

HEALTH AND SAFETY LABORATORY

The viability and integrity of the Health and Safety Executive's world-renowned laboratory service is being put at risk by the private finance initiative.

Although a substantial amount of research is placed with external suppliers the Health and Safety Executive maintains an important in-house agency, the Health and Safety Laboratory.

The primary role of the Health and Safety Laboratory is to provide casework support, evaluation or risk assessment methodologies, assessment of technical standards and forensic support – investigation of incidents which may require research and intelligence activities.

For example, significant work was done to support the investigation into the Ladbroke Grove train crash. The largest component of this support spend is with HSL and HSE benefits from the laboratory's fast response and multidisciplinary capability.

THREAT

Under the private finance initiative the HSL is currently in negotiation with a preferred bidder to rationalise its estate. This involves locating the laboratory on a single site at Buxton. If ministers are satisfied that the final proposals represent value for money then approval will be given.

Currently, HSL is based on two sites at Sheffield and Buxton and conducts research for both HSE and outside bodies, including industry, into health and safety issues. It is widely regarded as the world's premier health and safety laboratory.

The two sites provide a different range of research options. Buxton, occupying a considerable area, is used for experiments in flame and explosion. Sheffield's research concerns matters such as occupational health risk assessment, personal protective equipment, human factors, engineering and microbiology.

The current PFI bid involves the closure of the Sheffield site and the relocation of all the facilities and staff from Sheffield to Buxton. Prospect believes that this initiative creates a whole series of difficulties for the future viability of HSL.

STAFFING

There are few Sheffield based staff who wish to transfer to Buxton. As the rebuild of Buxton would take about three years, staff would look for, and obtain, different jobs outside of HSL. Figures held by HSE indicate that annual turnover among HSL's scientists is already running at around 17 per cent and that recruitment of replacement staff is proving difficult.

The skills and experience of staff have been built up over the years and HSL will find it increasingly difficult to maintain its intellectual and scientific output to HSE for research and scientific developments.

COSTS

HSL currently pays some £2 million per year for its accommodation on the two sites and we believe the planned new accommodation is likely to cost closer to £5 million per year.

As an executive agency, HSL is required to recover its costs through

charging and either the charges upon HSE and other bodies for research work will rise dramatically or HSL will have a gap in its finances that will have to be filled to maintain this strategic resource. This would probably have to be done by increasing the sums of money paid to HSL via grant-in-aid.

In addition, the costs of moving the laboratory and staff to Buxton are likely to be around £1 million spread over the first two years of the move. Either way the extra cost to the public purse of this move will be in excess of £4 million each year for the next 30 years.

TRAVEL

HSL management and the High Peak local authority both underestimate the environmental aspects of the proposed move. HSL's transport plan has identified that the only way to travel from Sheffield to Buxton on a daily basis is by car.

As there are some 250 staff to relocate there will be at least 400 additional journeys each day through the Peak District. This number will not significantly reduce even if HSL staff relocate to Buxton because the partners

of HSL staff will continue to travel back to jobs in the Sheffield area.

HSL is already paying relocation costs to staff who moved from London to Sheffield. Staff at the Sheffield site do not want to move – the cost of housing is much higher in the Buxton area and there is already evidence that HSL staff are drifting away to other jobs.

Prospect believes that the lure of an additional 250 high quality jobs in Buxton has clouded the judgement of the High Peak authority. It is unlikely that these jobs will be filled by local people because of the range of scientific skills required. Another factor is that the Sheffield universities provide a natural feeder route for HSL.

These difficulties taken together will cause major problems for HSL and its staff if the move goes ahead. It is the view of Prospect that the most cost-effective and environmentally responsible option would be to refurbish the half of the existing Sheffield site that needs upgrading. This option does not seem to be considered and Prospect cannot understand why.