In October 2014 we began a trial with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) to handle complaints about veterinary surgeons relating to small animals and horses. The trial is ongoing.

RCVS is the regulatory body for veterinary surgeons in the UK and deals with issues of professional misconduct, maintaining the register of veterinary surgeons eligible to practise in the UK and assuring standards of veterinary education. Only veterinary surgeons registered with the RCVS can practise veterinary medicine in the UK.

We handled 62 complaints between April and December 2015.

Handling RCVS complaints
The trial is voluntary and requires both the vet and complainant to agree to participate. Complaints are referred to Ombudsman Services directly from the RCVS.

Volumes are currently as projected. Because of the nature of the complaints, we take a sensitive approach to the way they are handled. Issues include allegations of poor clinical care and alleged poor customer service.

When we investigate a complaint we take into consideration relevant law, regulatory rules, guidance and standards, codes of practice and what is accepted as good industry practice. We also have access to a veterinary advisory panel for clinical or veterinary related issues, which has proved invaluable.

It is not our role to punish either the Practice or veterinary surgeon but to decide upon an action that it must do to put matters right. Sometimes this means making a higher or lower award than has already been offered. If the Practice has already made a payment to try and settle the complaint, this will be taken into account. We may also award a goodwill payment if we identify a shortfall in customer service, or recommend a non-financial award such as an apology and/or an explanation of what went wrong.

Case study
A rabbit owner took his pet to the vet with concerns that the animal was suffering from a cough.

When the pet failed to recover the owner believed that the vet had given the rabbit a course of antibiotics that was ineffective. He argued that the vet gave a significant lower dosage than the manufacturer recommended.

As the rabbit continued to suffer from a cough after completing the prescribed course of antibiotics, the vet recommended further investigation. This increased the costs of treatment considerably. The charges for the additional tests were in excess of £300.

The vet maintained the dosage prescribed was in line with the dosage normally prescribed for all the rabbits he treated with the antibiotic. The vet confirmed he had successfully treated rabbits with the medication and at the same dosage for many years. He stated that to recommend further investigation was the correct advice to give.

After taking independent veterinary advice we concluded that it was appropriate to offer a course of antibiotics to treat the rabbit’s symptoms and then to recommend further investigation if the pet did not improve.

However, we considered the manufacturers recommended dosage for the rabbit’s size. We checked advice given in two veterinary medical books and established that the vet had not given an adequate dosage of antibiotic. We also noted that the veterinary practice mis-quoted from one of the veterinary medical books.

Based on the evidence we considered and the independent veterinary advice we sought during our investigation, we decided it was appropriate that the vet should reimburse the fees for the additional investigation, a further consultation and additional medication.

We also required the practice to apologise and award a goodwill gesture to reflect the shortfalls in service. In total we asked that the practice award £500 to the pet owner.