

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Food supply networks: integrity and assurance review

Note of meeting with Glenn Taylor

Location: Nobel House

Date: 31 October 2013

Attendees:

Rebecca Kenner (RK) – Assistant Secretary - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Glenn Taylor (GT) - Head of Coroners and Scientific Services - Hampshire Scientific Services

Michael Walker (MW) – Subject Matter Expert - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

1. Introduction

MW gave a short overview of the Review; Chris Elliott was commissioned to undertake a review of the food supply chain, not just red meat, by the SoS for Defra and Department of Health. Chris has asked Michael to consider the food testing regime and lab capacity in England.

Michael also gave an overview of the Shared Scientific Services Project currently going on in Scotland, which is exploring options to merge the four Public Analyst labs with the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA). Michael explained that he thinks we should strongly consider a model that accepts the private sector, alongside the public sector represented by a single organisation. The Scottish project is showing us a way of exploring that.

2. Do you think the Scottish Shared Scientific Services project is a good idea? Is it possible? Has it been tried before? Why it hasn't worked before?

GT thinks that before we start considering any kind of merge of laboratories, we need to first consider whether or not it is the role of Public Analysts to “assure” the safety of food? Should the Food Standards Agency be more focused on genuinely providing an assurance role, in the same manner as the Health and Safety Executive, which puts in place a system where they assure industry to create a safe working environment.

Ideally we should have a national service, but the difficulty will always be the private and public sector organisations that currently operate within that; that isn't something that we can change.

Glenn explained that projects like this have been tried before in England. We (Hampshire) have tried to put a network of laboratories together with Kent, and with CTG tried swapping methods and standards together in the '90s. However, one of the biggest issues with these sorts of projects is the personalities and structures, not just of Public Analysts, but Local Authorities (LAs) themselves.

The wider issue though is that many people are starting to wonder whether the LAs really have a role in retaining responsibility for enforcement of food safety and standards. Over 90% of LA spend is on children/adult services and a very small percentage of what we (Hampshire Scientific Services) do is on food safety/standards. As LAs become increasingly pressured on expenditure, it's likely to be de-prioritised even further, so will lead to a more disjointed and fragmented service. We should be starting to move towards more regional working, using a national service e.g. National Trading Standards Board, National Environmental Health Board etc.

Then we can move onto labs to think about how we can work together – the lab managers who get together don't have the power to decide, but can still try and drive it forward; we have always had an attitude towards secrecy and competition.

GT's own lab has combined with the police and has been phenomenally successful, which has demonstrated to him that this form of working is what we should be doing. They are now trying to link with the University of Portsmouth, so research, academia, the police and LAs are working together to protect the public. Glenn is also pleased with the links that they have developed with local health officials, due to LAs role in Public Health now – this seems to have created a very strong link with health. GT would urge other authorities to look at the work they have done bringing together coroners, police, trading standards, environmental health and health colleagues – it shows you can work together in a regional way.

Glenn believes that laboratories themselves do have a tendency to fixate on the numbers of samples that are being taken, but the numbers of samples they are analysing as a whole probably wouldn't support any more than a national lab – a previous colleague used to refer to it as "Public Analysts UK PLC." We need to have centres of excellence, but perhaps in some areas we have to move beyond the UK for excellence e.g. going to Germany for some testing – is it really feasible to attempt to excel in a range of disciplines in a single national lab?

3. Traditionally the 'choreography' of how you switch to a regional/national service has been tricky – how do you think you can get around that?

GT feels that we, in England as FSA, DEFRA and DH need to be more strategic about how we organise laboratory services; you can't leave it to PAs and LAs in isolation – they are considering local pressures and will not look at it strategically. Hampshire has just cut its testing to £80,000 – when GT started their testing budget was £400,000. Enforcement really has to look beyond the laboratories – we should be working in partnership with Tesco, Sainsbury's and consumers in a more joined up way.

4. We want to make practical recommendations that can be acted upon, so what sort of recommendations can the Review usefully make in this area?

GT thinks that the first step is to think strategically about the sorts of analysis that we are going to need and only then decide what to do about it.

In MW's view, the solely private sector model is viewed by some as a risk: there is no guarantee that they would provide the necessary support in an emergency effort – they might decide the whole enterprise is not worth the expenditure and can find something more profitable.

In Glenn's view, enforcement doesn't favour monopolies, so he would not favour a solely private or public sector, preferring a mixed model. However, the public sector is dying, or will die out, and enforcement needs to be more strategic. Glenn's local authorities are very interested in some of the other work they do e.g. legal highs, additives etc. so at the moment, the lab is seen as very useful, but it's not clear how long that will last considering the pressure on local authority budgets. Any OCL is vulnerable to local decisions – anecdotally, some councils feel that if they have to face another round of cuts, they will be struggling to perform 'vital' services (refuse collection etc.), so there simply won't be the resource for publicly owned laboratories in councils.

When it comes to merging services, Public Analysts struggle with the technicalities of things like HR, governance and estates management. Defra/ DH/FSA need to be specific and strategic and take PAs with them – it is not for PAs to try and set the strategic direction as they don't know how to re-structure etc. Would it be possible to create a central pot of money (and, where appropriate, expertise) to solve those sorts of issues that scientific services can't work out themselves? It is not sustainable to carry on just hoping it will be alright or aiming to be the last LA lab standing.

GT feels that the Local Government Association would be the natural partner from the LA side in developing this sort of idea. Glenn is working with the LGA on coroners/medical examiners/flu pandemic, so think it would be possible to work with them on this. Rationalising the OCL system has become a low priority, but they would be interested as there may be a role for them – they would be keen to consider what involvement LA should have with this, if any.

GT explained that the National Trading Standards Board is relatively new, but has a fairly decent budget – £2.5m. They are trying to co-ordinate trading standards and work through regions, developing centres of expertise which can be shared up and down the country. His view is that they are unlikely to be territorial about scientific expertise (outside of PAs) – worth bearing in mind that less than half of the business of Public Analysts is food.

5. What can we do next? How can we go about it?

GT thinks that first you need to almost start again – forget what you've got and instead focus on what you want, otherwise you get involved in personalities etc. We need to say "we need labs that can offer these things", then consider what model you want and work out how we get them, looking up and down the country at what we need. Then you can consider what we've already got, looking at the strengths and weaknesses of both older models.

MW added that he felt that there doesn't seem to be any reason why any England/Wales based organisation shouldn't be able to do food, feed, fertiliser, toys, asbestos, water quality, nutrition, police, coroners all in the same laboratory.

GT's lab has changed from where it was; it's now a collection of experts, rather than just a PA laboratory. We (Hampshire) now have fingerprint experts, toxicology experts, drugs experts, CSI experts, alcohol experts etc. alongside PAs. However, these experts do not know anything about each other disciplines, they are a whole gambit of individual experts. We have successfully brought all these together, but it's not as simple as sharing equipment to make efficiencies – need to consider that it may not be more efficient to share equipment etc. because it is being used for a range of different samples. However, Hampshire is now large enough that they can consider each section have their own high-spec equipment – if consider UKAS accredited staff, the Hampshire Scientific Service staff add up to 130-140 FTE – but that's not all food.

When looking at how you rationalise specific public laboratory services, you need to think about what is of interest to them and what is in it for each laboratory – you need to decide whether you really want try and rationalise the 9 publicly owned laboratories into a national service, or whether there are aspects of some you want, but not all. Need to decide whether you really want to try and get them all together,

GT explained that he is torn between keeping his lab open and wanting a proper, viable enforcement service – the latter is more important than a laboratory service. GT would worry about creating a single central food lab, particularly with the way investigations etc. are going now with the number of products being bought over the internet and the blurry lines between what is a food or medicine. These issues extend beyond food, so you need to look at whether you want Government Science Service or solely food science.

MW feels that in order to ensure resilience and sustainability of a scientific service, you need a big enough organisation, so you are creating an organisation with a “critical mass”.

Action: GT to provide a short briefing paper to describe the Hampshire/Kent model, along with fingerprint, legal highs example (potentially to include as a boxed example in the report).

GT explained that when he started working with the Hampshire Scientific Service, he wanted it to be like LGC was at the time – their science is well respected and that is what they built themselves on. Now that the Hampshire lab is working in partnership it will be much harder to close the lab, which provides them with some security, although they still have to make savings.

6. To what extent was that model developed by your personal determination?

In Glenn's view, two people drove the vision for the model – he and a colleague (from Hampshire Constabulary) presented the Board with the Nokia 'burning platform' scenario as felt they had to do something drastic. They were met with a lot of luck and benefited from personal relationships they had developed, although they worked very hard to bring the services together. He would suggest that in order for a wider project like this to be successful, there needs to be a champion behind it in order to drive it forward.

GT feels that there must be a better way to do things than what we've got – the Public Analyst system was brilliant when it was set up 150 years ago, but the world has changed

and we need to move with it. When it was set up, LAs were undertaking this activity themselves, because adulteration happened at the local level, but that doesn't happen anymore – the adulteration happens elsewhere. The system is not broken, but it is breaking.

MW agreed that a national organisation would give economies of scale, footprint and the authority to guarantee a mixed model between private and public sector.

Glenn thinks it would be naïve to say “don't worry, the Local Authorities will continue” – the FSA have a written mandate to go into any LA that is failing. The model that we've got isn't working, but it's not working in many more ways than just the public analysts – they aren't part of enforcement in the way they used to be. The system itself isn't sustainable.

Defra/FSA/DH/LGA need to co-operate and set out what they want for enforcement – which will surely be evidence based and based on science, so will need to access to good quality scientists. Then you consider how many scientists you need – not just lab scientists, but data analysts and others that will allow enforcement bodies to think like criminals. A centralised service would mean a more viable, sustainable service, so better for careers, better for enforcement, plus a national Government Science structure might not necessarily want to take over all staff from public analyst labs

For example, with regard to imported food, ports in England, particularly Southampton, are known to be fairly strict, but criminals will be able identify where the weak spots are (e.g. once it is in the EU it's likely to appear in the UK). This where we need to start being strategic – what can we do to prevent this? Criminals will always know how to bring things in – so a more strategic approach to Government Science as a whole, with more joined up science, would be useful see our paper: the Procrustean Bed of EU food safety. Does one size fit all?

In terms of funding, LAs will never identify the funding that goes to them from HMT for food testing and additional funding is not available; if you tell LAs to do something, then it can be seen as an additional burden, but under new legislation (additional burdens directive) you cannot put additional burdens on LAs without funding that activity. Moreover, additional pressure on LAs and Whitehall is politically unacceptable, so you need to find your strategy then think of ways to implement it.

MW agreed that the Review will need to cast their recommendations very diplomatically in terms of who should be doing the work.

Action: RK to organise a further follow up meeting with GT and MW to discuss possible recommendations further.

25 November 2013