

4 February 2004

Reference:

To: All current contractors for FSA research/survey contracts

JOINT CODE OF PRACTICE ON QA IN RESEARCH - UPDATE AND ACTIONS

It is important that you read this letter and in particular consider how your current procedures align with the requirements of the Code. From June 2004, all applications for Agency funding will be expected to make a declaration of compliance with the Code's provisions as part of the application.

Background

On May 8 2003, the Agency, together with Defra, BBSRC and NERC, launched a Joint Code of Practice on Quality Assurance in Research. For the Agency, this was a major step towards implementing a key recommendation of the review of the Agency's research portfolio and management systems which reported in July 2001 – see <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/research-arbuthnott.pdf>.

The recommendation required that "as a general rule, by 2006, Agency-funded research projects should only be placed at laboratories that have implemented quality assurance schemes acceptable to the Agency". It is intended in the longer-term that most contractors will gain independent, third party accreditation of their quality assurance arrangements.

The new Code seeks to improve QA of the research process (e.g. traceability of samples, calibration of instruments) rather than the science, which has always been an integral part of evaluating research proposals. The single Code will ensure that research contractors working in the food, environment and agriculture areas are all adopting similar quality assurance procedures. The Devolved Authorities have subsequently endorsed the Code.

At the launch, we issued a copy of the Code and a covering letter to all of our current contractors, to coincide with one of the regular Agency Research Requirements

Documents issued at the same time (see <http://www.food.gov.uk/science/research/comresearch/qacopres>). The letter explained the background to development of the Code, our reasons for its introduction and what we expected of applicants/ current contractors, both in the year or so following the launch and in the longer term.

Activities since May 2003

In the first stage of implementation from May 2003 to May 2004, contractors making applications for funding were requested to sign a declaration acknowledging awareness of the Code's provisions and that they would use best efforts to comply with its principles. Initial activities have therefore focussed on raising and maintaining awareness of the Code.

The Agency's Research Coordination Unit (RCU) has issued background information on the Code and its implementation to internal Agency project/programme officers and external programme advisers, together with guidance on maintaining awareness of the Code with Contractors. The guidance made clear that project officers are not in a position to (or indeed expected to) carry out audits against the Code. However they are in a position to ask questions in the context of discussing progress on projects which can highlight aspects of the Code. Presentations/reminders about the Code have also been made at a number of workshops and other meetings where Agency contractors were present.

As another part of the implementation phase, Defra has contracted the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) to undertake a series of baseline assessments with a selection of its contractors, to establish the current position in relation to the Code's provisions and to give feedback on areas for development. Defra selected its top 20 contractors in terms of those receiving the most Defra funding, which also includes a significant number of Agency contractors. These cover different types of organisation, including Research Institutes and Agencies, University Departments and independent contractors. Defra agreed to share the outputs of the baseline assessment with the Agency. This programme is taking place now and is expected to report in May 2004. It is expected that the outputs from this exercise will help the joint signatories offer practical guidance to contractors on possible ways to overcome difficulties they may have in meeting the Code's requirements. In addition, the process will help the joint signatories develop the Code further, should it be required.

What is coming up - Declaration of compliance and audit

As indicated when the Code was launched, from June 2004, contractors making applications for funding will be expected to make a more definitive declaration of compliance with the Code. This allowed a period of a year from the launch of the Code for contractors to assess their current position and to start addressing any areas of concern. The Agency is currently considering the auditing provisions needed to back this up. In the first instance, this is likely to take the form of spot audits on projects which are likely to have a significant impact on developing the Agency's policy.

To maintain awareness, the Code's provisions and the timetable are highlighted when the Agency issues its regular Research Requirements Documents. **As before, Contractors are encouraged to get in contact with me to discuss any concerns or to seek clarification.** This letter will also be placed on the website and sent to everyone who is registered to the Agency's research e-mail newsletter service.

Yours sincerely



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