

Changes to the Management of Government Funded Veterinary Services Contracts for the delivery of Managed Veterinary Services in England and Wales

Additional information for Official Veterinarians

Background

From 1 April 2015 in Wales and 1 May 2015 in England APHA will manage TB testing and other veterinary services in England and Wales through suppliers, known as Delivery Partners, who have successfully tendered for this work in five geographical regions covering England and two regions covering Wales.

Contract awards for two regions covering Wales were announced on 27 January, but a legal challenge meant that APHA was not in a position to award contracts for the five regions covering England until 16 February. All of the contracts for England and Wales have now been awarded. The changes do not apply in Scotland.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why are changes being made to the way Government funded veterinary services are managed and what are the changes?

A: Local veterinary practices have historically made an invaluable contribution to national disease control programmes but the way in which these services are organised had become outdated.

Government has higher expectations of value for money and the structure of the veterinary industry has changed. To meet the current and future needs of Defra, the Welsh Government and Scottish Government, a project was set up to review and modernise APHA's relationship with individual vets and veterinary businesses. This had four main components, the fourth item being the subject of this briefing and FAQ:

- 1) APHA has outsourced OV training and accreditation to a commercial supplier, Improve International, who will provide a more business-friendly service to vets in England, Scotland and Wales.

2) Legislative changes have been implemented across England, Scotland and Wales by APHA to remove the redundant status of Veterinary Inspector from Official Veterinarians (OVs).

3) APHA has established Framework Agreements for a wide range of veterinary related work that may be required now or in the future.

4) APHA has introduced regional contracts across seven geographical regions (known as 'Lots') for the supply of veterinary services in England and Wales, covering a package of services including an enhanced response to disease outbreaks. This process includes procurement of bTB testing in a way which will allow local vets to compete for Government veterinary work.

In the past there was no clear contract between APHA and the veterinary businesses who were paid to deliver services; only a loose 'memorandum of conditions of appointment' between the former Ministry of Agriculture and the British Veterinary Association.

By introducing modern, well-structured contracts, APHA aims to put the obligation on regional suppliers (known as 'Delivery Partners') to assure the quality of services delivered by putting in place systems which APHA can then audit. Whilst APHA is confident that testing is widely being undertaken in an acceptable manner, there was some evidence that a small number of tests were not being undertaken in strict compliance with required procedures. This had potential consequences for the control of disease. The expectation is that bTB testing and other work will in future be delivered to a higher and more consistent standard, including an enhanced emergency outbreak response capability.

The costs of testing cattle for TB had never been tested in the competitive market place and it is important that APHA is able to demonstrate that government is achieving best value-for-money for the tax payer.

Q: How are the changes to the supply of Government funded veterinary services being implemented?

A: A tendering exercise was undertaken, inviting businesses to submit tenders for seven geographical regions across England and Wales to supply a fully managed service for the delivery of tuberculin testing and the supply of other veterinary services to Government. The successful bidders will sub-contract veterinary businesses within their geographical regions

to deliver work for them and will manage the relationship with those sub-contracted veterinary businesses.

Q: Why introduce the new contracts?

A: In the past there were no clear contracts between APHA and the businesses that were paid to deliver services. APHA's relationship was primarily with individual vets and as many thousands of vets were engaged at least occasionally, the number of relationships was unmanageable. By introducing modern well-structured regional contracts APHA is modernising its partnership with the veterinary profession whilst ensuring that the best quality of service is delivered; ensuring that on-farm testing is as effective as possible in detecting disease; and getting the best value for the taxpayer. APHA as the regulatory body, will audit the Delivery Partners' quality systems (which will include occasional spot-check audits of individual OV's work in the field).

Q: What are the main benefits of these contracts?

A: The quality and scope of the overall TB testing service will be significantly increased, particularly in terms of the Delivery Partner regular audit of vets in the field. In addition, the price paid by the taxpayers for TB testing can more clearly be shown to represent best value for money. In the event of an animal health emergency, Delivery Partners are contractually committed to collectively provide a minimum of 100 vets (and many more should TB testing be temporarily suspended).

Q: How and when will these changes be implemented?

A: At the service commencement date (1 April in Wales and 1 May in England) all newly commissioned TB and other OV work will be allocated to Delivery Partners. Work that has already been assigned to practices before this date under the existing arrangements is to be completed outside of the Delivery Partner's responsibility by those practices at existing rates. It is not intended that work already allocated to OV Practices under existing arrangements will be recalled or reallocated. Detailed information on implementation and transition will be made available by APHA and regional Delivery Partners prior to commencement of the new arrangements.

Q: Does the emphasis on improving and demonstrating the quality of testing imply a previous lack of compliance with required procedures?

A: APHA is confident that testing was widely being undertaken in an acceptable manner, but there was some evidence that a small number of tests were not being undertaken in strict compliance with required procedures. The new contracts include quality assurance

arrangements which will not only assure the service being provided, but also establish means by which this quality can be demonstrated, and strengthen mechanisms for dealing with non-compliance.

Q: What services are covered by the new delivery contracts?

A: All services currently delivered by OV's fall under the terms of the contracts, including:

- 'Services A': TB Testing in Cattle
- 'Services B': TB Testing non-bovines and other Government paid work, notably brucellosis testing and anthrax investigations
- 'Services C': Incident Response e.g. provision of vets to assist APHA in a disease outbreak.

Each contract covers a specified geographical region of England and Wales.

Q: Where are the geographical regions ('Lots') and who has won the contracts?

A: England and Wales have been divided into seven geographical regions and a single Delivery Partner has been contracted to deliver tuberculin testing and other services within each region. Contracts have now been awarded and confirmed and the successful Delivery Partners are:

Lot	REGION	DELIVERY PARTNER
1	Wales North	Menter a Busnes
2	Wales South	Iechyd Da (Gwledig) Ltd
3	South West 1	XL Farmcare Devon & Cornwall Ltd
4	South West 2	XL Farmcare Wessex Ltd
5	South East	XL Farmcare South East Ltd
6	Midlands	XL Farmcare Midlands Ltd
7	North	XL Farmcare North Ltd

Q: Why were contracts in England awarded later than the Welsh contracts?

A: An unsuccessful tenderer issued legal proceedings in respect of the English lots, and contracts could not be awarded until legal discussions had concluded. The unsuccessful

tenderer has now withdrawn their objection to the procurement process outcome enabling contracts to be awarded and signed in England.

Q: Until the new arrangements commence, what should farmers and livestock keepers do with regard to testing, and who should they contact to make arrangements?

A: Farmers should refer to their Test Notification Letter which will advise them of who they need to contact to arrange their test. From 1 April in Wales and 1 May in England, Test Notification Letters will advise farmers to contact their Delivery Partner, but up until that point, current arrangements will continue.

Q: Isn't this just a cost cutting measure?

A: No, although it is expected that savings to the taxpayer will be achieved through these contracts, the primary reasons for the change are the wider objectives of improving the quality of testing, and thereby disease control. The procurement process was heavily weighted towards assessing the quality of the services to be provided and gave quality greater weight than the prices bid. Within the elements associated with price, more credit was given to bids that passed more of the income to front line delivery.

Q: How will this affect payments to Official Veterinarians?

A: The primary reason for the change is to improve the quality of testing, and thereby disease control and introduce a more collaborative and strategic approach to working in partnership with the livestock industry and the veterinary profession. Under the new arrangements APHA's contractual relationship will be with the regional Delivery Partners, who will be paid by APHA for the services delivered. The level of payment is commercially confidential but it was arrived at for each lot by a fair and transparent competitive process, so we are satisfied that it is a realistic rate for the package of services to be delivered. Payments by Delivery Partners to subcontracted OVs or OV practices are the responsibility of Delivery Partners and not a matter for APHA.

Q: Won't the contracts lead to a lower standard of tuberculin testing driven by cost cutting?

A: No, testing will continue to be undertaken by fully qualified vets who will be required to hold an up to date Official Control Qualification (OCQ) in Tuberculosis Testing as a result of the new approach to OV training with training provider Improve International. In addition, in future the vets undertaking testing will work within a quality assurance system, which has not always been the case until now.

Q: Don't the new contracts break the link between farmers and their vets?

A: In recognition of the important relationship between farmers or livestock keepers and their vets in preventing and controlling disease and for ensuring the health and welfare of animals, the new contracts require Delivery Partners to offer testing work to eligible veterinary businesses operating within their geographical regions.

When making arrangements for tests, farmers and livestock keepers can express a preference to use a specific veterinary practice from within the Delivery Partners network to undertake their testing, and this preference will be honoured where possible. Farmers and livestock keepers who would prefer to use a practice that is not part of the Delivery Partners network retain an option to pay for the testing privately.

Q: By removing testing from small veterinary businesses, isn't APHA adding to existing pressures on practices in the farmed livestock veterinary sector?

A: No, when making arrangements for tests, farmers and livestock keepers can express a preference to use a specific veterinary practice from within the Delivery Partners network to undertake their testing, and this preference will be honoured where possible. If their regular farm vet is not part of the contract or is unable to undertake the test on time then they will be supplied with another OV who will be able to complete the test on time and to an equally high standard. Farmers and livestock keepers who would prefer to use a practice that is not part of the Delivery Partners network retain an option to pay for the testing privately.

Q: What measures will be in place to ensure a monopoly situation does not develop?

A: There will be no monopoly on veterinary services in either England or Wales and testing will continue to be undertaken by vets and practices from across the seven regions. All seven winning bidders are financially independent businesses, each made up of a consortium of local veterinary practices within their region. When making arrangements for tests, farmers and livestock keepers will be able to express a preference for a specific practice within the Delivery Partners network to undertake their testing, and Delivery Partners will also offer testing work to other eligible veterinary businesses within their region. Additionally, farmers and livestock keepers will still retain the option to use a practice outside the Delivery Partners network and pay for their testing privately.

Q: Won't the contracts lead to some veterinary practices giving up government testing?

Some OVs and OV practices may make the business decision to no longer offer TB testing or other services. However, we expect that the majority of vets and practices will continue to

provide government testing services within the new contracts and the extremely high level of registration for OV training and authorisation suggests that farmers and livestock keepers should have no difficulty in accessing a suitable vet. Vets who are not part of a government contract will be able to carry out private testing such as pre-movement testing provided they are qualified under the OCQ(V) training scheme and maintain high standards of quality and professionalism.

Q: How does this approach fit with the Welsh Government's Cymorth TB project?

A: The Welsh Government's *Cymorth TB* project seeks to enhance the role played by veterinarians in improving the support given to farmers in helping to reduce the risk of TB and to develop best practice for the case management of TB breakdowns. Given its emphasis on improving service quality and the utilisation of Delivery Partners providing other services within the regions, the new delivery model will help meet that objective.

Q: What is happening in Scotland?

A: These changes only apply in England and Wales. In Scotland OV services will continue to be delivered as now.

Q: What is the impact on the number of vets employed by APHA?

A: There is no impact on the number of Veterinary Officers employed within APHA as a result of these changes. APHA's veterinary strategy defines the future scope of veterinary work within the agency.

Q: If I wish to continue carrying out Government funded veterinary work, how do I do so?

A: You will need to maintain OV Modular accreditation and APHA authorisation to carry out OV work. You will also need to make contact with a regional Delivery Partner or Partners and discuss the possibility of being contracted to carry out Government funded veterinary work on their behalf (this may be through a sub-contracted business).

Q: Under the new contracts, who should farmers and livestock keepers contact to arrange TB tests?

A: Farmers' and livestock keepers' primary point of contact for making TB testing arrangements is their regional Delivery Partner, and Delivery Partner's contact details will be included in TB test notification letters from 1 April in Wales and 1 May in England. The Delivery Partner will establish the farmer's OV preference and will ensure that arrangements for the test are in place.

Q: If I'm contracted to work for a Delivery Partner, will I still be able to carry out private TB testing?

A: Yes, private TB testing will continue as at present.

Q: If I have a query about the amount I've been paid for Government funded work managed by a Delivery Partner, who should I take this up with?

A: All queries regarding contractual arrangements for TB testing (for both bovines and non-bovines) and other OV work (such as Anthrax reporting and Brucellosis testing) taking place within the new arrangements should be referred to the regional Delivery Partner.

Q: If I am unable to complete a TB test, who should I advise first?

A: You should inform your sub-contracted practice who in turn will notify your regional Delivery Partner. The matter may then be referred to APHA.

Q: Who is my first point of contact if I suspect Notifiable Disease?

A: There will be no changes to the reporting arrangements regarding Notifiable Disease. OVs should still continue to report any suspicion of Notifiable Disease to the Duty Vet at their local APHA office.

Q: If I have queries about Government policy on disease control, who should I refer to?

A: Information and guidance about disease control can be found on the APHA and Defra sections of the Gov.uk website and on the Scottish and Welsh Government's websites. If you are unable to find the information you are seeking you should contact your APHA regional office.

Q: If I have concerns about the standard of testing facilities or health and safety matters on farm, who should I refer to?

A: OVs are responsible for completing a risk assessment regarding their own health and safety when conducting on-farm testing and inspection for APHA. APHA will support OVs in any appropriately evidenced decision to withdraw from a test on health and safety grounds. It is not appropriate to cut corners on the test procedure on the grounds of health and safety. If the test cannot be conducted properly for health and safety reasons, it should be abandoned.

Delivery Partners must provide information to farmers and livestock keepers on the standards of handling facilities expected and if the animals are not presented in a safe and efficient manner then the Delivery Partner can decline to do the work; therefore concerns around health and safety should be raised with your Delivery Partner who should discuss them directly with the keeper. If the matter cannot be resolved, the Delivery Partner should refer the issues to the APHA Supplier Liaison Officer (SLO) for the delivery contract. You should not raise these matters with the APHA Duty Vet.

Q: If I witness or if I am affected by a health and safety incident on farm, what should I do?

A: You should contact your veterinary practice or the Delivery Partner. Delivery Partners must notify APHA immediately of any incident occurring in the performance of its obligations under the contract which results in personal injury or where damage to property could lead to personal injury.

Q: If I see evidence of possible ear tag swapping or other interference with the TB test, who should I advise first?

A: Any issue that could result in subsequent enforcement action must be referred to the APHA Duty Vet, who will consider if action by either the Local Authority or the APHA Regulatory Hub is appropriate.

Q: If I make an error in Sam or I experience technical difficulties with the system, who should I contact?

You should contact your local APHA office who will ask you to complete a GEN02 form so the process of correcting the error can commence. You must also advise your Delivery Partner for their records.

If you have a technical issue with Sam you should contact the IBM OV helpdesk as per current arrangements.

Q: Will Tuberculin still be supplied directly from APHA to OV practices?

A: Sufficient supplies of tuberculin will be supplied, free of charge, by APHA. Distribution arrangements will be agreed with regional Delivery Partners to identify the most efficient means for delivery of Tuberculin supplies, ensuring the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) regulations are met.