

London Food Co-ordinating Group's Approvals Sub Group

Minutes of Meeting held on 19 November 2008

City of London offices, Walbrook Wharf, EC4

Food authority	Officer attending	Apologies
Barking & Dagenham	Fola Ogunwole	Hope Robinson
Barnet	Mark Stanbury	
Brent		Shamsul Islam
"		Lemoy Paterson
Camden	Yinka Fagbohunka	
Croydon		Brian Griffiths
Enfield		Rob Bartlett
Hackney	Nigel Whiteley (Chair)	
Haringey	Ajit Kansara	
Havering	Andy Bourlet	
Islington	Carole Milligan	
Kensington & Chelsea		Linda Wheeler
Kingston	Keith Fowler (Minutes)	
Lambeth		Carol Stewart-Williams
Lewisham	Ken Giles	
Merton	Pippa Barnes	
Redbridge	Henry Katsande	
Richmond		Karen Alvey
Sutton		Jenny Winslet
Tower Hamlets	Eleni Vasilopoulou	Sandra Edmeade-Walters
Wandsworth	Peter Reddell	
Westminster	Laura Parrott	
Chelmsford BC	Roy Perry	
Tendring D C		Alan Johnson

Items

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Presentation by Veterinary Meat Hygiene Advisers on 'The Meat Plant Approvals Process'

NW welcomed to the meeting Lawson Wood (LW) of the Meat Hygiene Service and Charlie MacLean (CMc) of the Food Standards Agency to give a presentation on 'The Meat Plant Approvals Process', and to answer a number of questions we had sent them beforehand.

NW advised LW and CMc that given our interest in their work, our Group would defer all the other items on the Agenda. LW and CMc proceeded with their presentation, responding to questions from officers, and participating in an informal exchange of views.

Below are summarised the relevant points from the presentation and the discussions, arranged in a more logical order than they cropped up during the meeting.

1 - The speakers

Lawson Wood (LW) is a Lead Veterinarian working for the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), who manages the Official Veterinarians and Meat Hygiene Inspectors that attend and supervise abattoirs and meat cutting plants in Greater London and the south-east. LW works from home, and travels all over London and South East England. Charlie MacLean (CMc) is a Veterinary Meat Hygiene Adviser working for the Food Standards Agency (FSA) whose role is to inspect and approve abattoirs and meat cutting plants in Greater London and the south-east.

2 - The roles of the Food Standards Agency, the Meat Hygiene Service, and Veterinary Meat Hygiene Advisors

FSA - The FSA Meat Hygiene and Veterinary Division deals with the policy concerning meat, and grants approval to meat establishments.

MHS - The MHS is the executive agency of the FSA and enforces food law at meat establishments. LW described the MHS as the 'animal welfare and meat hygiene police'.

VMHA - CMc advised that his role as a VMHA is to assess meat plants for Approval, and to grant Approval. Before granting Approval LW and CMc jointly inspected meat plants to ensure consistency of standards.

CMc indicated that the FSA were moving to phase out VMHAs, with the MHS taking over their role in the Approval process. He found that FBOs respect VMHAs as advisors, but they dislike what they see as the 'police' in the MHS.

LW advised that the MHS divided the UK into 37 geographical areas, with London falling into one area, (no. 32).

3 - 'Cutting plants' - What are they in law?

CMc pointed out that a 'cutting plant' means: 'an establishment used for boning and/or cutting up meat', (Reg 853/2004, Annex I, para 1.17), and so includes all butchers shops, and establishments which manufacture minced meat, meat preparations, or meat products, and which bone and/or cut up the meat they use as the raw material in that establishment. However CMc drew a distinction between cutting and boning operations that were a precursor to manufacturing, and cutting plants.

4 - Cutting plants which are exempt from approval by the FSA

CMc started off by confirming that all cutting plants require Approval unless they are exempt. Exemptions are set out in Regulation 853/2004, Article 1.5 which exempts retail establishments unless food of animal origin is supplied to another establishment. However, under Article 1.5 (b) (ii) where the supply of food is to retail establishments only and is a marginal, localised and restricted activity the exemption remains in place.

Regulation 853/2004, recital 13 sets out the EC's interpretation of these terms. Following consultation with the EC, the UK has interpreted these three terms (in the Food Law Practice Guidance, A.5.4.2) as:

- **'Marginal'**: supply of food of animal origin up to a quarter of the business in terms of food or in relation to fresh or processed meat up to 2 tonnes a week, (but not wild game meat which remains subject to the "quarter" exemption), subject to the establishment having a genuine retail outlet supplying the final consumer with part of its production of meat; (this can include mail order and internet sales).

In summary, for establishments (such as butchers shops), the supply up to 2 tonnes of meat is permitted, or up to a quarter of the business in terms of food (e.g. 3 tonnes meat and 9 tonnes of other food).

- **'Localised'**: supply of food of animal origin within the supplying establishment's own county plus the greater of either the neighbouring county or counties or 50 km/30 miles from the boundary of the supplying establishment's county;

- **'Restricted'**: supply of food of animal origin is limited to certain types of products or establishments. In the meat sector, the restrictions are in relation to the amounts of meat supplied and the requirement for a 'genuine' retail outlet (see 'marginal' above).

5 - How to estimate the throughput of a cutting plant - to determine whether the supply of meat is 'marginal'

LW advised that establishing the throughput of fresh or processed meat was difficult. All approved plants are required, by law, to submit their throughput tonnage of meat to the MHS for charging purposes.

LW considered meat businesses often had incomplete or unreliable records of the amount of meat entering the establishment. He listed several indicators that could be used by enforcement officers to aid in assessing the size of a business:

- Physical size of plant.
- Plant facilities – size of cutting rooms, chillers, freezers.
- Type & amount of meat present – exposed or carcass, boxed, in 'Dolav' containers (large cubic plastic containers holding up to a tonne), trays, or 'Jumbo' containers (large hexagonal cardboard containers), etc.
- Presence & amount of animal by-products.
- Number of staff
- Number of vehicles serving the business
- Complexity of the cutting operation. With simple cutting into primal cuts, each butcher can cut a large amount of meat daily. On the other hand, when carrying out finer butchery work, only a relatively small amount weight-wise might be processed.

6 - The approval procedure - how it works in practice for VMHAs

- Regulations on the Approval procedure

CMc outlined the relevant legislation (used by both the FSA and food authorities), ie Regulation (EC) No 852/2004; 853/2004, Article 4, on the approval of establishments; 882/2004, Article 31, on the approval of establishments; (and we also mentioned Reg 854/2004, Article 4, on the official controls on products of animal origin).

CMc outlined the approvals procedure by the FSA for cutting plants and other meat establishments where they are the enforcement authority;

- **Full approval**: establishment is fully compliant.
- **Conditional approval**: establishment is not fully compliant but food safety risks are being adequately managed and the operator is taking steps to implement permanent solutions. (See item 11 below on the discussion over this).
- **Refusal**: where there is serious non-compliance, whether structural or food safety management.

- 'Appraisal' visit by VMHA

The first visit to a catering butcher's plant by a VMHA is usually an 'appraisal visit', (which may not be an 'official control'), at which he goes through a checklist with the FBO and gives him advice. Once the FBO has carried out most of the work required, the VMHA will revisit and the FSA may grant Conditional Approval. No charge is made for the approval visits.

- How VMHAs advise FBOs of deficiencies in an establishment

At the end of his appraisal visit CMC gives the FBO an unofficial list of deficiencies, so that the FBO can start rectifying them straight away. LW shows the FBO various catalogues of suitable equipment, eg, of drains, to point the FBO in the right direction.

'Deficiencies list'. The VMHA sends the FBO the official 'Deficiencies list' after the appraisal visit, specifying in full what is wrong. He does not specify what the FBO must do. The 'Deficiencies list' is arranged in columns headed: 'Details of observed deficiencies' and References (to the regulations).

Advice. PB enquired about the amount of advice officers should provide to businesses to help them attain the Approval standards. LW and CMC acknowledged that there was some debate on this within the FSA, mainly around whether to notify a business only of their "deficiencies" preventing them being granted approval, or to advise more generally on the practical measures a business needed to take. CMC advised that he often gave informal advice on the latter. However, many businesses required a consultant to help them through the Approval process.

Undertakings. VMHAs do accept informal 'undertakings' from FBOs if the VMHAs have confidence in the management to finish the work after being granted Approval.

- Priorities for approval of establishments by VMHAs

Officers raised several questions relating to VMHAs' priorities and timescales. In response LW and CMC advised that they worked to three priorities. CMC outlined these as; first new businesses, second was catering butchers which were subject to approval due to the change in the hygiene regulations, and the third was existing establishments which were licensed (under the revoked fresh meat hygiene regulations). (See item 12 below on 'Appraisal by the consultants CMI').

- Time taken for cutting plants to meet the standards for Full Approval

CMC explained that the legislation provided for the granting of Conditional Approval to allow businesses to operate while working on complying with the remaining requirements, after which Full Approval could be granted. This was for a maximum period of six months (Reg 882/2004, Article 31, para 2(d)), although in practice CMC said six months could be difficult to achieve, and it often takes longer for a FBO to meet the standards for Full Approval. (Several food officers in the meeting agreed that this is what they also found). LW and CMC added that it often required three visits by a VMHA before being satisfied that a plant met the standards for full approval. They found that it was rare to grant full Approval on the first appraisal visit.

7 - Plans of proposed cutting plants - What to look for

CMC provided helpful advice on a number of aspects as follows:

- Look at the site plan regarding the suitability of the location, access for vehicles, any polluting neighbouring businesses etc.
- Then look at the floor plan for adequacy of space, and flow of products, staff, water, etc.
- Obtain information on the products and the production volumes.

If these three proposals appear satisfactory, give 'approval in principle' to the plans.

8 - Inspections of meat cutting plants for approval - The deficiencies commonly found

- What to look for when inspecting meat establishments

When first inspecting plants for approval (or for enforcement) the key matters to look for include; the structure, fittings, staff training, and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs).

- List of some common deficiencies

LW and CMc showed a series of photographs which highlighted some common deficiencies with meat cutting plants, that required correcting before Approval could be granted. LW listed the common deficiencies:

- Intake and despatch facilities. (CMc added that often a difficulty with catering butchers was the lack of space preventing adequate separation of practices, and storage etc).
- Floor drainage. (See below).
- Waste water. (Eg, controlling the waste water from machines).
- Cleaning, cleaning equipment, and cleaning chemical storage. (See below).
- Plastic strip curtains. (See below).
- Hand or arm operated taps.
- Knife disinfection. (See below).
- Refrigeration unit grilles.
- Boot washing machines, (which failed to contain the dirty wash water sprayed over the floor).
- Temperature control. (E.g. minced meat left in corridors, and not cooled quickly to 2°C).
- Meat containers & stacking. (See below).
- Pest prevention
- Water testing
- Animal by-products. (See below).
- Dry goods store, and Spice store
- Standard operating procedures & HACCP-based procedures. (See item 10 below).

- Plastic Strip curtains

CM emphasised that plastic strip curtains are not 'doors'. They need to be cleaned daily, but are difficult to clean, so LW requires proper doors to cutting rooms. The use of strip curtains should be restricted to inside freezers to help to reduce ice build-up.

- Floor drainage

Adequate drainage is important to take away waste water from the work environment. VMHAs often require proper floor drainage to be installed in meat cutting plants. Open channels with removable grids are preferable to enclosed channels with a narrow access slit at floor level, which prevents adequate cleaning. The worst drains are the ones made from pressed metal, which get flattened by fork lift trucks, and then cannot be cleaned.

- Meat containers & stacking

Cardboard boxes of meat may only be stacked to a limited height. When stacked too high they are likely to get damaged, and the contents contaminated. Also, using cardboard boxes containing meat to step on to reach other packs or items damages the boxes.

- Cleaning, cleaning equipment, and cleaning chemical storage

CMc suggested that "foggers" should be used periodically (eg, 6 to 8 weeks) to generate a sanitising aerosol to disinfect rooms and refrigeration equipment. These can easily be bought and are not expensive. Refrigerator grilles are almost always dirty or dusty and not cleaned sufficiently frequently.

Cleaning equipment should be well-maintained, and the cleaning equipment itself kept clean. Hence the requirement in the hygiene regulations for adequate facilities to clean cleaning equipment.

The cleaning chemical storage area must be separate from food, but small quantities of chemicals may be kept nearby for cleaning during breaks in work.

- Knife disinfection

CMc recommended that hot water disinfection facilities should have a hinged lid, be deep enough to submerge knives up to the blade/handle junction, and have a low-water cut-out. LW expressed his opinion that there was no substitute for hot water disinfection, and attempts with using chemical disinfectants had achieved only a log 2 reduction in bacterial count after 8 to 10 minute contact time. (Most of the research work in this area seems to have finished in the late 1990s). It is also useful to install at least two disinfectors, so that work can continue in the event that one fails.

- Animal by-products (ABP)

Category 2 ABP is unfit waste, including blown bags of meat. CMc stated the importance of staining it and storing it outside food rooms, (and certainly not in freezers or fridges in food rooms). To clean the dirty containers most plants have a high pressure hose. Due to the small amount of Category 2 ABP generated in cutting plants, it is permitted to be placed in a plastic bag, stained, then kept in a freezer outside food rooms until there is sufficient for collection. The dye (Black PN) is expensive.

Category 3 ABP includes 'meat' that is still edible, eg, scraps and trimmings. This can be stored within the food rooms, provided it is placed in clean receptacles (eg, made of stainless steel). This 'meat' can be stored in fridges or freezers for a few days before collection.

CMc also reminded us of the importance of checking that ABP is disposed of correctly, i.e. collected by an approved transporter and destined for an approved ABP processing plant, (approved for processing the appropriate category of ABP).

- Wooden cutting blocks

CMc informed us that wooden blocks are still acceptable for cutting meat, provided they are thoroughly cleaned, by brushing and planing down, followed by scrubbing with really hot detergent wash, and then a sanitiser.

9 - Standard operating procedures, and HACCP-based procedures

Standard operating procedures (SOPs). They are often inadequate or failed to reflect actual practices. SOPs form an essential part of the FBO's food safety management system, and are very important for staff training and when plant audits are being carried out.

CMc looks to see what operations there are, and then for documented SOPs for those operations, eg: for removing the spinal column, or for producing minced meat. He also looks for documents setting out the functions of the plant, and staff work instructions.

HACCP-based procedures. CMc advised that initially HACCP can be too technical for many meat businesses, so he looks instead for documentary evidence of Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) and Good Hygiene Practices (GHP), eg, temperature records from receipt to delivery of cut meat. He described most meat cutting operations as 'common sense'.

For Conditional Approval, CMc requires SOPs to be in place, and a HACCP plan with critical control points (CCPs) that are meaningful to him, with practical ('reality checks') and documentary evidence that the CCPs were being controlled in practice.

10 - Published guidance for meat producers

- Meat and Livestock Commercial Services Ltd (?)

There are also good guides produced by the Meat and Livestock Commercial Services Ltd (?) (previously the Meat and Livestock Commission). One guide is on meat cutting plants. Website: <http://www.mlcclassification.co.uk/index.asp> (?)

- FSA Meat Industry Guide

This FSA guide is of use despite its length. CMc thought that it was invaluable, considering that VMHAs are behind in their work. Businesses can look at the relevant sections. LW added that the pdf version is searchable, eg, you can find each occurrence of the phrase 'water supply' sequentially through the file.

'Guide to food hygiene and other regulations for the UK meat industry'.

<http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/miq25sept08.pdf>

- FSA 'Food safety management Diary for meat producers'

NW enquired about the value of this FSA publication (parts of which are copied from 'Safer food, better business'). LW considered it was useful for the smallest plants, but it has confused the issue somewhat for larger businesses. In larger plants, a full HACCP system is required.

<http://www.foodstandards.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/foodmandiary2006.pdf>

11 - Conditional approval - The standards that VMHAs require

CMc said that VMHAs may grant Conditional Approval if an establishment is not fully compliant but the food safety risks are being adequately managed and the operator is taking steps to implement permanent solutions. (See item 6 above). Officers remarked how different this was from our group's understanding of the standards for Conditional Approval.

NW said that we thought that establishments would need to reach a high standard before being granted Conditional Approval. CMc replied that the pre-requisites (to HACCP), standard operating procedures, HACCP, monitoring and recording should all be in place. For example if his confidence in the management was low, then he would require higher standards of hygiene and structure to reduce the risks at that establishment to an acceptable level.

12 - Appraisal of catering butchers establishments by the consultants CMi

- The transitional period

CMc explained a derogation from the requirement for approval which applied to some establishments. For plants, including catering butchers, previously restricted to trading on the national market there is a transitional measure allowing them to continue to trade in the same way, as long as they are approved by the end of 2009.

'Food business operators (FBOs) who before 2006 were allowed to place food of animal origin on their national market may continue to place such products on this market ... until such time as the competent authority ... has approved the establishments handling such products'. (Regulation 2076/2005, article 4). This 'transitional period' ends on 31 December 2009, (Article 1).

- Progress on the Approval of catering butchers' cutting plants

LW advised there were an estimated 140 catering butchers' cutting plants in England referred to the FSA for Approval, but he was not able to provide information on the number so far approved. The FSA are now using consultants to assist VMHAs in meeting the deadline of the end of 2009.

CMc commented on the appointment by the FSA of the consultants 'CMi'. Their role was restricted to carrying out pre-approval 'appraisal' visits to catering butchers for the purpose of advising FBOs, and determining priorities for inspection by VMHAs. Only the VMHAs carry out the Approval inspections. The CMi auditors come from a variety of backgrounds, some are EHOs, and some come from industry. CM had not met any of them. There has been resistance by some FBOs to the use of these consultants. Also, since their appraisal visits are free, some FBOs take little notice of the advice given.

13 - Cutting plants inspected by the MHS

PB asked on the frequency of inspections by official veterinarians. LW advised this was on a risk-based assessment, and the interval between inspections varied between 2 and 12 months. The visits are pre-arranged with two weeks notice. Discussion took place on the merits of unannounced visits achieving a more representative picture of how businesses performed. CMc and LW both considered that unannounced visits by the MHS would be more effective, and the better FBOs preferred this also.

14 - Cutting plants subject to approval, but operating without approval

LW wanted an ongoing dialogue with local authority food officers. He wanted us to phone the VMHAs for advice, and to exchange intelligence about meat cutting plants operating without approval.

- Enforcement by food authorities

LW emphasised that food authorities have the enforcement powers to deal with unapproved meat cutting plants, whereas the VMHAs working for the FSA, or OVs and MHIs working for the MHS, do not have the power of entry to them. The reaction from several officers present was one of surprise. LW therefore proposed improved liaison between the MHS and food authorities, so that we can take regulatory action against unapproved meat cutting plants. VMHAs can only advise food authorities what enforcement action the FA could take in each case.

The UK is unique in the European Union in having two enforcement authorities for the same type of establishments.

PB enquired about businesses operating a catering butcher function and non-meat retail activities in the one establishment, if it was possible to reach agreement between the MHS and the LA on a single enforcement authority for the whole establishment. CMc advised at present this was unlikely but if so he felt all the business activities should fall under the MHS role.

- The unapproved cutting plant initiative - How to find them

LW said that anecdotal and direct evidence shows there are meat cutting plants operating that food authorities are not aware of, and many of these require approval. He displayed a map showing the location of cutting plants in one north London borough, some of which were approved, some were in the process of being approved, and some were largely unknown to the authorities. Often they are on commercial estates.

LW informed us that the MHS aimed to build up a good relationship with FBOs of approved establishments, and their consultants, who were often reliable sources of information on "illegal" operations. The FBOs of approved establishments are resentful of unfair competition from cutting plants operating without approval, which undercut their prices. LW was informed about a number of meat cutting plants that openly advertise as 'wholesale butchers' in the Turkish press, but are not approved. A quick glance through Yellow Pages revealed similar operations being advertised.

Discussion then took place on ensuring that LAs continue to take enforcement action against any suspect meat cutting plants that had been referred to the FSA as "catering butchers" and but were, not yet, approved. It is essential that enforcement of the hygiene regulations by LA enforcement officers continues in plants awaiting approval.

- Who should give advice to them?

Officers also raised questions as to the extent of any advice on approvals enforcement officers should give to businesses seeking approval. CMc expressed the opinion that officers should give advice, but consult with the VMHAs. We should indicate to the VMHA the scale of work required by the establishment and the urgency.

MS referred to a joint visit he had made with CMC which both agreed had been useful, and they considered that joint visits were helpful means of dealing with businesses where officers thought Approval was required.

- Cutting plants relocating

Officers also raised the difficulty of cutting plants re-locating after being told about the need for Approval. LW agreed this was an issue, some plants do disappear after the VMHA's first appraisal visit, and they had insufficient resources to track these plants down. MS told us of a plant in his experience which boned pigs heads, that had relocated within a mere two days of being contacted, complete with a walk-in chiller.

- Enforcement action against 'illegal' meat cutting plants

MS said that the only way of inspecting some 'illegal' meat producers was to raid their premises. LW has been on raids of farms, organised by food authorities. MS added that he had been on three raids, working for the FSA Illegal Meat Task Force. Their advice was to wear stab-proof vests.

MS advised that from his work with the Task Force it was important to obtain information on where meat from illegal plants was going, to help trace the 'underground' supply networks. Illegal operations tend to hide themselves away, eg, among metal merchants, where they can process, eg, illegally slaughtered meat. He knew of operations where sales of meat were by phone, or the internet, for collection from a garage.

15 - Smithfield Market

- The type of market

LW advised that Smithfield Market was the only remaining 'intervention market' for fresh meat in the UK, serving as a buffer for short-term fluctuations in supply and demand. The Market has 43 different businesses each of which is a meat cutting plant subject to approval. The market itself, i.e. the common parts and facilities, is also a food business establishment and as such required Approval. The FBO is the City of London. The Principal Veterinary Officer there is Mike Seton.

- The throughput of meat

LW informed us that the weekly throughput was about 3,00 tonnes made up as follows;

- 1,000 tonnes exposed red meat carcasses (of which 'wholesale cuts' requiring further butchery off-site comprised 75%).
- 1,200 tonnes boxed poultry meat, (90% going directly to the catering trade).
- 800 tonnes boxed red meat, (99% going directly to the catering trade).
- 2,400 tonnes is distributed, cut, cooked & eaten within Greater London, (ie 80% of the total throughput).

This level of throughput does not reconcile with the declared throughput of approved cutting plants, or declared catering butchers, known within Greater London. This raises the question - where does the rest of this meat go to? See the next item on 'Meat delivery vans'.

16 - Meat delivery vans - (The 'white vans' question)

- The number, registration, and inspection of vans

LW pointed out that approximately 1,000 vans collections take place from Smithfield Market each week, at night, many of which are unmarked white vans. 10 to 15 vans are checked weekly by meat inspectors for compliance with Reg 852/2004. They find that a large proportion of these vehicles are only registered with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) at domestic addresses, and are not registered as food business establishments with the food authority where their vehicle is ordinarily kept. The FSA Food Fraud Task Force considered this undermines the

traceability of meat, and renders true accountability for handling the food almost impossible, with obvious implications.

LW said that at Smithfield, the MHS is proposing to check more of these delivery vans, to push for the FBOs to register their establishments with their home LAs. This cooperation between the London LAs and the MHS should help to clarify the meat supply chains that exist in Greater London. There was general agreement with this suggestion among the officers present.

17 - How to find the local authority for a particular address or postcode - 'Directgov'

LW advised that it was often difficult to ascertain which the home LA area for a particular business address and suggested that a lead officer contact for each LA would help. A helpful website found by CM is 'Directgov', which can be used to find out which LA a street or postcode is located in. The web address is: <http://local.direct.gov.uk/LDGRedirect/Start.do?mode=1>