UK SCIENCE PARTNERSHIP FOR ANIMAL AND PLANT HEALTH
MINUTES FROM 26th MARCH 2020 MEETING

Date: Monday 26th March 2020, 13:00 – 14:00
Venue: Video conference - Zoom

Attendees
Chair: Julie Fitzpatrick (independent Chair)
Mike Francis & Ian Toth (independent members)
Gideon Henderson, Nicola Spence & Christine Middlemiss (Defra)
Jef Grainger, Calum Murray (UK Research and Innovation)
Rick Mumford (Food Standards Agency)
Alan Tollervey (DfID)
Alistair Carson (DAERA - Northern Ireland)
Graeme Beale (Scottish Government)
Kath Webster (Animal and Plant Health Agency)
Mark Chappell (Government Property Agency)
Scott Sellers, Mike Sutton-Croft (Defra support)
Sadhana Sharma, Harriet Trewin (BBSRC support)
Secretariat: Chris Jacobs (Defra/UKRI - secretariat)

Apologies:-
Deborah Keith (independent)
Melanie Welham (UK Research and Innovation)
Guy Poppy and Jane Clark (FSA)
Martin Williams (Welsh Government)
Alex Churchill (GO-Science)
Miles Carroll (Public Health England)
Anna Brown (Forestry Commission)
Alison Wallace (Wellcome Trust – observer)

Summary of actions
ACTION 14-1: Secretariat to follow-up (with individuals) outstanding actions from the December 2019 meeting.
ACTION 14-2: Members to rapidly provide the Secretariat with i) a summary of what Covid-19 support their organisations are currently providing – in terms of research, funding calls, facilities, equipment and personnel; and ii) the potential for more to be offered. This will be pulled together into one paper summarising the animal and plant health research support available across the UK. The paper will be fed into the Covid-19 response process by those most closely involved, and also sent to Lord Gardiner and devolved ministers.
ACTION 14-3: The Defra and FSA Chief Scientific Advisers (CSAs) to act as a conduit between the Partnership and the CSA Network/Science Advisory Group on Emergencies (SAGE)/any other relevant science group addressing Covid-19 - keeping others aware of what the Partnership can offer in terms of people/equipment/facilities and passing any requests from those groups back to the Partnership for possible action.
ACTION 14-4: The Partnership should act as a rapid response clearing house to make animal/plant science equipment, facilities and personnel rapidly available in the effort to tackle Covid-19.
ACTION 14-5: The secretariat should schedule an interim video/teleconference in a month or so to review i) progress in supporting government efforts to tackle Covid-19, and ii) whether anything more on this could and should be done collectively by the Partnership.
**ACTION 14-6:** The National Science Capability for Animal Health (SCAH) programme team agreed to keep the Partnership updated on developments as the investment plans are taken forward.

**Welcome, previous minutes/actions and update (Papers 14:1 and 14:2) – 13:00 to 13:05**

**Welcome and minutes of the December meeting:**

1. The Chair welcomed members and thanked them for joining the meeting at such a difficult time (hence why the format/content of the meeting had been changed). The Chair particularly welcomed Graeme Beale to the Partnership, replacing Liam Kelly as the Scottish Government representative. Comments on the December minutes had been received from the Forestry Commission and UKRI and these had now been incorporated. The minutes were therefore formally accepted.

**Paper 14:1 - actions from July meeting:**

1.1 The Chair noted that whilst some of the actions had been completed, there were a number which were outstanding or where updates had not been received. The secretariat agreed to follow-up with individuals outside the meeting.

**ACTION 14-1:** Secretariat to follow-up (with individuals) outstanding actions from the December 2019 meeting.

**Paper 14:2 – written updates:**

1.2 The Chair thanked the Food Standards Agency, Innovate UK and Defra for providing written updates, and particularly drew attention to the summary of topics discussed at recent Defra monthly biosecurity meetings – included in the update paper for the first time.

**2. Coronavirus (Covid-19) - 13:05 to 13:30**

2.1 The Chair acknowledged that all the member organisations will be coordinating their own urgent responses to Covid-19, but suggested this was an opportunity for us to consider whether there was anything we could be doing collectively, in terms of animal/plant health facilities, staff, expertise, or indeed research funding, which could help tackle Coronavirus. This represented a real opportunity for the Partnership to demonstrate its value, by helping address an emergency in a joined-up way; but it would need a rapid and flexible response.

2.2 The Chair invited Defra's CSA to provide context and background to the discussion before seeking others' comments. In discussion the following points were made:

2.2.1 One of the main calls on the animal and plant health science community is to help increase UK capacity for testing. Workstream 1 - led by Public Health England (PHE) – is focused on using PHE labs (Porton Down) and NHS labs to increase capacity to 25,000 tests per day using polymerase chain reaction (PCR) equipment with Roche protocols. It was anticipated that the target should be met by the end of March of shortly after. Both the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) and the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera) have offered staff to help develop the test; and any other offers of suitable personnel and equipment would be helpful.

2.2.2 Workstream 2 is being led by Number 10 in collaboration with a commercial supplier based in Milton Keynes, and is designed to move to more extensive testing, with capacity increased by the end of April to 100,000 tests per day. The limited availability of Kingfisher instruments has been identified as a particular limitation and bottleneck; so any offers of such instruments would be very welcome. In time, there is likely to be a follow-up request for more equipment and personnel.
2.2.3 The current focus is on antigen testing. Whilst urgently needed, there is no imminent move towards antibody testing being widely rolled out because there is no commonly agreed test or interpretation of results.

2.2.4 Antibody tests can be both qualitative – looking for the presence or absence of a particular antibody, or quantitative - looking for the amount of antibody that is present. For now, qualitative tests will not be a priority.

2.2.5 The James Hutton Institute (JHI) does a lot of PCR work, and currently has lots of staff with suitable technical expertise stuck at home – they could represent a potential source of help. Other organisations are likely to be in a similar situation. For now, the focus is on using existing lab facilities and ramping them up rather than bringing in extra lab capacity. This may change in the future though, and it is helpful to know of this potential capacity in case of future requests for help.

2.2.6 One of the 12 public health labs in the testing network is based in Belfast, and they are ramping up PCR testing. Staff from the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) have volunteered to join the pool of staff running PCR tests. It was noted that Northern Ireland’s animal health side has the capability to screen huge numbers of samples for antibody tests, but these have not yet been called on.

2.2.7 Newcastle University has donated 7 real-time PCR machines to the testing effort, and other research institutes could potentially do the same.

2.2.8 Scottish animal health institutes have recently been approached by government to assess availability of containment level 3 (CL3) facilities; although it’s surprising how little knowledge there is on the human health side of available facilities and capacity on the animal and plant health side.

2.2.9 There is a risk of duplicating research and so it is important to make the best use of resources. This was seen with Schmallenberg where there was rapid identification of the priority questions and who was best placed to answer them. Whilst this is a good ambition, it is hard to pull together at speed.

2.2.10 The UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) is looking at research across the board and is setting up a dashboard summarising what research is being funded – not just in the UK but internationally.

2.2.11 Vaccine tests in animals are being run at both Porton Down and Pirbright – a good example of One Health in action, with veterinary models being used to address a human health issue. Extensive field trials are also underway in Kenya (based on a chimpanzee vaccine for Rift Valley Fever).

2.2.12 DFID is particularly interested in the impact of Covid-19 on food systems and the potential for major food price shocks. However, DFID’s research is constrained by social distancing and the inability of researchers to conduct work in the field. Their programmes are also under threat from the Consortium of International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) centres facing financial trouble.

2.2.13 It would be helpful if we could summarise what members of the Partnership have been asked to provide in terms of helping address Covid-19 – both research and staff/facilities, as well as identify further potential help/support/facilities which could be made available. This information could be brought together into a UK Science Partnership for Animal and Plant Health offer of help. The Partnership could then act as a rapid response clearing house to make people and equipment/facilities quickly available.

**ACTION 14-2:** Members to rapidly provide the Secretariat with i) a summary of what Covid-19 support their organisations are currently providing – in terms of research, funding calls, facilities, equipment and personnel; and ii) the potential for more to be offered. This will be pulled together into one paper
summarising the animal and plant health research support available across the UK. The paper will be fed into the Covid-19 response process by those most closely involved, and also sent to Lord Gardiner and devolved ministers.

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**ACTION 14-5:** The secretariat should schedule an interim video/teleconference in a month or so to review i) progress in supporting government efforts to tackle Covid-19, and ii) whether anything more on this could and should be done collectively by the Partnership.

### 3. APHA/Weybridge update (no paper) – 13:30 to 13:55

3.1 The Chair noted the recent Budget announcement of £1.4 billion investment in the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) - to be used to redevelop and future-proof the Weybridge facility. The Chair invited Mark Chappell (Government Property Agency) and Kath Webster (APHA) to update members on the investment plans, supported by a set of slides seen by the attendees. In discussion the following points were made:

3.1.1 Flexibility is key in how the estate is used - some programmes of work have significantly expanded for a limited time, and then been subsequently re-purposed.

3.1.2 Whilst the site development will inevitably involve upheaval for staff, there has been considerable frustration at working in a sub-optimal facility, so confirmation of the site development plans has significantly boosted staff morale. A balance will be needed in the interim between maintaining statutory work whilst making sure the new facilities are fit for purpose and represent an attractive and effective working environment. APHA staff numbers at the site are likely to increase by approximately 200 on site completion.

3.1.3 This represents an important investment for the whole of the UK, not just the Weybridge site, so congratulations were offered to the programme team in securing the investment, with gratitude expressed for the level of communication with the Partnership and its member organisations.

3.1.4 Pirbright had been kept up to date with the developing business case, and APHA staff at the Weybridge site will continue to work closely with Pirbright colleagues in the future – in the same way that they do currently.

**ACTION 14-6:** The National Science Capability for Animal Health (SCAH) SCAH programme team agreed to keep the Partnership updated on developments as the investment plans are taken forward.

### 4. Any other business and next meeting – 14:55 to 15:00

4.1 Members were reminded that the next quarterly meeting will be on Monday 15th June 11:00 – 14:00. An interim meeting will be scheduled in the meantime, to discuss the latest on Covid-19.