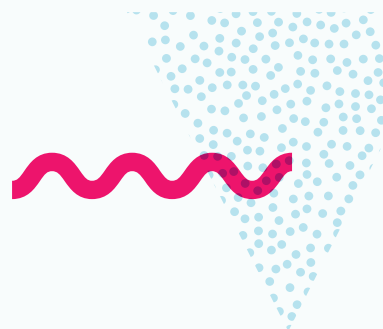


Veterinary Client Mediation Service

**Supporting Relationships Between
Vet Practices and Animal Owners**

Annual Report 2023-24

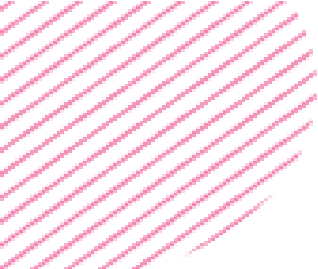




Contents

Introduction	2
Executive Summary	3
VCMS Objectives 2024-27.....	5
Complaint Resolution	6
Remit	7
Outcomes	9
Resolutions	12
KPIs.....	13
Insights and Highlighted Trends.....	16
Stakeholder Engagement and Interaction	23
Objectives 2024-2025	27
Appendices	28
Appendix 1 – Data	28
Appendix 2 – VCMS Process	40





Introduction

Welcome to the 2024 VCMS Annual Report. This year's report shares an overview of VCMS activity and insight from the resolution of veterinary complaints by the VCMS in 2023/24.

The last year has seen focus and discussion around the impact on both consumers and veterinary professionals of the changes in provision of veterinary care and practice ownership over the last 10-15 years. These changes have also taken place in the context of significant increase in pet ownership across the UK, a cost of living crisis placing pressure on household finances and the potential for more complex and costly (in many different ways) of veterinary care and treatments both at first opinion, general practice and referral, specialist levels.

Within the complaints referred to the VCMS, we continue to see many examples of really strong and positive relationships between animal owners and veterinary professionals, and mutual recognition and appreciation for the commitment of veterinary practice colleagues focused on animal welfare and supporting animal owners. The VCMS has shared the insight from nearly 30,000 complaints handled by the service since its inception in 2016/17. Much has changed in that period, but the trends in complaints are largely consistent – communication, enabling animal owners to make informed and confident decisions and of course, the emotional factors linked to the close familial bond between many animal owners and their pets.

Approaching client care, communication and complaint responses with a Quality Improvement ethos supports many practice teams to improve those conversations and so in turn the confidence in the decisions made and the clinical judgment that guides those decisions.



At the VCMS it is important that we continue to share that insight and in particular the animal owner perspective to allow that voice to help veterinary practices and the professionals interacting with owners to continually strengthen how consults and clinical expertise enables owners to make the best decisions for their animals in the context of their individual circumstances and lives. This remains a key priority for the VCMS as we look to the future.



Jennie Jones

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Executive Summary

Overview of the VCMS activity and insight from 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025

Number of enquiries received in 2023-24

3,548

-2.6%
YoY

3,618 enquiries concluded in 2023-24 (v 3,629 in 2022-23)

87%

Enquiries concluded in 60 days or less

8%

Enquiries concluded in between 61-90 days

5%

Enquiries concluded in more than 90 days

98%

Enquiries were in remit

56%

Enquiries handled at preliminary stage

1,372

Practices invited to engage

1,144 in 2022-23

1,050

Practices accepted the invitation

818 in 2022-23 (28% increase)

77%

Engagement rate

72% in 2022-23 (5% increase)

936

Mediations concluded

795 in 2022-23 (18% increase)

82%

Resolution

84% in 2022-23 (2% decrease)

767

Mediations

668 in 2022-23 (15% increase)

Timescales

Average

23.4 Days

vs 17.1 days
2022-23

Mediated

59 Days

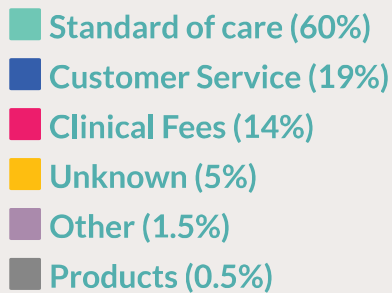
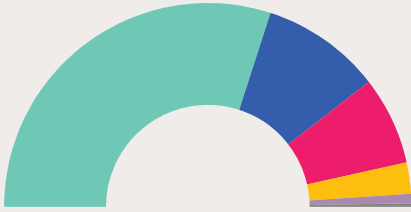
vs 39.6 days
2022-23

Feedback



More than 9-in-10 consumers would recommend the VCMS

Nature of Complaint



5 Most Common Complaint Circumstances 2023-24

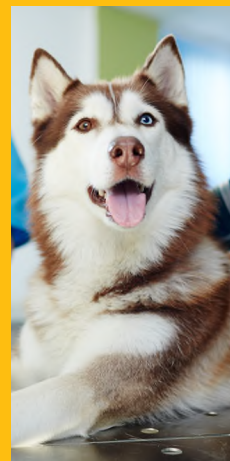
376
Customer Service -
Consent - Service
and Communication
+31% YoY

647
Standard of Care -
Unexpected Outcome
+37% YoY

554
Standard of Care -
Diagnostic Pathway
Insufficient
+12% YoY

174
Standard of Care -
Wrong Diagnosis
-30% YoY

154
Clinical Fees -
Fees considered
to be excessive
-21% YoY



1 Complaints relating to the standard of care

Complaints relating to the standard of care increased as a proportion of the complaints referred to the VCMS for a second year running by 4%. There was an increase in complaints relating to unexpected outcomes and where the animal owner felt the practice had not adequately investigated (diagnostic pathway insufficient). This, however, sits alongside a fall in complaints involving diagnosis errors which fell by 30% year on year.

2 Complaints relating to the consent conversation and process

In 2023-24 the VCMS saw a 30% increase in complaints concerning the communication around consent, and the consent process. We explore some of the insights linked to this trend in the 'Insight' section of this report.

3 Fall in complaints regarding excessive fees

While the overall number of complaints relating to fees (rather than veterinary care or service) increased slightly to 14% of all enquiries, the VCMS saw complaints linked solely to animal owners considering fees to be excessive fall by one fifth. There has been an overall increase over the past 5 years, but 2023-24 saw this levelling off.

4 Complaints relating to customer service

Complaints relating to customer service remained steady at 19% of all concerns and fell by 7% year on year.

VCMS Objectives 2024-27

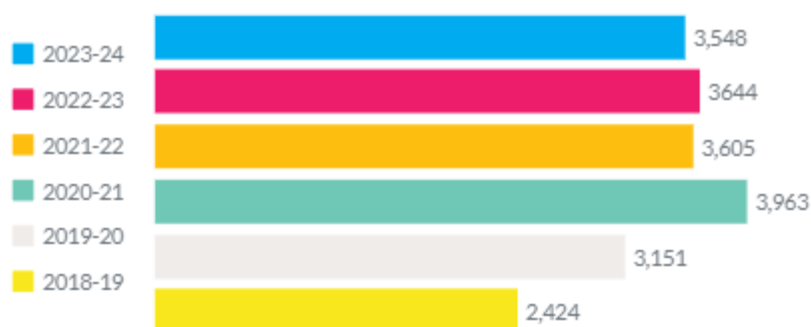
Confidence	» Share insight and analysis from 2023. » Maintain strong feedback response rates to ensure VCMS effectiveness can be quantified and monitored. » Ensure impartial qualitative and quantitative complaint insight feeds into Government, RCVS and wider sector activity regarding client/practice relationships, consumer protection, standards of practice and in maintaining confidence in the veterinary profession.	
Clarity	» Deliver proportionate and effective complaint mediation within 60-day time frame. » Continue to engage with stakeholders and the veterinary professionals.	
Courage	» Encourage & promote engagement with the VCMS mediation process by practices. » Consider how the VCMS can support quality improvement within the veterinary sector, via reflective intelligence-led practice and learning culture - closing the learning loop. » Consider how the VCMS can support the professions and the sector to address the workforce pressures experienced in recent years and ongoing with focus on retention and developing confidence in key communication and client care areas of practice.	
Compassion	» Support practice and individual veterinary surgeons all team members not just vets to develop confidence in effective local complaint handling processes and skills to increase local resolution. » Provide ongoing guidance to dissatisfied veterinary clients to facilitate local resolution in a constructive way continue to increase our signposting to other support organisations where needed for both animal owners and veterinary practices.	

Complaint Resolution

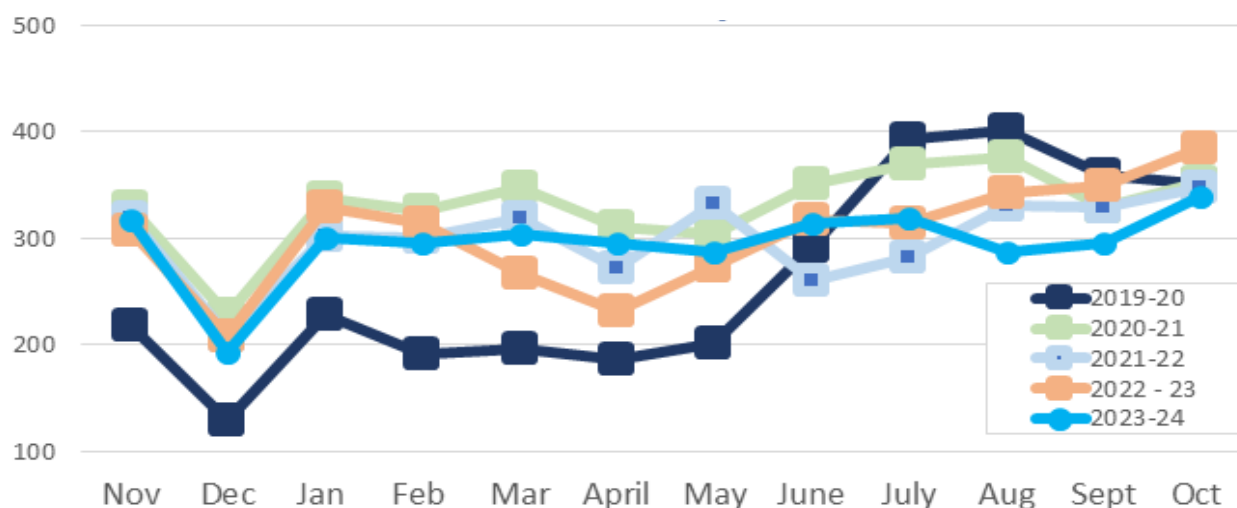
VCMS Activity Analysis

The VCMS has seen a consistent level of complaint activity in 2023-24 and received an average of 296 enquiries per month across the year (consistent with 2022-23 at 304 per month).

VCMS Activity

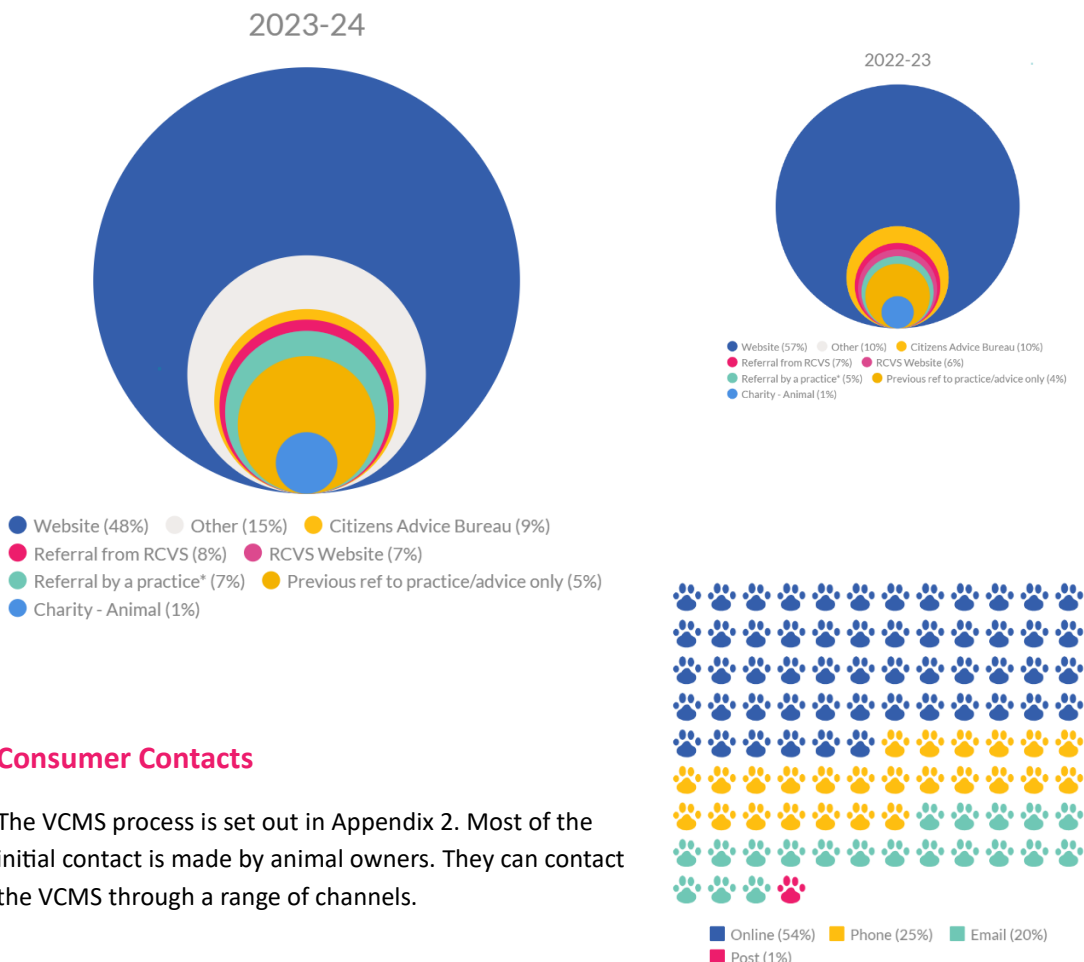


VCMS Activity - By Month



The activity trends across the year were like previous years, with March and April being busier than 2022-23, and August and September seeing fewer complaint referrals than in the same months last year.

Source of Enquiries



Remit

98% of enquiries received by the VCMS fell within the remit of the service.

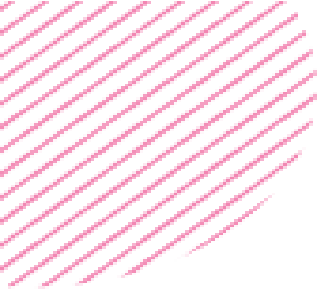
Of the 76 that involved issues or factors which fall outside the service remit:

- » 1 required a referral to the RCVS in the circumstances involved issues which may amount to serious professional misconduct. This was a decrease from 7 in the previous year.

It is vital that the VCMS identify and refer complaints which are received that require RCVS investigation. It is also key that the screening of those issues is accurate as a disproportionate referral frustrates the client and can cause significant distress to the veterinary professional involved.

Any potential referrals are considered within the 'red flag' VCMS process and are reviewed by a senior resolution manager and the Head of the VCMS. Where further guidance is needed then the VCMS team will approach the RCVS Professional Conduct team on an anonymised basis.

During 2024 the RCVS professional conduct team completed an audit of enquiries received directly into the VCMS (having not been considered by the Professional Conduct team within the screening process). The audit confirmed that concerns involving potential serious professional misconduct allegations were identified and referred to the SPM process.



In order to maintain effective and trusted referral pathways, the VCMS undertake:

- » Regular training/ case discussion at weekly meetings
- » Update reviews on RCVS investigations and findings

Screening reviews as part of the weekly progress reports as a further oversight/check process.

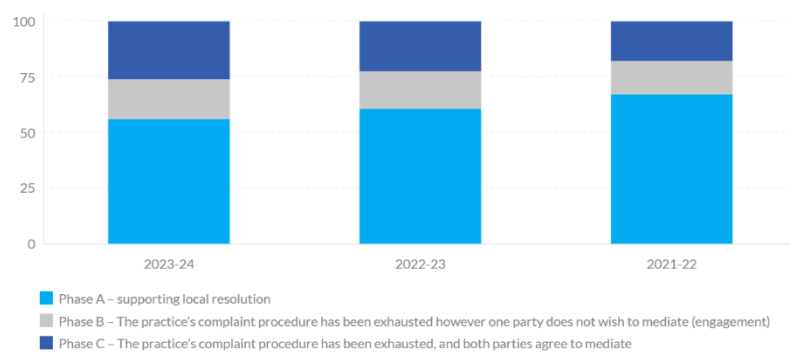
16 involved circumstances where the complaint response or the situation giving rise to a complaint occurred more than 12 months prior to the VCMS referral. This criterion is a standard across ADR and complaint bodies. This category increased from 14 in 2022-23, which is consistent with our complaint resolution body data and likely to be linked to ongoing pressures on household finances.

- » 16 involved circumstances where the complaint response or the situation giving rise to a complaint occurred more than 12 months prior to the VCMS referral. This criterion is a standard across ADR and complaint bodies. This category increased from 14 in 2022-23, which is consistent with our complaint resolution body data and likely to be linked to ongoing pressures on household finances.
- » 11 complaints involved commercial animals or where the client/practice relationship was commercial. This is consistent with year-on-year data.
- » 8 referrals were made by individuals who were not the owner or the representative of the owner. These included charities.
- » 5 complaints were received from complainants based outside the UK, involving veterinary professionals and practices based outside the UK.
- » Of the 37 other complaints, these included:
 - Pet insurance complaints without a veterinary practice issue (referred to the Financial Ombudsman)
 - Complaints involving businesses that are not veterinary practices such as groomers or animal behaviorists
 - Wildlife care
 - The matter had already been considered by the civil courts and a judgment given
 - Civil dispute involving a veterinary professional but outside the context of veterinary care.

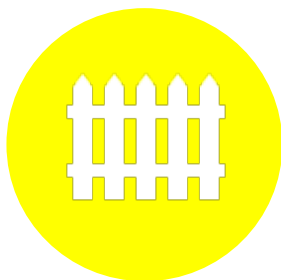
Outcomes Within the VCMS Process

The VCMS assists complaints falling within remit in a range of ways:

- » Phase A – supporting local resolution
- » Phase B – engagement
- » Phase C – mediation



Summary of Outcomes



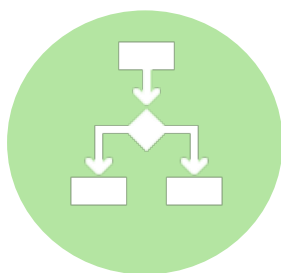
Out of remit,
86 (2% of all enquiries)
-12 YoY



Resolved with advice
from VCMS,
417 (12% of all enquiries)
+ 48 YoY



Supporting local resolution:
Early input and referred to
practice for local resolution
1,563 (43% of all enquiries)
-217 YoY



Consumer not to pursue,
304 (8% of all enquiries)
+33 YoY

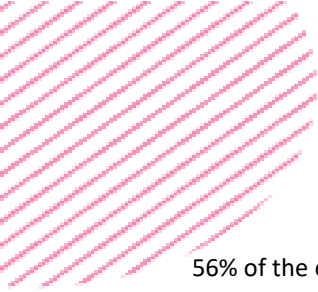


Practice declines invitation
to mediate, 322
(8.9% of all enquiries)
-4 YoY



Mediated by VCMS,
936 (26% of all enquiries)
+14% increase

Phase A – Supporting Effective Local Complaint Resolution



56% of the complaints in remit were supported to resolve the concern locally within the practice.

This is a further decrease in the proportion of complaints handled at this stage, having fallen from 67% in 2021-22, 60.5% in 2022-23 down to 56% in 2023-24.

This may be as a result of more local dialogue between animal owners and veterinary practices or clearer complaint processes which mean animal owners are able to raise their concerns and are receiving acknowledgements or responses in an expected and reasonable time.

There is very little variation in the nature of complaints being referred to the VCMS at this early and local phase, so we do not see a trend for any particular complaint scenario escalating to VCMS at an earlier or later stage than others.

The VCMS screens all enquiries that are in remit, to assess whether local resolution has been exhausted.

The VCMS continue to support local resolution through the advice and guidance activity with consumers who reach out to the service before or during the practice complaint procedure. The guidance and support seek to assist animal owners in raising a clear and specific complaint and articulating their desired outcomes.

VCMS CASE STORY – supporting local resolution within veterinary practices

The client contacted the VCMS as their hamster had an issue with its eye. They took the hamster to a vet specialist who prescribed medication for the hamster to treat an eye infection. Unfortunately, the hamster did not respond to the medication. The animal owner contacted the only local practice open on a Sunday and requested euthanasia. The animal owner complained that the practice refused to see hamster and gave information about other out of hours options some distance away. The hamster's owner was dissatisfied with the response from the practice and contacted the VCMS for support. The VCMS 'Phase A' team provided the guidance and information to help the owner to raise their concerns with the practice in accordance with the practice's internal complaints procedure. This enabled the animal owner to resolve their complaint with the practice.

VCMS CASE STORY – supporting local resolution within veterinary practices

In another case, the animal owner raised their concerns with the VCMS regarding miscommunication around the pet plan cover and blood tests relating to their cat. After requesting all the information about the complaint, the cat's owner provided this and shared all correspondence with the practice. The Phase A team supported the owner in identifying and clarifying how they wanted the situation resolved. The team also provided useful information to help the owner to decide on their desired outcome from mediation and understand the VCMS mediation process.

Where the practice complaint process has concluded, the VCMS will request the client to provide copies of all relevant documents and to read and sign an Agreement to Mediate.

At this stage, the VCMS explains the remit of the service and the role of mediation. This is set out in the 'How We Can Help Guide'. The animal owner then considers whether mediation is an appropriate pathway for their complaint.

Phase B – Engagement

If the practice's complaint procedure has been exhausted, then the animal owner receives an Agreement to Mediate and more detail about the remit and mediation approach of the VCMS process.

Veterinary Client Engagement

In 2023-24 the VCMS saw the number of animal owners progressing with the mediation maintained at around 81% of those whose complaint had exhausted local resolution processes. In 2021-22, service saw a significant increase in the number of complainants that contacted the VCMS but then did not proceed with the mediation, but this trend has levelled off for the second year running.

Veterinary Practice Engagement

The proportion of veterinary practices engaging and accepting the invitation to mediate increased in 2023-24. The increase was seen in both numerical terms and a percentage of potential mediations.

This is an encouraging statistic and linked to the engagement work undertaken by the VCMS. Most practice complaint policies refer to the VCMS, including all the large veterinary groups. This encourages engagement and allows the consumer an escalation pathway which is accessible and free at the point of use.

In the last quarter of the year, practice engagement exceeded 80%. Engagement can be improved, and this remains a key objective for the VCMS. There will be

complaint circumstances where VCMS mediation is not appropriate. The VCMS is pleased to note that practice assess each complaint on a case-by-case basis, rather than any policy or practice wide reluctance to engage. Veterinary practices are also encouraged by their Professional Indemnity Insurer to engage in most cases where there is a potential claim. The VCMS review all circumstances where a practice declines and will if appropriate speak further with a practice to encourage engagement or seek to understand why the practice feels mediation is not the right way forward.

There are circumstances where telephone mediation may not be appropriate:

- » RCVS investigation has been opened in relation to the same facts;
- » Animal owner's behavior has resulted in police involvement;
- » On the advice of indemnity insurers.

When mediation is likely to be beneficial:

- » When there are outstanding fees or a demand for a refund – a swift process can address the outstanding fees, and in the event it does not, the parties can confirm they have attempted ADR before commencing any legal proceedings;

1,372

Practices invited to engage

1,144 in 2022-23

1,050

Practices accepted the invitation

818 in 2022-23 (28% increase)

77%

Engagement rate

72% in 2022-23 (5% increase)

- » When the practice feels they have given a full response and have nothing more to add – the animal owner continues to feel dissatisfied and seeks to escalate the complaint. Here, mediation can provide an effective and efficient mechanism to bring the matter to a close;
- » When the animal owner is seeking a financial resolution, and the practice is unwilling to consider this – a resolution can often still be found;
- » When either the animal owner or the practice have started legal proceedings – as the VCMS is an approved ADR body and ADR must now be considered by parties in civil proceedings (in England and Wales there are penalties for failing to attempt ADR without good reason).

Complaint Resolution

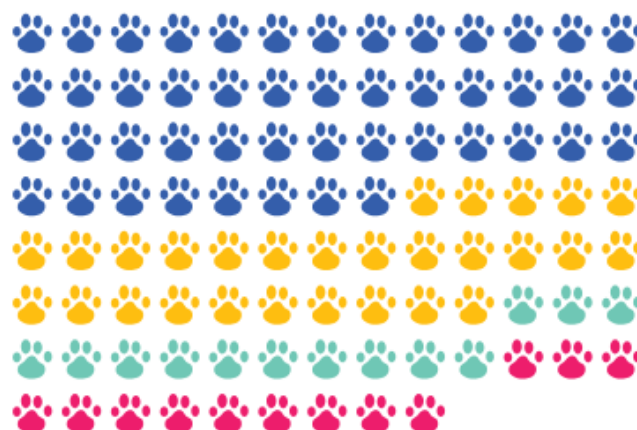
During 2023-24, the VCMS conducted 936 mediations, which is a 18% increase on the previous year.



Resolutions

Non-financial resolutions include:

- apologies
- explanation
- grief support
- further treatment
- memorial gifts



- Non-financial (47%)
- Financial - animal owner pays outstanding fees (28%)
- Financial - refund (13%)
- Financial - goodwill gesture (12%)

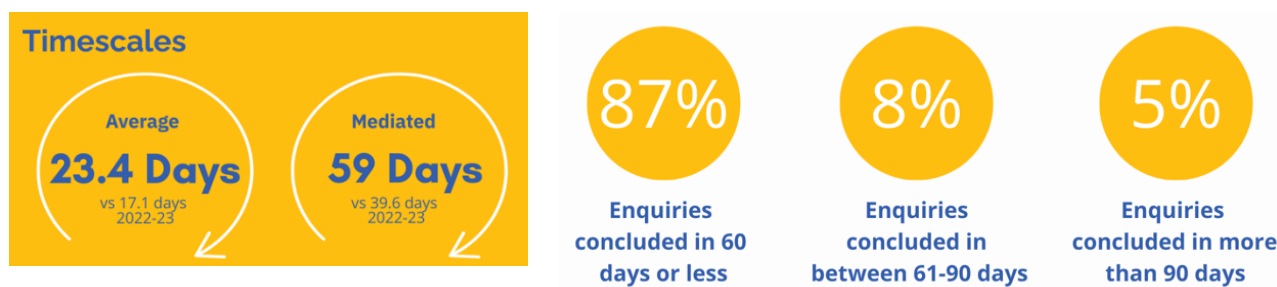
Average goodwill gesture
£420.85

Average refund
£444.37

Average fee payment by client
£949.55

KPIs

The VCMS monitor the timescales and satisfaction ratings as measures of impact and effectiveness.



Feedback

Over the last VCMS year, we have received some incredible feedback from both client and practice. Our feedback response rates have increased from both parties and now stands at 24% from completed mediations (18% for clients and 7% for practices). We have introduced a new way to collect feedback by using Microsoft forms which was put in place halfway through this year so there is a mixture between old and new feedback. This method has allowed us to be more flexible when choosing questions for the clients to answer and has had a higher response rate than from our previous feedback method used. We will continue to monitor how effective this feedback method is over the next VCMS year and will make any necessary adjustments.



"Service was excellent. Clear, concise and friendly."- Client

"The team are amazing. I really appreciate the time and patience. They really take time to understand what you're dealing with. Fantastic service."- Client

"Very thorough and professional process. I felt able to address my concerns and be listened to with support and compassion - so important after the difficult experience we had."- Client

“Very fast and simple process to use. Colleagues are helpful and answered all the questions I had.”- Practice



Animal owners rated their satisfaction with the outcome at 8.6/10



87% of practices considered VCMS to be fair



74% of animal owners considered VCMS to be fair



Animal owners rated their satisfaction with the process at 9.5/10



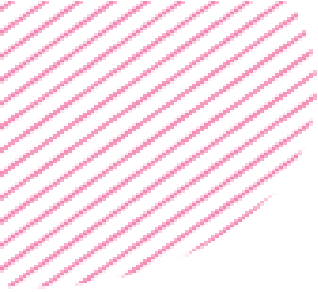
More than 97% of animal owners & practices found VCMS efficient and helpful



More than 9.8-in-10 practices would recommend the VCMS

“We have used the VCMS a number of times and always found the mediators to be very approachable with a good understanding of the issues. They are very happy to offer pragmatic advice towards reaching a satisfactory outcome.”- Practice

“I find the VCMS an excellent way to try and resolve challenging complaints.”- Practice



CTSI Audit

The VCMS is an Approved ADR Body accredited under the ADR regulations 2015, and by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute. The CTSI audit ADR Bodies bi-annually and annual data is submitted for review. The comprehensive audit process assesses the effectiveness and the impartiality of the ADR process within the VCMS. The 2024 process was completed towards the end of the year and the VCMS was found to be effective, compliant with the requirements of the ADR Regulations and displaying several areas of best practice in the delivery of an ADR scheme.

Concerns Raised

During 2023-24 no formal service complaints were raised under the VCMS complaint process.

Having seen an increase in feedback responses, the VCMS reviews all feedback as a team and to identify trends or areas where communication and explanations can be improved.

Consistent with previous years and other complaint resolution schemes, dissatisfaction expressed by service users is linked to the outcome particularly where a consumer is seeking a disciplinary penalty against an individual veterinary professional. Often this feedback acknowledges the support provided by the VCMS and satisfaction with the process, but not the outcome. Responses of this nature are low in number, but all are considered carefully and contacted individually to seek further understanding.



Service Improvements

As part of the ongoing commitment to improving and evolving the mediation service, the VCMS has introduced or piloted the following:

- » MS Teams/video conferencing mediation calls with the parties, generally separately but also facilitating calls involving both parties.
- » Further training on signposting and supporting animal owners who require assistance beyond the remit of the VCMS – ensuring all VCMS team members know where to signpost for individuals needs.

Insights and Highlighted Trends

Complaint Insights

Nature of Complaint



Standard of care (60%)
Customer Service (19%)
Clinical Fees (14%)
Unknown (5%)
Other (1.5%)
Products (0.5%)

5 most common complaint circumstances 2023-24

Standard of care: Unexpected outcome

647, +37% YoY (#2)

Standard of care: diagnostic pathway insufficient

554, +12% YoY, (#1)

Customer service: Consent – service and communication

376, +31% YoY (#3)

Standard of care: wrong diagnosis

174, -30% YoY (#4)

Clinical fees: Fees considered to be excessive

154, -21% YoY (#5)

Full data tables are provided at appendix 2.

Key Trends

Complaints Relating to Standards of Care

The VCMS saw a slight increase in the proportion of complaints where the animal owner considered there to be an issue with the standard of care provided (+4% compared with 2022-23). There was also a slight decrease in complaints falling in the 'other' category. This may be explained by the classifications being changed which may have influenced the data as the following categories were included last year:

- » Animal owner disagreeing with the treatment plan
- » Medication overdose
- » Pre-purchase examinations in equine

There was an increase of 37% in complaints relating to unexpected outcomes (176 more in 2023-24 compared with 2022-23). Many of the cases involve concerns where the animal owner's expectation of

the treatment pathway have not been met, or awareness and understanding of potential complications means they are concerned that there has been an error on the part of the practice team. Some complaints will involve errors, but qualitative analysis suggests a large proportion of complaints are about communication rather than clinical errors.

VCMS CASE STORY

Mr A raised concern with Practice X regarding the treatment of their cat, Morris. The owner complained that the vet did not consider the bloating found on examination, to be a concern and administered the routine booster at the time of the consult. The Vet informed the owner that they had felt fat deposits but did not feel there was a need to follow up. Mr A saw another vet a few days later as the animal's abdomen had grown bigger still. The practice performed an ultrasound which showed abdominal fat. The practice explained to Mr A that they attributed the finding to the client's son overfeeding Morris, which left Mr A and his family feeling guilty and upset.

Mr A took a photo of Morris to show difference in bloating in one week. Two other veterinary surgeons were consulted and both diagnosed fluid build-up due to rapidity. They also stated that giving a booster was not appropriate until issue resolved and that a referral should be made as soon as possible. The bloods and urinalysis showed protein loss (either kidneys or intestinal) which could have been caused by a range of conditions, and one of which was cancer. This prompted further testing. Cancer was never definitively diagnosed, by Practice X or a referral centre as no surgical biopsy was taken. Around a week later, Morris presented with marked oedema presentation and was euthanised.

Mr A felt the Practice X's actions resulted in the need to refer when earlier action could have allowed a euthanasia decision at an earlier stage to save suffering.

In the mediation, the practice explained that their clinical findings detailed bloating/fluid, which was acted upon with abdominal palpitations indicating fat deposits not fluid. An ultrasound was undertaken as a key diagnostic tool for fluid and this confirmed that no fluid was present. On that basis, administering the booster posed only a low risk at that time.

The practice reviewed the photos of the pet before and after the family's holiday. The practice also referred to the clinical history records which recorded that the cat improved after last visit. The practice maintained that the client wanted referral and had signed the consent form for referral centre to proceed with their care and costs.

Upon further discussion sharing each parties' perspective, the practice agreed to waive the balance of the outstanding invoice for £603.52.

In 2024 the VCMS saw a decrease in complaints relating to:

- » Post surgery and recovery complications – these nearly halved
- » Concerns that an incorrect diagnosis had been made (-30%)
- » Concerns that the diagnostic or treatment options were not adequately explained (-56%).

Complaints relating to the diagnostic pathway still account for approximately a quarter of VCMS referrals. Interestingly, in 2024 there was a decrease in complaints where the animal owner believed a wrong diagnosis had been made, against an increase in complaints where the animal owner felt the practice had not undertaken the right tests at the right time – 'did not do enough to get to the bottom of what was wrong' (this increased to 554 in 23-24 from 493 in 22-23).

VCMS CASE STORY

Mrs Y complained that Practice D had undertaken unnecessary diagnostics and treatment on their French Bulldog, Billie. Mrs Y raised that the practice had not been proactive, and that they were aware that French Bulldogs are prone to UTI stones, but this was not appreciated by the practice. Mrs Y was disappointed and felt that the practice must have been unable to read the scan and identify the stones which were visible on an ultrasound. Mrs Y felt the x-ray was an unnecessary cost and carried an unnecessary risk of sedation. Mrs Y asked how many stones had been removed during the procedure and was then informed that the clinical team had not been able to complete the procedure.

A claim had been submitted under Mrs Y's pet insurance, and the claim had been paid to Mrs Y who was holding this pending resolution of the complaint.

During the mediation, the practice provided context and explained that lots of breeds are prone to UTI stones, so this is always on their clinical radar. When Billie attended the emergency out of hours provider, their urine sample showed a high population of bacteria. For this reason, anti-biotics were prescribed. Mrs Y was advised to attend their registered practice if Billie did not respond to treatment. The practice explained that they did not see Billie again for 20 days. They confirmed they had performed an ultrasound of the bladder, and this did not reveal any stones. The x-ray was of the urethra where stones were located, and that in their clinical judgment, an x-ray is the better tool for the urethra. The practice explained flushing the stones into the bladder is a first opinion practice procedure. The plan had not been to remove the stones. During the procedure the aim was to flush the stones into the bladder for safer and easier removal rather than opening the urethra. The subsequent location of a large stone complicated the procedure requiring referral. This had not been Mrs Y's understanding of the planned procedure. The practice took on board the learning over clear communication regarding possible complications which might require referral. This was covered in team training.

Resolution: Mrs Y accepted the practice's apology and acknowledgment that the communication had not been clear. Mrs Y was reassured that the practice was taking measures to improve communication and agreed to settle the outstanding fees.

Practice Engagement in Mediation

Veterinary practice mediation engagement in complaints relating to the standard of care provided is strong, and the highest of all complaint categories.

Outcomes

The resolution rate in complaints involving concerns about the standard of veterinary care received is strong at 79%.

Where complaints in this category are resolved with a non-financial agreement, the resolution often involves quality improvement to improve standards of practice, explanations and even facilitated discussion to aid owner understanding.



Customer Service-Related Complaints

The three most common complaints relating to customer service during 2024 were:

- » Animal owners feeling dissatisfied with consent conversation increased by a third year on year,
- » Issues with records (which would not amount to a breach of the RCVS Code of Conduct), and
- » Concerns regarding a Veterinary Professional's attitude. This category was included in 2023 and so it is not possible to give comparison data this year.

Outcomes

Not unexpectedly, a slightly higher proportion of service-related complaints are handled by VCMS supporting local resolution in the practice. Once resolved these complaints do not need to return to VCMS for further mediation. Last year VCMS saw less than 4% of referrals coming back into mediation once early complaint resolution had been facilitated.

VCMS CASE STORY

Ms T dog, Molly presented at Practice S with symptoms which were latterly diagnosed as mitral valve disease. At the initial consult, Ms T was told Molly was suffering from Syncope and based on this diagnosis, a comprehensive ultrasound was instructed to explore the apparent seizures. The vet advised this was due to 'a lack of oxygen getting to the brain'.

Ms T explained that she had asked the veterinary surgeon for more information about the condition was and the process going forward. She felt that she had raised numerous questions and that these had not been answered. Ms T was advised to monitor Molly's breathing after any seizures and return after a week. Ms T then began her own research and sought answers from the internet.

A scan later diagnosed mitral valve disease. The condition was treated with medication, Cardisure.

A claim was submitted to the pet insurers.

Ms T heard nothing more from either the practice or the insurer and made several requests for confirmation from the practice. She was reassured that all was in hand.

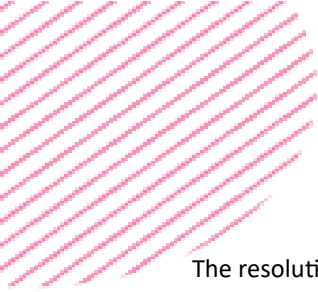
Ms T then received an email to say they needed a completed and signed insurance form from the client. Ms T has signed and returned this to the practice weeks before. The practice team searched, and the form was found in the practice.

Once processed, Ms T was contacted by the practice accounts team, who explained the outstanding balance was due from her directly as the insurance claim had been rejected. This was 4 months after the diagnosis and treatment.

Ms T raised a complaint and was frustrated as the practice did not respond within promised timescales.

The practice explained they were appreciated Ms T's frustration but not prepared to negotiate on the final bill of £355.51 as this was an insurance dispute between Ms T and her insurer. The practice offered to assist by facilitating Ms T's purchase of Molly's medication from the practice with payment on collection and the final payment be made in 3 instalments.

Through the mediation process, Ms T and the practice agreed a resolution with the practice crediting the consult fee and agreeing that the remaining balance be paid over 3 months at an affordable level for the client.



The resolution rate was slightly higher than the overall resolution rate, at 86%, with complaints relating to end-of-life care and a feeling there was a lack of empathy by the practice team being resolved in more than 90% of complaints.

Complaints Relating to Fees

In 2024 the VCMS saw a further increase in the complaints relating to fees. This increased from 9% in 2020-21 to 14% 2024. That said, the number of complaints relating to reasonableness of fees did fall in 2024 by a fifth, from 200 to 157. In the previous year we saw this category of complaint enter the '5 most commonly referred' complaint issues.

As with customer service-related complaints, a higher proportion were handled as 'local resolution support' and either returned to the practice for early resolution or resolved so the animal owner no longer wanted to further escalate their complaint.

Veterinary practice engagement was consistent in this category, but the VCMS saw slightly lower engagement in complaints relating to insurance and pet plan related issues.

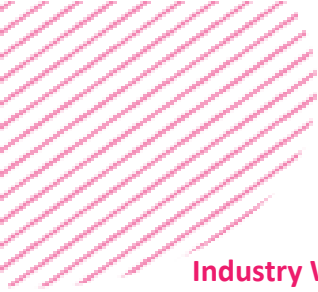
Resolution rates in cost related complaints were also consistent with the overall rates except insurance cover issues which often relate to concerns over the decision of pet insurers and where the animal owner feels the veterinary practice's actions have influenced or cause an insurer to decline cover.

VCMS CASE STORY



Mr & Mrs B had been registered at the same practice for several years; they had a good relationship with all team members and had recommended the practice to others on many occasions. Following a lengthy treatment plan for Bobby, their elderly dog, it was agreed that euthanasia was the most appropriate option. The euthanasia took place peacefully, and Mr and Mrs B commented that it was everything they had wished it to be. Unfortunately, 6 days after the euthanasia, Mr and Mrs B were sent an invoice for payment and what they viewed as a 'demand' for payment within 7 days. They were very upset by this as they had always paid fees promptly and they felt it was inappropriate so soon after they had lost their pet.

Through the mediation, the resolution manager was able to explore both perspectives and explain why the invoice had been posted and then in turn, the impact this had on Mr and Mrs B. The practice was able to convey their sympathy and acknowledgement of the impact through the resolution manager. Mr and Mrs B were also reassured that the practice had not intended to imply there was an issue or a concern the client would not pay. The discussions with each party also explored what improvements could be made to avoid a repeat of this situation. An outcome of those discussions meant the resolution manager shared insight and suggestions on how the process and communication could be refined. The practice arranged for flowers to be sent to Mr and Mrs B to apologise for the distress caused and thank them for their input.



Industry Wide Insight

Engaged Decision Making

Insight through complaint mediation conducted during 2024 is consistent with observations and analysis in the 2022-23 annual report. The underlying or root cause of many complaints is communication. When mediations explore the issues and context, it highlights why communication is so fundamental to the animal owner and veterinary professional relationship. Ambiguity and assumptions can play a part. Often client dissatisfaction is linked to how the animal owner ‘feels’ about the decisions made. In veterinary care, the decisions made are often complex and emotive. They also involve factors far wider than the clinical options and prognosis relating to the animal patient. The industry and profession are increasingly reflecting on the importance of contextualised care approaches in consultations and client decision making. This is not a new concept but the recognition that animal owners need to have access to the relevant information to assess what is the best option for their animal and for them as the animal owner. The VCMS is sharing insight and contributing to this ongoing discussion in the context of the development of far more complex and varied clinical options available and how veterinary care is delivered in the 21st century.

The complaint insight regarding consent conversations highlights the importance of relevant, accessible information and knowledge to support animal owners in making more confident and better-informed decisions, in collaboration with veterinary professionals. This is then likely to increase trust between the practice and the owner, by giving the animal owner greater confidence in the decisions made and a clearer understanding and acceptance of the possible outcomes.

Understanding ‘The Why’ and Reasoning

Analysis of both qualitative and quantitative insight suggests that a key trend in veterinary complaints relates to understanding and explanations around diagnostics, particularly in relation to the ‘why’ and the value or benefits of results within informed decision-making.

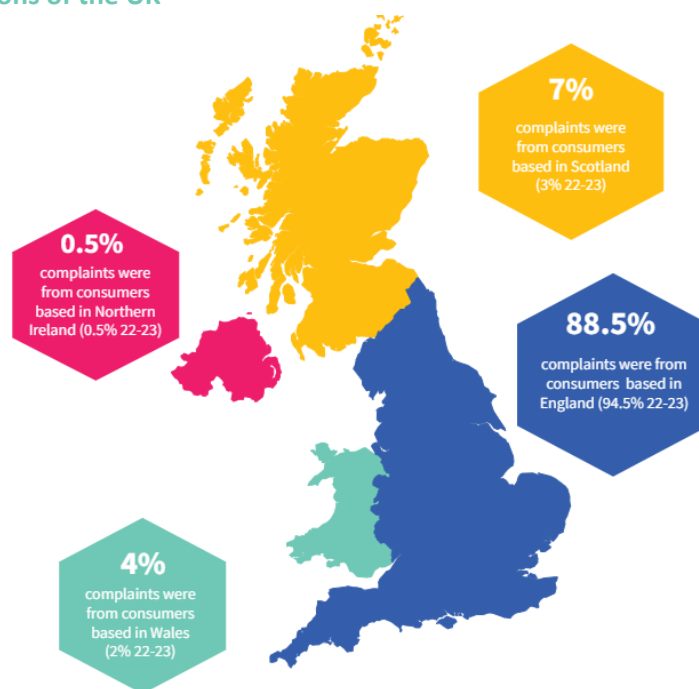
Within complaints, animal owners may express their concerns as:

- » ‘we spent lots of money on tests which only confirmed what we knew and did not change the prognosis – we should have been advised to make that decision earlier’
- » ‘when we moved to the other practice, they diagnosed the issue straight away and provided medication which worked. I don’t know why we didn’t do that test first and what was the point of all those other tests’
- » ‘we did all those tests and went back to the treatment plan we discussed at the outset – what was the point’

The underlying cause often links to whether the animal owner considers they have received value for money and assessing the cost/benefit analysis of the available options or the presented pathway. VCMS conversations will often then focus on facilitating the explanation of the clinical recommendations or decision-making so animal owners have a clearer understanding of why certain diagnostics were appropriate and how progression of symptoms may have altered the recommended tests.

Where practice teams effectively communicate these aspects as part of the consult and consent conversation, animal owners feel they have the necessary information to participate fully and make informed decisions which consider the needs of their animals and their own circumstances. In addition to this, mediations will also explore how animal owners can be helped to understand the responsibilities of animal ownership and feel able to ask questions or express concerns within the consent conversations for diagnostic or treatment pathways.

Complaint Insight – Regions and Nations of the UK



Complainant Insight

Complainant EDI Data

Full EDI data analysis of veterinary clients accessing the VCMS is provided at appendix 4.

All client service users are asked to share EDI data, which is held anonymously, to analyse engagement. Response rates are high for veterinary clients who contact the VCMS via the online form. Responses are low for those contacting the service by phone or post. This means the EDI data is not comprehensive and should be viewed with this in mind. The VCMS continues to explore ways to improve the capture of this data.

Stakeholder Engagement and Interaction

Digital Engagement

In 2023-2024, the VCMS social media activity and publications focused primarily on engaging the consumer market across both LinkedIn and Facebook. This was achieved by producing both timely and informational content designed to help inform pet owners about various aspects of the veterinary team/animal owner relationship and animal care. From articles helping to prepare owners for their first vet visit to pieces about new regulations, the activity yielded positive engagement and reach. The consistent delivery of high-quality content resonated with the audience, ensuring a meaningful connection with pet owners and fostering a community around responsible pet care.

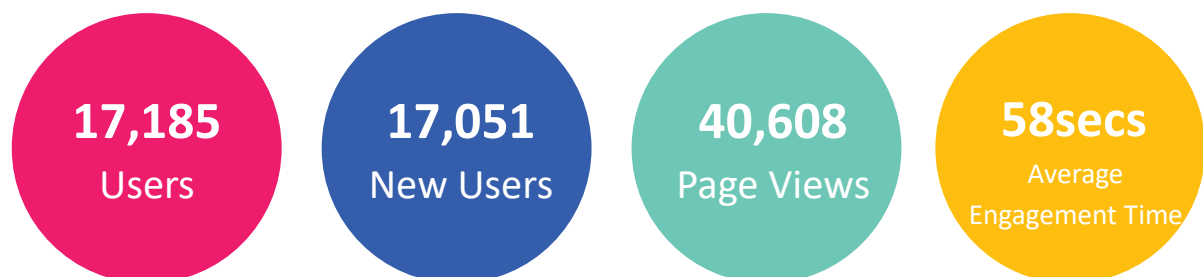
Beyond educational content, social media played a pivotal role in promoting VCMS's presence at key veterinary events, including BSAVA Congress, BVA Live, the London Vet Show and other events. Regular updates, live event coverage, and interactive posts not only informed followers of these events but also created opportunities for engagement. Attendees were encouraged to participate in discussions, share insights, and interact with the VCMS.

This strategic use of social media contributed to a strong engagement rate, with audiences actively responding to posts, sharing content, and discussing key topics raised by the VCMS. The emphasis on user interaction, including Q&A sessions, polls, and comment-driven discussions, reinforced VCMS's role as a trusted resource for veterinary-related concerns.

The impact of this approach was reflected in the growth of the VCMS's consumer sector following, which saw a 10% increase in followers, an encouraging growth in engagement.

Along with the attendance at the major trade events & social media activity, the VCMS has contributed to a number of professional journals throughout the period.

Website Engagement



We also track how visitors reach our digital platforms:

- » Organic search - arrive at the website following a search for a relevant key word;
- » Direct - accesses the website by entering the vetmediation.co.uk;
- » Referral - linked to VCMS website via a third party site such as RCVS.
- » Organic social - driven to the site by social media activity
- » Email - link provided in an email.

This analysis indicates that over half of the visits to the VCMS website are driven by information shared by other organisations, which would include veterinary practices providing details to their clients.

Consumer Focused Activity

In addition to the social media activity, the VCMS has continued to reach out to organisations such as Citizens Advice and Which? to raise the profile of the VCMS with consumer representatives and animal owners more generally.

Member of the VCMS team met with Which? in the summer of 2024 to share an overview of VCMS activity and impact, and to also explore the recent Which? consumer research and contributions to the CMA Market Investigation.

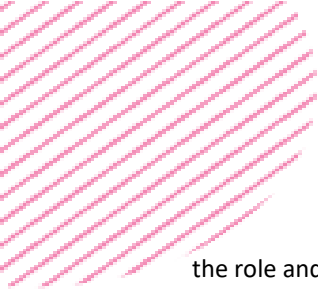
The VCMS also continues to develop relationships with respected animal owner groups and charities. An example of supported activity by the Chronic Arthritis Management charity contributing at the Canine Arthritis Management Society's Chronic Pain Management Symposium in April 2024 and in their series of animal owner facing webinars throughout the year.

Profession Focused Activity

During 2023/24, the VCMS attended and presented at:



The VCMS raised awareness of the service and shared insight through having a presence at these events. Members of the VCMS team attend and meet veterinary professionals on a one-to-one basis and explain



the role and impact of VCMS mediation. The events also provide the opportunity for veterinary professionals to provide feedback on their experience of the VCMS process. Many of the events also hosted VCMS seminars or exhibitor sessions where the VCMS presented an update on activity and shared insight on the underlying trends and causes of cost related complaints. It is estimated that these events enabled the VCMS to interact with over 1,000 veterinary professionals including veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses, practice manager, front of house colleagues and practice leads.

The VCMS also collaborated with other stakeholders in a range of activities during 2023-24:

- » The BVA, VDS and VCMS collaborated to deliver a series of webinars focused on “Navigating the client journey – communication and reducing complaints through team interaction” and “Managing emotions in stressful situations” in Spring 2024. The webinars were presented live and included engaging interactions with a veterinary professional audience, and available for download.
- » Presentation to the Veterinary Defence Society CPD conference providing an overview of the VCMS and insight sharing to Claims Consultants and Claims Advisors.

CMA Review of Veterinary Profession

The CMA Market Investigation into the veterinary services for household pets was launched in 2024 following the call for information issued in September 2023.

The VCMS have shared information and insight with the CMA, initially in the form of a virtual meeting with the team collating the call for information in late 2023, and then more substantively in the consultation and investigation processes conducted during summer and autumn 2024. A VCMS teach-in with the CMA Board took place in October 2024.



The VCMS contributions have focused on two key areas:

1. Insight on complaint trends from the complaints referred to the VCMS relevant to the issues investigated by the CMA
2. Regulatory and complaint redress in the veterinary sector

During late 2024 and early 2025 the VCMS have responded to CMA Requests for Information and submitted a detailed response to the working paper on the regulatory and complaint. This ongoing dialogue will continue during 2025 until the conclusion of the investigation in Autumn 2025

Objectives 2024-2025

Confidence	» Share insight and analysis from 2024. » Maintain strong feedback response rates to ensure VCMS effectiveness can be quantified and monitored. » Ensure impartial qualitative and quantitative complaint insight feeds into Government, RCVS and wider sector activity regarding client/practice relationships, consumer protection, standards of practice and in maintaining confidence in the veterinary profession.	
Clarity	» Deliver proportionate and effective complaint mediation within 60-day time frame. » Continue to engage with stakeholders and the professions.	
Courage	» Encourage & promote engagement with the VCMS mediation process by practices. » Consider how the VCMS can support quality improvement within the veterinary sector, via reflective intelligence led practice and learning culture.	
Compassion	» Support practice and individual veterinary professionals to develop confidence in effective local complaint handling processes and skills to increase local resolution. » Increase consumer awareness of the VCMS at the point of need to enable consumers to access the service in the event of an escalating complaint. » Improve accessibility to the VCMS to mitigate barriers to complaints being raised and enabling complaints to be resolved effectively and proportionately.	

Appendix 1 - Data

Nature of Complaint

Nature of complaint	2023-24
Clinical Fees	487
Customer Service	676
Products	15
Standard of care	2138
Miscellaneous	232
Grand Total	3548

Nature of complaint	2023-24	2022-2023
Standard of care	60%	57%
Customer Service	19%	20%
Clinical Fees	14%	13%
Miscellaneous	6%	9.5%
Products	0%	0.50%
Grand Total	100%	

By Business Type	Corporate	Independent
Standard of care	59%	68%
Customer Service	21%	17%
Clinical Fees	15%	10%
Miscellaneous	5%	4%
Products	0%	0%
Grand Total	100%	100%

Subcategory of Complaint

Nature and sub-category	2023-24	YoY % 23-24 v 22-23
Clinical Fees	487	103%
Issue with invoicing	147	112%
Estimate -exceeded	41	93%
Fee – excessive	157	79%
Insurance claim related issue	23	55%
Insurance cover issue	44	157%
Medication charge	24	200%
Pet Care Plan issue	30	600%
Prescription Charge	13	325%
Miscellaneous	8	100%
Customer Service	676	93%
Complaint handling	18	34%
Consent - service/communication	376	131%
Disregarded O views or feelings	19	33%
End of life - client care	39	70%
Failed to update	17	17%
Lack of empathy	7	15%
Records issue	98	102%
Unhappy with attitude of Reception staff	24	600%
Unhappy with attitude of Veterinary staff	71	546%
Unknown	7	64%
Products	15	56%
Allergic Reaction	1	50%
Non veterinary product	2	67%
Product not working as expected	10	53%
Miscellaneous	2	67%



Standard of care	2138	104%
Consent - uninformed/risk not covered	8	80%
Delay in diagnosing	135	75%
Diagnostic pathway - insufficient	554	112%
Diagnostic pathway - too extensive	41	76%
Disagree with treatment plan	51	1700%
Discharge	5	83%
Elective surgery complication	74	86%
Euthanasia	62	107%
Failed to explain options	31	44%
Medication overdose	54	1080%
Out of hours	51	150%
Pre-purchase examination	12	600%
Recovery - complication	58	54%
Surgery - complication	99	69%
Unexpected outcome - dental	47	84%
Unexpected outcome - other	647	137%
Miscellaneous	35	100%
Wrong diagnosis	174	70%
Miscellaneous	232	67%
Grand Total	3548	



Fee Related Complaint Data 2017-2024

	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22	2020-21	2019-20	2018-19
Clinical Fees	487	474	441	348	341	320
As a % of all complaints	14%	13%	12%	9%		
Issue with invoice e.g. error	147	131	80	46	38	19
Estimate exceeded	41	44	69	36	59	53
Fee considered to be excessive	157	200	129	137	120	105
Insurance claim related issue	23	42	67	49	49	69
Insurance cover issue	44	28	43	29	36	10
Medication charge	24	12	22	35	29	52
Prescription Charge	13	4	18	10	9	12
Miscellaneous	8	1	13	6	1	8
Pet healthcare plan	30	5				

Outcomes

Phase	2023-24	2022-23	2021-22
Phase A			
Out Of Remit	76	88	98
Referred to Practice - Preliminary Mediation	1,563	1,780	1,926
Advice Only - Preliminary Mediation	417	369	418
Phase B			
Client Not to Proceed with Mediation	304	271	259
Practice Declined to Engage	322	326	282
Phase C			
Resolved on mediation	767	668	540
Mediation Concluded Without Resolution	105	49	98
Mediation Concluded as Requires Formal Claim Process	64	78	77
TOTAL	3,618	3,629	3,699

Out of Remit

Reason	2023-24	2022-23
Referral to RCVS	1	7
Complaint circumstances over 12 months old	16	14
Commercial animal/relationship with practice	10	12
Complainant is not the animal owner or appointed representative	8	11
Outside UK	5	17
Previous use of ADR trial or VCMS		4
Other	36	23
Total	76	88

Engagement Data

Phase B & C	2023-24	2022-23
Practice Declined to Engage	322	326
Complaint concluded through mediation	767	668
Mediation Concluded Without Resolution	105	49
Mediation Concluded as Requires Formal Claim Process	64	78
In mediation	114	23
Mediated and in mediation	1372	1144
Practice accepted invitation in 2022-23	1050	818
Practice engagement in 2022-23	77%	72%

Mediation Outcomes

	2023-24 %	2022-23 %
Complaint concluded through mediation	82%	84%
Mediation Concluded Without Resolution	11%	6%
Mediation Concluded as Requires Formal Claim Process	7%	10%
Grand Total	100%	100%

Outcomes by Business Type (%)

Outcome by business type	Corporate	Independent
Out of remit	2%	1%
Referred back to practice - preliminary mediation	41%	39%
Advice - preliminary mediation	11%	10%
Client does not proceed with mediation	8%	10%
Practice declined to engage	9%	12%
Resolved on mediation	23%	25%
Mediation concluded as requires formal claim process	2%	2%
Mediation concluded without resolution	4%	3%
Grand Total	100%	100%

Outcomes by Nature of Complaint (%)

Outcome by Nature of complaint*	Out Of Remit	Supporting local resolution	Party engagement	Mediated & resolved	Mediation Concluded as Requires Formal Claim Process	Mediation Concluded Without Resolution
Standard of care	1%	53%	18%	22%	3%	3%
Customer Service	1%	56%	17%	22%	1%	3%
Clinical Fees	1%	53%	18%	25%	0%	3%
Grand Total	2%	55%	17%	21%	2%	3%

*Analysis provided for 3 main categories as volumes in other categories mean statistical analysis is unreliable.

Resolution Data 2019-2024 (Financial and non-financial)

	Resolution rate (% of mediations where complaint is concluded)	Financial/non-financial resolutions	GWG / Discounts	Fees paid by clients
2023-24	82%	53/47	£420.85/£444.37	£949.95
2022-23	84%	43/57	£315.97/432.29	817.99
2021-22	76%	48/52	558.05 / 510.80	1007.38
2020-21	71%	50/50	328.38 / 510.80	748.87
2019-20	77%	46/54	296.97/ ***	571.45
2018-19		44/56	327.71/ ***	694.27



EDI Data

Response rates: 48.7% of clients answered the EDI Questionnaire

Data Categories (VCMS v National data for benchmarking)

Age (%)

Age	VCMS Age Range (%)	Comparison with ONS Data (%)
16-24	7.09	11.7
25-34	22.45	13.5
35-44	24.4	13
45-54	20.73	13.3
55-64	17.49	12.6
65 Or over	7.71	18.5
Under 16	0.12	20.8
Grand Total	100	100

Gender (%)

Gender	Gender (%)	Comparison with ONS Data (%)
Female	70.38	50.4
Male	28.54	49.2
Other	1.08	0.4
Grand Total	100	100

Disability (%)

Disability	Count of Disability (%)	Comparison with ONS Data (%)
No	79.24	82.2
Yes	20.76	17.8
Grand Total	100	100

Ethnicity (%)

Ethnicity	Count of Ethnicity (%)	Comparison with ONS Data (%)
Asian	3.5	9.3
Black	0.97	4
Mixed	3.24	2.9
Other	1.88	2.1
White	90.4	81.7
Grand Total	100	100

Sexual Orientation (%)

Sexual Orientation	Count of Sexual Orientation (%)	Comparison with ONS Data (%)
Bisexual	2.32	2
Gay	3.41	2.7
Heterosexual	91.74	93.6
Other	2.54	1.7
Grand Total	100	100

Marital Status

Marital Status	Count of Marital Status (%)	Comparison with ONS Data (%)
Civil Partnership	6.36	4.9
Divorced	6.69	6.6
Married	44.15	40.7
Prefer not to say	5.41	Not a category in ONS data
Separated	1.08	Not a category in ONS data
Single	33.87	47.5
Widowed	2.43	0.1
Grand Total	100	100

Religion (%)

Religion	Count of Religion (%)	Comparison with ONS Data (%)
Buddhist	0.22	0.5
Christian	39.19	46.2
Hindu	0.67	1.7
Jewish	0.37	0.5
Muslim	2.37	6.5
None	47.26	37.2
Other	2.96	0.6
Prefer not to say	6.81	6
Sikh	0.15	0.9
Grand Total	100	100

Region (%)

Region	Count of Region	Comparison with ONS Data (%)
England	88.5	84
Northern Ireland	0.56	3
Scotland	7.11	8
Wales	3.83	5
Grand Total	100	100

Annual Comparison Data

Year	Total
2023-24	3,548
2022-23	3644
2021-22	3,605
2020-21	3,963
2019-20	3,151
2018-19	2,424

	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	YTD Total
2023-24	318	193	300	295	304	295	287	314	320	287	295	340	3548
2022-23	308	209	329	315	267	232	274	318	315	343	349	385	3644
2021-22	320	208	302	301	319	272	333	261	282	331	329	347	3605

Feedback Data

Response Rates – Mediations 24.25%

	2023-24		2022-23	
	Client feedback	Practice feedback	Client feedback	Practice feedback
Responses 2023-24	161	66	82	23
/10				
How well did we understand your concerns	9.7	9.7	9.5	9.8
How satisfied were you with the outcome	8.6	9.3	7.6	9.1
How satisfied were you with the process	9.5	10	9.3	9.4
Easy to contact VCMS	9.8	9.7	9.7	9.7
How would you rate your overall experience	9.4	9.6	9.3	9.6
%				
Would recommend VCMS to others	95%	96%	91%	95%
Would use VCMS again	96%	98%	93%	97%
Would use ADR again	95%	94%	93%	96%
Consider VCMS to be:				
Fair	74	87	74	87
Helpful & efficient	97	100	93	98
Productive	90	100	87	92

Supporting client/practice relationships

Having reached the end of the mediation, would you now consider using this veterinary practice in the future?	23%
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Appendix 2 – VCMS process

