

A close-up portrait of a middle-aged man with glasses, smiling slightly. He is wearing a blue blazer over a white shirt. The background is a solid green color.

# A change of culture

Charles Hartwell, CEO of Eville & Jones, provider of official veterinary controls to meat processors, has big plans for the company's future.

**Q.** You've been with Eville & Jones for just over a year, what attracted you to this role?

**A.** I came from a professional services background and in my last role I spent six years running a legal practice, which started off as a regional practice and we grew it to be truly national. It had the same characteristics, in a way, as Eville & Jones. This company is a geographically diverse cohort of professionals, so our people are dotted all over the country and managed by a central support function here in Leeds, which was the same system as I had before in the law, a highly regulated environment. Food standards and animal welfare standards are also highly regulated and it presented a great opportunity to help drive cultural change, both within the business and externally.

With Brexit coming up, the owners of the business identified some good opportunities for a bit of diversification in terms of the work that we do. They wanted someone with a commercial background who had worked in a similar environment, although not necessarily in the same sector, and had grown a business at scale and driven that cultural change, which would enable them to do the same thing here. That's why they brought me in and that's what appealed to me about the business.

We're going through a period of change both in the regulatory environment and what's happening in the sector and with the customer base, and that's really exciting to me. I like the challenge.

**Q.** What is your reaction to the Food Standard Agency (FSA)'s decision to seek alternatives to the current monopoly arrangement for the provision of official veterinary controls?

**A.** I welcome competition, I think it's very healthy. Actually, when we last put our tender in, there were two other competitors there. I'm not speaking for the FSA, but I don't think having a sole provider is a policy; we bid for a tender. The country is split into various lots and we bid for all of those lots separately. The FSA reviewed our bid, the same as they did for everyone's bid and decided that we were the best.

Having a competitive landscape is, I think, very healthy for the sector, certainly when it keeps us on our toes and long may that continue. If, when it comes to the next tender round, the FSA decides that it wants more than one provider, so be it.

**Q.** How do you respond to recent allegations in *Private Eye* that meat suppliers were previously overcharged by the FSA, to cover Eville & Jones' profit?

**A.** I'm not sure that I can comment on that, because I have no involvement at all with how the FSA charges the industry for the delivery of the official control service. So, I have no idea, you would have to ask the FSA. If I knew how the charging structure was put together then maybe I'd be able to comment, but the FSA are the ones making the charges.

**Q.** The same article also covers the leak of information from the FSA to a journalist. Has the FSA informed you about the data breach?

**A.** We were contacted by the FSA to inform us that there had been a breach. I would say it's unfortunate, but I understand it's human error and someone may have emailed something by mistake. It's unfortunate but these things happen.

**Q.** Following Brexit, there have been increased pressures on the number and capacity of Official Veterinarians (OVs) in abattoirs. Was this situation not foreseen?

**A.** Brexit has been incredibly challenging, especially as we're in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic as well. One of the interesting things that people may not be aware of is that in 2018 – which was the last year of published data before the pandemic hit and pre-Brexit – there were around 2,000 new vets registered with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and just under 1,600 left the membership. There was growth there of about 400 vets but in that landscape, demand exceeded supply so there were still vacancies for vets.

Of those 2,000 who joined the Royal College, the UK veterinary school system was only able to produce 900 vets, so just over 1,000 joined from the EU and I think that trend has been there for a very long time.

We do not have the ability in this country to generate the number of vets that we need and the alternative is that we either change our entire regulatory system, or we have to get them in from overseas and in the past, the EU has been the logical place to source them from.

So, we did plan for Brexit and that there would be the introduction of visa requirements from 1st January 2021. On that basis, we recruited a significant number of vets into the business in November and December 2020 and we've delivered full service to our FSA obligations. Nowhere have we said, 'We're sorry, this abattoir can't open because we can't provide a vet or a meat inspector.' So, I think that's actually been pretty successful. We have an in-house recruitment team and a big pipeline of vets and meat inspectors that are coming in on a continual basis.

However, the introduction of an IELTS Level 7 qualification requirement for English from 1st January this year destroyed everything, because we only found out about that a week or two before the end of the Brexit transition period. That has basically meant our recruitment pipeline stopped instantly. So far, we haven't recruited any vets from the EU since 1st January. We've got a pipeline now because of the temporary registration system, but that is the impact.

So, I think we did prepare well. We faced some unknown challenges and Covid-19 has caused even more challenges because for vets to get their visa, they have to undertake an English test. Due to Covid-19, many test centres across Europe are closed. So that's another issue that we didn't think was going to be a major problem coming into this year.

◀ **Q.** Earlier this year, the English language requirement for vets was reduced from IELTS Level 7 ('good user') to Level 5 ('modest user'). How can the industry work with vets who cannot communicate well in English?

**A.** For the last 20 years, there has been no level. We conduct all our interviews in English. To become an OV, we would place a candidate on an OV course undertaken by Bristol University, which would be taught in English, assessed in English and they would have to pass in English. Then they would go through an induction and training process conducted in English. So, I think there's a big misunderstanding that somehow we're reducing English standards by going from level 7 to level 5, where actually it's the complete opposite; we're going from level zero to level 5.

The introduction of something that never existed in the past, or if it did exist it wasn't implemented, has caused a massive issue within the veterinary sector because you can't pass it. Vets are being expected to come in with the same level of English as you would need to study at Oxford or Cambridge University.

We could not possibly introduce into an abattoir someone who didn't speak English because they wouldn't physically be able to do their job. Our customer, the FSA, wouldn't accept it. But without any formal standards of English, this country has some of the highest standards of animal welfare, food safety and product reputation in the world. So, I don't understand really, from that perspective, where the problem lies. In a situation where we're seeing a massive increase in demand for vets, through the introduction of export health certificates and port inspections from the EU, which is now a third country, we're cutting off the supply so that can't end well.

**Q.** What's the way forward for recruitment now?

**A.** We have the temporary registration now in place and our recruitment and selection process is going to be the same as it's always been, because it's rigorous. From a veterinary public health point of view, we're starting to see the impact of the temporary registration route coming to fruition, which I'm very grateful for. The pipeline isn't as big as it would have been pre-Brexit and there are a number of political reasons why people may decide not to work in the UK anymore. The recruitment pipeline has started to pick up again, which is good, but it will take some time to start really having those people coming through the system.



• Vets wishing to work in the UK now have to prove English standards to gain a skilled working visa and temporary registration.

## Coffee Break



**Family:** My wife and I have a daughter, 13, and an English Springer spaniel called Hilda.

**First car:** A blue VW Polo.

**When I was younger, I wanted to be:** A film director. Anthony Minghella, Oscar-winning director of *The English Patient*, went to my school and I was inspired by him.

**My hero is:** I'm not sure I have a hero but currently, I would say Sarah Gilbert, who designed the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine.

**Favourite food:** Surf and turf – a nice juicy steak with either big prawns or a bit of lobster.

**Favourite holiday destination:** Anywhere on a ship. I was born and bred on the Isle of Wight and could see all the ships going past. I used to sail when I was little, so I've got the bug.

**Favourite book:** *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens.

**Hobbies:** Running – I've done off-road half-marathons and mountain marathons.

**Q.** What are your ambitions for your time in this role?

**A.** I think that Eville & Jones as a business is on a journey and I've set about bringing a cultural change. My opinion is that public health vets are seen by some as maybe being second class vets; consumers and the public at large are not really aware of what a public health vet does. One of the things I want to do in my role here is to make our vets and meat inspectors feel very proud of the role they play. For those people who might have different views within the sector, I want to change their opinion of our people.

There are some mistakes this business has made in the past, which I'm addressing. I think our vets and meat inspectors have been taken for granted. I've set about changing that, making sure they have a voice and are engaged in the direction of travel of the business.

From a commercial perspective, I'd like to expand the range of services that we're able to offer the UK food sector. We have a huge amount of knowledge within this business and I think we haven't used it to the potential that we could. So I see, hopefully, great success for Eville & Jones and for us to play a part in the way the industry is regulated and governed. We want to make sure that we're able to continue, as UK PLC, to have great meat with the highest possible standards and we've got a role to play in that. 