

The National Bee Unit: What Does It Do?



Animal &
Plant Health
Agency

By Julian Parker and Sandra Gray, NBU

NBU Inspectors visit us and provide an invaluable service identifying diseases and pests and advising how best to manage these situations. They also undergo rigorous and continuous training and assessment to ensure they continue to meet high competency standards.



A Bee Inspector examining a frame.
All photos courtesy of Julian Parker.

Within the NBU, the field inspectorate comprises 51 Seasonal Bee Inspectors managed by eight Regional Bee Inspectors. The regions are broadly arranged into Eastern, North East, Northern, South East, Southern, South West, Western and Wales. The active inspection season is from 1 April to 30 September and the Seasonal Bee Inspectors are employed on seasonal six-month contracts. The Regional Bee Inspectors work full-time, twelve months of the year.

Bee Inspectors' Training

Some Seasonal Bee Inspectors work for other parts of the Animal Plant Health Agency between October and March. This year, six Seasonal Bee Inspectors have been offered year-round contracts, working six months for the NBU and six months for either the Plant Health Inspectorate or Animal Health. A further eighteen Seasonal Bee Inspectors have also been trained and employed over winter by the Plant Health Inspectorate to assist with imports and exports following the UK leaving the EU and the transition period coming to an end.

When beekeepers have had a visit from an Inspector, they often ask: "what qualifications do you need to join the National Bee Unit?" The answer is that the essential experience criterion is five years of beekeeping experience. As part of the interview/ selection process, candidates are required to participate in a photographic assessment of disease and pest recognition, a competency-based interview, which will also include a technical beekeeping section, and an apiculture skills assessment. Candidates must pass each stage of the assessment in order to be able to proceed to the next.

When a candidate is appointed as a Seasonal Bee Inspector, they have a nine-month probation period. They attend a two-week residential training course at the NBU offices at Sand Hutton for basic training where they are issued with their training records. After this, training

continues in the field under the close supervision of their Regional Bee Inspector until their probation period and Training Record is complete and signed off.

After a Seasonal Bee Inspector has completed the training period and worked one full season, they are required to undertake assessment for the City and Guilds Level 2 Award in Bee Health Management and Safe Use of Veterinary Medicines. This qualification, which is bespoke to the NBU, completes their formal training pathway.

As with all employment, however, there is training on a continuous basis for the NBU Inspectors. At the start of the season, in April, the NBU Inspectorate undertake a one-week residential Technical Training Course at Sand Hutton, Yorkshire. The week includes collection of equipment for the year, training talks and technical updates from the NBU and external speakers. Annual assessment to certify that inspectors retain their disease and pest recognition competency is required by the NBU's ISO 17020 Quality Accreditation and also takes place during this week.



Under 'normal' circumstances, in person, group training continues for the NBU Inspectorate including talks and technical updates. This was not possible during 2020, a particularly unusual year for us all.

Being ISO 17020 quality accredited means that all the field inspectors are audited as part of maintaining the ISO Accreditation, which covers NBU foulbrood assessments and treatments. These audits are conducted both internally within APHA

and externally by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS). As a minimum, Authorised Bee Inspectors (Regional and Seasonal) are assessed internally every three years with witness inspections. Witness inspections, conducted by external auditors, take place annually across regions on a rolling basis. The ISO Quality Assessment also audits NBU office procedures and records.

Contending with COVID during 2020

No article, at the present time, would be complete without mentioning the impact of COVID-19 in the 2020 season. The first national lockdown started just before the start of our season and all the plans for the Annual Technical Training at Sand Hutton were cancelled. We were faced with the logistics of distributing equipment to the Seasonal Bee Inspectors (SBIs), delivering updates and training for the forthcoming season as well as working out how inspections could be carried out while complying with COVID-19 guidelines. Not only that, the planned interviews for candidates to fill SBI vacancies in Southern, South Eastern and North Eastern regions, due to take place in March at Sand Hutton, were also cancelled at short notice. However, like the honey bee, the NBU went into 'hive' mode, 'all working, brain storming and pulling together', with the result that NBU office staff packed and distributed equipment by courier to the SBIs and, being classed as Key Workers, guidelines were drawn up and issued to inspectors to ensure inspections could be undertaken safely.

While the inspectors could travel and carry out inspections, all planned Healthy Bee Days providing training to local associations were cancelled along with the implementation of a BDI whole apiary shook swarm project. As with all with businesses, we have seen the much-accelerated use of virtual meetings, webinars and 'Zoom', so in April some parts of the planned start of season technical training could take place using these methods.



Inspectors being trained in the apiary.

In June, candidates for vacancies who had been selected for the scheduled but postponed one-day assessment, originally planned for March at Sand Hutton, were able to undertake the first part of the assessment. The Disease Recognition Assessment was conducted using computer and phone with the local Regional Bee Inspector. Those successful went on to have a 'Face Time' video interview with three interviewers, as would have otherwise taken place at Sand Hutton, in normal times. Following this stage, candidates underwent the apiary assessment, which was conducted in a candidate's apiary of their choice by the Regional Bee Inspector and a local SBI. In this way we adapted our recruitment to the circumstances of COVID. We are pleased to say that Keith Bartlam was appointed as SBI in the North East, Danyaal Conn was appointed as SBI in the South East and Isaac Mullane SBI in the South. All are receiving training by their Regional Bee Inspector in the field and Isaac, in particular, has undertaken Asian hornet training, thanks to this year's incursion. It is worth pointing out that the NBU was the first team in APHA to undertake recruitment interviews under COVID-19 guidelines.

Due to COVID, the field-based ISO 17020 Audits did not take place, but the office audit did and there were no non-conformities. City and Guild Assessments, similarly, did not take place but there are plans for these to now be undertaken in 2021. Finally, during any inspection visit, inspectors will always be happy to answer any questions about the NBU.

“There is training on a continuous basis for the NBU Inspectors and annual assessment to certify that they retain their disease and pest recognition competency and maintain their ISO 17020 quality accreditation status.”

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