

The National Bee Unit: Organisation and Roles

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Animal & Plant Health Agency

Each year, a number of similar questions are posed to inspectors; these questions are not about disease but about the NBU, its inspectors and their recruitment and training pathway. So here we have attempted to address some of the more common questions or confusions that arise.

What is the NBU's responsible government body?

We often find that beekeepers are unclear as to where the National Bee Unit (NBU) fits within the scope of government agencies and how we are connected or interact with various other organisations.

The NBU has been part of several parent organisations in the past

Many beekeepers will recall that the NBU has resided within a variety of parent organisations over the years. In reasonably recent history this has included the Central Science Laboratory (CSL) which became the Food and Environment Research Agency (Fera) in 2009 and then in 2014 we were moved to the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), a newly formed agency arising out of the combination of the former Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency, the Plant Health and Seeds Inspectorate (from Fera) and the NBU (also from Fera). These changes were prompted when Fera moved into the private sector to become Fera Science Ltd, with the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) retaining an interest in Fera Science Ltd. While some government services may be provided by the private sector, government regulatory and enforcement responsibilities are not normally outsourced in this way and hence a new home was needed for the NBU and Plant Health.

The NBU is now part of APHA

Today, the NBU is the bee health team or inspectorate within APHA. APHA is an executive agency of Defra within the Defra group, which comprises 33 agencies and public bodies. APHA, as an executive agency, is sponsored by Defra, Welsh Government and Scottish Government. The bee health team in Defra is responsible for bee health policy in England and in turn sets the programme to be delivered by the NBU. In addition, the NBU also delivers the bee health programme for Welsh Government, bee health being a devolved matter. Scotland also sets its own bee health policy but has its own inspectorate and so the NBU does not carry out inspection activities in Scotland. We nonetheless work closely with our Scottish colleagues, and Scottish inspectors use the NBU's BeeBase database and inspection tools. In a similar fashion the NBU maintains contact with bee health colleagues and inspectors within Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and they often join us for our annual technical training at the start of the bee season, ensuring a healthy dialogue is maintained in areas of joint concern or interest.



Honey bee investigating foxglove by Helen Howarth.

The NBU works with Fera

We continue to work with Fera Science Ltd, as they still provide diagnostics services to the NBU along with science support through a long-term service agreement with Defra. Defra still commissions bee research with various institutions according to need and available funding. It is worth highlighting that while we still interact and work together with Fera Science in many areas, Fera and the NBU (as part of APHA), are separate organisations.

Seasonal Bee Inspectors certify diseased equipment for BDI Ltd; they are not part of BDI

One other area of common confusion is the NBU's relationship to Bee Diseases Insurance Ltd (BDI). This confusion most likely arises because the local NBU Seasonal Bee Inspector (SBI) is the person completing the details on the BDI claim form in the apiary when disease is discovered and equipment needs to be destroyed to eradicate and control the disease. In this instance the SBI is certifying for BDI the equipment deemed necessary to destroy in order to control disease in the apiary along with its overall condition, to allow BDI to assess compensation under BDI insurance. Other than completing this task for BDI, NBU is not part of BDI, but we do work closely with them, as we have a joint interest in effective management of bee disease and to this end we do collaborate on projects and research funded by BDI from time to time.

