From the Minister of State
The Rt Hon Jim Paice MP

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Chair
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
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Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency

Thank you for your letter of 7 March 2012 in which you have asked for further clarification and assurances about the evidence received by The Committee about the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency’s (AHVLA) rationalisation of laboratory services and introduction of competitive tendering for Official Veterinarians.

The nature, extent and timing of consultation on the rationalisation was as follows. In May 2010 a Strategic Surveillance Workshop was held involving a wide range of stakeholders including Devolved Administrations, Veterinary Professionals, Farming Industry Groups and Other Government Departments. The Workshop was part of the wider Veterinary Surveillance Strategy¹. After reviewing the output from the VSS and this workshop AHVLA commissioned the Sustainable Surveillance Project (ASSP)². ASSP membership was expert in surveillance design and the science and practicalities of laboratory testing, and included the CVO Wales.

The ASSP report was presented to AHVLA’s Executive Team in April 2011 when it was recommended that post mortem examination of carcases work be ‘de-coupled’ from the provision of laboratory services functions. AHVLA then commenced with a review of Laboratory Services. This was an internal review carried out by AHVLA staff with internationally recognised expertise in the conduct of laboratory tests. The review report and recommendations were accepted by the AHVLA Executive Team on 2 August 2011 and on 17 August 2011 the report and AHVLA’s recommendation to rationalise laboratory services was sent to the Chief Veterinary Officers for England, Wales and Scotland to

¹ Annex A of AHVLA’s written evidence gives details on VSS
comment on.

On 23 August 2011 AHVLA submitted its proposal to me for approval to move forward with the rationalisation plans; I gave approval on 9 September 2011. Defra, Welsh Government and I considered this an Operational matter and I was content that adequate research and consultation had been carried out and AHVLA were able to give assurance that a continued quality-assured surveillance network would be maintained in England and Wales.

An announcement about the rationalisation was made to affected staff and AHVLA staff in general on 1 September 2011 subject to further consideration. Once I had given clearance to AHVLA confirmation of the changes was given to AHVLA staff on 13 September 2011.

The Agency is committed to working even more closely with its delivery partners and stakeholders as can be seen from its Corporate and Business Plan1. The Committee will be aware that AHVLA is reviewing how surveillance is delivered in England and Wales4. AHVLA set up an Independent Advisory Group chaired by Prof Dick Pfeiffer which has made recommendations and their report will be published within the next couple of weeks. Throughout the OV Procurement Project5, AHVLA has actively engaged with the veterinary profession to seek balanced solutions for the future procurement of tuberculin testing which could deliver value for money while offering local vets opportunities to work with farmers to prevent and control the spread of TB.

AHVLA have confirmed that the new laboratory network ensures that the Agency will continue to deliver the whole range of testing currently required and tests will continue to be performed to the necessary quality standard. I do understand the concerns about the transportation of those samples collected from post mortem material at sites which will no longer have laboratory testing facilities, but these issues have been given full consideration and as you heard at the meeting, we are confident that surveillance outcomes will not be compromised. You rightly note in your letter that some tests are to remain and be carried out at the post mortem sites.

These tests are:

- Smear – Staining & Microscopic examination (includes EAE, Q Fever and Brucella)
- Anthrax Diagnosis
- Detection of acid alcohol fast bacilli (mycobacteria)
- Wet preparation – microscopic exam for motile protozoa
- Worm count – sample is sent to a remote lab either pre or post sieving for quantitative count and ID of parasites
- Worm egg count

Many EU countries already use a similar model to that being introduced by AHVLA. Once changes are in place, the Agency will continue to monitor its service carefully to

2 http://vla.defra.gov.uk/science/sci_surv_model.htm
3 http://animalhealth.defra.gov.uk/about/official-vets/changes-to-procurement/procurement-updates.htm
ensure that they are working effectively and that the time taken to provide results is minimised. AHVLA is keen to improve the service it provides at the same time as reducing costs, so they can continue to deliver the service required, together with mutually beneficial surveillance outputs.

Cost savings the AHVLA have advised The Committee of to date are staff cost savings only and the impact of keeping some testing alongside post mortems does not affect this cost saving. The introduction of mobile incubators will not impact the £2.4million saving per annum, rather marginally offsetting additional estate and facility based savings e.g. on the maintenance of equipment in the centres no longer carrying out laboratory tests.

The portable incubators were put in place in late March 2012. AHVLA has been working in collaboration with the incubator manufacturer and designers of a custom-made flight case, so that the end product is safe, effective and resilient in routine use. AHVLA will continue monitoring the use of the incubators in use to ensure that they provide the same temperature and the same atmosphere as a static laboratory incubator.

Of the Lab Services staff affected by phase 1 of the rationalisation, seven have been redeployed within the Agency, including those undertaking re-training as field staff, whilst one has re-deployed to another Civil Service department. Of the remainder some have found alternative employment outside of the Civil Service whilst others have opted for voluntary redundancy. Four staff have been affected by compulsory redundancy.

You have asked in your letter about the impact of changes on AHVLA’s ability to tackle emerging threats such as Schmallenberg. The Agency detected Schmallenberg so quickly because of its strong European and international links and its expert species groups and their links to private veterinarians. None of these elements are affected by the current changes to laboratory testing. I am confident there will be no decline in the quality of surveillance as a result of these changes, including the ability to test for emerging diseases such as Schmallenberg.

As was stated in the oral evidence given by Catherine Brown no formal impact assessment was carried out by AHVLA in line with the legal advice on requirements.

Control of TB continues to be a high priority for Defra, and those involved in delivery of the bovine TB programme. With bovine TB costing in excess of £63 million of public money each year we must have a system in place that ensures the skin test is carried out in a way that assures quality of testing and demonstrates value for money. As said in evidence given to the Committee AHVLA acknowledge that completion of the skin test by the farm vet can have advantages and that is why AHVLA continue to consult widely with private veterinarians and the veterinary and farming industry on how to deliver the requirements of the TB programme to the standard required by EU law.


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6 2009/10 cost of bovine TB in England. This represents 18% of Defra’s total spend on Animal Health & Welfare. A total of £26.6 million was spent on compensation for slaughtered animals in 2009/10, this is 42% of the total bovine TB spend for 2009/10.
of the outcome of these meetings can be found on the Defra web site\(^7\), as will any updates on decisions taken and recommendations made by the Board to Ministers.

JIM PAICE MP

\(^7\) http://www.defra.gov.uk/food-farm/animals/responsibility-cost-sharing/