations, economic constraints, workforce challenges and internal divisions. Addressing these pressures will be central to ensuring that the profession can attract, retain and support the people and skills needed to serve Irish society effectively through to 2035.

Ireland's veterinary profession is now at a turning point.

A combination of pressures is reshaping how veterinary services are delivered and sustained. Workforce shortages, changing expectations regarding work-life balance, digital transformation, sustainability commitments and an ageing ownership profile are altering the structure, culture and economics of veterinary practice. At the same time, the profession plays a vital role in Ireland's agri-food system. A resilient and skilled veterinary workforce is essential for safeguarding animal health and welfare, protecting food safety, supporting export credibility and also aiding rural communities.

Veterinarians are highly trusted by both farmers and pet owners, reflecting the profession's vital contribution to animal welfare, food safety and public health. This trust underscores its national significance and strategic importance.

The veterinary profession is also influenced by broader economic and societal forces, including fluctuations in agricultural markets, rising operational costs and evolving client expectations. These external dynamics shape service demand, practice viability and workforce sustainability across the sector.

The stakes are high. Without coordinated and practical action, the risks are significant:

- **Deteriorating retention rates across all career stages**
- **Declining capacity for large animal services**
- **Reduced attractiveness of the profession to new entrants**
- **Increasing pressure on independent practices already under strain**

XLVets Skillnet commissioned this research to transition from analysis to action. The central question guiding this initiative is:

What skills, structures and supports are necessary now to ensure the veterinary profession in Ireland remains viable, competitive and sustainable through 2035?

Conducted by Ipsos B&A in partnership with XLVets Skillnet, Skillnet Ireland and XLVets Ireland, this study provides an evidence-based foundation for a sector-led workforce development response. Its objectives are to:

- **Examine the likely future trajectory of the veterinary sector in Ireland**
- **Identify the education, training and workforce development needs arising from this trajectory**
- **Inform a practical, scalable skills strategy capable of strengthening the profession over the next decade**

This report outlines the findings and, importantly, the implications for action.

About XLVets Skillnet

Established in 2011, XLVets Skillnet is a not-for-profit Learning Network co-funded by Skillnet Ireland and its member companies. Skillnet Ireland receives funding from the National Training Fund through the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Among the 70+ Skillnet Ireland networks, XLVets Skillnet is the only network dedicated exclusively to supporting the veterinary sector in Ireland. The network offers sector-led education and training to enhance professional skills, leadership capacity and business resilience within independent veterinary practices.

Through its programmes, XLVets Skillnet helps veterinary professionals enhance and update their skills, stay aligned with emerging best practices and respond to evolving industry demands. Member practices recognise workforce development as a crucial factor in sustaining long-term growth, competitiveness and resilience in both the veterinary and broader agri-food sectors.



A clear and grounded
understanding of the future of the
veterinary profession in Ireland

5. Research Approach

This research aims to provide a **clear and grounded understanding of the future direction of the veterinary profession in Ireland** and its implications for workforce development.

Phase 1: Building the Evidence Base

The first phase involved a structured review of 22 key industry, regulatory and policy documents. These documents were identified in collaboration with XLVets Skillnet and covered various topics, including workforce trends, retention challenges, business performance, sustainability, One Health, client expectations and international developments in veterinary practice. Rather than summarising existing material, the review aimed to identify key patterns:

- Where are the pressures intensifying?
- Where is the profession already adapting?
- Where are the gaps in capability becoming most visible?

Using a structured research framework, Ipsos B&A synthesised the findings into a thematic overview that highlighted recurring risks and emerging opportunities. This overview formed the backbone of the qualitative phase, ensuring that interviews were focused on the issues most likely to shape the profession in the coming decade.

Phase 2: Listening to the Profession

The second phase moved beyond published material to engage directly with those working in the veterinary landscape. Ipsos B&A conducted 18 in-depth interviews with stakeholders representing clinical practice, education, regulation, sustainability, human resources, business advisory and the veterinary pharmaceutical sector. Additionally, a focus group was held with veterinary students from UCD, Budapest and Warsaw to capture the perspectives of those entering the profession.

Sectors engaged:



This diverse mix was intentional, ensuring that the research reflected:

- The realities of day-to-day practice
- The pressures facing business owners
- The expectations of the next generation
- The broader policy and sustainability context

Interviews took place between July and September 2025, providing participants with the opportunity to speak candidly about the future of the profession. All contributors were assured anonymity, which encouraged open discussion of both strengths and systemic challenges. The result is not simply a collection of opinions but a coherent picture of a profession at a turning point, one that is deeply valued but facing strain and in need of a coordinated, skills-led response.

6. Key Findings



Structural Shifts Reshaping Veterinary Practice in Ireland

The research indicates that the Irish veterinary profession is experiencing a structural transition rather than merely facing isolated operational challenges. Throughout the interviews, participants consistently described a profession that is clinically robust and deeply committed to animal welfare, taking pride in the high quality of veterinary care provided in Ireland. However, they also acknowledged that the systems supporting professional life, such as leadership pathways, workforce design, business capabilities, team structures and advisory roles are under increasing pressure.

External factors are not just influencing practice operations; they are reshaping them. Regulatory expansion, modernisation of the agri-food sector, evolving workforce expectations, rapid technological advancements and growing sustainability obligations are fundamentally changing the context in which veterinary services are delivered and maintained.

Increasing access to information and technological advancements have led to more informed and engaged clients. As a result, veterinarians are increasingly required to act not only as clinicians but also as educators, advisors and trusted interpreters of complex information.

Several stakeholders characterised the profession as being at a genuine inflexion point rather than experiencing a temporary cycle of pressure. While it is not described as being in crisis, there is clear concern that without coordinated adaptation, structural vulnerabilities may intensify. In particular, participants raised the risk of a future shortfall in rural veterinary coverage, as a significant number of large animal practice owners approach retirement without clearly defined succession pathways.

The research identified six interconnected structural shifts that illustrate how these pressures are leading to emerging skills gaps and workforce design challenges across the profession. These structural shifts correspond directly with the six strategic themes that inform the workforce and skills recommendations presented later in this report.



6.1 Leadership, Ownership and Workforce Sustainability

The demographic profile of the veterinary profession has undergone significant changes in recent years, particularly with a steady increase in the number of women entering the field. Participants did not view this shift as a challenge but rather as a signal that professional culture, leadership norms and pathways to ownership must evolve accordingly.

Younger veterinarians increasingly perceive their profession not just as a job but as a long-term career that should be sustainable. They emphasise the importance of maintaining personal boundaries, and work-life balance is now seen as a fundamental expectation rather than just a preference. Stakeholders have noted a clear generational divide between those who were trained under traditional vocational models and those entering the field today, who prioritise structure, sustainability and well-being.

“Work-life balance has become a major consideration for vets. It now influences who they work for, where they work and the type of work they are willing to undertake.”

This shift in expectations does not indicate a decline in commitment to clinical excellence. However, younger professionals are less willing to accept undefined boundaries regarding working hours, on-call demands and unclear career advancement paths. As one stakeholder remarked, the “old unspoken rules” of the profession are no longer taken for granted.

Despite the increasing proportion of women in the field, this change has not yet translated into proportional representation in practice, ownership or senior leadership roles. Several participants pointed out that traditional ownership models and succession pathways have not evolved at the same pace as the workforce composition, resulting in a structural misalignment between the professionals being attracted to the field and the current leadership opportunities available.

This trend reflects broader changes occurring across high-skilled sectors. Younger professionals now expect structured career progression, clear HR policies, transparent feedback mechanisms and both emotional and professional security within the workplace. Several interviewees emphasised that veterinary medicine is no longer competing solely within its own sector; it is now competing with other skilled fields that offer flexibility, defined career pathways and formalised employment supports.

Leadership and Ownership in a More Complex Environment

As the demographic and cultural profile of the profession evolves, practice ownership has become significantly more complex than in previous decades. Practice owners have described several challenges, including:

- Increased regulatory compliance
- Oversight of antimicrobial stewardship
- Data protection obligations
- Expanded employment law requirements
- Financial risks in an inflationary environment

Many owners express frustration with the rising administrative burden, noting that “the job is no longer

just clinical.” Corporate consolidation has also altered the competitive landscape, with independent practices now competing in markets shaped by economies of scale and centralised management structures.

For younger veterinarians, ownership is no longer seen as the inevitable endpoint of their careers. Instead, it is viewed as a strategic decision that must be balanced against financial risks, lifestyle choices and alternative career options. Clinicians are increasingly cautious about pursuing ownership without a clearer understanding of preparation, governance and structured support.

“At a stage when many vets are trying to buy a home, taking on a second mortgage to become an equity partner presents a significant barrier.”

Why This Matters

Employment expectations have changed significantly, but the structures of practice and ownership models have not always kept up. This disconnect risks ongoing tension between traditional professional norms and the realities of today’s workforce.

“Work-life balance has become more important than earnings.”

If leadership pathways, workplace design and ownership preparation are not intentionally aligned with modern expectations, the potential consequences could include continued retention challenges, bottlenecks in the leadership pipeline and delayed succession transitions. Over time, capable clinicians may choose alternative career paths, which could gradually undermine the viability of independent practice, especially in rural areas.

Structural Insight

The demographic shift is more than just a change in profile; it signifies evolving expectations within a complex regulatory and commercial landscape. Informal progression models that have traditionally supported leadership transitions are no longer adequate.

Without structured leadership development, preparation for ownership and succession planning, independent practices could face delayed transitions. This could lead to consolidations driven by structural pressures rather than by strategic intent. The sustainability of the profession relies on proactively aligning the workforce composition with the leadership structure.

Skill Gaps

This shift highlights emerging capability gaps in:

- Leadership development and succession planning
- Workforce design and flexible role structuring
- Human resource governance and policy clarity
- Ownership readiness, governance literacy and financial preparedness
- Strategic decision making and change management

Clinical expertise alone is no longer sufficient to sustain independent practice. Structured leadership, HR capability and governance skills are increasingly essential to ensure continuity, resilience and long-term independence.



The profession can no longer depend solely on individual resilience to maintain long-term engagement]



6.2 Talent Attraction, Retention and Career Development

Retention pressures were consistently mentioned throughout the interviews and were described as “persistent” rather than episodic. Stakeholders noted that early career attrition has become increasingly visible, with the first 12 months often characterised as a “make or break” period. Mid-career professionals are balancing intensifying professional demands along with family responsibilities. Veterinary nurses are navigating role expansions without consistent recognition or clear progression structures. As a result, retention is no longer a background issue; it has become a structural vulnerability.

Early Career Transition Under Heightened Scrutiny

Graduates entering the field today face a significantly different environment compared to previous cohorts. They encounter:

- Clients who are more informed and digitally connected
- Increased reputational risks linked to social media
- Heightened emotional expectations
- Scrutiny surrounding pricing and treatment decisions

Participants spoke about the emotional burden carried by younger veterinarians, particularly in companion animal practice. Difficult conversations about cost, euthanasia and treatment limitations now occur within a context of amplified

public visibility and sensitivity. A consistent theme emerged: while graduates are clinically well trained, they are often underprepared for the emotional intensity and complex communication required in modern practice. In the absence of structured mentoring and formal induction, the transition can feel destabilising. Practices that have implemented supportive graduate models reported stronger integration, increased confidence and improved retention.

“Practices that want to attract and retain the best graduates must provide structured and effective mentorship.”

The increasing number of veterinarians trained abroad highlights the importance of structured induction and mentorship programmes to ensure familiarity with Ireland's regulatory environment, agricultural systems and disease landscape.

Mid-Career Strain

Mid-career professionals described cumulative pressure arising from:

- Expanding administrative documentation related to regulatory compliance
- Antimicrobial stewardship reporting requirements
- Staffing shortages
- Intense and unpredictable on-call demands

In rural areas, larger herd sizes and higher performance expectations create additional strain. As one stakeholder noted, “there are fewer people doing more work.” This cohort often balances professional responsibilities with family commitments, increasing the risk of burnout or reconsidering their careers.

Veterinary Nurses and Role Frustration

Veterinary nurses are well-trained and operate within regulatory frameworks that allow for an expanded scope of practice. However, the delegation and utilisation of their skills vary significantly between practices. Nurses expressed frustration over the underutilisation of their skills, particularly in settings where traditional role boundaries persist. In the context of staffing shortages, this underutilisation contributes to inefficiency, reduced job satisfaction and weakened team cohesion.

Why This Matters

Retention is influenced by more than just salary. It is shaped by factors such as workplace culture, clear pathways for career advancement, the quality of mentorship, effective delegation, strong HR practices and the availability of emotional support. The profession can no longer depend solely on individual resilience to maintain long-term engagement; instead, structure, transparency and development opportunities have become essential.

If these elements are not improved, the likely outcomes include worsening workforce shortages, increased dependence on international recruitment, rising burnout across career stages and emerging service gaps, especially in rural areas. Therefore, retention should not be viewed as a minor issue but rather as a fundamental factor in workforce stability and the sector's resilience.

Structural Insight

Attrition is a systems design issue operating within an increasingly demanding external environment. Informal mentoring models and unstructured progression pathways that may have sufficed in the past are no longer adequate. Retention is directly linked to leadership capabilities and workplace design, which feed into positive retention and work culture, productivity and career clarity.

Skill Gaps

This shift highlights emerging capability gaps in:

- Graduate transition support and structured onboarding
- Mentoring, coaching and clinical supervision capability
- Career pathway design and progression planning
- People management and inclusive workplace leadership
- Employee engagement, wellbeing and retention strategies
- Flexible and modern workforce practices

Attracting and retaining talent requires more than recruitment alone. Supportive career structures, strong mentorship and progressive workplace practices are essential to sustaining a motivated and resilient veterinary workforce.



6.3 Rural and Large Animal Practice Sustainability

Ireland's agri-food sector is becoming increasingly sophisticated, with export markets demanding traceability, environmental accountability and demonstrable antimicrobial stewardship. Farm enterprises are:

- Scaling in size
- Integrating performance data
- Operating under climate targets
- Facing regulatory reporting obligations

Stakeholders within large animal practice have noted that the role is becoming more complex. As one participant observed, "The expectation now is that you're part vet, part data analyst, part advisor." Veterinary input remains central to herd health, food safety and regulatory compliance within this evolving system.

"The modern large animal vet is expected to be part clinician, part data analyst and part advisor."

Veterinary services are increasingly transitioning from reactive treatment toward preventive, data-informed and advisory-led care, particularly within herd health and farm management.

Workforce Preference Shift

Despite the strategic importance of large animal practice, fewer graduates are choosing to focus exclusively on this area. Without targeted intervention, several stakeholders

expressed concern about emerging service gaps in parts of rural Ireland. In some regions, this was described as a risk of developing "vet deserts", where emergency coverage and structured herd health support could become increasingly difficult to sustain. Factors influencing this trend include:

- Emergency unpredictability
- Physical demands
- Geographic travel
- Perceived work-life imbalance
- Economic fragility in some rural areas

Several participants pointed out that perceptions of large animal practice have not yet aligned with its evolving advisory and strategic potential.

Advisory Evolution Underway

There is a growing opportunity to reposition large animal practice as advisory-led rather than primarily reactive. Digital herd monitoring, predictive analytics and sustainability metrics provide veterinarians with the opportunity to act as strategic partners in farm performance, antimicrobial stewardship and environmental compliance. This evolution requires enhanced skills in:

- Data interpretation and analytics
- Advisory communication and influence
- Environmental and sustainability frameworks
- Farm business economics

Why This Matters

Large animal veterinary services are crucial to Ireland's food production system. Veterinarians directly contribute to safeguarding export standards, enhancing biosecurity, promoting responsible antimicrobial use and supporting national climate and sustainability goals. Their role extends beyond workforce planning; it is vital for the country's economic and strategic interests.

If current trends continue without targeted intervention, we could face a growing shortage of veterinarians in rural areas, reduced disease surveillance capabilities, emerging animal welfare issues and potential reputational damage to Ireland's agri-food exports. Thus, the sustainability of large animal veterinary practice is closely linked to the resilience of the broader agri-food system.

Structural Insight

The sustainability of large animal practice is influenced by both workforce preferences and structural economic realities. If the profession cannot align role design, workload structure and advisory positioning with modern expectations, the

capacity for rural veterinary services may continue to decline. Ensuring viability requires intentional repositioning rather than passive adaptation.

Skill Gaps

This shift highlights emerging capability gaps in:

- Advisory communication and client engagement with farmers
- Herd health planning and preventative care expertise
- Data literacy and evidence-based decision making
- Sustainability and climate-smart agricultural advisory capability
- Knowledge transfer and stakeholder collaboration
- Rural practice succession and business continuity planning

The future of rural veterinary services will depend on a shift from reactive care to proactive advisory roles. Strengthening these capabilities will be critical to supporting Ireland's agri-food sector and sustaining rural communities.



[There is a growing opportunity to reposition large animal practice as advisory-led rather than primarily reactive



6.4 Business Resilience and Competitiveness of Independent Practices

Veterinary practices function as small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in an increasingly complex economic and regulatory landscape. Practice owners have expressed the challenges of balancing clinical leadership with growing business responsibilities, which include:

- Compliance with antimicrobial and data regulations
- Complexities of employment law
- Inflationary cost pressures
- Pricing sensitivity among clients
- Investment decisions in digital systems

Corporate consolidation has intensified competition in recruitment and salary benchmarking, putting extra pressure on independent practices. At the same time, many practice owners are nearing retirement, often lacking formal succession plans. Participants indicated that the combination of market consolidation and uncertainty around succession creates a structural vulnerability, rather than merely an isolated business challenge.

Why This Matters

While clinical standards remain high, strong clinical practice alone does not ensure an organisation's sustainability. Without solid business capabilities and financial resilience, practices find it difficult to retain staff, invest in modern systems or effectively compete with corporate groups. This fragility directly affects workforce stability, ownership transitions and long-term independence.

If these capability gaps persist, the likely outcome will be a gradual decline in the viability of independent practices. This could lead to increased consolidation driven by structural weaknesses rather than thoughtful strategy, a reduced capacity to invest in staff development and compromised succession planning. Therefore, business capability is not a peripheral concern; it is vital to the sustainability of the sector.

Structural Insight

Business capability is now central to the sustainability of veterinary practices, rather than a secondary focus. In an environment characterised by regulatory expansion, competitive pressure and economic volatility, informal learning models are inadequate. Structured business capability is now essential for professional independence and long-term resilience.

Informal Business Learning in a Formalised Environment

Historically, many veterinarians acquired business skills through experience rather than structured training. However, today's landscape requires greater sophistication in financial planning, HR management and governance oversight. Many participants acknowledged that business management is often "learned the hard way." Inconsistent capability was particularly evident in financial literacy, HR management, delegation design and succession planning.

"I qualified with little understanding of how to run a veterinary practice as a business"

Without robust business systems, practices may struggle to:

- Offer competitive compensation
- Invest in digital infrastructure
- Manage compliance risks
- Plan ownership transitions effectively

"Veterinary practice owners are highly skilled clinicians, but business management is not always their core strength."

Collaborative networks of independent practices demonstrate how shared resources, peer learning and collective bargaining can enhance resilience while preserving professional autonomy and community-based service delivery.

Skill Gaps

This shift highlights emerging capability gaps in:

- Financial management, budgeting and cost control
- Pricing strategy and revenue optimisation
- Strategic planning and risk management
- Practice governance and regulatory compliance
- Entrepreneurship and ownership readiness
- Marketing, branding and client relationship management

In an increasingly complex and competitive environment, commercial capability is essential. Strengthening business acumen will enable independent practices to remain sustainable, competitive and resilient.



While clinical standards remain high, strong clinical practice alone does not ensure an organisation's sustainability.



Clinical delivery is gradually shifting
from reactive treatment to preventive
and data informed management.



6.5 Modernising Clinical Delivery through Team-Based Practice

The traditional veterinarian-centric model of care is evolving due to workforce shortages, efficiency pressures and rising client expectations. Veterinary nurses now operate within regulatory frameworks that support an expanded scope of practice. However, practices of delegation remain inconsistent, often influenced more by culture and habit than by regulations.

“Many veterinary nurses enter clinical practice expecting a long-term career, but limited progression opportunities and role diversity often constrain their development”

At the same time, technology is facilitating remote monitoring, earlier interventions and more proactive care models. Clinical delivery is gradually shifting from reactive treatment to preventive and data informed management.

Emerging Team-Based Models

Practices that have adopted structured, team-based approaches report significant benefits, including:

- Improved workflow efficiency
- Reduced veterinarian burnout
- Increased nurse engagement and satisfaction
- Enhanced patient throughput

These models typically feature clearer delegation pathways, tiered clinical responsibilities and defined communication protocols. However, stakeholders recognise that changing long-standing habits requires confident leadership, cultural alignment and intentional workflow redesign. Rising client expectations further emphasises the need for coordinated team communication to effectively manage both emotional and informational complexities.

“A fractured team inevitably leads to a fractured service.”

Why This Matters

Efficiency and long-term sustainability in modern veterinary practice depend on structured delegation and optimised team utilisation. Underutilising qualified veterinary nurses represents both a workforce inefficiency and a lost productivity opportunity. In an environment characterised by constrained staffing and rising client demand, maximising the scope of practice and embedding tiered team models is no longer optional; it is becoming operationally essential.

If delegation remains informal and team structures underdeveloped, practices are likely to experience continued inefficiency, escalating veterinarian burnout, poor utilisation of highly trained nurses and reduced capacity to meet increasing client expectations. Sustainable clinical delivery now requires deliberate team design rather than incremental adjustment.

Structural Insight

Clinical sustainability increasingly depends on role clarity, structured delegation and integrated team leadership. When workflow design is informal and culturally driven rather than strategically structured, capacity constraints and burnout are likely to persist. Modern practice requires deliberate redesign rather than incremental adjustments.

Skill Gaps

This shift highlights emerging capability gaps in:

- Delegation frameworks and scope of practice optimisation
- Effective utilisation of veterinary nurses and support staff
- Team leadership, supervision and performance management
- Interdisciplinary collaboration and communication
- Workflow optimisation and operational efficiency
- Clinical governance and quality assurance
- Modern veterinary care depends on collaborative, team-based models. Enhancing these capabilities will support efficiency, improve patient outcomes and enable practices to meet growing demand.



6.6 Digital Transformation, Sustainability and Future Ready Skills

Digital disruption is rapidly transforming the veterinary profession. Technologies such as AI-assisted diagnostics, integrated practice management systems, telemedicine and remote herd monitoring tools are becoming increasingly accessible. However, the adoption of these technologies remains uneven.

Some practices are enthusiastic early adopters, while others are more cautious. Common concerns include:

- Capital investment costs
- Gaps in training and confidence levels
- Uncertainty regarding return on investment
- Integration challenges with existing workflows

The pace of technological development is unlikely to slow down, and data-driven decision-making is becoming integral in both companion and large animal settings.

Emerging Team-Based Models

At the same time, accountability for sustainability is intensifying under national and EU policy frameworks. Veterinary professionals play a central role in:

- Antimicrobial stewardship
- Climate-conscious protocols
- Biosecurity resilience
- Implementing the One Health approach

While sustainability discussions are increasing at the policy level, they have not yet been consistently incorporated into everyday clinical and advisory decision-making. The One Health agenda continues to enhance the profession's societal relevance by linking animal health, human health and environmental sustainability.

“Veterinary practice has evolved beyond traditional boundaries; the societal need for veterinary input within a One Health context is now substantial.”

Why This Matters

The long-term influence and credibility of the veterinary profession will increasingly depend on its ability to integrate effectively into broader health, environmental and digital systems. Technological fluency and sustainability literacy are no longer specialist advantages; they are becoming baseline professional expectations. Practices that are slow to adapt risk losing competitiveness, facing greater regulatory pressure and diminishing their role within wider health and environmental frameworks.

Failure to strengthen digital and sustainability capability may also result in reduced professional influence, technological stagnation and missed opportunities for advisory leadership within the evolving One Health landscape. Maintaining relevance to 2035 will require proactive integration rather than reactive compliance.

Structural Insight

Digital and environmental integration represents a fundamental shift rather than an optional enhancement. Future relevance will depend not only on clinical excellence

but also on the profession's ability to operate confidently within data-driven, sustainability-oriented frameworks. The capacity to adapt in these areas will significantly influence competitiveness and societal standing up to 2035.

Skill Gaps

This shift highlights emerging capability gaps in:

- Digital literacy and practice management systems proficiency
- Data governance, analytics and evidence-informed decision making
- Artificial intelligence awareness and application
- Telemedicine and remote service delivery capability
- Environmental sustainability and regulatory compliance
- One Health integration and biosecurity awareness

As technology and sustainability reshape professional practice, these competencies will become fundamental. Building digital confidence and environmental literacy will ensure the veterinary profession remains innovative, responsible and future-ready.



7. Summary of Findings

A consistent pattern is emerging across all six structural shifts, and external pressures are intensifying the demands on the veterinary profession.

The evolution of Ireland's agri-food system is increasing the advisory expectations for large animal veterinarians. Regulatory developments are leading to greater administrative and compliance burdens, while rising client expectations are amplifying emotional labour. Technological advancements are necessitating improved digital literacy, and the need for environmental accountability is expanding professional responsibilities. At the same time, generational shifts are transforming leadership norms and workplace expectations. Individually, each of these pressures can be managed; however, collectively, they are reshaping the profession's operating model.

The central challenge facing the veterinary profession in Ireland is not clinical competence but rather the capacity to adapt. The research highlights internal cultural tensions, including generational divides regarding work-life expectations, differing perspectives on ownership and some resistance to structural reforms. If these issues are not addressed, they could hinder necessary adaptation at a time when coordinated evolution is essential.

Strengthening the capacity to adapt will depend on developing leadership skills, formalising mentoring structures, modernising rural advisory models, enhancing the resilience of small and medium-sized enterprises, optimising team-based care and embedding digital and sustainability literacy across practice settings.

Without coordinated, skills-focused development in these areas, structural strain is likely to increase. However, with deliberate investment and strategic alignment, the profession can remain resilient, competitive and nationally significant through 2035.

These priority capabilities establish the foundation for the workforce skills framework outlined in the following section

A person wearing a blue lab coat is shown in profile, looking at a laptop. The laptop screen displays a medical ultrasound image. The person is sitting at a wooden table. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

A cohesive skills agenda for the veterinary profession through 2035

8. Skills Framework to 2035

Aligned with the six strategic themes identified in this research, the Skills Framework to 2035 outlines the priority capability areas required to support the profession’s long-term sustainability and adaptive capacity.

The six structural shifts identified in this research highlight a clear set of emerging capability requirements. Although each theme presents unique challenges, they collectively form a cohesive skills agenda for the profession through 2035. The table below summarises the core strategic themes and the priority capability areas that will need structured development.

Strategic Theme	Emerging Capability Needs
Leadership, Ownership and Workforce Sustainability	Succession planning, HR governance, ownership literacy
Talent Attraction, Retention and Career Development	Graduate transition, mentoring capability and people management
Rural and Large Animal Practice Sustainability	Advisory communication, data analytics and sustainability literacy
Business Resilience and Competitiveness of Independent Practices	Financial planning, pricing strategy, governance
Modernising Clinical Delivery through Team-Based Practice	Delegation design, nurse CPD, workflow optimisation
Digital Transformation, Sustainability and Future Ready Skills	AI confidence, data literacy and One Health integration

These insights inform the Skills Framework to 2035 and underpin the thematic recommendations outlined in the next section.

9. Recommendations

The findings of this research are clear: the Irish veterinary profession does not face a deficit in clinical capability but rather a challenge in adaptive capacity.

To strengthen this capacity, coordinated development is required across leadership, workforce design, business resilience, rural sustainability, digital integration and environmental accountability. XLVets Skillnet is uniquely positioned to lead the skills response within independent practice. However, meaningful and sustained change will require collaboration among education providers, representative bodies, regulators, government and industry stakeholders.

To align with national policy frameworks and Government action plans, the recommendations are organised under six strategic themes. Each theme reflects the structural shifts identified in this research and outlines both the actions to be delivered by XLVets Skillnet and the wider collaboration required across the veterinary ecosystem.



Theme 1: Leadership, Ownership and Workforce Sustainability

The veterinary profession in Ireland is experiencing significant demographic change, increasing ownership complexity and evolving workforce expectations. Traditional leadership pathways and succession models have not always kept pace with these developments, creating uncertainty around ownership readiness and long-term sustainability within independent practices. As a growing number of practice owners approach retirement, the need for structured leadership development and succession planning has become increasingly urgent. Strengthening leadership capacity is essential to ensuring continuity, resilience and confidence across the profession.

Objective:

To enhance leadership confidence, accelerate readiness for ownership and reduce succession bottlenecks in independent practices.

XLVets Skillnet Workforce Actions

To address demographic changes, evolving workforce expectations and the growing complexity of ownership, XLVets Skillnet will:

- Develop a career development pathway that guides participants from emerging leaders to senior leadership and ownership readiness.
- Expand structured succession planning support to facilitate smoother ownership transitions.
- Introduce targeted leadership pathways to enhance representation and progression into senior roles.
- Provide modern HR and workforce design training for practice leaders.
- Facilitate peer leadership networks to promote shared learning and practical exchanges.

This framework will incorporate practical business applications, peer learning and structured mentoring to support leadership progression at various career stages.

Wider Industry and Government Collaboration

- Engage veterinary schools to strengthen leadership and business readiness within curricula.
- Collaborate with representative bodies to support structured leadership pathways.
- Support national workforce planning initiatives that strengthen succession and ownership readiness.

Implementation Consideration

Leadership development and succession planning require sustained engagement from practice owners and emerging leaders. Participation is voluntary and often constrained by time and resource pressures within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Programmes must therefore be flexible, modular and clearly aligned with practical business outcomes. Long-term success will also depend on broader economic stability and confidence in independent practice ownership.



Theme 2: Talent Attraction, Retention and Career Development

Attracting and retaining skilled veterinary professionals has emerged as a critical challenge across the sector. Early career attrition, mid-career strain and evolving expectations around work-life balance and professional development are reshaping workforce dynamics. Graduates are entering a more complex and demanding professional environment, requiring structured support, mentorship and clear career pathways. Ensuring a sustainable and fulfilling career trajectory is essential to maintaining workforce stability, enhancing job satisfaction and safeguarding the long-term resilience of veterinary practice in Ireland.

Objective:

To improve the integration of graduates, enhance their professional confidence and strengthen long-term retention in independent practice.

XLVets Skillnet Workforce Actions

To stabilise retention and reduce attrition among early career professionals within the first five years, XLVets Skillnet will:

- Expand and formalise structured graduate transition programmes.
- Introduce mentor training for senior clinicians.
- Offer modules on communication and emotional resilience.
- Facilitate peer learning networks for early career professionals.
- Provide practical guidance for designing structured induction processes within practices.

This approach aims to shift graduate support from informal apprenticeship models to structured, practice-embedded transition systems.

Wider Industry and Government Collaboration

- Strengthen alignment between veterinary education and professional practice.
- Enhance preparation for communication, resilience and professional expectations.
- Promote structured mentoring and career development pathways across the profession.

Implementation Consideration

Retention is influenced by workplace culture, leadership practices and organisational commitment as much as by training provision. While XLVets Skillnet can equip practices with structured frameworks and supports, sustained impact will depend on employer engagement and the consistent adoption of best practices. Collaboration with educational institutions and professional bodies will be essential to ensure alignment between graduate preparation and industry expectations.



Theme 3: Rural and Large Animal Practice Sustainability

Large animal veterinary services play a vital role in Ireland's agri-food system, supporting animal health, food safety, biosecurity and export credibility. However, the sector faces growing challenges due to changing workforce preferences, increasing regulatory and sustainability requirements and evolving farm advisory demands. Fewer graduates are choosing to specialise in large animal practice, raising concerns about the long-term viability of rural veterinary services. Sustaining and modernising this area of practice is essential to supporting rural communities and maintaining Ireland's global reputation as a leader in high-quality food production.

Objective:

To enhance the attractiveness, strategic positioning and long-term sustainability of large animal practice within Ireland's evolving agri-food system.

XLVets Skillnet Workforce Actions

To support rural sustainability and reposition large animal practice as an advisory-led, strategically aligned service, XLVets Skillnet will:

- Deliver training in herd data analytics and digital monitoring.
- Develop capabilities in advisory communication and influence.
- Integrate modules on sustainability and antimicrobial stewardship.
- Provide farm business literacy training tailored for veterinary professionals.
- Promote preventive and advisory-led service models.

This approach will help transition from reactive service provision to proactive, data-informed herd health and sustainability advisory roles.

Wider Industry and Government Collaboration

- Collaborate with government, representative bodies and agri-food stakeholders to explore rural sustainability supports.
- Examine potential incentives to maintain large animal veterinary coverage.
- Support structured graduate placement pathways in rural settings.

Implementation Consideration

The long-term viability of rural veterinary services is shaped by broader economic, demographic and policy conditions beyond the scope of training alone. While capability development can enhance the attractiveness and resilience of large animal practice, sustained service provision may require targeted policy supports, incentives and alignment with national agri-food strategies. Continued collaboration with government and industry stakeholders will be critical to achieving meaningful impact.





Theme 4: Business Resilience and Competitiveness of Independent Practices

Veterinary practices operate as small and medium-sized enterprises within an increasingly complex economic and regulatory environment. Rising operational costs, regulatory obligations, competition for talent and corporate consolidation are placing pressure on independent practices. While clinical standards remain high, inconsistent capability in business management, governance and human resource practices creates structural vulnerabilities. Strengthening commercial resilience and strategic management capacity is essential to ensure long-term independence, competitiveness and sustainability across the sector.

Objective:

To enhance financial resilience, workforce stability and long-term independence within SME veterinary practices.

XLVets Skillnet Workforce Actions

To support the sustainability of independent practices, XLVets Skillnet will:

- Expand training in financial literacy and pricing strategies.
- Deliver structured HR and people management programmes.
- Provide training on governance and compliance awareness.
- Support the development of structured succession planning models.
- Facilitate business performance forums.

This initiative will transition business management from informal, experience-based learning to structured capability development aligned with the needs of modern SMEs.

Wider Industry and Government Collaboration

- Engage with regulators to ensure proportional implementation frameworks for SMEs.
- Support enterprise development initiatives aligned with national competitiveness objectives.
- Collaborate with Skillnet Ireland to strengthen SME capability and resilience.

Implementation Consideration

Independent veterinary practices operate within a competitive and regulated market environment influenced by inflationary pressures, workforce shortages and corporate consolidation. Business capability development can mitigate structural vulnerabilities; however, regulatory and economic conditions will continue to shape operating realities. Training programmes must therefore be practical, accessible and tailored to the needs of SME businesses to maximise engagement and effectiveness.



Modernising clinical delivery through team utilisation is essential to ensure sustainable and high-quality veterinary services.





Theme 5: Modernising Clinical Delivery through Team-Based Practice

Workforce shortages, increasing case complexity, and rising client expectations are driving a shift away from traditional veterinarian-centric models of care. Veterinary nurses now operate within regulatory frameworks that support an expanded scope of practice, yet their skills are not consistently utilised across practices. Structured delegation and integrated team-based models offer an opportunity to improve efficiency, enhance job satisfaction and reduce burnout. Modernising clinical delivery through optimised team utilisation is essential to ensuring sustainable, high-quality veterinary services.

Objective:

To enhance operational efficiency, improve nurse utilisation and strengthen sustainable clinical delivery models.

XLVets Skillnet Workforce Actions

To optimise clinical delivery capacity and reduce burnout, XLVets Skillnet will:

- Expand advanced veterinary nurse continuing professional development (CPD) pathways.
- Offer training on delegation and workflow redesign.
- Support integrated vet-nurse team development.
- Provide leadership training focused on communication and fostering a positive culture.
- Promote best practice models for tiered clinical design.

This initiative will assist practices in transitioning from informal delegation models to structured, team-based care frameworks that maximise the scope of practice and enhance operational resilience.

Wider Industry and Government Collaboration

- Support regulatory clarity regarding the scope of practice.
- Encourage professional and educational bodies to advance veterinary nursing development.
- Promote best practice models for integrated team-based care.

Implementation Consideration

The successful adoption of team-based models requires cultural change, leadership commitment and consistent implementation at the practice level. While training can support structured delegation and workflow redesign, behavioural change will depend on internal leadership, regulatory clarity and confidence in expanded scopes of practice. Ongoing professional and regulatory alignment will be essential to support sustainable implementation.



Theme 6: Digital Transformation, Sustainability and Future Ready Skills

Rapid technological advancements and increasing environmental accountability are reshaping the veterinary profession. Innovations such as artificial intelligence, telemedicine, data analytics and digital monitoring tools are becoming integral to modern practice. At the same time, national and EU sustainability frameworks are elevating expectations around antimicrobial stewardship, climate-conscious farming and One Health integration. Ensuring that veterinary professionals possess the digital fluency and sustainability literacy required to adapt to these changes is essential to maintaining professional relevance, regulatory readiness and strategic alignment with national priorities.

Objective:

To ensure that the profession remains digitally competent, environmentally accountable and strategically relevant by 2035.

XLVets Skillnet Workforce Actions

To support digital fluency and environmental responsibility, XLVets Skillnet will:

- Deliver programmes to enhance digital literacy and AI confidence.
- Provide practical training for technology integration.
- Offer workshops on sustainability practices aligned with national and EU frameworks.
- Expand leadership modules focused on antimicrobial stewardship.
- Integrate awareness of One Health and public advisory capabilities.

This will encourage proactive capability building, enabling practices to incorporate digital and sustainability considerations into everyday decision-making rather than merely reacting to regulatory changes.

Wider Industry and Government Collaboration

- Align workforce development with national climate, innovation and agri-food strategies.
- Collaborate with Skillnet Ireland to support scalable, enterprise-led training.
- Support regulatory clarity in digital innovation, sustainability and One Health initiatives.
- Implementation and Strategic Alignment

Implementation Consideration

Digital investment decisions and sustainability obligations are influenced by external regulatory, technological and economic factors. XLVets Skillnet can build capability and confidence across the profession; however, widespread adoption will depend on access to infrastructure, financial resources and clear policy guidance. Alignment with national digital, climate and One Health strategies will be critical to ensuring long-term relevance and impact.



The Irish veterinary profession does not face a deficit in clinical capability but rather a challenge in adaptive capacity

10. Measuring Impact to 2035

The recommendations outlined in this report are designed to enhance the veterinary profession's adaptive capacity over the coming decade. While specific targets may evolve in response to sectoral needs, progress should be demonstrated through measurable improvements in key workforce and enterprise

indicators. These indicators are aligned with the six strategic themes of this report and provide a basis for monitoring progress and evaluating the long-term impact of workforce development initiatives.

Aligned with the six strategic themes of this report, the following outcomes will serve as indicators of success by 2035:

Strategic Theme	Illustrative Indicators of Progress by 2035
Leadership, Ownership and Workforce Sustainability	Increased participation in structured leadership and succession development pathways; stronger readiness for ownership and smoother transition planning within independent practices.
Talent Attraction, Retention and Career Development	Reduced early career attrition, improved retention rates, and higher levels of participation in structured mentoring and graduate transition programmes.
Rural and Large Animal Practice Sustainability	Enhanced engagement in large animal advisory services; increased participation in rural placements; and strengthened capacity in data-driven herd health and sustainability advisory models.
Business Resilience and Competitiveness of Independent Practices	Strengthened financial and governance capability among small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) veterinary practices; improved succession planning; and enhanced business sustainability.
Modernising Clinical Delivery through Team-Based Practice	Improved utilisation and career progression opportunities for veterinary nurses; increased adoption of team-based care models; and greater participation in workflow optimisation and delegation training.
Digital Transformation, Sustainability and Future Ready Skills	Greater uptake of digital and sustainability-focused continuing professional development; increased confidence in AI and data-driven technologies; and enhanced alignment with One Health and environmental objectives.

Monitoring these indicators in collaboration with Skillnet Ireland and other sector stakeholders will support evidence-based decision making, enable continuous improvement and ensure that workforce development investments deliver sustained and measurable impact.

A profession that is leadership-ready,
digitally confident, commercially resilient
and attractive to the next generation



11. Conclusion

This research confirms that the Irish veterinary profession is not in crisis but is at a crucial point of transition. Clinical standards remain strong, and a deep commitment to animal welfare is embedded across the sector. However, the structural context in which veterinary professionals operate has changed significantly.

Demographic shifts are reshaping expectations regarding leadership and ownership. Retention pressures are exposing weaknesses in early career transitions and workplace design. Large animal practice remains central to national agri-food resilience but faces sustainability risks without deliberate repositioning. Independent practices are navigating increasing regulatory and commercial complexities. Team-based models are emerging as an operational necessity, while digital integration and environmental accountability are becoming essential professional competencies rather than optional enhancements.

Together, these six strategic themes provide a coherent roadmap for strengthening the resilience, sustainability and competitiveness of the veterinary profession in Ireland through 2035. Individually, these developments are manageable; collectively, they represent a reconfiguration of how veterinary practice must evolve to remain viable, competitive and nationally relevant.

The core issue identified in this research is not a lack of clinical expertise but the need to strengthen adaptive capacity. Leadership capability, structured workforce design, business resilience, advisory evolution, team optimisation and digital fluency are now central to professional sustainability.

XLVets Skillnet is well-positioned to lead structured workforce development within independent practice. The programmes outlined in this report provide a practical and scalable pathway to address identified skills gaps. However, long-term sustainability will depend on coordinated collaboration among education providers, regulators, representative bodies, government and Skillnet Ireland.

Investment in veterinary workforce capability is not merely a sectoral issue; it underpins Ireland's food security, export integrity, rural vitality and One Health responsibilities. The decisions made in the coming years regarding leadership development, rural sustainability, business capability and digital readiness will shape the resilience of the profession for the next generation.

With coordinated action and sustained investment in skills, the veterinary profession in Ireland can confidently modernise, retain its independence and continue to play a significant national role through 2035 and beyond.

By 2035, success will mean a profession that is leadership-ready, digitally confident, commercially resilient and attractive to the next generation.

Topline Summary, Irish Veterinary Profession

1

Ireland's veterinary profession remains highly trusted, clinically strong and central to animal welfare and export credibility.

2

The core challenge identified is adaptive capacity, not a lack of clinical competence.

3

Younger vets expect sustainable careers with clearer boundaries and better work-life balance.

4

The profession is not in crisis, but it is at a clear inflection point shaped by structural change rather than short-term disruption.

5

Demographic change and generational shifts in expectations, is reshaping leadership, ownership and workforce design.

6

Retention pressures are persistent across the profession

7

Traditional ownership and succession pathways have not kept pace with workforce change, creating risks for independent practice continuity.

8

The first 12 months in practice are critical for graduate integration, confidence and retention.

10

Veterinary nurses are essential to workforce sustainability, but inconsistent delegation and limited progression continue to restrict their contribution.

11

Large animal practice remains strategically vital to Ireland's agri-food system, rural communities and national food security.

9

Mentoring, structured onboarding and career pathways are essential to attract and retain talent.

12

Fewer graduates are choosing large animal roles and specialities.

13

Large animal practice is evolving from reactive clinician to advisory, data-led and sustainability-focused work.

14

Independent practices face rising regulatory, cost and market pressure.

15

Business capability is now essential to practice sustainability.

16

Team-based care is becoming central to modern clinical delivery.

17

Digital confidence is becoming a baseline professional requirement.

18

Sustainability and One Health literacy are increasingly important in the sector.

19

The report identifies six priority workforce and skills themes.

20

Investment in workforce capability will help protect food security, rural vitality and export credibility.

21

XLVets Skillnet is positioned to lead a structured workforce response, but long-term success requires collaboration.

22

By 2035, success means a resilient, modern and attractive profession to the next generation.

23

Informal workflow models are no longer sufficient; sustainable practice requires deliberate team design, communication and operational leadership.

The image shows two people from behind, standing in a grassy field. The person on the left is wearing a dark jacket and trousers, with their hands clasped behind their back. The person on the right is wearing a quilted jacket, trousers, and tall boots. In the background, there is a large tree and a flock of sheep. The entire image is overlaid with a teal-to-green gradient and a pattern of white polka dots of varying sizes.

**Building a future that
honours tradition and
embraces change.**



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