

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Food supply networks: integrity and assurance review

Note of meeting with Duncan Campbell

Location: Association of Public Analysts Conference, Liverpool

Date: 23 October 2013

Attendees:

Duncan Campbell (DC) - Public Analyst - West Yorkshire Analytical Services and Honorary Secretary of the Association of Public Analysts

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

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.

2. How did Official Control Laboratories cope during the horsemeat incident?

DC gave an overview of the way the West Yorkshire laboratory system works; there are 5 metropolitan districts of West Yorkshire, each of which deals with food hygiene work, with food standards being covered across the five by the West Yorkshire trading Standards Service, which range between the more traditional split between food hygiene and food standards and some with more complicated systems. The laboratory is self-financing, with its main client being West Yorkshire Trading Standards, but also undertaking contracts from Derbyshire to the Tees.

In terms of TSOs and other officers being available to take samples there were limited resources, so other TSO work had to take a backseat during the horsemeat crisis. Nationally testing did work, but without the testing capability of private labs (with one sending samples to Germany) it is difficult to know how that would have worked.

West Yorks. offered ELISA testing, but the Food Standards Agency (FSA), wanted labs to undertake DNA analysis, so W. Yorks passed on their samples to Eurofins (also important to note the difference between 'passing on' samples, which is provided for in statute and is not the same as a form of sub-contracting). However, the mechanics of the process of passing on some samples did cause some issues with the UK Food Surveillance System. It's difficult to know how other labs coped during the incident.

3. How is the Official Control Laboratory system coping more generally?

There is no funding available to ensure a baseline level of competence, so DC believes that if a particular type of analysis isn't required for a period of time, there is no mechanism for retaining the capability to use provide those tests. A major weakness of the funding of public analyst laboratories is that their sole funding is through submission of samples: there is no strategic planning. This is in contrast to Public Health England, which is centrally funded with integrated services and co-operation between laboratories.

One of the other issues is that local authority labs close due to local decisions, there is no national strategic planning. The current provision of services is demand-led, so as demand is falls, so does supply. Those Local Authorities that close their own laboratories then spend substantially less on food standards testing. DC's view is that more LA-owned labs will close in the next 2-3 years, due to political decisions and local pressure on budgets. Closures will not consider a national strategic picture.

4. How could the OCL system be improved?

DC thinks there needs to be central funding from the FSA for laboratory services. Without this, more labs will close without any strategic rationale. Central funding will be the only way to ensure there is a planned amount of food standards investigation, food sampling and food testing. In 2012, Birmingham City Council didn't use any of their own money to undertake food sampling, which DC found out as a result of a Parliamentary Question.

It is very difficult to separate the work that Public Analysts in local authority labs undertake on Official Controls from the other scientific functions they perform, as every lab has a different mix.

DC felt that an effective way of funding lab services might be for funding to go directly to the Trading Standards Board, which is then allocated regionally. This would allow for a system that was centrally funded, regionally co-ordinated and locally delivered. FSA funded sampling is a 'sticking plaster' to cover up dwindling local authority funded testing – Local Authorities now use money from the FSA's National Coordinated Food Sampling Programme to replace rather than supplement their own funding do their own sampling, rather than their own budgets. Written guidance states that LAs should undertake risk-based sampling, but most of them have no budget to undertake truly risk based sampling.

Due to the current mixture of private/public sector provision of laboratory services in England, DC feels that a system similar to what the Scotland is moving to (considering merging of PA labs and SEPA labs) is not possible. In any system where there is competition for business, is it not possible get the mixture of co-operation and specialisation that would be present in a system following the Scottish model.

If you are to continue to have a situation where local authorities labs have to bid for contracts against each other and private sector labs, the public provision of laboratories will not be able to last much longer. However, with a certain amount of resource committed to a particular regional direction, it may be possible to continue. It is also important to retain local relationships between PAs and enforcement officers in any centrally funded system, as this is a vital component of successful investigations.

There is very little appetite in the sector to start with a 'clean slate' and little appreciation that in order to deal with a complicated food supply chain, you need quite a complex laboratory system to address it. Unfortunately it is difficult to know how much lab provision would be required for such a system without knowing how much analysis will be needed.

Another issue is how effectively Trading Standards Officers (TSOs) are undertaking food standards inspections – at the moment it is extremely variable, particularly inspections of national manufacturing and retail companies. It is unrealistic to ask a TSO with no food science training to be competent at inspecting one of these premises (example of one TSO who when inspecting a meat processing plant did not see the significance of lamb heart going into lamb mince and not being declared on the label). DC feels that a long-term strategy would be to have Public Analysts (or their staff) attend the high risk/high stakes inspections with TSOs and investing in food science training for TSOs.

Action: DC to send MW and RK information about Parliamentary Question on testing in Birmingham.

5. What about the merging of laboratories?

DC feels that a merged laboratory model would have an attraction, particularly a merge with Public Health England, which would remove the (sometimes arbitrary) separation between food hygiene and food standards. The only issue would be the 'provision of scientific services' to LAs, so the other scientific expertise PAs provide to Local Authorities e.g. asbestos, consumer safety, landfill sites monitoring, etc. Would it be possible to move that responsibility over to PHE too?

Also a reduction of Local Authority budgets has led to less investigations of referrals to Home Authorities for large national businesses, as many authorities do not have the resource to deal with them. Even with a centralised system, the ability of LAs to enforce breaches revealed by whatever testing regimes there is will always be limited. However, there must be a mechanism for solving the problem, supported by an effective prosecutions system acting as a deterrent – otherwise, what is the point of taking the samples?

Action: RK to get in touch with DC to organise a visit to West Yorks. laboratory.

25 November 2013