The Animal and Plant Health Agency is a member of the Government Veterinary Surgeons (GVS) network. Edwina Thirkell, Deputy Veterinary Director of APHA, explains the opportunities for vets working in the public sector.
What is GVS?

The Government Veterinary Surgeons (GVS) network is a group of vets who work within UK government. There are a number of opportunities available; not often on a new graduate’s list of career options, but certainly worth bearing in mind.

According to a recent (2013) RCVS survey, about 700 vets categorise themselves as being employed in the public sector by government departments and agencies. With about 18,900 vets in practice in 2013, this amounts to roughly 4 percent of practising vets. The umbrella organisation, GVS, is led by the head of profession, the UK’s Chief Veterinary Officer, and it links all the government vets spread across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

What sort of opportunities does public sector employment offer vets who are looking for jobs?

As a general rule, jobs fall into three categories: operational, research and policy-based.

**Operational jobs** involve interaction with animals, keepers, testing samples, investigating surveillance submissions and monitoring a wide range of different industries linked to animals and animal products. These jobs require a high level of knowledge and the ability to investigate and risk-assess a situation or event.

**Research jobs** involve carrying out studies and projects to provide evidence to safeguard animal health and welfare and public health. This tends to be applied rather than fundamental science and can have a direct impact at the national and international level.

**Policy jobs** rely on your knowledge and awareness of a particular area of veterinary medicine, the legal framework, and policy expectations as well as the ability to review and collate a range of information so you can provide evidence based advice, guidance or other information in order for decisions to be made. Vets will be providing advice that can influence policy across the EU and play a critical role in the detection, definition and management of animal-related risks.

Which government departments employ vets?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Government Department</th>
<th>No. of vets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animal and Plant Health Agency (formerly Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency)</td>
<td>340</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Agriculture and Rural Development, Northern Ireland</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Defra]</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Standards Agency (including the Operations Group, formerly the Meat Hygiene Service)</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Office</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Defence</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Government</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh Government</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinary Medicines Directorate</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(Feb 2014 Data)*

Other departments (e.g. Department of International Development and Health Protection Agency) employ vets on a more occasional basis.
WORKING AS A GOVERNMENT VET

What sort of work is involved?

The variety of work in government service is immense, and changes all the time. GVS encourages and supports interchange between member organisations, so you can get an idea of other work areas too. Working hours are generally fixed (but flexible), and out-of-hours work is often more limited than in practice, or in some cases not required at all. As a rule, working terms and conditions like holidays and pensions are well defined and secure. You may have the opportunity to develop deeper expertise and apply for promotion at an appropriate time in your career, which for some will mean taking on more leadership and managerial tasks or it can mean taking greater responsibility for scientific or veterinary advancement. Support for personal development and CPD can be generous and diverse. On a wider scale, working in the public sector is, for many people, a meaningful and fulfilling role. Doing things ‘for the greater good’ can be satisfying and have effects that can be seen across a wide area - for example, bringing about change on welfare legislation can have positive effects on millions of animals both in UK and EU.

Even those jobs that appear to be completely office or laboratory-based can still involve trips and visits within UK and internationally. Veterinary advisers can travel around the world supporting policy and industry colleagues in the opening of new markets for animals and their products. Working for organisations such as Defra, FSA, the Welsh Government or the Scottish Government tends to involve providing veterinary policy advice. This type of work can be very demanding, but rewarding, and you get involved with a wide variety of other professionals, including lawyers, economists, statisticians, sociologists and politicians.

What sort of applicant would be successful, if applying for a public sector job?

The most common new entrant profile is a vet who comes to us with 4 or 5 years’ experience, although a minority of successful applicants have come straight from vet school. Having a few years of practice experience is seen as an advantage. Many enter GVS initially in a field or laboratory-based role from where you can move on to a policy-based role if they wish, although this is not the only route you can take. For some roles a postgraduate qualification (such as epidemiology) is an advantage. The recruitment and promotion process does not solely focus on your technical or clinical knowledge; instead, the ability to reflect upon your broader skills and competencies is crucial.

Valued skills and attributes across all posts include analytical thinking, decision-making and good communication. Practice experience is less important than the ability to prove that you can deal with a variety of situations, and have done so. In a recent AHVLA recruitment campaign there were 175 applicants and 21 were recruited, so competition is quite strong.

What are the specific benefits of GVS jobs?

Working for the Government means that you can generally be assured of your terms and conditions. Once permanently employed (and not all jobs hold this status), you can be certain of what you are entitled to, including pay, leave, overtime and other allowances. The contributory pension schemes applicable in any government department will apply; they are generally regarded as good schemes, with appreciable benefits. You can also, in many cases, apply to work part-time, or on a more flexible basis (for example, term-time working or compressed hours), but do not assume this, as some departments do not have enough veterinary staff to support this. Training and development is supported; some teams offer excellent training benefits, including the option to acquire post-graduate qualifications. You might also benefit from being in a large team, which means that you taking preferred time off can be more easily supported. Above all else, your job security is good. We also support providing equal opportunities for applicants with disabilities; a legal requirement, but sometimes more practicable in a government environment.
The work you are asked to do can be very professionally satisfying, and often require you to use a wide range of your veterinary skills. Judgment and communication skills are particularly important, and there is a lot of complex problem-solving required. One aspect of the job which may attract applicants is that, in many cases, you do not personally need to issue bills, although some member organisations charge for statutory services and as with all government work, there is an expectation that public money will be used responsibly.

Some GVS jobs have an international aspect, and offer opportunities for travel overseas. Many of our vets work in multidisciplinary teams which can be rewarding and enjoyable – government vets usually work with a very broad range of people, from both within and outside the civil service, and often from many countries. Many find this contact with a range of other professionals rewarding and stimulating. All of these attractions mean that staff turnover is low.

The applied-science nature of the research jobs means the research you do will often have a direct impact on the “real world”, resulting in improvements to disease control and surveillance activities. You may also have the opportunity to provide expert advice in outbreak situations and work with leading scientists from around the world.

Some vets get involved in difficult legal cases - many GVS staff have extensive legal powers, and enforcement actions range from providing advice to appearing in court to ensure convictions.

One thing is certain; the job is a “real” veterinary job, promoting the health and welfare of animals on a variety of ways. Compared to practice, where you work on cases individually, government vet work tends to be much wider in scope, impact and influence and takes account of the veterinary medicine at the herd, regional, national and sometimes the international level. On many occasions, your involvement brings improvement and progress to the lives of many more animals than the one-to-one experience in veterinary practice.

The job advert usually specifies the pay range; your entry salary is normally based on your experience, qualifications and the defined pay rate for the job.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Veterinary Posts Pay Range</th>
<th>Salary</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior Veterinary Inspector (entry level)</td>
<td>£33,300 - £39,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 7 Vet</td>
<td>£43,600 - £52,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 6 Vet</td>
<td>£53,200 - £63,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher grade vets</td>
<td>Senior Civil Servant Rates</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Feb 2014 Data)

And the downside, if there is one?

Being part of the civil service can mean it can seem as though there is a lot of process and jargon to learn and work with, which is a downside if you would feel constrained by that. However this is a necessary aspect to ensure you act within the law and policy and can account for your actions and public money. You might also notice an increase in paperwork or computer-based data inputting compared to jobs in the private sector. Some people undoubtedly miss the busy and interactive nature of practice work; however, most people we recruit stay with us for a long time. You also have to become acquainted with the political nature of your work, and adapt to this over time remembering that, in addition to being a veterinary professional you are also a Civil Servant working for the government of the day.
WORKING AS A GOVERNMENT VET

The amount of contact with animals is less than in practice, (sometimes there is none at all) and the bureaucracy can take some getting used to. Some of the population medicine policies you are involved in can be controversial and might conflict with your political views; for example, the culling of animals for disease control purposes. But by being part of the GVS, you can use your experiences and knowledge to help inform how policies develop. People you meet may not understand what you do, or why, and sometimes the decisions you have to make are unpopular or controversial. It’s also not a one-way street; vets regularly go back into practice with relative ease, with a new perspective, having seen a different world.

In some cases, you may find that, in order to further your career or gain additional experience, you need to be able to move around the country; not always simple if you have strong links to a particular location.

If you enjoy the immediacy of practice, the pace and long-term analytical nature of the work in GVS jobs may frustrate you; however, when the pressure rises, due to a crisis or an emergency, the pace significantly increases. In this type of situation, the work continues seven days a week, and demands can be high until the situation is under control.

**What advice can you give on being successful in the recruitment process?**

The main advice is to remember that the process is competency-based rather than relying solely on you providing evidence of your level of technical or professional knowledge. A ‘competency-based approach’ means that you will be asked to provide examples of when and how you have demonstrated the skills, competencies and behaviours being sought, not theoretical examples of how you might deal with a situation. You may also be asked to give a presentation or undertake a risk-assessment exercise to test your thinking, decision making and communication skills. GVS takes care to ensure that the questions asked are not based on government experience, but are designed to highlight the specific skills and abilities of the applicant. Many vets aren’t used to this type of interview and some may not do as well as they could, even though they may have the skills we need. If you want to join GVS it is well worth finding out about the competency-based application and interview approach. Spend some time thinking about suitable evidence and practice your presentation and interview technique with a person you trust to give you constructive feedback!

You should also be patient; the recruitment process is slow but it’s worth it in the end. You can get an indication of the timescale for recruitment from the organisation managing the vacancy.

If you are still at university you could apply for our extra mural studies (EMS) placements and internships; if you’re already qualified, get in touch (via the GVS website) and we can often organise for you do some job shadowing.

**Further information**


**Civil Service Jobs website (for England, Scotland and Wales)** [www.civilservice.gov.uk/recruitment](http://www.civilservice.gov.uk/recruitment)

**Northern Ireland Recruitment website** [https://irecruit-ext.hrconnect.nigov.net/](https://irecruit-ext.hrconnect.nigov.net/)

You can refer to the website of individual organisations for information on the type of veterinary work being carried out and contact details.