

Review of UK official food and feed laboratory system

Research programme: Capabilities

Study duration: 2018-09-01

Conducted by: Food Standards Agency and Food Standards Scotland

Background

As the Central Competent Authority under Regulation (EC) 882/2004 and its forthcoming replacement Reg (EU) 2017/625, the FSA is responsible for ensuring the UK has sufficient laboratory capacity and capability to deliver official controls on feed and food safety and standards in order to protect public health. This is otherwise known as the UK official food and feed laboratory system.

The number of official laboratories for food and feed has been declining and this has increased concerns about the resilience of UK official food and feed laboratory service capacity and capability. While this situation has been the subject to a number of reviews over time, a formal assessment of the entire laboratory network has never been conducted by government.

At its December 2017 meeting, the FSA Board agreed that a comprehensive review of laboratories was an important priority and that FSA should work jointly with other government departments in this shared area of responsibility. An update of the review's progress was given in the FSA Chief Executive Report to the Board in March 2019.

Research Approach

A comprehensive review on official laboratories was conducted between September 2018 and March 2019 in a phased approach. The first phase assessed the current capacity and capability of laboratories that provide services to UK Government departments. The second phase assessed the risk in continuing with the current system of delivery of official controls by laboratories and how the current and future risks might be mitigated.

The Phase 1 review collected information on expertise and methods currently available for food and feed official controls through engagement with various laboratories and a comprehensive questionnaire. It summarised the role of different types of laboratories that provide a service to Government and local authorities for food and feed official controls, reviewed the current capability and capacity of these laboratories and highlighted gaps where improvement was required.

The Phase 2 review assessed the whole enforcement laboratory network by engaging with relevant UK Competent Authorities and wider stakeholders to understand the role each one undertakes in food and feed enforcement. In addition, it undertook a review of international systems for delivering laboratory services to identify areas of best practice. An Expert Panel was also established to provide current knowledge of food and feed enforcement and challenge the findings and conclusions.

Results

The first phase assessed the readiness of UK official control laboratories for EU exit and looked at the capability and capacity of laboratories providing services to the local authorities and UK Government departments.

This concluded that initial laboratory capability and capacity is sufficient for day 1 of EU Exit. Where potential gaps were highlighted in some areas by the review, official control laboratories could resolve these by using their current routes of access to other laboratories in the wider network such as the National Reference Laboratories (NRLs) and other testing laboratories by means of sub-contracting. Under normal enforcement operations, these tests are available and will continue to be for Day 1 of EU Exit.

The second phase concluded that whilst the current system has sufficient laboratory capability and capacity, it is highly fragmented, with complex funding structures, resulting in a lack of central accountability and causing inefficiency.

It lacks coordination between different Government Bodies (Central Competent Authorities), resulting in variations between the direction given to different parts of the network. Additionally, there is no national strategy for food/feed sampling and testing and for data sharing;

A report on FSA's vision for the future UK official food and feed laboratories will be presented at its Board meeting on 18th September 2019.

Research report

England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

PDF

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England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

PDF

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