ASK any incoming BVA president what he or she intends to achieve during their term of office and you are likely to receive a self-deprecatory answer mapping out the limitations of the role.

They will probably point out that leading the profession’s representative body is a corporate responsibility for the whole BVA officer team and the association’s permanent staff.

If pressed, they may well outline their plans, but with fingers crossed behind their back, knowing that their cherished hopes may come to nothing if they have to spend all their time reacting to a major incident, like the 2001 foot-and-mouth epidemic.

But for two days of their presidential year, the incumbent has the opportunity to set the agenda for debate within the profession and ensure those discussions are focused on matters of particular personal interest. That is when they are choosing the topics to be discussed at the annual BVA Congress which, again this year, forms part of the London Vet Show at Olympia on 19th and 20th November.

So with 2003 Liverpool graduate Sean Wensley’s name etched in gold lettering on the wall at 7 Mansfield Street, it is not surprising that animal welfare issues and the profession’s global responsibilities are major elements in the 2015 BVA congress programme.

A keen interest

At 35 years old, Sean is believed to be the youngest president in the association’s history and for the majority of those years he has demonstrated a keen interest in the health of both wild and domestic species and the environment that they are living in.

Growing up in Formby, just north of Liverpool, he spent as much time as possible in the great outdoors, observing the rich biodiversity of the Sefton coast nature reserve.

As a veterinary student, he also did some indoor bird watching, studying the behaviour of the zebra finches kept at the local pet shop where he had worked at weekends during his teenage years. That project, funded by a grant from the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, highlighted the differences in the birds’ behaviour once they become habituated to the presence of a human observer sitting motionless across the room from the bank of cages.

But when working on that summer project he also noticed some inconsistencies in humanity’s relationship with the animal kingdom – issues which he would explore later in his role as a senior member of the PDSA’s veterinary staff.

“The pet shop sold food for caged birds as well as nuts and seeds for garden food dispensers: it puzzled me how the public was comfortable with the idea of some species like canaries being kept in cages but would have been horrified by the sight of garden birds being kept in the same conditions.”

After graduation, Sean completed an MSc in applied animal behaviour at the University of Edinburgh and then worked for a couple of years at a first opinion practice back in Liverpool. But he was keen to return to the issues that had captured his attention as a student and moved to Bristol.

There he divided his time between working as a locum and as a freelance behavioural scientist researching and writing reports for the neighbouring vet school and external organisations such as the Companion Animal Welfare Council.

In 2008, one of those bodies, the PDSA, advertised for a veterinarian to work in its education and communications department. Sean was appointed for the job at a time when the charity was keen to understand the underlying causes of the preventable health and welfare problems that occupied much of the time of veterinary staff at its 51 hospitals around the country.

Sean worked on the first of the annual animal welfare reports, investigating the extent to which the British public understands the “five freedoms” welfare needs of the animals they keep and how educational initiatives could be used to influence the behaviour of pet owners.

He has also maintained an interest in the interactions between humans and animals beyond these shores. As well as serving as a BVA Animal Welfare Foundation trustee, he was a committee member for the association’s overseas group for six years.

The theme for much of the congress programme and, indeed, the stated theme for the rest of his presidential year, reflects these interlinked concerns with animal welfare and the developing world.

Pressures of overpopulation

He fears that the relentless growth in the human population is putting increasing pressure on the health and well-being of domestic animal species at the same time as it is forcing unprecedented numbers of wild animal species into extinction. But he believes in looking for the positives in this increasingly uncertain world.

“We are expected to hit the peak global population of 9 billion in 2050. That is likely to result in a doubling in world demand for meat and other animal products, so we have to increase productivity while ensuring the welfare of farmed livestock is safeguarded.

“There will be an ongoing debate about how we create a sustainable livestock industry and we in the veterinary profession have to make our voice heard because we have a vital contribution to make in this,” he says.

But it would be a mistake for those of a cynical bent to assume from this that the new BVA president is some kind of woolly-minded idealist who has divorced himself from the practical concerns of the association’s membership.

“It is critical for us to recognise that these challenges can be a distant irrelevance for those colleagues who are not enjoying their professional lives. While vets should be part of these global conversations, it will not be at the expense of thinking about the real difficulties that some of our colleagues are facing and finding practical and meaningful ways to support them,” he says.

One of the policy decisions that he will be implementing as president will be an increase in the resources that the BVA provides for its young vet network, which aims to provide support for vets at a stage when they can often feel alone and isolated.

“We will be arranging a meeting of those local groups that are already thriving and find out what works so that it can be replicated all across the country,” he explains.

Identifying hazards

As well as tackling current concerns, the BVA has been heavily involved in horizon scanning to identify the potential hazards ahead for the profession and working out possible strategies to deal with them. The results of the Veterinary Futures initiative, carried out in collaboration with the RCVS, will be announced at this month’s congress.

“Together with the internal review of the BVA’s governance and the update of the association’s strategy for improving animal welfare, this is the third of the major policy initiatives that we have been working on over the past few months. I would love to see as many members as possible coming along and joining in discussions on these topics which will form part of the BVA’s contribution to the London Vet Show,” he says.

“But remember that you don’t have to be a BVA member to be part of the debate: all veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses are welcome to attend as many sessions as they wish. Also, don’t forget that these non-clinical subjects can form part of your CPD allowance – you don’t have to stick to the orthopaedics lectures.”