

# What the new TB testing arrangements mean for farmers

20 February 2015 | By [Alistair Driver](#)

THE Animal and Plant Health Agency has finally confirmed the award of the five regional TB testing contracts in England, after the award was delayed by a legal challenge. ALISTAIR DRIVER explains what it means to farmers and vets.

## Who has won the English bids?

In England the regional Delivery Partner contracts have been awarded to:

- South West One: XL Farmcare Devon and Cornwall
- South West Two: XL Farmcare Wessex
- South East: XL Farmcare South East
- Midlands: XL Farmcare Midlands
- North: XL Farmcare North

Last month it was announced the Welsh contracts had been awarded to:

- Wales North: Menter a Busnes
- Wales South: Iechyd Da (Gwledig)

The provisional award in January of all five English contracts to bids linked to one business XL Farmcare [raised eyebrows within the veterinary and farming communities](#).

It prompted a [legal challenge from losing bidder Xperior Animal Health](#), based partly on the insistence in the original APHA tender document that one company should not be allowed to dominate, including being awarded more than one of the three biggest contracts.

[XL Farmcare](#), responding to questions posed by Farmers Guardian, insisted the bids had been won by ‘five independent companies, each owned and managed by separate consortiums of farm veterinary practices’. It said all were ‘firmly rooted in their local, rural communities’.

APHA confirmed, while some administrative and support services are sub-contracted to other companies under the XL brand, it was satisfied the five winning bidders are all ‘different suppliers’ and ‘financially independent businesses. Each is made up of a consortium of local veterinary practices within their region, the agency said.

For more details on the two Welsh companies click [here](#)

## When do the changes come in?

In England, the new system starts on May 1, a one month delay due to the time taken up by the legal challenge, which was withdrawn earlier this month.

In Wales the new regime begins on April 1.



Changes to the current TB testing system begin in England on May 1 and in Wales on April 1.

From those dates all new TB testing and other Official Veterinarian (OV) work will be undertaken by the seven regional Delivery Partners in England and Wales.

Work already assigned to OV's practices under existing arrangements will be completed by those practices after the start dates.

### **What do farmers need to do when a TB test is due?**

Farmers and livestock keepers will continue to be responsible for ensuring that TB testing is completed on time but will need to contact their regional Delivery Partner to make the arrangements, rather than their local vet.

Delivery Partners will then be responsible for allocating the actual testing activity through their network of practices, and for assuring the quality of the work performed.

Details of how to contact the Delivery Partners will be revealed prior to the new arrangements starting.

### **Will I still be able to use my local vet?**

The new contracts require Delivery Partners to offer testing work to eligible veterinary businesses operating within their geographical regions.

When making arrangements for tests, farmers can express a preference to use a specific veterinary practice from within the Delivery Partners network. Farmers can register their preference now at [www.xlfarmcare.co.uk](http://www.xlfarmcare.co.uk).

This preference 'will be honoured where possible'.

All existing providers of the TB testing service will have the opportunity to register as an approved supplier.

XL said its five regional companies in England had already forged strong links with local vets. The percentage of practices who carry out TB testing and had 'provided their support for the bids in advance of their submission' were:

- **Devon and Cornwall:** 60 per cent
- **Midlands:** 92 per cent
- **North:** 55 per cent
- **South East:** 69 per cent
- **Wessex:** 73 per cent

The companies are now inviting more local practises to get involved. Rob Henderson of XL Farmcare Midlands said: "If a veterinary practice is not yet working with a regional Delivery Partner and wants to undertake TB testing and other Government veterinary work for their own farm clients, and they can deliver the required standard of work, then they can enter into an agreement with the regional contract holder to provide this."

XL said: "There are conditions that all approved suppliers will need to meet, but if they are met and the farmers name that practice as their preference, then the link between farmer and local vet will be fully maintained."

#### **Will farmers have to use vets who are signed up to the Regional Delivery Partners?**

No. Farmers who prefer to use a practice that is not part of the Delivery Partners network will still be able to pay for the testing privately.

#### **Will TB testing be viable for local vets under the new arrangements?**

The tenders were highly competitive and, while the pricing structures within the regions have not been made public, it is expected that vets will end up, on the whole, being paid less for TB testing.

Phil Elkins, of Xperior Farm Health, said TB tests currently work out, on average, at around £3/head. He predicted prices paid to vets could drop by as much as '40 to 50 per cent' under the new arrangements.



Farmers will contact regional Delivery Partners, rather than their local vets, to arrange TB tests

The NFU, BVA and Xperior have argued lower prices for vets could result in testing not being viable under the new arrangements, particularly on remote herds where only a handful of cattle need testing. They have warned this could result in the link between farms and their local vets being lost.

XL insisted the tender process 'was not all about lowest price'. Part of the tender scoring was based on the percentage of income spent directly on front line services.

"The XL Farmcare companies all scored maximum marks in this section, showing that they have all committed to give the greatest percentage of income to the testers, relative to any other bidder," it said.

The five English regional companies have committed to pay the same amount for testing to all suppliers, including shareholding practices, within their region. Exact pricing structures have not been revealed but they may take into account issues like the size of herd and location.

"As all shareholding veterinary practices are happy to undertake testing for the rates agreed by their regional XL Farmcare company, this should give confidence to all sub-contracting veterinary practices," XL said.

### **What if a farmer's preferred vet does not want to carry out my test at the price offered?**

APHA said the new contracts required Delivery Partners to offer testing work to eligible veterinary businesses operating within their regions.

"Individual vets or practices will make a business decision on whether or not they wish to undertake the work as part of the Delivery Partner's network. There won't be a situation where a vet would refuse to do work 'for a particular price'. They will either be part of the Delivery Partner's network (which will include the overwhelming majority of vets and practices in the region) or they will not.

"If a local vet business decides to no longer offer TB testing services then the Delivery Partner is obliged to find an alternative eligible veterinary practice from within the Delivery Partners network so as to ensure that tests continue to be delivered by the relevant deadlines."

XL said all practices that apply to be an approved supplier would be contractually required to undertake the tests that it carried out the last time the farm was tested.

"If there are tests that cannot be carried out by the practice that had previously done the work, then that work will be offered to those approved suppliers in the region who can undertake the work."

### **Will XL be employing more vets?**

The BVA, NFU and Xperior have all predicted a shortfall of local vets willing to carry out the testing will encourage the XL companies to fill the gap by employing vets from elsewhere, with the work increasingly being performed by vets from overseas as a result.

XL said ‘none of the regional companies have any intention of employing vets’. It reiterated that where the work could not be done by the vet that had carried out the test previously, the work would be offered to approved suppliers who can carry out the work.

### **Do the testing arrangements apply to non-bovines?**

APHA confirmed the contracts cover TB testing of non-bovines in response to a request on Twitter from South West breeders of pedigree pigs (@PrimroseHerd) who have suffered from bTB in their pigs over the past few years.

## **Reaction to the award of TB testing contracts**

“This new partnership with the veterinary industry will modernise the way we deliver key services such as bovine TB testing and improve our ability to detect disease and protect animal health.

“The new arrangements provide higher levels of assurance about quality of testing and value for money. Testing will continue to be performed by fully qualified vets and APHA will carry on working in close partnership with the veterinary profession.”

### **APHA’s Veterinary Director, Simon Hall**

“It is essential that local vets in England continue to play an important role in critical disease testing, such as bovine TB, and other OV services and we will expect the delivery partners to utilise the existing networks of local veterinary practices.

“We will monitor how the service is being delivered at a local level and feed in any concerns raised by our members to Defra and APHA, particularly in terms of any erosion of the link between vets and farmers and the potential impact of a loss of veterinary services in rural areas.”

### **BVA president John Blackwell**

“It is vital that the new delivery partners maintain local service delivery so farmers can continue to use their own vets without having to pay towards the testing costs,” Ms Batters said.

“We are concerned that testing on some smaller farms, or farms which have more complicated tests, will no longer be economically viable for the local vet practice under this new system.

“It is also important that if there are any problems when the new system is introduced which result in overdue tests farmers are not fined under cross compliance for something that is beyond their control.”

**NFU deputy president Minette Batters**