

HM Government

Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Note of meeting with the Association of Public Analysts (APA)

Venue: MWB Victoria

Date: 17 July 2013

Attendees:

Elizabeth Moran – President - Association of Public Analysts

Professor Chris Elliott – Independent Reviewer – Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Mary Newman – Secretary - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

David Foot – Assistant Secretary - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

1. Chris Elliott Introduction

Chris Elliott (CE) set out the background to the Review. He was very interested in the role and capacity of Public Analyst laboratories in dealing with food safety and standards work, including high profile incidents such as the horsemeat fraud.

2. Role and capacity of Public Analyst laboratories

Elizabeth Moran (EM) set out the Public Analyst (PA) landscape. There were around 15 laboratories left in the UK. There were currently 29 practising PAs. At the peak of the profession there had been around 100. There was sufficient capacity to deal with day to day demands because the level of sampling by local authorities (LA) had dropped significantly due to funding cuts. Legislation required that PAs had to obtain a Mastership in Chemical Analysis awarded by the Royal Society of Chemistry and had to be officially appointed by a local authority. It was estimated that laboratories in England dealt with approximately 20,000 food samples a year.

During the horsemeat incident FSA had co-ordinated a sampling survey and requested LAs sample on their behalf. LAs had also done their own sampling. A protocol for sampling and analysis had been developed by the FSA for their survey. LAs had been

instructed to take samples and to send them to PAs. Only 6 PA laboratories had been able to carry out the analysis on all the horsemeat related samples. That had led to considerable pressure on that part of the system. Other analysis work had been put on hold and some laboratories were still catching up. There had been some initial delay in dealing with the samples as five of the six laboratories had to obtain reagents and validate the testing methods for horse before starting to test. The laboratories had worked very hard and long hours to deal with the samples promptly, but it had been touch and go whether they could deliver to the timetables set during the incident.

The laboratories had been told by FSA to use an old (Lab-on-a-Chip) method. There had been some disagreement about this because under the legislation it is for PAs to direct the analysis and decide on the most appropriate method and some of the labs were able to use more up to date real-time PCR techniques.

The test threshold for a positive result had been set at 1% by FSA. However, the laboratories with real-time PCR had been able to achieve limits of detection of 0.01% DNA. That had led to some issues with FSA around consistency of approach.

EM said that in the area of food hygiene there was more coordination of testing compared to food standards work. The UK has a centrally funded network of public health laboratories performing food hygiene work. Public analyst laboratories are not centrally funded or coordinated but are owned and controlled by local authorities or private companies. The FSA, as the competent authority, did not therefore have access to full information about what each laboratory was able to deal with or their capacity to react.

The number of laboratories was continuing to reduce as local authorities decide to close their laboratories which would mean capacity problems would continue to grow. Most LAs had closed their own laboratories because it was cheaper to outsource their testing. Equipment levels in most local authority laboratories is not up to modern standards, none had DNA sequencers. Defra and FSA had in the past provided ad hoc funding for equipment but this piecemeal approach was ineffective if a laboratory was subsequently forced to close because it was no longer viable. With the continuing closure of laboratories more PAs were likely to move to private sector labs or leave the profession altogether.

To help address capacity problems there had been consideration of regional laboratories which could have expertise in certain tests. But that required the controlling LAs to agree the arrangements and closure of some laboratories. These issues had contributed to the fact that there had been little progress. Another problem was that food sampling was no longer a core activity in many LA laboratories which had branched out into other services to maintain income. Many local authorities now put public analyst services out to tender and the market was very much driven by price. The reduction in sampling meant that there was no capacity for new laboratories to enter the market. Competition was fierce between the remaining PAs.

EM thought that the laboratory infrastructure would significantly reduce over the next few years which could result in one company like Public Analyst Scientific Services becoming the main provider. It was likely that in a short period of time all testing would be in the private sector. LA laboratories would find it increasingly difficult to compete as those laboratories were not able to undertake the wide range of tests required because of lack of modern equipment and relevant staff experience due to budgetary constraints.

Problems with official control laboratory capability issues had been demonstrated with regard to some samples taken at UK ports. Samples taken at Felixstowe port to be tested for genetically modified organisms are currently sent to Hamburg, Germany for testing. That led to delays for importers. So importers were sending their ships to Hamburg which was closer to the laboratory. That loss of trade for the port had an economic impact on the UK economy.

3. APA views on potential Review outcomes

CE invited EM to set out the outcomes APA would like to see from the Review. EM said that there had to be more engagement from Government, Defra and or FSA, to address the closure of PA laboratories and the lack of capacity to deal with incidents. There had to be a fundamental review of the service. The EFRA Committee had supported the idea of a review in their recently published report. The FSA Chair had also asked the Government's Chief Scientist to undertake a review.

11 September 2013