I write on behalf of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee about the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency’s (AHVLA) rationalisation of laboratory services and introduction of competitive tendering for Official Veterinarians.

Having considered the written and oral evidence we received on these issues, the Committee would be grateful if Defra could provide further clarification and assurances on the points raised in this letter. I would be grateful for a response to by 10 April.

Several of our witnesses expressed concern that there had been insufficient consultation about the proposals to remove laboratory services from certain AHVLA sites. We are concerned that such a major change should take place without a full consultation with professional bodies and the providers and users of the Agency’s laboratory services. We would therefore be grateful if the department could set out the nature, extent and timing of the consultation undertaken prior to this decision. We are particularly concerned to receive evidence that this decision was only taken following consultation with appropriate scientific experts.

The AHVLA may undertake further rationalisations or reorganisations in the future. We therefore seek the department’s assurances that any further changes at the Agency will take place only after an appropriate full consultation exercise.

Many witnesses highlighted the importance of users of AHVLA’s services being reassured about the efficacy of diagnosis. Many of our witnesses referred to the risk of samples deteriorating in transit and the negative impact that would have on accurate and timely diagnosis, particularly for delicate or fastidious organisms. We note the department’s evidence that several tests already involve the transfer of samples to other laboratory locations. Nevertheless, we are concerned that there has been insufficient analysis of the likely impact of transporting samples to other laboratories. We would be grateful, therefore, if the department could set out, for those tests that are currently conducted at sites undertaking post mortems, the evidence the Agency relied upon when deciding to withdraw laboratory services. We would also be grateful for confirmation that further research is being undertaken to understand the potential impact of the policy on disease detection.
In oral evidence the Chief Veterinary Officer and the Chief Executive of the AHVLA referred to introducing mobile incubators for the transfer of certain samples to distant laboratory sites. We note that this option was not considered in the ASSP study. We would be grateful for reassurances that the costs and impact on diagnosis of this approach have been properly evaluated.

We understand that some diagnostic testing will continue to be conducted alongside post mortems. We are concerned that until the AHVLA has determined which diagnostic tests will be retained at post mortem sites it will not be possible to determine the cost savings generated by the rationalisation programme. We would be grateful for clarification as to which tests will continue at post mortem sites and an assessment of the overall cost savings achieved by the rationalisation taking into account those tests that will be retained post mortem side and the introduction of mobile incubators.

In oral evidence the AHVLA’s chief executive emphasised the importance of key specialist staff and told us that some of those key staff had been invited to redeploy to other AHVLA laboratory sites. However, we received some evidence suggesting that some specialist staff are unwilling or unable to move to a new location. Moreover, witnesses also told us that while staff had been invited to move to other laboratories there were no vacancies available at those alternative sites. We are concerned that the laboratory services rationalisation programme will result in a loss of key specialist skills across the AHVLA, which will have an impact on quality of service and reduce the Agency’s resilience. We would therefore be grateful for the department’s assurance that no critical specialist skills will be lost following the closure of some AHVLA laboratory services.

The Committee is concerned about the impact of the closure of certain AHVLA laboratory services on the Agency’s ability to identify and tackle emerging threats. This concern has been brought into sharp focus in recent weeks with the spread of Schmallenberg virus in the UK. Animal disease is one of the top national risks managed by Defra and it is a risk that is likely to become less predictable as animal disease patterns are influenced by climate change. We are concerned that Defra has allowed the AHVLA to focus too much on cost-saving without considering the wider implications of reducing the laboratory services network, not least the longer term economic impact of serious animal disease outbreaks in the UK.

We are also concerned that the policy of closing certain AHVLA laboratory services will have a disproportionately detrimental economic impact on rural areas. The closure programme will lead to skilled jobs moving from rural areas to urban areas. We note that the AHVLA was advised that an impact assessment did not need to be undertaken for this policy, however, we believe it is imperative that Defra undertakes an analysis of the impact on the rural areas affected by the changes.

We note the concerns expressed about the impact of the AHVLA’s tendering for OVs proposals, particularly on small veterinary practices. While we do not consider it inevitable that larger veterinary consortia would lead to a reduction in the quality of testing, we are concerned that some of the additional benefits of local vets visiting farms to conduct tests
may be lost. We would therefore be grateful for Defra’s assessment of the impact of the change on the quality of TB testing and seek clarification as to whether EU procurement rules are sufficiently flexible to reflect benefits other than price.

The Committee’s principal concern when considering these issues has been the UK’s continuing ability to identify, monitor and tackle animal disease. We are aware, however, that the Government will need the support and confidence of livestock farmers and other stakeholders as it looks to introduce responsibility and cost sharing. We consider the handling of these proposals, particularly the closure of certain AHVLA laboratory services, will have done little to inspire confidence in the department. We would be grateful for an update from the department on the status of responsibility and cost sharing proposals.

Miss Anne McIntosh MP
Chair