

Twenty-fourth Report of Session 2022-23

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Redevelopment of Defra's animal health infrastructure

Introduction from the Committee

Animal disease outbreaks have major impacts on farmers and rural communities, and the UK food industry and trade. This has been demonstrated by outbreaks such as Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis (BSE), Foot and Mouth disease and most recently Avian Influenza. The National Audit Office estimated that the 2001 Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak cost the public sector over £3 billion and the private sector over £5 billion based on prices at that time (respectively over £4.6 billion and £7.7 billion in 2020–21 prices). Some impacts are not quantifiable such as the mental health effects in rural communities. COVID-19 has highlighted the breadth of impact a zoonotic disease outbreak (diseases that can be transmitted from animals to humans) can have.

The Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra or the department) leads government policy on animal health in England. The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) is an executive agency of the Department and is responsible for the delivery of the Department's policy objectives in this area. The APHA investigates and responds to emerging animal disease outbreaks, as well as undertaking long-term research into animal diseases. The APHA's Weybridge site is the UK's primary science capability for managing threats from animal diseases. Following a long period of inadequate management and under investment in the Weybridge site, the Department has put in place its Weybridge redevelopment programme. The Department's current estimate is that the Programme will cost £2.8bn over 15 years.

Based on a report by the National Audit Office, the Committee took evidence on 13 July 2022 from Defra, the APHA and the UK Chief Veterinary Officer. The Committee published its report on 16 November 2022. This is the government's response to the Committee's report.

Relevant reports

- NAO report: [Improving the UK's science capability for managing animal diseases](#) – Session 2022-23 (HC 64)
- PAC report: [Redevelopment of Defra's animal health infrastructure](#) – Session 2022-23 (HC 42)

Government response to the Committee

1. PAC conclusion: We are greatly concerned that the UK government is not sufficiently prioritising the threat from animal diseases.

1a. PAC recommendation: The Department must be more effective in highlighting the significant threat from animal diseases and ensure that the next update to the National Risk Register adequately reflects the seriousness of this threat.

1.1 The government disagrees with the Committee's recommendation.

1.2 The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) already highlights the threat from animal diseases in the National Risk Register (NRR). In the most recent Register, Defra has updated with additional threats identified as being the highest impacts for the

different livestock sectors, including African horse sickness and African swine fever. Defra will continue to contribute actively to NRR processes.

1.3 The National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) covers all possible biological threats, risks to infrastructure and security and deliberate threats, including animal health. The same scoring methodology applies to all threats, weighted to prioritise public health and environmental impact. Animal diseases score less highly against threats where high numbers of human fatalities or long-term environmental impacts are likely.

1.4 The effective action provided by Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) Weybridge is one reason why animal health risk scores as it does. The science that takes place there – and across the country – is a strong mitigation, controlling and reducing threat to the public and environment. These threats are regularly reviewed and added to as new threats emerge.

1.5 Defra has its own risk assessment process for more immediate biological threats and consequential impact. Monthly risk reporting (for animal, plant and invasive species threats) informs the department's internal risk management processes.

1.6 Defra Chairs the Human and Animal Infections Risk & Surveillance group (HAIRS), which was active throughout the COVID-19 pandemic providing risk assessments for zoonotic and reverse zoonotic threats from SARS-CoV-2. The chair participants in the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), and the Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens where new and emerging zoonotic disease threats are raised.

1.7 Defra co-funds the International Natural Hazard Forward Look, providing weekly expert advice to government on emerging hazards overseas. Defra funds the development of a public facing platform improving international communication of significant threats.

1b. PAC recommendation: The Department should also write to the Committee after the next National Risk Register update and explain the rationale behind the new ranking for animal diseases.

1.8 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: June 2023

1.9 The department will update the Committee after the next National Security Risk Assessment is conducted with an update on how animal diseases are reflected. This update will also describe the advice received from the SAGE sub-group, Science Advisory Council for Exotic Diseases (SAC-ED), which was recently asked to advise on the current NSRA work.

2. PAC conclusion: The Department has allowed the Weybridge site to deteriorate to a completely unacceptable degree, through a combination of inadequate management and under investment.

2. PAC recommendation: The Department and HM Treasury must learn lessons from Weybridge and ensure that the situation is not repeated with the Department's other key infrastructure or more widely across the UK's important national infrastructure. The Department's Treasury Minute response must include details of how it is implementing an asset management strategy for the Weybridge site and how it is implementing lessons learned in developing its new facilities management contract.

2.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: March 2023

2.2 The Asset Management Policy, Asset Management Plan, Weybridge Campus Strategy, (including Development Control Plan), are on target to be fully adopted by Quarter 4 of 2022-23. Asset Management lessons learnt have been included in the procurement for the new Workplace and Facilities Management contract and these are set out below.

2.3 The planned Target Operating Model (TOM) post contract commencement will deliver an operational asset strategy from a bespoke blend of industry standard maintenance standards. The Service and Facilities Group 20 (SFG20) - the industry definitive standard for building maintenance specifications) and the Health Technical Memorandum (HTM) - an industry standard set by the NHS, will drive asset maintenance. This regime will provide the asset data and condition information, used in conjunction with the campus building strategy, to create the forward maintenance register and subsequent replacement plans.

2.4 The procurement has focussed on evaluating bidders against their capability and capacity, through science specific evaluation to deliver services to the Weybridge estate. To drive a strong technical response, bidders are being assessed on a 70:30 Quality: Cost ratio. All bidders have had a site tour and briefing from APHA Directors and the department's Chief Engineer about site requirements. To be successful each bidder must demonstrate capability to deliver to the standards required.

2.5 The future service provider's sub-contracting model is being tested in evaluation to ensure a balance of technical specialism and resilience. Once contracted the service provider will have full access to incumbent sub-contractors to enable knowledge retention. A key area of focus is the increase in capacity and capability of the Facilities Management team. Weybridge will have a dedicated Technical Services team with an increase of around 50% in technical management.

3. PAC conclusion: The Weybridge site is continually vulnerable to a major breakdown which would severely impact the APHA's operations including responding to disease outbreaks.

3. PAC recommendation: As a matter of urgency, the Department and the APHA need to stress test their contingency plans for a major breakdown at the Weybridge site and how they would cope with a significant animal disease outbreak which coincided with a major breakdown. In its Treasury Minute response, the Department should provide assurance about the strength of its contingency plans.

3.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: June 2023

3.2 The department and APHA have comprehensive business continuity plans which seek to mitigate and minimise the risk inherent in the aging facilities. These plans are regularly reviewed and will be next reviewed once the Weybridge Development Control Plan (WDCP) is finalised in early 2023.

3.3 In addition to business continuity planning, the agency and department run regular critical incident exercises to test business response and readiness for a wide variety of scenarios from fire through power and water supply interruptions and potential loss of facilities.

3.4 The agency is in the process of developing a more detailed understanding of the vulnerabilities at Weybridge site (as distinct from facility condition). This work will identify if and how capabilities can be delivered from alternate locations or facilities. The Weybridge facility

and the science that takes place there – and across the country – acts as a strong mitigating factor that controls and reduces the threat to the public and the environment.

3.5 The government is already in conversation with other cross government laboratories and partners to identify opportunities to co-ordinate, utilise or support each other in the face of UK wide critical events, multiple events such as coincident animal disease outbreaks, cascade events, new and exotic zoonotic threats and pandemics and so on.

3.6 The agency also partners to undertake cross-government animal, zoonotic and public health emergency exercises every six months, the next of which is planned in 2023.

4. PAC conclusion: It is not yet certain that there will be sufficient investment in developing the Weybridge site capacity to ensure the UK's long-term resilience to animal diseases.

4. PAC recommendation: The Department needs to work with HM Treasury to establish a more certain funding position for the Weybridge redevelopment programme. In doing this, the Department will need to improve its understanding of the benefits of the programme to support the investment case. In addition to its Treasury Minute response, the Department should provide the Committee with a further update on the status of Weybridge's funding shortfall by Summer 2023.

4.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: Summer 2024

4.2 The department will continue work across the first tranche of the programme (through to 2024-25) to refine its understanding of the costs and benefits, which will feed into the main investment decision for the redevelopment of the site, required in summer 2024, ahead of the main build phase for Science Capability for Animal Health Programme (SCAH). It will update the Committee via Treasury Minutes on progress. In the meantime, £198 million has been allocated over the current Spending Review 2021, to enable preparatory work to progress on site.

5. PAC conclusion: There remains substantial uncertainty over the costs of the Weybridge redevelopment programme.

5. PAC recommendation: The Department needs to continue to develop its cost estimate and be clear where, and how much, uncertainty remains. This should include the use of cost ranges to illustrate the level of uncertainty.

5.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: Summer 2024

5.2 The cost estimate will continue to be developed over the current tranche, through to the main investment decision in 2024, including how uncertainty is reflected in those costings. It is the intention of the department to introduce cost ranges.

6. PAC conclusion: There is a risk that the Weybridge redevelopment programme will not have sufficient staff capability and capacity to manage the Programme effectively.

6. PAC recommendation: The Department needs to ensure that it has the right staff capability and capacity to deliver the Weybridge redevelopment programme. It should report back to us once it has finalised its wider plans for staff reductions setting out how it plans to ensure it has the staff it needs to deliver the Programme.

6.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: June 2023

6.2 The programme continues to recruit to its agreed role profile for the current Tranche through to 2024-25. The department is currently reviewing capacity and capability requirements for the full lifecycle of the programme and continues to use all available levers to secure expert resources including specialist allowances and via its supply chain.

7. PAC conclusion: The redevelopment of Weybridge is a large construction programme with a range of commercial risks that will need careful management.

7. PAC recommendation: The Department should report back to us in six months on progress in developing its commercial strategy and specifically on how it:

- **Intends to structure its contracts and manage their integration effectively; and**
- **Will ensure there is adequate competition for the main construction contracts.**

7.1 The government agrees with the Committee's recommendation.

Target implementation date: June 2023

7.2 The department will update the Committee in six months via Treasury Minute. The Commercial Strategy Phase II has been endorsed by the SCAH Programme Board. Phase III of the Strategy is in development with a planned completion by Quarter 3 of 2023. By May 2023, the programme will have options around Science Hub form of contract and competition, including packaging approach and the contracting environment to manage sub programme integration. This will reflect early market engagement to ensure the department's approach will attract sufficient market interest.