

Results of the December 2015 Participant Feedback Survey

Background

To maintain accreditation to ISO17043, it is important that we continue to improve the service that we offer to participants. A way of recording participant satisfaction is to carry out feedback gathering exercises. This is the third survey that we have conducted. Details of the previous surveys are available on the PT section of the HSL website (<http://www.hsl.gov.uk/proficiency-testing-schemes/participant-feedback>).

Survey

The survey was emailed to all asbestos participants, including AIMS, Asbestos in Soils Scheme (AISS), Regular Inter-laboratory Counting Exchange (RICE) and Scanning Electron Microscopy Fibre Counting Scheme (SEM). In total 490 participants were emailed the survey and 142 responded (29% response rate).

Results

- Q1. From the 142 responses – 77% participate in AIMS, 52% in RICE, 20% in SEM and 17% in AISS.
- Q2. 52% of the responses were from the UK, 41% from Europe and 7% from ROW.
- Q3. Participants were asked to indicate who delivered their proficiency testing samples. The data collected is to be included in an audit on our courier service.
- Q4. 99% of participants found the timescales for submitting results acceptable.
- Q5. 99% of participants found the process for submitting results easy to follow.
- Q6. 98% of participants found the timescale for issuing reports acceptable.
- Q7. 77% of participants use the PT website to find useful information. Participants are sent a link to the relevant webpage when subscribing to the scheme.
- Q8. 87% of participants are aware that we offer a range of QC samples. All participants are emailed a copy of the QC order form at the start of the financial year.
- Q9. 65% of participants are aware of our procedure for returning a sample for investigation following a round result. The procedure for returning a sample is outlined in the individual scheme Information Books for Participants.
- Q10. Participants were given the opportunity to comment/make suggestions for the schemes.

Customer Comments

For the majority of the questions, participants were given the opportunity to comment further, if applicable. Below are a few examples of the responses:

Q4. Timescales for submitting results.

- Length of time allowed for submitting RICE counts can occasionally be an issue for labs whose counters are working away from the main laboratory.
 - *emails are sent to laboratories with details of when to expect their slides at least 2 weeks prior to slides being despatched - laboratories have 20 working days to submit their counts. Schedules for the current subscription year are available on the HSL PT pages of the website. Unfortunately, for HSL to be able to administer 3 rounds per year, we are unable to increase the time allowed to count the slides.*

Q5. Ease of submitting results.

- A participant stated that it would be easier if all AIMS results could be entered in one go rather than on multiple screens.
 - *one of the main reasons for the separate screens is to try and reduce data input errors for laboratories.*

Q6. Timescale for issuing reports.

- A couple of participants would like their final report issuing quicker.

- AIMS individual reports are usually issued within 10 working days, although this has been quicker for recent rounds. The group report is usually issued with a month of the results deadline date - we are working towards reducing this timeframe.
- RICE provisional reports are normally issued within a couple of working days of receiving counts. The certificates can not be issued until after the Lab 2 deadline date and all slide queries have been investigated.

Q10. Comments/ Suggestions regarding the Schemes.

- Participants are generally happy with the customer service provided by the PT team.
 - comments include; excellent customer service, prompt reply to queries, vast improvement over the last few years, good timescales for reports, queries dealt with in a more constructive manner.
- A comment has been made regarding use of minerals which have a close composition to asbestos being used in TEM samples.
 - the PT team are constantly looking for new materials to produce samples and suggestions are most welcome.
- Labelling of samples.
 - an AIMS lab was concerned that the sample label is on the outer bag and not the inner bag and could lead to confusion. The main reason for the label being on the outer bag is that we offer past AIMS samples to purchase as QC material. The samples are re-labelled as a QC number, rather than a validation number. AIMS samples should ideally be opened and analysed one at a time to avoid contamination.
 - The soil samples were not clearly labelled in R8, which could have led to confusion when entering results on the PT Online Data Entry System. This was rectified for R9 (despatched w/c 18.01.16).
- RICE.
 - participants would like to be able to use the PT Online Data Entry System for submitting their RICE results. We are currently in the process of updating our system and will hopefully be able to offer this in the very near future. A pilot group of participants have entered results on the system and given their feedback, we're very grateful for this information.
 - some suggestions for additional information on reports have been passed to the Scheme Technical Manager.
 - participants feel the introduction of the slide photographs are a great improvement.
 - participants would like to be able to purchase RICE slides with certain densities, for QC purposes. We are hoping to have these available by April 2016, and email will be issued with further information.
- Sample Investigations.
 - a sample can be returned to HSL for investigation once the individual report has been issued. Full details on the process can be found in the scheme Information Book for Participants. The sample is independently analysed by a qualified analyst and the result submitted to the PT team. A decision is then made as to whether the participants score is amended. The investigation form is returned to the participant with the outcome, which should include information on how this decision was arrived at. If the participant is still not happy, the decision can be appealed to the Fibre Proficiency Testing Steering Committee (FPTSC). *Unfortunately it's not possible for us at the moment to be able to invite participants onsite to view the investigation process.*
- Cost of Schemes.
 - some participants have commented on the price of the schemes.

- *some participants have commented on the cost of replacing a lost/damaged slide is high.*

Discussion

This is the third feedback gathering exercise and the response rate remains high. The main aim of this survey was to determine if the timescales issued by HSL are acceptable and information easy to obtain.

Generally participants are very happy with the service that we are providing, many commenting on the improvements seen over the last few years. The main area of concern is the cost.

The scheme costs are reviewed each year and are priced accordingly. In previous years we have subsidised the Asbestos in Soils Scheme and in 2015/16 we introduced the courier charge for distributing packages around the world. For 2016/17 we have frozen the cost of AIMS as we felt the efficiencies that we have recognised with the introduction of our PT Online Data Entry System should be passed on to our participants. The cost for foreign laboratories joining our scheme can be increased by the strength of the GBP, unfortunately this is out of our control.

In 2015/16 we introduced a damaged slide fee and a withdrawn slide fee. If a slide is damaged but we feel it is acceptable for use within the scheme, the lesser charge will apply. The true cost for producing a reference slide is a lot higher than the cost charged for a withdrawn slide. We understand that accidents do happen, however, we also need to be able to offer slides of an acceptable standard for future rounds.

In previous surveys, participants have requested for the methods used by to analyse samples to be included in the AIMS group report. We have now updated our PT Online Data Entry System to include a range of methods for participants to choose from. We are hoping to feedback this data within R58 Group Report.

We are continually striving to improve the quality of the schemes so this exercise will be carried out annually. Participants are reminded that they are welcome to provide constructive feedback at any time by emailing the PT administration team.

Outcome

The results, comments and feedback have been passed to the HSL PT team and will be discussed at the next FPTSC in June 2016.