

HM Government

Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Note of telephone conference with Devon County Council

Location: Nobel House

Date: 6 December 2013

Attendees:

Sarah Appleby – Secretary – Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Rebecca Kenner – Secretariat – Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Melanie Welland – Devon County Council

Ray Beale - Managing Director Devon Norse Ltd

Apologies for absence: Professor Chris Elliott – Lead Reviewer – Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

1. Introduction to the Elliott Review

SA thanked MW and RB for taking the time to contribute to Professor Elliott's Review. She noted that Professor Elliott had been asked to deliver an interim report within six months of being appointed in June and a final report by spring 2014. She said that the interim report would contain a number of recommendations on which Professor Elliott would be seeking comment in the New Year.

2. Food supply to public sector in Devon

MW explained the public sector food supply arrangements in Devon and the joint venture between the County Council and Norse, which was extended 2 years ago to cover the supply of school meals. There are 365 schools in the county (including primary, secondary, and special schools) which have delegated budgets. They have the option to cook food in-house; procure independently; or buy in from Norse. Devon CC has no direct control over schools budgets, and does not collate school meal supplier data or information. With the delegation of budgets the school governors are responsible for the catering service and provision of food. The Council has no central client service, and each school is responsible for ensuring that school meals comply with all relevant food safety as well as the School Meals regulations. Information on nutrition is available through the Schools Food Trust.

Norse now supply school meals to about half (160) the schools in Devon. RB explained that Norse is competing on quality and standards, and some schools may base procurement decisions solely on price. It was felt that some schools lacked the expertise to make decisions about food safety and authenticity. Competent companies were thought to be losing out because schools may base decisions on cost and possibly glossy marketing. Both MW and RB felt that delegating this work to schools was a huge responsibility.

RB explained that Norse only covers the Devon area at the moment but has expansion plans and recently put in 3 tenders for work outside Devon. Where there are pre-qualification questionnaires, there is a much higher regard placed on food safety than otherwise. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the protection of vulnerable groups supplied by this service.

RB and MW did not think that any halal or kosher meals are being served in schools, care homes or meals on wheels in Devon, and faith issues associated with food authenticity have not arisen.

Devon County Council currently has responsibility for supplying food to care homes, residential homes, and meals on wheels. Devon Norse undertakes Food Safety audits at these premises on behalf of the Council. Devon CC recommends that the best value will be obtained through Devon Norse, where they know that the company complies with food safety requirements, and that effective audits are routinely carried out to ensure good standards are in place.

Whilst it was agreed that it is for the food businesses supplying food to comply with legal requirements, the horse meat incident showed that there were concerns about the authenticity and traceability of food supplies. Although their preferred supplier, Norse, has a Primary Authority role by which they are working with Exeter City EHO and Devon and Somerset Trading Standards in order to ensure improved food Safety and Traceability. Subject to appropriate checks, Devon Norse hope to have their services endorsed.

MW explained that the Local Authority Care Association is the nationally recognised group which would provide information and advice to Local authorities about the standards required in relation to food procurement. LACA hold an annual conference in Birmingham in June each year. DfE currently produce procurement guidelines on nutrition, but not traceability, integrity and assurance. MW felt that it would be useful for the review to recommend that guidelines are produced on catering procurement for schools, care homes etc. to help general managers work out what they need to do to ensure the integrity of their supply chains and what they should be looking for.

12 December 2013