House of Commons
Welsh Affairs Committee

The future of AHVLA services in Wales

Volume II

Additional written evidence

Ordered by the House of Commons
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The Welsh Affairs Committee

The Welsh Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Office of the Secretary of State for Wales (including relations with the National Assembly for Wales).

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Additional written evidence may be published on the internet only.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Adrian Jenner (Clerk), Anwen Rees (Inquiry Manager), Lori Verwaerde (Senior Committee Assistant), Dabinder Rai (Committee Assistant), and Jessica Bridges-Palmer (Media Officer).

Contacts

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List of additional written evidence

(published in Volume II on the Committee’s website www.parliament.uk/welshcom)

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Written evidence

Written evidence submitted by Dr Ruth Watkins

Statement to oppose reducing staff and services at the VLA laboratories in Carmarthen and Aberystwyth:

— The significant reduction in staff will result in significant loss of service and the eventual closure of one or both these small laboratories. See para. 1.

— Reduction or loss of laboratory diagnostic facilities in Wales will decrease vets ability to provide modern standards of animal disease management and welfare. See paras. 2. and 3.

— Loss of professional ethos in Wales. See para. 3.

— Laboratory diagnosis is essential for the practice of modern veterinary (and human) medicine. See paras. 4. and 5.

— VLA pathology laboratories in Wales ensure local animal health problems are addressed and communicated locally. See para. 6.

— Develop the Veterinary Laboratory service in Wales, don’t close it down. See para. 7.

1. I have heard there has been a proposal to close both the VLA laboratories in Wales, at Carmarthen and Aberystwyth. Now there is a proposal to reduce the staff by 10 and to reduce further the services the pathology laboratories offer. Will this result in a post mortem service only? The reduction in staff by 10 is very significant and will amount to the same thing in the end: it will not be worth maintaining and running the two VLA laboratories for a reduced skeleton service such as post mortems only, so they will be closed.

2. Agriculture is the biggest industry in Wales. The VLA laboratories are a vital support to the vets in Wales and through them to the farmers as well as pet owners. Yet in Wales there is no Veterinary School or Veterinary Research Institute, and now it is proposed to close the only two VLA pathology laboratories. Wales is entirely reliant upon England and Scotland for veterinary expertise, training and animal hospitals, and a pathology laboratory service.

3. This is surely an abnegation of responsibility by the Welsh Government. It also reduces the opportunities and professional aspiration of young people in Wales who must leave Wales to acquire veterinary training. Scotland whilst having twice the human population of Wales but perhaps less farm animals than Wales, has two Veterinary Schools, one VLA laboratory in Edinburgh and the Moredun Institute—the latter provides a series of lectures for farmers in Wales; every lecture I have been to has been packed by farmers with standing room only. Clearly there is a hunger from farmers for good scientific information. England has five Veterinary Schools and some 10 VLA laboratories and research facilities such as Pirbright and Weybridge. Without even these two VLA laboratories Wales will be completely parasitic upon the other UK nations for modern veterinary medicine.

4. In modern medicine, both human and veterinary, it is essential to make an accurate diagnosis to manage disease. Until the nineteenth century diagnosis was a matter of opinion based on signs and symptoms but in the era of scientific medicine it is necessary to confirm or refute a clinical diagnosis, or make one where none has been made at post mortem for instance, by laboratory analysis. Appropriate management can then be instituted. Clinical understanding and acumen is also greatly enhanced by learning the correct diagnosis. Whilst it may not be necessary in all instances that the vet attends to send samples to the laboratory, in some it is either essential or highly desirable and the welfare of animals is greatly benefited by the correct diagnosis and management. Without any laboratory support at all in Wales the vets might as well be working in rural Africa.

5. Infectious disease diagnosis is an example of an essential service from a diagnostic laboratory. This will need communication with the vet, for example, to discuss the differential diagnosis, obtain the right samples, the correct containers, interpretation of the results and the diagnosis, also finally management such as treatment or vaccination. The same clinical symptoms and signs may have a number of different causes, and there is always the unexpected—such as Bluetongue serotype 8 infection that emerged in Holland: the initial diagnosis was made by a laboratory based vet with an interest in infection who came out to a farm with sick animals.

6. Access to laboratories for vets allows the vet the opportunity for assistance in differential diagnosis or management as the laboratory staff have their areas of expertise. Educational opportunities such as the Sheep Veterinary Society meeting for vets held at the Carmarthen VLA laboratory where for example a presentation was given by one of the staff on resistance to Fasinex (used to treat liver fluke) in some local sheep flocks. The pathologist had done a study in response to a problem that some local farmers experienced with their sheep. This is clearly of value to local veterinary practitioners who can advise on effective management of this problem and it would not have been picked up by a VLA laboratory somewhere in the South of England for example.

7. If any action is to be taken I think the laboratories should be developed to provide more tests and greater educational opportunities for both vets and farmers. They could be integrated to complement each other and provide a more accessible service for Welsh farmers with for example online information such as that provided by the Scottish Agricultural College, SAC, that has excellent web advice on fluke infection for example.
Ev w2 Welsh Affairs Committee: Evidence

I am utterly opposed to the reduction in staff and service of the VLA laboratories at Carmarthen and Aberystwyth. Please reconsider this retrograde step that you propose.

Dr Ruth Watkins MBBS, MRCP, FRCPath (retd. Clinical Virologist)

Now a small farmer with a herd of Welsh Black Cattle, a flock of some 60 breeding ewes, a few chickens, dogs and cats. I am an associate member of the Sheep Veterinary Society.

I am proud to live in Wales and have a small native plant farm, and happy for my details to be known. I don’t consider any of the information I have given to be confidential.

November 2011

Written evidence submitted by Rhodri Glyn Thomas AM

1. Executive summary:
   (a) The proposal for the downgrading/centralisation of services away from the Carmarthen and Aberystwyth laboratories appears to have been made on the basis of possible financial benefits as opposed to agricultural welfare.
   (b) The proposal for the downgrading accepts that demand on the services will not change.
   (c) The proposals do not adequately demonstrate how the current level and speed of testing can be upheld with a reduced number of laboratories.
   (d) Current proposals from the AHVLA will result in the loss of 12 specialist laboratory jobs by 2013.
   (e) The sustainability of the laboratories in the future has not been demonstrated.
   (f) Welsh farms account for approximately 11% of the total UK cattle. It would therefore be disproportional to remove vital testing procedures completely out of the country.
   (g) Conflicting statements have been made by both Welsh and UK Governments regarding consultation. This has acted as a barrier to the consultation process.
   (h) Carmarthenshire in west Wales is the country’s highest producing milk region. The centralising of laboratory services out of Wales is “out of sync” with the food production sector in Wales and could potentially have disastrous consequences on the local, rural economy.
   (i) UK Minister of State, James Paice MP, has confirmed a 24 hour delay for diagnosing livestock diseases would be unacceptable. The AHVLA has failed to demonstrate how data analysis can be conducted within the current timescales.

2. Brief biography of author:
   (a) Rhodri Glyn Thomas is a Member of the National Assembly for Wales and has represented the Carmarthen East and Dinefwr constituency since the creation of the Assembly in 1999.
   (b) Mr Thomas has served as the Welsh Government’s Minister for Heritage.
   (c) Mr Thomas has served as Chair of the Assembly’s Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee.
   (d) He has also served as Chair of the Rural Development Sub-Committee.
   (e) He has served as Chair of the Culture Committee and Chair of the Health Committee.
   (f) Mr Thomas is his party’s spokesperson on European matters and serves as a member of the Committee of Regions. He has made a catalogue of representations on behalf of the Welsh Assembly in Europe in relation to the Common Agricultural Policy.
   (g) Mr Thomas has also served on the European Ad Hoc Commission, established towards end of 2010 to prepare a Committee of the Regions view on the future EU Budget. In this role, Mr Thomas has underlined the importance of the EU to Wales, in terms of Wales engaging in the international arena, the need for a common approach across the EU to the major challenges facing Europe and the world. He has reiterated the importance of a strong EU budget in helping to address these challenges, underlining in particular the benefits that EU funding brings to Wales notably the Structural Funds and CAP, drawing particular attention to how essential this is to communities in remote and rural parts of Wales.

3. The report from the AHVLA accepts that the demand on services will not decrease as a result of centralising testing services. Taking into consideration the number of skilled job losses throughout the network, outsourcing would be inevitable. This decision contradicts what appears to be the main purpose of centralisation—cost savings.

4. Whilst minimum services would be retained in Carmarthen and Aberystwyth, such as Post Mortem examinations, the AHVLA has said this is only “while a review is undertaken of the best way to deliver this work in the future”. There is no future security for even the most minimal services in the two west Wales sites should the current proposals be accepted. This is a fundamentally unacceptable position to support Wales’ largest industry.
5. I am concerned by the conflicting statements made by both Welsh Government and UK Government Ministers. The two governments are presenting differing statements as to who was or was not involved in the consultation programme. The Welsh Government has stated it was not consulted by the UK Government on the downgrading proposals. The UK Government has stated the Chief Veterinary Officer for Wales has been involved in the consultation. This is extremely worrying contradiction and is a barrier to those who wish to raise genuine concerns to the Inquiry.

6. The UK Minister of State in DEFRA has confirmed in the House of Commons that a 24 hour delay in diagnosing livestock diseases would be an acceptable timescale. If vital testing services were to be removed from Wales in their entirety, such a delay would be inevitable. The farming industry is dependent on swift analysis from laboratories and we cannot afford the delays that will be caused by sending information further away. The downgrading proposals do not justify how the current timescales of testing would be achieved within a centralised service.

7. Carmarthenshire, within west Wales, is the country’s highest producing milk region. This is a high-density livestock area. Aberystwyth is already a centre of excellence for the work it has developed on parasitology. The centralising of laboratory services is “out of sync” with the food production sector in Wales and could potentially have disastrous consequences on the local rural economy.

8. At Carmarthen many samples are delivered by three large local practices by hand. This face-to-face contact provides an important intelligence gathering exercise and makes this work invaluable for the purposes of surveillance. This decision downgrading proposals will not only mean a disproportionate cut on services provided in Wales, but that Wales will not have a bespoke laboratory service unlike both England and Scotland.

9. In conclusion, the laboratories in Carmarthen and Aberystwyth are vitally important. Their closure will prove detrimental to animal health, to the agricultural industry and to the Welsh economy.

November 2011

Written evidence submitted by Milfeddygon ProStock Vets

The closure of the laboratory services at the Veterinary Laboratory Agency (VLA) in Carmarthen would have seriously negative consequences for Animal Health and Welfare in Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Glamorgan.

Our 100% farm animal practice with over 40,000 bovines registered looks after animals in all of these counties. On a daily basis we personally deliver samples to the VLA in Carmarthen.

These samples vary from nasal swabs and broncho-alveolar lavage for diagnosis of Bovine Respiratory Disease, fecal samples for parasitology to mastitis milk samples for culture and skin scrapings for ectoparasites. We get instant diagnosis, usually the same day!

Most of the results come to us via email, sometimes by telephone first, followed by a report via email. The emails are checked at least three times a day and downloaded immediately on our password protected online “Cloud-storage”. Vets can access the laboratory results anywhere immediately.

Our clients expect to get their results as soon as possible and whenever the veterinary surgeon in charge of taking the sample will tell the farmer when he can expect to have the result. We have mobile numbers for all our clients as well as landline numbers.

All our vets have an extremely good relationship with the laboratory staff at the VLA. We discuss our constraints and cases and talk about sample quality, limitations of the tests and even have a look through the microscope to see what “they” look like.

To me, losing the laboratory services at VLA Carmarthen would be a disaster for the animals we look after because there will be a significant delay in getting results back and this will result in unnecessary suffering and spread of disease. But it would also be a major loss to the veterinary surgeons because we will lose a wealth of experience and expertise that is present in the lab.

We have already decided that we will open our own laboratory if the VLA laboratory services in Carmarthen will cease to exist. The sad thing is that we will have to start from scratch and all the expertise present at the VLA in Carmarthen will be lost forever.

I hope sincerely that DEFRA and the AHVLA will reconsider the decision about the closure of the laboratory services at the VLA in Carmarthen.

November 2011
Written evidence submitted by Simon Hart MP

I am writing in relation to the forthcoming Welsh Affairs Select Committee visit to Carmarthen to look at the future of the AHV A laboratory, and I hope that some of the local information contained may assist the Committee. I apologise if this submission is a little late, but I have been out of the country over the last few days.

I understand that although it is partially subsidised by the tax payer, farmers currently have to pay for the service provided by the laboratory. In the event of its closure cost and time constraints could result in some farmers being reluctant or unable to transport carcasses over a longer distance; which could in turn create a situation where some diseases may go unrecorded and therefore unnoticed. This would lead to farmers not receiving a proper diagnosis for things like sheep abortions, and therefore even greater financial loss if left untreated. It is also unclear whether the current system of laboratory operatives visiting some farms to undertake work would continue; a facility which is of immense benefit.

I believe there is therefore an argument to support the continuation of labs in high cattle/farm animal density areas, particularly to ensure that in the event of a major UK disease outbreak it is possible for farmers to receive the fastest results and advice possible.

Under the Freedom of Information Act I obtained the information enclosed with this letter detailing the number of separate diagnostic submissions made for post mortem diagnosis to AHVLA Carmarthen in the twelve months to September 2011. I hope it is of interest, however I should add that I am not aware of the geographical area they cover.

Finally I should add that there has only been limited reaction to this locally, indeed I have not received any representations from employees or farmers at the time of writing. However, that should not imply that the issue is not important to the area, nor that we should not strive to maintain at least one laboratory in West Wales.

November 2011

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<tr>
<td>TC0001</td>
<td>Post mortem examination: Farmed poultry and game birds older than two weeks and farmed rabbits</td>
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<tr>
<td>TC0002</td>
<td>Post mortem examination: Sheep, goats, deer and pigs</td>
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<td>TC0003</td>
<td>Post mortem examination: Cattle over six months</td>
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<td>Post mortem examination: Camelids</td>
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<td>Post mortem examination: Calves (up to six months), camelids (up to 12 months)</td>
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<td>TC0537</td>
<td>Post mortem examination: Badger</td>
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Written evidence submitted by Biobest Laboratories Ltd

— Veterinary practices in Wales already send samples to laboratories throughout the UK whether for farm or companion animals.
— There is a reasonably efficient postal service that permits delivery of samples throughout the UK.
— Regional laboratories that test low numbers of samples are not likely to be cost effective and the fact they receive few samples demonstrates they are not in fact valued by vets in practice.
— The “surveillance” subsidy provided to Government laboratories for farm animal diagnostic testing makes it difficult for the private sector to provide services in all areas as it does for companion animals. If this subsidy were removed all services would efficiently be provided by the private sector with the possible exception of a Post Mortem service.

1. Biobest are a private sector veterinary laboratory based near Edinburgh. We test samples from all over the UK and cover all species including farm animals. Many veterinary practices with a farm animal interest start using us through some of the sponsored pharmaceutical company schemes for viral, bacterial and parasite monitoring or because they have a Hi Health Herdcare (one of the two largest cattle health schemes for endemic infectious disease) member as a client. We then aim to encourage more general use of our services beyond this.

2. We receive and test farm animal samples from Western Wales and South West England as well as the far North of Scotland and the Northern Isles. For example we currently have Fluke and Ostertagia samples from both beef and dairy herds arriving every day under sponsored testing with costs partly or fully paid by pharmaceutical companies. The only service we do not offer is post mortems; the distances involved in transporting carcasses would be too high and the current subsidised Post Mortem service would make competition difficult even locally.
3. The Government subsidised laboratory testing services of AHVLA in England and Wales, AFBI in Northern Ireland, and SAC in Scotland make no commercial sense. There is no need for standard laboratory tests to receive support. In companion animal testing there is a strong and competitive network of private laboratories offering every possible test at excellent prices and a range of service levels. A number of laboratories submit companion animal data into recently established databases at no cost to Government. The subsidy given to Government laboratories for farm animal work prevents the establishment of a fully competitive market in all test areas that would drive up service and drive down price. If economically priced PMs are required for either disease surveillance or to assist farm animal businesses to thrive then financial support may be required, although the subsidised PM in itself may lead to an approach to each PM that could not be justified for diagnosis or surveillance in a commercial setting. It is true that vets in practice value the support provided over the phone by VIOs both north and south of the Scottish border, however these individuals would simply be employed in the private sector if the private labs were performing the test work. Expertise in the tests Biobest offer and phone support on these tests and disease control is the key selling point for Biobest to differentiate ourselves from the “number only” labs such as NML and Eclipse.

4. In summary the AHVLA rationalisation should proceed and all support for laboratory testing of farm animals should be withdrawn. DEFRA should support the IT to allow all veterinary laboratories to report into the surveillance system and if necessary make a small contribution to such laboratories for the time required to generate the reports from their Laboratory Information Management Systems.

November 2011

Written evidence submitted by Mr J Swift

I write to inform you that I think the decision to close laboratory testing in the Regional Veterinary Lab at Carmarthen is wrong. It will result in delayed diagnosis due to postal delay.

I have always received an excellent rapid service from Carmarthen, and think it is wrong of you to stop this whilst maintaining a better service in England. We contribute to the running of DEFRA and so Wales should not be treated as second class.

January 2012

Written evidence submitted by Mr C Williams

I cannot understand why the Tory Government is stopping laboratory testing at the AHVLA laboratory in Carmarthen. This is a very bad decision and should be reversed. The postal delays whilst we wait for a diagnosis will be crucial. I have used the Lab on many occasions and have had an excellent service. Also South Wales has lost many government jobs and our tax payers should be treated as fairly as those in England, where they retain their veterinary testing.

From What I have read plenty of savings could be made in AHVLA by reducing International Conferences and travel.

There must be plenty of waste in DEFRA that can be trimmed before our laboratory testing is closed.

January 2012

Written evidence submitted by Malcolm Gittings

Regarding the closure of veterinary testing facilities in Wales; I watched the Welsh Affairs Committee online and I was most disappointed to hear James Paice and Catherine Brown state the two laboratories in Wales have minimal expertise. In my experience of the Carmarthen testing laboratory this is definitely not the case. With worrying on farm problems they have always provided me with a rapid diagnosis, advice and reassurance. Therefore, at least one lab should be retained with a full testing capacity. In Wales, as tax payers we contribute to DEFRA and we should not be deprived of this excellent service within our Principality.

January 2012
Written evidence submitted by the Welsh Government

1. Following the merger of the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency, both executive agencies of Defra, in April 2011 an internal review of regional laboratory services across England and Wales was carried out as part of an aim to identify £3 million of annual savings. Following the review AHVLA announced that its laboratory services work will in future be delivered from fewer locations, based in England. Some £2.4 million of annual savings have been identified resulting from the proposal.

2. There are two regional laboratories in Wales, Carmarthen and Aberystwyth, both of which are affected by the review. Laboratory testing currently carried out at both sites is scheduled to be removed by 31 March 2013. There are currently some 26 laboratory staff at the Welsh sites, 11 of which are working on testing at the two sites will be affected. The withdrawal of services will also affect six sites in England.

3. The majority of the surveillance budget was not part of the devolution of animal health and welfare budgets package agreed with Defra and transferred to Wales in April 2011. Defra undertake surveillance on an England and Wales basis and administer the associated funding. The two laboratory sites in Wales are under the control of Defra and its executive agency, the AHVLA.

4. My officials were first made aware of the outcome of the review in a brief telephone discussion on 5 August 2011 between Nina Purcell, the AHVLA Chief Operating Officer and Dr. Christianne Glossop, Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) Wales, which covered the broad proposals but did not cover the detail of the impact of the proposals affecting Wales. During the discussion the CVO Wales asked for a paper setting out the details.

5. The Review was also discussed at the AHVLA Strategic Advisory Board on 15 August 2011, again in broad terms and it was stated that a detailed paper would follow.

6. On 17 August 2011 Catherine Brown (AHVLA Chief Executive) telephoned CVO Wales about the review and the discussion focussed on the savings the Agency hoped to achieve in implementing the findings of the review. The detailed report of the review, which indicated the impact of the proposals on the two laboratories in Wales, was received by my officials later the same day.

7. The proposed changes were approved by the Defra Minister of State for Agriculture and Food and announced by AHVLA. Although CVO Wales was invited to participate in the AHVLA Sustainable Surveillance Project (ASSP) Welsh Government was not invited to participate in the specific review of laboratory services or comment on the proposals. Following receipt of the report my officials replied to AHVLA on 22 August 2011 that WG had had no opportunity to influence the outcome of the report and it was considered an operational matter for AHVLA. My officials also sought assurances that a laboratory presence will be maintained in Wales and that the changes will not impact on the efficient delivery of laboratory services. On 26 September Dr Christianne Glossop wrote to Nina Purcell, AHVLA Chief Operating Officer raising concerns about the potential impact of the changes on the efficient delivery of laboratory testing in Wales.

8. I understand that none of the sites in Wales or England will be closed as a consequence of this review. AHVLA’s veterinary services work, including post mortem examinations, will continue to be provided by all the current regional laboratory sites. My officials will be engaged in further developments and are particularly mindful of the need to maintain a laboratory presence in Wales for post mortem examinations in light of the distances carcases would need to be transported if examinations were centred in England.

9. During a meeting with the Defra Ministerial team in London on 25 October and an exchange of views on the devolution of animal health and welfare budgets I raised the review of the AHVLA and the future of laboratories in Wales and I expressed my hope for early consultation in future.

10. I met Catherine Brown and Senior Directors of AHVLA on 23 November 2011. At the meeting I stated that there was a high level of concern in Wales about the impact of the laboratories services review in terms of the removal of laboratory testing from Wales and the associated job losses. I emphasised the need to ensure that, in future, early warning and timely consultation by AHVLA on such matters affecting their services and facilities in Wales is essential. I also stated my overall desire to retain the existing sites in Wales and to improve the quality of service to the livestock industry.

11. I understand that the Wales Office had concerns that they were not apprised of the outcome of the report and its impact on services in Wales. Welsh Government officials do not notify Wales Office on matters affecting Wales instigated by UK Government departments or their executive agencies. I understand from the Devolution Guidance Note 4 (DGN 4), issued by the Wales Office, that the Secretary of State for Wales would expect to be consulted by UK Ministerial colleagues on the impact that their proposals will have on Wales. This obligation was not discharged by making the report of the review to the CVO Wales. In this case approval was obtained by AHVLA from the Defra Minister of State.

January 2012