

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Food supply networks: integrity and assurance review

Note of meeting with the Clerk of the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee

Location: Millbank House

Date: 19 March 2014

Attendees:

Chris Clarke (CC) - Clerk of the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee

Duncan Sagar (DS) - Clerk of Select Committees

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

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

1. Introduction

MW gave an overview of the work of the Review and motivations behind it. MW explained his role as an expert to the Review, focusing on laboratory capacity and capability in the UK, and the history and current situation for Public Analysts.

There are currently six Public Analyst laboratories that are owned by Local Authorities. All consist of relatively small teams, so the Review has proposed, in a recommendation in the interim report, that they come together and amalgamate with another public sector laboratory service, e.g. Public Health England. MW's view is that public sector PA labs in isolation cannot survive, but if they were to merge with another provider they have the sustainability, expertise and equipment in order to have longevity. However, MW acknowledged that any sort of re-structuring exercise would take these organisations far outside their comfort zone, so the Review feels it's necessary to have another organisation in place that is able to help them undertake this process.

2. The role of the committee

MW also explained that, in addition to an organisation that is able to help manage the process of merging the laboratories, there also needs to be some form of external oversight which will encourage all parties involved to retain momentum on what could be quite a lengthy piece of work. MW feels that the HoL Science and Technology Committee is well placed to perform this role. MW would envisage that

the Committee could bring the relevant parties together to ask how the process is progressing, what action has been taken and provide a forum for exploring the possibilities. They could also provide a leadership role, assuming the Committee agrees and communicates that this way forward is a 'good thing' for UK plc. MW also noted that the current Chair of the Committee, Lord Krebs, is experienced and knowledgeable in this area – it would be an advantage for someone of his stature, and the Committee's reputation, to give a lifetime to the project e.g. the research, the implementation and project development.

DS agreed that this would be an interesting area of inquiry for the Committee, although pointed out that although the Committee will pick a theme from time to time, the House of Lords Committees do not have an oversight role of particular Government departments in the same way that a Commons Select Committee might. Likewise, it is not the role of the Committee to undertake any Government role in change management.

CC explained that due to the rotation system, Lord Krebs will no longer be Chair of the Committee at the end May/June (so end of this session) and will no longer be a member of the Committee. When deciding subjects for future inquiries, Committee staff tend to generate a long list of subjects for potential future inquiries, which is then narrowed down to a shortlist, from which the Committee members choose the next subject. The Lords Science and Technology Committee has a remit to consider any aspects of science and technology in the UK, so it has a very broad range of potential subjects it could cover.

DS felt that, in terms of a recommendation that could be made about public oversight in final report, the following may be appropriate: "In due course, it may be desirable if the relevant Committees in both Houses look at this area."

CC explained that there are a number of other possible Committees that may be appropriate to undertake a similar level of oversight, which already have a strong interest in food, such as the EU sub-committee on agriculture, which has a strong angle on the food supply chain. CC also felt that it was important to consider that in the event that the Committee did pursue the inquiry and it was something members decided to do in the next session, there could be no guarantee that they would reach the same conclusions as those that you had come to in the Review; it is not the role of Committee to rubber stamp something that the Government want to take forward.

MW is not concerned about that issue; he explained that he appreciates the expertise of the Committee and believes that their consideration and analysis would be extremely valuable on this issue.

MW explained the objective of the recommendations that were made in the interim report in this area are unlikely to change in the final report, not least because these recommendation have been wholly welcomed by a number of disparate parties. Once the final report has been published, the Review team will no longer be in place, so we won't be in a position to plot out how the laboratory system will work. However, we feel that the best way forward would be for these public sector laboratories to come together to form their own organisation, which they then decide their own priorities, strategy and how they will be structured. Each laboratory that is

willing to take part should be part of the process of making a strategic asset out of the expertise and resources that remain.

MW feels that if all goes well, whoever takes on a role of external oversight should not be in too much difficulty. However, there is a need, at some intervals during the process, for an objective, external observer, who is not involved in the process, to ask how it is progressing and consider any obstacles that may be in place. MW feels that the HoL Science and Technology Committee is well suited to this, because the issue is not solely about the food chain as such, or specific to Defra, and it requires an organisation to take a dispassionate, scientific view of what is good for science in the UK.

DS felt that there was no reason why this issue shouldn't be put in the mix of what the S&T committee might do, but restated that there was no guarantee that the Committee would like to undertake it as an inquiry and if they do, no guarantee that they would come to the same conclusion. DS felt that it might be a good idea for the relevant Minister to write a letter to the Chair of the Committee, making them aware of this recommendation and also that this may be something that the Government would be interested in them looking at. As a matter of courtesy, this letter should also be copied to the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, as there may be some sensitivity of asking the Lords Committee to do this over the Commons.

RK explained that Professor Elliott had already appeared in front of the EFRA Committee in January, where the Chair had referenced recommendation 23, [suggesting that the HoL Science and Technology should have responsibility for oversight for the recommendations related to laboratories], which she considered strange given how much work the EFRA Committee have already done in this area. Professor Elliott explained to the Chair that this recommendation was specifically related to scientific provision and capacity in the UK, so it was more appropriate for scientists to undertake oversight.

MW agreed; this recommendation was made specifically to the HoL Committee because it was felt that taking an overview, and a long term view, was necessary, and also wanted a broad, scientific overview of a scientific problem. On that basis, both MW and Professor Elliott felt that the collective wisdom of the HoL Committee would add more value than any other.

CC agreed that, if this is the role you want a Parliamentary Committee to fulfil, then the HoL Science and Technology Committee could be the right choice, as that is how they see themselves (e.g. long term, broad scientific overview).

DS explained that it would be their role, as Committee staff, to put the options to the Committee in terms of public interest, timeliness etc. and if the Minister wanted to make a case for this, then that would be helpful.

CC explained that the Committee are already very interested in Public Sector Research Establishments, so it's not inconceivable that they might do a big inquiry into PSREs in the near future, so perhaps this issue could also fall under that umbrella, of a much larger inquiry. Informally, this sort of large scale inquiry may take place in June/July this year.

MW agreed that looking at public sector PA labs in that context would be helpful as it would broaden the scope and help to avoid silo working. Likewise, any view that PSREs are being 'trimmed', at the detriment of the consumer and the public sector would certainly resonate with the points made in the interim report.

MW also felt that it would be beneficial because of the links to helping these laboratories create their own strategic outcome frameworks. In his view, these laboratories are doing sampling analysis across a broad swathe, so they are doing everything from stopping defective food at ports, allergens in restaurants etc. As a result, they then have their heads buried in the detail, whereas what they need is someone asking them to demonstrate what they do for the good of society. It would be helpful for them to be able to work with organisations that are closer to Ministers and have a longer vision e.g. identify a problem, undertake surveys/surveillance and relevant enforcement, then publicise what they have achieved and show the process. They need a more coherent national framework and strategic overview, and considering their work in the context of other PSREs may help them achieve that.

3. Next steps

DS felt that the most appropriate way forward would be for the relevant Minister to send a letter to the Committee in early June. State opening is expected to be in early June, so a letter should be sent to the Committee by June 10th at the very latest. This would be helpful if it's something that the Government would welcome politically; ideally the letter should respect the independence of the Committee but also make clear the Government's intention.

CC agreed that this is potentially an interesting piece of work for the Committee, and they are well placed to do it. However, CC also stressed that the Committee's remit is very broad, so there is no guarantee that they would decide to do something like this.

21 March 2014