

Comment

Getting back together

NEWS that the Government intends to merge Animal Health and the Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) comes as a surprise, not least because the decision has been made without any of the consultation that has come to characterise government decision making in recent years.

Announcing the decision in a written ministerial statement earlier this week, Caroline Spelman, the Secretary of State at Defra, said that merging the two agencies 'will allow us to bring together services, expertise and scientific capability on animal health. It will improve our resilience in delivering important services, including our animal disease emergency response capability and science requirements for animal health. In resource-constrained times, the merger will enable the agencies to create more efficient ways of working, reduce the cost and bureaucracy needed to manage the interfaces between these agencies, Defra and the devolved administrations, and their customers.'

She said the merger will go ahead shortly, with as little disruption to staff and customers as possible. A single chief executive will be appointed this summer, and will be tasked with working out how to achieve the full integration of the agencies, including structures and ways of working, by the autumn.

On the face of it, there is a certain logic in combining the field operations of Animal Health with the veterinary investigative functions of the VLA, as both are essential to effective disease control. Also, it isn't so long ago that the two functions were combined in the Animal Health and Veterinary Group of the old Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF). They were separated in 1995, following a review by the last

Conservative government, when the old veterinary investigation service was moved out of MAFF and merged with the Central Veterinary Laboratory (CVL) to form the VLA as a new executive agency, operating at arms' length from government. The CVL had itself been made an agency in 1990. Veterinary field operations remained in MAFF (now Defra) for the next 10 years before themselves being transferred to a new agency – the State Veterinary Service, later renamed Animal Health. With this latest merger, things haven't quite turned full circle, but they have certainly moved through a fairly substantial arc.

That said, the announcement raises a number of concerns. Not least among these is that, to use the words of the Secretary of State, it comes in 'resource-constrained times'. The Government is clearly committed to reducing bureaucracy and cutting costs. In principle, there can be no objection to this but, in practical terms, as with any reorganisation undertaken with a view to making efficiency savings, there is always a danger that work will be disrupted, expertise lost and important activities axed. This cannot be allowed to happen in merging Animal Health and the VLA, which between them provide a 'frontline service' in disease control, and whose activities in relation to animal health, animal welfare and public health are clearly in the public interest. Reassurance is needed that the merger will not simply become another way of cutting costs by reducing the number of people working on disease surveillance and research. Given the often very local nature of much veterinary activity, it will also be important that the national network of disease surveillance laboratories is maintained.

The merger needs to be considered in the context of Government plans to introduce responsibility and cost sharing, which will almost certainly have an impact on the activities of the new agency. For the time being, those plans remain unclear, particularly in the light of a comment in the Secretary of State's statement that 'The Government believes that policy advice should be carried out by Departments, not arms' length bodies'. Under the previous Government's plans for responsibility and cost sharing, responsibility for animal health policy was to be transferred from Defra to a new arms' length body.

It also needs to be considered in the context of devolution and of talk of Defra's animal health budgets being devolved (see p 4 of this issue). In addition, it will have implications for the provision of Official Veterinarian (OV) services, which Animal Health recently announced are to be subject to tender (*VR*, May 22, 2010, vol 166, pp 634, 635).

The decision has clearly been made quickly, but the merger should not be conducted in haste. The two agencies already have to work closely and, if it's done properly, the result could be an integrated agency fully committed to animal health. However, in the current financial climate, that's a pretty big if. Disease surveillance and control is important, as the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak demonstrated all too clearly. As the BVA commented this week, there is a need to consult widely on how the merged organisation will work. The aim must be to ensure the best possible outcome in terms of safeguarding animal health.

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