



Cumann Lucht Bainistíochta Contae agus Cathrach
County and City Management Association

CCMA Response to:

A Review of the Official Control System in Ireland and Opportunities for Improvement - Scientific Committee of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland

May, 2016

Local Authorities (LAs) are responsible for the supervision of low throughput food businesses (slaughter halls and meat production premises) under service contract to the FSAI. Official controls are performed by veterinary inspectors supported in some cases by contract veterinary staff. The frequency and intensity of inspections and audits in establishments are prioritised by risk assessment of the premises.

The “Review of the Official Control System in Ireland and Opportunities for Improvement” document provides an overview of the current official food control system in Ireland and is based on an independent report that included consultation with stakeholders (Evaluation of the Official Food Control Inspection System in Ireland Final report to the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, ICF International, 08 December 2014).

The report acknowledges that there is much in Ireland’s official food control inspection system that is working well and states that dedicated staff are applying coherent procedures to inspect food business operators and that the available evidence suggests there is effective enforcement and oversight.

Ireland has one of the highest performing food safety systems amongst the target group (17 OECD countries) as established by the 2014 Report of the Conference Board of Canada. This is a good base from which to commence a strategic review of the Official Controls system as it indicates strong credibility within the sector (LA veterinary sector, DAFM, HSE, SFPA and ultimately the FSAI).

However the independent consultant’s report identified operational, structural and strategic issues that need to be addressed to strengthen the effectiveness of the official control inspection system. The issues identified were:

Roles and Responsibilities: The effectiveness of intra and inter-agency cooperation, collaboration and coordination and the extent to which agency representatives are free from conflicts of interest in undertaking control activities. The report looks at the current role of the FSAI and its relationship with the four main agencies who deliver official controls under service contract. The current role of the FSAI is that of auditor. However the report outlines two other potential roles. One of these roles would be for FSAI to assume full control, with agency staff reporting directly, but this is not seen as feasible. The other role is that FSAI have greater responsibility in interrogating data and

acting upon this information by having greater authority in dictating policy and resources dedicated to official controls, and that this enhanced role for the FSAI was worthy of consideration. Another common theme in the review was the apparent lack of effective sanctions by FSAI over several of the official agencies, as well as potential conflict of interest within the agencies, as many have dual functions of promoting the food industry as well as policing it.

Control Activities Implementation: How effectively the agencies prioritise and verify control implementation.

Enforcement: The extent to which sufficient powers are available to the FSAI and the official agencies and the use of effective, proportionate and dissuasive enforcement measures.

Reporting and Transparency: The effectiveness of data collection and reporting systems to demonstrate control implementation and the extent to which there is effective information sharing. It seems apparent that whilst each individual sector is performing well and meeting its EU reporting obligations, comprehensive and consistent reporting both remains a challenge. The division of reporting responsibilities between agencies obviously presents a challenge for FSAI in meeting its statutory obligations. Each reporting agency cooperates with the other but this does not appear to be systemised. The key finding from a management point of view is the need to develop a more robust and effective performance management system.

The report suggests a range of KPI's to monitor the performance of agencies in their performance of official controls and in delivering service contracts. In this instance it might be useful for the CCMA to seek early engagement with FSAI in advance of any roll out of KPI's so that metrics might be agreed and flagged well in advance.

FSAI have a history of publishing all reports and this has been a concern in the past in relation to the activities of LA's. An issue several years ago, following FSAI audit of four LA's whereby they then intended to publish the audits on a per county basis, was strongly challenged by LAVS on the basis that there would be a lack of anonymity. Again reflecting the common theme of this report, that the current LA system is 'fragmented', means that any reporting on an individual county basis, will by default identify not only the inspector (as typically only one) but also the Food Business by virtue of reporting the 'activity' involved. When this was successfully argued with FSAI they agreed to aggregate the report and publish it as a region.

Going forward it will be important that not only are the KPI's agreed in advance and generally found to be sensible and productive, but that the issue of reporting same is also agreed, and that the anonymity of both inspector and food business is preserved by aggregation, be that reporting per region or on a country at large basis? However in the absence of any shared services/regionalisation and in the context of individual service contracts continuing, this may have to be difficult to challenge.

Staff Resources and Expertise: The extent to which there is effective resource distribution across control activities and that staff have sufficient expertise and experience to effectively carry out their control activities. The Report does highlight the need for extra training, staff resources and financial resources to allow robust systems be embedded in work practices.

This review recommends a number of reforms to the official food control system to make the system more effective. The recommendations cover a wide range of topics including performance management; data collection; funding; consistency of official controls; internal audit; stock of risk; enforcement powers; flexibility arrangements; institutional conflicts of interest; aligning resources to risk; expertise in specialist areas.

Some recommendations have already been addressed at least in part by the LA sector including data reporting through OAPI, the use of documented procedures and internal auditing. Other recommendations will require cross agency cooperation.

Whilst it is recognised that the recommendations have merit, implementation will put pressure on resources particularly funding and staff deployment.

The sector acknowledges that the report recognises the particular difficulties faced by the LA sector in maintaining continuity and consistency of service given the small size of their veterinary teams and the fragmented nature of the service.

The report recognises the challenges associated with delivering a national service for official controls through multiple small independent local authorities include a lack of critical mass in each local authority area and limited availability of regional cover when County Veterinary Officers (CVOs) are absent. Local authorities also have low levels of flexibility in terms of matching resource demands to staffing levels. This includes, for example, difficulties associated with redeploying LA veterinary officers from areas with relatively few premises to areas with a higher number of premises. LAs have also faced difficulties replacing retired LA veterinary officers due to the recruitment moratorium in the public sector.

In order to address the recommendations the LA sector recognises that structural changes will be required and agrees with the report conclusion that regionalisation offers the best solution. The findings of this review justify the proposed development of a regional veterinary service particularly in relation to the delivery of the FSAI service level agreement and might influence those who presently object to the concept. There does seem to be an assumption within the ICF that regionalisation of LAVS will occur. The impact of the ongoing prohibition in public sector recruitment is a major issue. It is also essential that adequate financial, ICT and other resources, in addition to human resources, will be essential to guarantee the quality of and compliance with food protection needs and requirements.

The sector has already developed regionalisation proposals for the service in The Regional Veterinary Services Implementation Plan (CCMA, 18/03/2016).

The Local Government Sectoral Plan proposes a three regional approach based on the Putting People First Action Programme for Effective Local Government. Three regions is an existing sectoral norm. Oversight is provided by National and Regional Steering Groups for Veterinary Services along with a Regional Veterinary Officer in each of the three regions to lead the veterinary team.

The National Steering Group provides one central contact point for other official control agencies so allowing for efficient communication between the organisations to facilitate the proposed cross agency collaboration. Intra sectoral co-ordination and collaboration are essential to the robustness and embedding quality in future service delivery.

The desirability of a performance management system based on realistic targets with resource aligned to work load is recognised. In consultation with the FSAI this could be integrated into the Annual Veterinary Services Plan.

Regionalisation would facilitate progression of a number of the recommendations such as consistency of official controls, internal audit, consistency of enforcement, oversight and specialisation by providing the structure and critical mass essential to such developments.

Reducing the number of service contracts to three would reduce the administrative burden on the FSAI. Periodic review and assessment of the revised control system in collaboration with stakeholders, will be essential.

Conclusion

The LA Sector welcomes the outcome of this Review of the Official Control System in Ireland as positive. Many of the conclusions of the independent report are in agreement with those already reached by the sector. Provided adequate resource is forthcoming the sector is of the opinion that the recommendations of the review would be best implemented through the structures proposed in the Regional Veterinary Services Implementation Plan.

References:

1. A Review of the Official Control System in Ireland and Opportunities for Improvement; Scientific Committee of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland 2016
2. Evaluation of the Official Food Control Inspection System in Ireland Final report to the Food Safety Authority of Ireland; ICF International, 08 December 2014
3. Regional Veterinary Services Implementation Plan; CCMA, 18/03/2016

(Note a slight typo in Final Draft Report, end of 3.0 refers to recommendations in section 5.0, whereas the recommendations are in 6.0)