

CIEH Meat Crimes Survey 2005

Introduction

A number of possible resolutions to the problem of meat crimes have been raised in various settings, including the CIEH cracking down on meat crimes conference and the Waste Food Task Force. This survey was undertaken in January 2005 to assess local authority approaches to meat crime and to solicit opinions on these suggested resolutions.

A total of 183 local authorities responded to the questionnaire, which is a response rate of 42%.

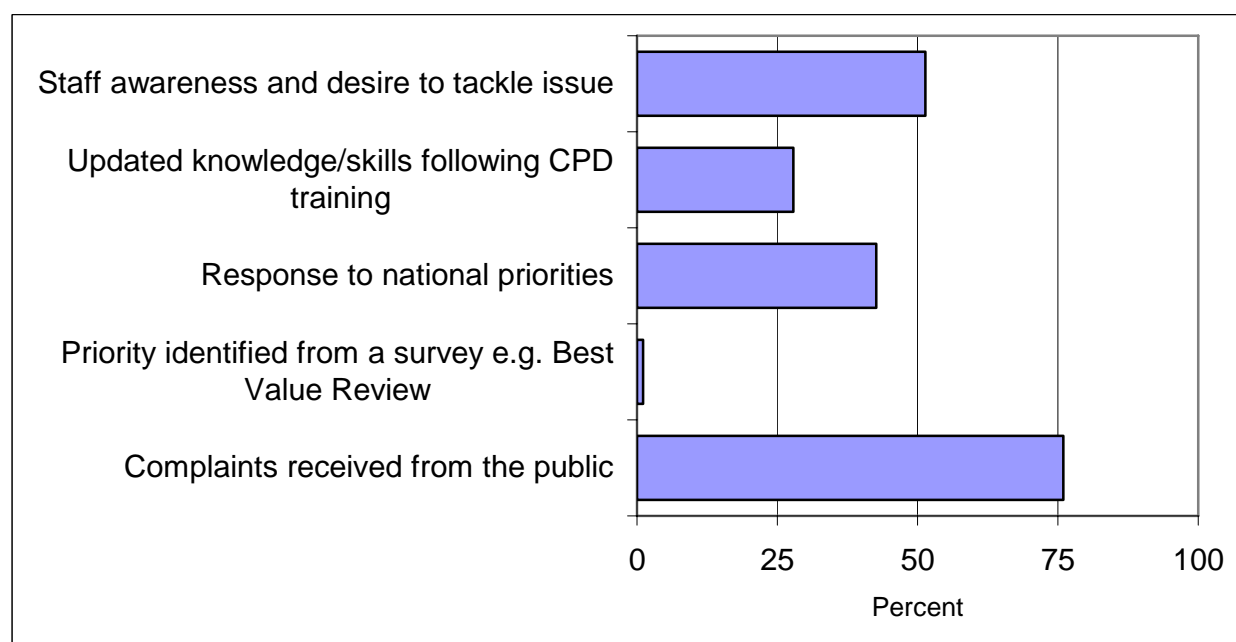
For the purpose of this survey, 'meat crimes' encompass a number of different activities each presenting a specific risk to a different population. Meat crime spans the illegal killing of animals, including the production of 'smokies,' targeted at a specific ethnic group and the associated illegal movement of livestock. It includes the 'cleaning up' and reintroduction of waste or condemned meat into the food chain, presenting a public health risk to consumers. It covers the illegal importation of meat which may carry disease presenting a risk to the national herd or flocks, and to consumers.

Local authority approach to meat crime

The majority of authorities took a reactive approach to meat crime (86%) with just 12% taking a proactive approach and 2% (4 Las) selected 'none'.

Respondents were then asked to indicate what factors influenced this approach to meat crime from a given list of five plus an 'other' category. As respondents gave multiple factors, column/bar percentages sum to more than 100%.

Figure 1. Factors that have influenced the local authority approach to meat crime



Taking responses as a whole, complaints received from the public was the most significant factor influencing the approach taken to meat crime, cited by 76% of responding authorities. Staff awareness and desire to tackle the issue (51%) and response to national priorities (43%) were also important factors. Updated knowledge/skills following training was cited by 28% of responders and only 1% of authorities identified meat crime as a priority from a survey such as a Best Value Review.

Figure 2. Factors that have influenced the local authority approach to meat crime, by approach taken

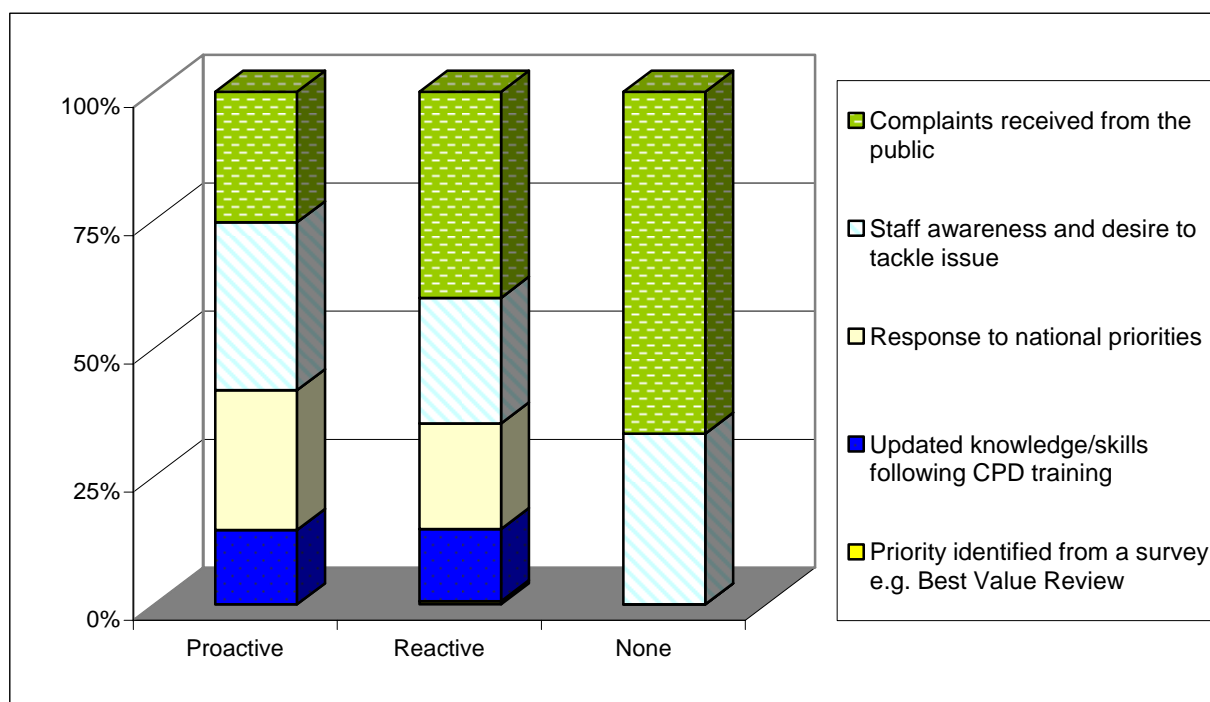


Figure 2 illustrates that the factors influencing the local authority approach to meat crime vary by the approach taken.

Reactive authorities cited complaints received from the public as the most significant influence on their approach (78%) followed by staff awareness and desire to tackle the issue (48%) and response to national priorities (40%). Updated knowledge/skill following CPD training (27%) had less of an influence and very few authorities cited priority identified following a survey (1%).

Local authorities with a proactive approach to meat crime cited staff awareness and desire to tackle the issue as the most significant influence (86%). Response to national priorities (71%) and complaints received from the public (67%) were also important. Updated knowledge/skill following CPD training was selected by 38% and none of these authorities selected priority identified following a survey as an influence.

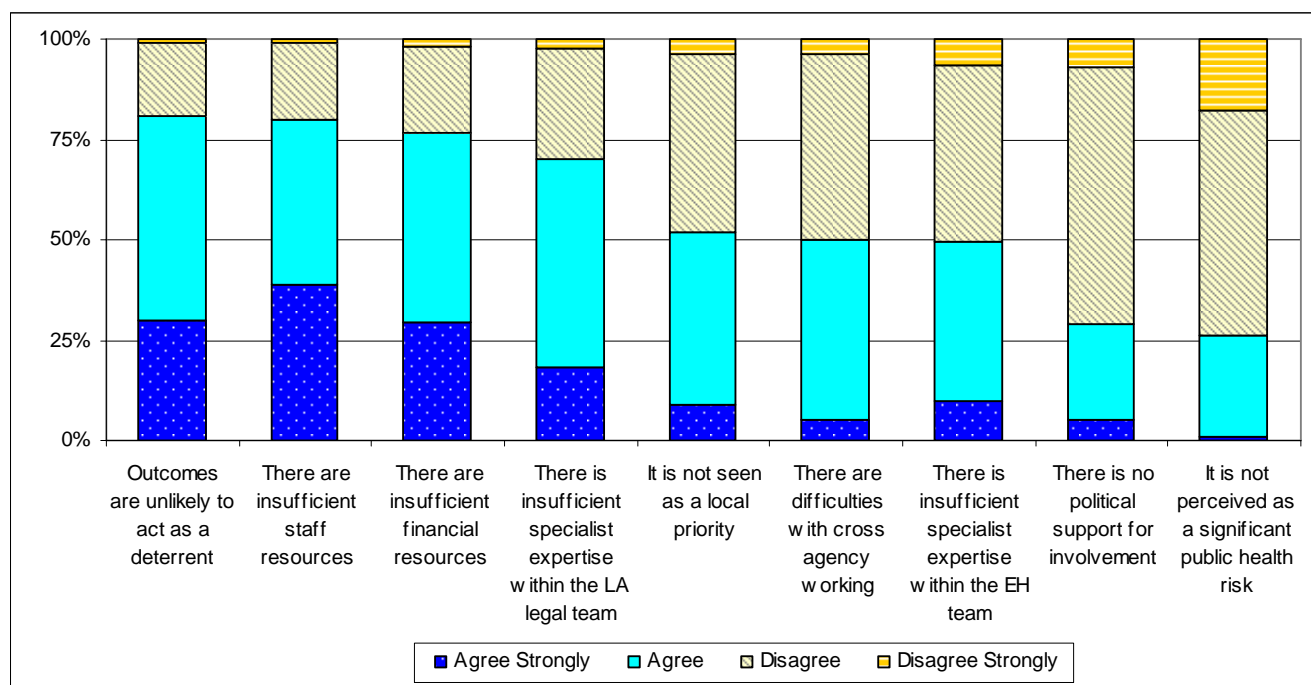
Other factors influencing the local authority approach to meat crime, and that do not fit in the categories above include:

- Not identified as a problem in the local area (10 - 'reactive')
- Intelligence/notification/liaison with other bodies (10 - 'reactive')
- Lack of resources (6- 'reactive')
- Involvement in a meat crime case or with the illegal meat task force (4 - 'reactive', 1 - 'proactive')
- Barriers listed in Q3 (2 - 'reactive')
- Identified as a problem in the local area (2 - 'proactive')
- Protecting public health (1 - 'proactive')
- Cultural issues (1- 'reactive')

Barriers preventing action being taken against meat crime

Respondents were asked to rate on a four-point scale whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of barriers which could prevent action being taken against meat crime.

Figure 3. Barriers preventing action being taken against meat crime

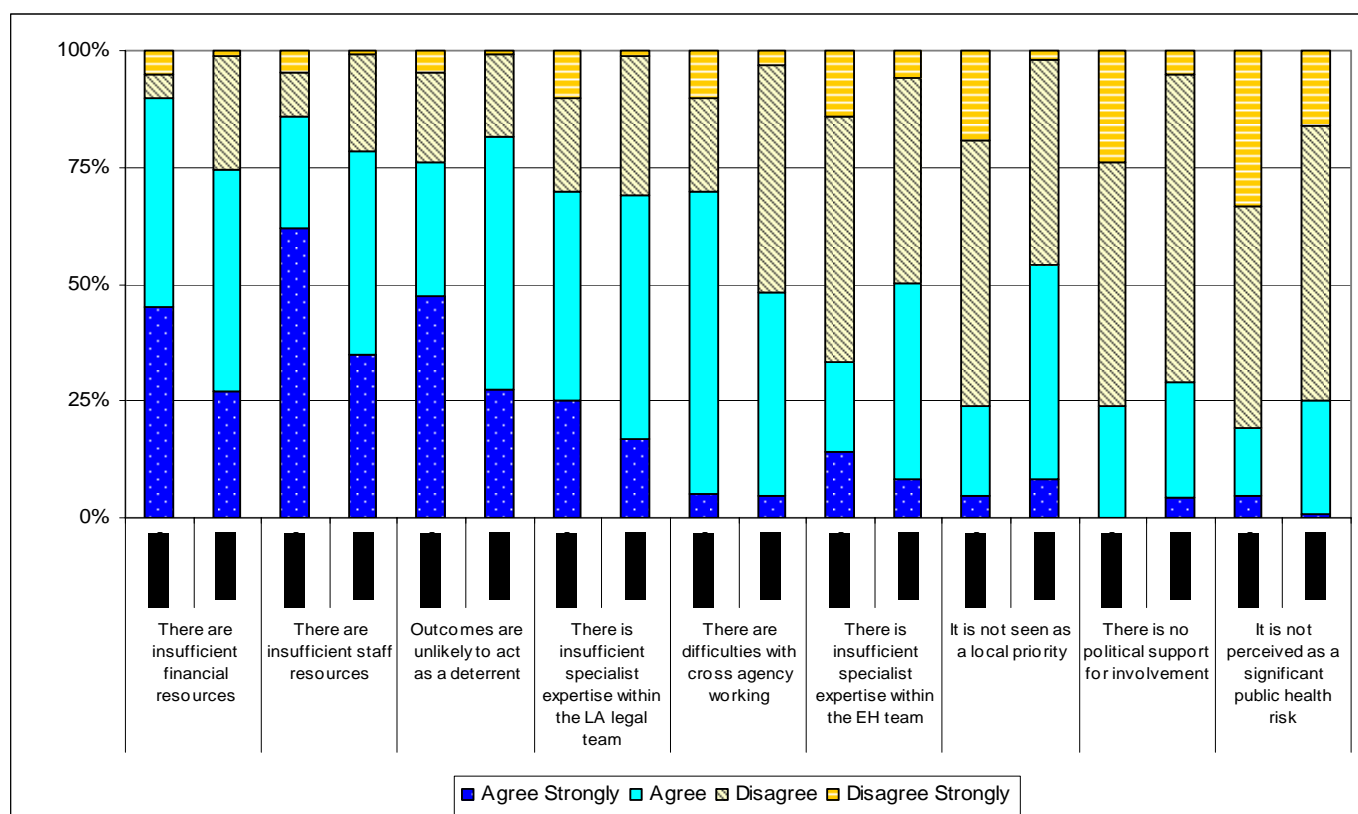


The majority of respondents agreed with four of the nine barrier statements. Outcomes are unlikely to act as a deterrent (81%) received strongest overall agreement followed by there are insufficient staff resources (80%), there are insufficient financial resources (77%) and there is insufficient specialist expertise within the local authority legal team (70%). However, the strength of agreement differed for these barrier statements with 39% agreeing strongly that there are insufficient staff resources, 30% agreeing strongly that the outcomes are unlikely to act as a deterrent, 29% agreeing strongly that there are insufficient financial resources and only 18% agreeing strongly that there is insufficient specialist expertise within the local authority legal team.

The majority of respondents disagreed with the statements that action against meat crime was prevented due to a lack of political support for involvement (71%) and that meat crime was not perceived as a significant public health risk (74%).

Response to the statements that meat crime is not seen as a local priority, that there is insufficient expertise within the environmental health team and that there are difficulties with cross agency working were mixed with a majority of respondents neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Figure 4. Barriers preventing action being taken against meat crime, by local authority approach to meat crime



Note: the four local authorities selecting 'none' when asked what approach was taken to meat crime have not been included in this breakdown.

General agreement or disagreement with the barrier statements were similar regardless of the local authority approach to meat crime however, local authorities taking a proactive approach tended to agree or disagree more strongly than those authorities taking a reactive approach to meat crime.

Barriers that could prevent action being taken against meat crime were:

- Insufficient financial resources 90% 'proactive' (45% agree strongly) 74% 'reactive' (27% agree strongly)
- Insufficient staff resources 86% 'proactive' (62% agree strongly) 78% 'reactive' (35% agree strongly)
- Outcomes are unlikely to act as a deterrent 76% 'proactive' (48% agree strongly) 82% 'reactive' (27% agree strongly)
- Insufficient specialist expertise within the local authority legal team 70% 'proactive' (25% agree strongly) 69% 'reactive' (17% agree strongly)

The majority of authorities with both proactive and reactive approaches to meat crimes disagreed with the following barrier statements:

- Meat crime is not perceived as a significant public health risk 81% 'proactive' (33% disagree strongly) 75% 'reactive' (16% disagree strongly)
- There is no political support for Involvement 76% 'proactive' (24% disagree strongly) 72% 'reactive' (5% disagree strongly)

Respondents from local authorities taking a proactive approach to meat crime also agreed with the statement that difficulties with cross agency working was a barrier (70%) although only a minority (5%) agreed strongly. Authorities with a reactive approach gave a mixed response to this statement with 48% agreeing and 52% disagreeing.

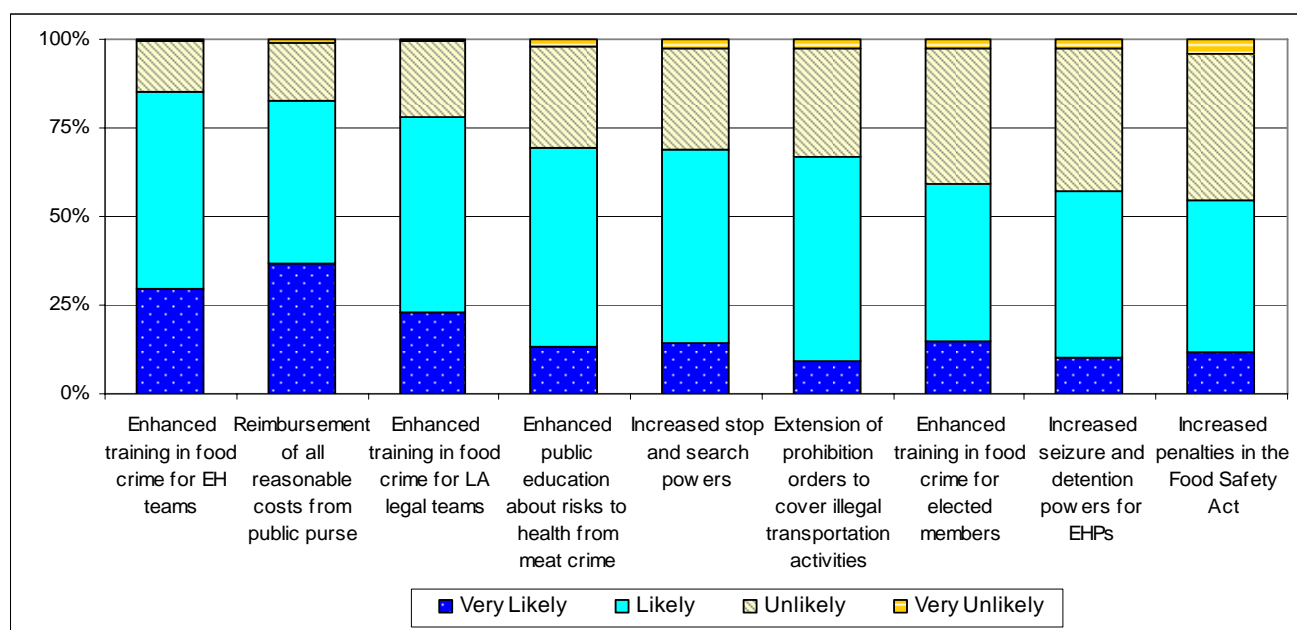
Agreement with the statement that there is insufficient expertise within the environmental health team varied according to the local authority approach to meat crime. The majority of proactive authorities disagreed (67%) whilst reactive authorities gave a mixed response (50% agreed, 50% disagreed).

The survey also asked respondents to identify any other barriers preventing action being taken against meat crime. Responses can be grouped into three categories: concern for officer safety; lack of powers; and problems with the logistics of seizure and detention. These issues will be discussed together with the responses to the final section of the survey where respondents were asked to bring any other issues to our attention.

Proposals likely to affect the decision to investigate and take proceedings in future cases of meat crime

Respondents were given a list of nine proposals which might help local authorities tackle future cases of meat crime and were asked to rate each statement on a four point scale.

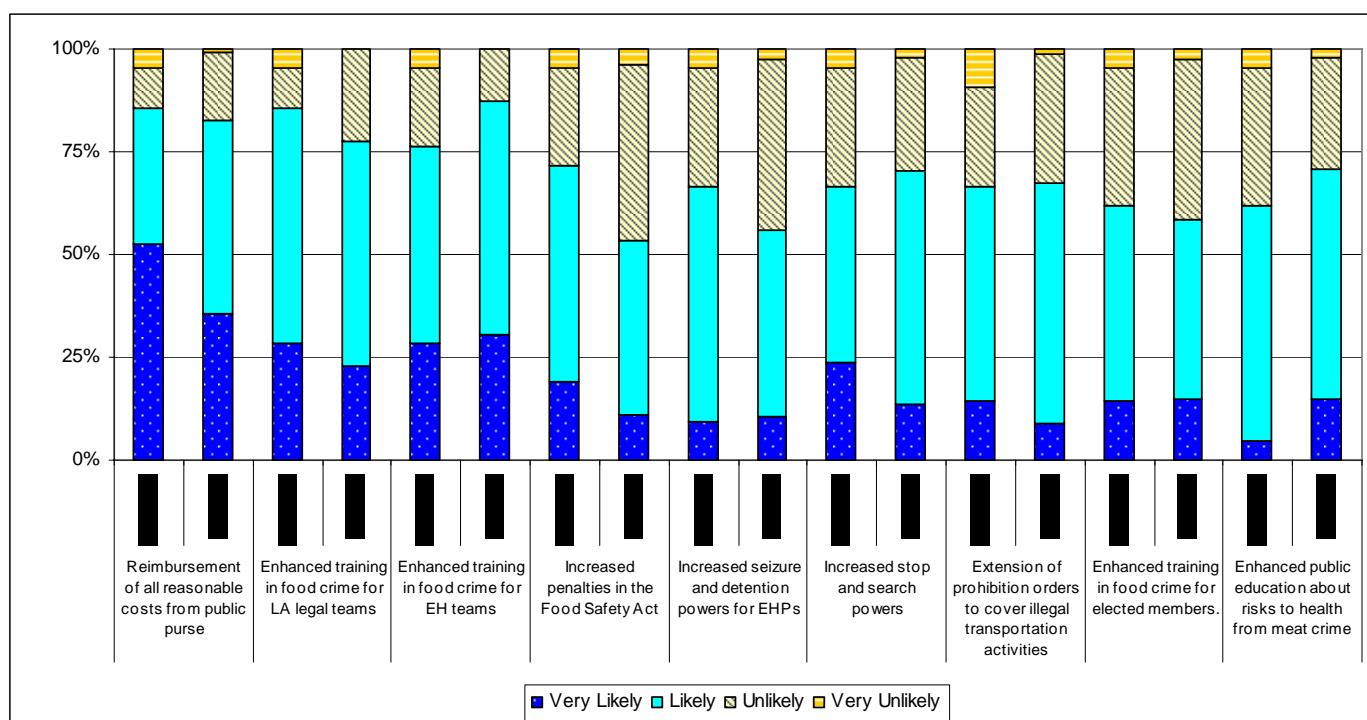
Figure 5. Proposals aimed at enabling local authorities to tackle meat crime



All nine of the proposals listed in the questionnaire were considered likely to affect the decision to investigate and take proceedings in future cases of meat crime. Enhanced training in food crime for environmental health teams and for local authority legal teams along with reimbursement of all reasonable costs from the public purse were the three most popular proposals.

- Enhanced training for environmental health teams 85% (29% very likely)
- Reimbursement of all reasonable costs from the public purse 82% (37% very likely)
- Enhanced training for legal teams 78% (23% very likely)

Figure 6. Proposals aimed at enabling local authorities to tackle meat crime, by local authority approach to meat crime



Note: the four local authorities selecting 'none' when asked what approach was taken to meat crime have not been included in this breakdown

Figure 6 illustrates that response to the nine proposals aimed at helping local authorities tackle future cases of meat crime were broadly similar for authorities taking proactive and reactive approaches to meat crime.

Reimbursement of all reasonable costs from the public purse was rated very likely by 52% of 'proactive' authorities with a further 33% rating it as likely, giving a majority of 86% in favour of this proposal. Local authorities with a reactive approach to meat crime also rated this proposal highly with 36% finding it very likely and 47% likely (83% total).

The proposals for enhanced training in food crime for local authority legal and environmental teams were also rated highly with 86% of 'proactive' authorities finding both statements very likely or likely and 87% and 83% respectively for 'reactive' authorities.

Response to the proposal for increased penalties in the Food Safety Act differed between authorities with a proactive approach and authorities with a reactive approach to meat crime. 71% of 'proactive' authorities showed agreement by rating the proposal very likely or likely compared to just 54% of authorities taking a reactive approach.

All other proposals received an overall positive response from both 'proactive' and 'reactive' authorities.

The four authorities selecting 'none' when asked to describe their approach taken to meat crime did not find any of the nine proposals likely to affect the decision to investigate and take proceedings in future cases of meat crime.

Any other issues

The final section of the survey asked respondents to bring any other issues to our attention. These responses, along with those given to the question asking if there were any other barriers preventing local authorities taking action against meat crime, are summarised below.

Officer safety

A large number of responses emphasised concern over staff safety when dealing with meat crime offences.

“Ensuring the safety of staff is a priority particularly when dealing with organized criminal gangs and potentially violent persons”

Lack of powers

A number of issues were raised concerning a lack of powers available to local authorities when dealing with meat crimes and of the complexity and difficulties with the existing legislative framework.

Lack of powers for arrest and securing interview time:

“No powers to arrest and interview therefore suspects can walk away and prepare thoughts, corroborate stories, just agree to answer written questions etc which hampers investigations”

Difficulty of obtaining warrants:

“Warrants are difficult to obtain, we should have a warrant system similar to that for inspectors of health and safety”

Other legislative issues included:

“Legislation only enables seizure of unstamped meat and does not allow prosecution under Section 9 – failing to meet food safety requirements”

“It is difficult to get any reasonable penalty when we have no powers to look into business finances and show the profit involved to get the Asset Recovery Agency to look at a case you need evidence of at least £50,000 profit from the crime. They also do not view meat crime as an offence”

“The use of the ‘private kill’ provision in the Fresh Meat (Hygiene and Inspection) Regulations 1995 presents a potential legal loophole. Persons slaughtering their own animals may claim that the meat is intended for their own consumption. It is however, difficult for investigators to keep track of such meat making it relatively easy for the unscrupulous to slip meat into the food chain. This provision should be removed or at least limited to a number/volume of meat that can be produced for own consumption”

In contrast another authority which is “battling against a culture of home kills” stated that:

“The council opinion is that this is a harmless rural pursuit and farmers have a right to give meat (or even sell it) to family and friends”

Penalties issued by courts:

“The penalties and powers we already have are quite sufficient; the problem is that courts do not take the issue seriously”

“Education of magistrates etc would assist in raising the level of fines handed out”

“Magistrates need to be encouraged to hand out maximum sentences to offenders in order to assist us in our endeavour to protect the public”

Logistics of seizure and detention

“Lack of facilities required to detain, seize or destroy large quantities of unfit meat”

“The cost of storage of meat until a case is heard is crippling and is never recoverable. Arranging storage for meat is also difficult”

“There is a large cost associated with keeping seized meat as evidence. Magistrates should view it and order it destroyed without delay, thus the case is proven within minutes of seizure”

Need for a central coordinating agency dealing with meat crimes

“Meat crimes are rare occurrences for most authorities. It would be useful to bring in officers from a central agency to advise on steps taken, including the correct legal procedures. I have used the meat task force for advice but felt that the investigation would have helped with somebody actually working with the authority for a period of time whilst the investigation was on going”

“This crime would be better dealt with as a regional crime and would need a specialist team who could act in a more covert fashion”

“I believe there should be a nationally coordinated and resourced group dealing with the investigation of meat crime. This approach would ensure that officers who are fully qualified and competent in meat crimes would be involved in the detailed investigations and in a position to have an overview of national data. Clearly the local authority would be called upon to provide officer assistance in the investigations but the lead role would be undertaken by ‘experts’ ”

“A national unit able to conduct investigations and track intelligence across local authority boundaries would constitute the best response to meat crime”

As well as the need for a central agency, a number of authorities also discussed the need for a shared central intelligence database for meat crime:

“There is no shared intelligence database, each local authority is putting in information and can only see the details of their own data. These issues cross local authority boundaries and enforcement responsibilities. Police have a national database even though they have separate operational areas”

Cross agency working

Meat Hygiene Service and local authority roles:

“There are a number of grey areas in respect of who is responsible for enforcement (MHS or LA). These are areas where unscrupulous activities are likely to take place and probably be exploited”

Securing police involvement in meat crime cases:

“Difficulty of securing police involvement unless fraudulent activity can be identified”

“Police support is imperative however, police often regard this type of activity as low priority and are therefore reluctant to support”

“All meat crime should be prosecuted by the police via CPS and local authority officers/FSA called in as witnesses. Arrest and trial in this fashion will raise public awareness of the offences”

“The police are better equipped to deal with this type of crime – perhaps using EHO’s and MHI’s as expert witnesses”

Government departments and agencies:

“Lack of coordination between responsible government departments e.g. DEFRA and FSA”

“There is no cooperation from Customs”

Inter-authority collaboration:

“This activity usually spans over several local authorities and unfit meat cannot be seized by an officer travelling to another authority leads to difficulties in ensuring the right people are present on different occasions”

One local authority has introduced a programmed meat transit inspection regime. Arrangements have been made with the local police to stop vehicles carrying meat and with local companies to store meat if detained.

Another authority also referred to the transport of food:

“Ensure the burden of proof remains firmly with food transporters, no paperwork should equal an offence”

Safe production of smokies

“Continue with the investigation into the safe production of smokies to deter the criminal element”

“It is these ‘technical’ offences where it is not the actual product but its place of origin that cause us problems. For these we get little political support because in most cases there is no proven health risk”

Logistical issues of meat crime investigations

Surveillance and investigative issues:

“Lack of surveillance techniques and equipment, especially where activities occur in isolated areas”

“Confusing and conflicting advice re surveillance”

“Large areas of remote agricultural land make surveillance/intelligence difficult to achieve”

“Covert surveillance in ethnic areas is incredibly difficult and expensive particularly in inner city areas”

“Inadequate storage space to catalogue and store documents”

“Forensic examination of computer records requires specialist knowledge”

“Ability to audit company accounts”

“Ability to organise extensive surveillance programme - there appears to be little or no training available for officers in this area”

“Local authorities’ knowledge/expertise is limited on subject matter such as surveillance techniques, dealing with volume evidence, disclosure of evidence, confidentiality within local authorities”

Gaining intelligence:

“Knowledge and awareness of such criminal activity occurring locally”

“Limited awareness of national investigations”

Resource issues

Including the time involved in lengthy investigations, the costs this incurs and limited staff availability. Out of hours staffing issues were also a problem for many authorities.

“Given the results that other authorities have obtained and the costs and time the actions have taken this will not be considered a priority by us”

“Resource problems are a major issue as departments are low staffed and if officers are taken off duties to investigate meat crime, it puts pressure on the rest of the team”

“Lack of resources prevent proactive work in this area”

“Even if it became apparent that there was a local problem there are no resources available to tackle the problem”

“Ring fenced resources for funding or secondment of specialist teams would help”

“We have recently secured a successful prosecution of an operator of an illegal cutting plant. The operation, including surveillance and getting to court, took two years and was very resource intensive (both in officer time and financial terms). This fact will deter many local authorities taking action against illegal meat activity and will need to be addressed in order to crack down on the activity”

“For a very small authority it would be totally impractical to attempt to undertake effective action”

Emphasis on inspection targets:

“The emphasis placed on achieving food hygiene inspection targets leaves very little time or resources to deal with more important public health issues such as meat crime”

“All food work is driven by FSA targets and no credit is given for dealing with these issues”

“The time a full investigation would take would mean that key staff wouldn’t be able to undertake COP9 work with a resultant risk of being named and shamed”

“Proactive work would take resources away from areas where local authority performance is measured”