

## Results of the December 2016 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 fourth 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 525 participants were emailed the survey and 151 responded (29% response rate).

### Results

- Q1. From the 151 responses – 76% participate in AIMS, 14% in AISS, 52% in RICE, 25% in SEM.
- Q2. 48% of the responses were from the UK, 44% from Europe and 7% from ROW.
- Q3. 95% of participants find their samples/ slides to be of a suitable standard.
- Q4. 99% of participants receive their samples in a timely manner.
- Q5. 99% of participants find the process for submitting results easy to follow.
- Q6. 89% of participants are aware that they can find our scheme schedule, information books & FAQ's on our website.
- Q7. 98% of participants are happy with the timescales for submitting results.
- Q8. 94% of participants that receive a group report find them informative.
- Q9. 30% of participants feel our schemes have improved during 2016/17 and 70% have seen no noticeable improvements. No-one feels the schemes have got worse.
- Q10. Participants were given the opportunity to comment/make suggestions for the schemes.

### Customer Comments

Participants were given the opportunity to comment further on a few of the questions. Below are a few examples of the responses:

- Q3. Are the samples/ slides provided as part of your scheme of a suitable standard?
- A number of comments were received regarding the condition of the RICE slides - chipped/ damaged/ dirty.  
*- due to the valuable nature of the slide data we are unable to replace slides within a batch when they have slight damage to them. Slides are only included in the round if HSL deem them to be suitable. Slides are assessed following the completion of each round, and replaced if necessary.*
  - Some comments included poor condition, uneven distribution, excessive bubbles, and high concentrations.  
*- The RICE Scheme is a test of analysts' ability to use the counting rules in HSG248 (WHO Rules) correctly, therefore the slides must contain a variety of densities of different fibre types. Bundles, split fibres, fibres attached to particles and various widths of fibres will all test the participant and ensure competence for any eventuality on real samples.*  
*- following completion of R104 there were 45 slide investigations carried out instigated by either a participant comment/ query or by HSL when checking provisional report data. 20 slides were withdrawn. A number of our slides are getting older, or are damaged during a round and we are in the process of producing new slides and introducing them in to the scheme as candidate slides. Unfortunately, the time for a candidate slide to become a reference*

*slide is a lengthy one as it must receive 12-15 counts by a Category 1 lab before the data can be reviewed.*

*- If participants have any concerns regarding a slide, they should advise the HSL PT administrator. All slides within a batch should be counted, however, the slide could be withdrawn by HSL following their investigation.*

Q8. If you receive a group report for your scheme, do you find this informative?

- A number of participants would like to know the concentration of asbestos within a sample.  
*- we will begin to include this information for manufactured samples within the AIMS group report.*
- A number of participants would like to receive a group report for TEMS.  
*- this is something we are working on including with our scheme within the near future.*
- More information to be included within the AIMS group report, e.g. z score information  
*- additional information will be included in future reports.*
- A suggestion to include information within the group report on whether any other laboratories have had problems with their samples.  
*- the group report highlights where laboratories have made errors on their samples. A section could be included in the next group report to highlight how many laboratories returned their sample/s for investigation - including the outcome of those investigations. For RICE, the slides are investigated on return to HSL and if the slide is deemed unsuitable for the scheme, both Lab 1 & Lab 2's are informed.*
- For SEMS further information was requested for the uncertainty for results.  
*- a lab only needs to calculate the uncertainty for the analysis it undertakes. Data supplied from all the participants is included in the group report, this should help.*

Q9. Do you feel our schemes have improved in 2016/17?

- Generally participants are happy with our schemes and have seen improvements with our communication, online result submissions and the quality of samples. We are continually striving to improve our schemes, and the main area of concentration at present is online result submission for our RICE scheme and online renewal of scheme subscriptions.

Q10. Comments/ Suggestions regarding the Schemes.

- From the feedback gathered and the comments received, participants are generally happy with the schemes provided by HSL.  
*- comments include; schemes are run smoothly and efficiently, turnaround times and communication is excellent, quick feedback after submitting results, very happy with how the scheme is conducted.*
- AIMS  
*- Some participants have requested the amount of asbestos to be specified: we will supply this for manufactured samples within our group reports.*
- *- A few comments have been made regarding the samples, for e.g. too easy, type of samples, homogeneity and asbestos types: we try to produce samples to accommodate a range of different laboratory needs, over a scheme year there will be a number of challenging samples and a variety of asbestos types and matrices. All our samples are screened by internal analysts then sent to external validators to assess suitability for the scheme. One of the main criteria's is homogeneity; if the samples are not homogenous they will not be used in the AIMS round.*  
*- Labelling of samples: a 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 and confusion.*

- TEM
  - *We have received a number of requests from participants to have a quantitative scheme containing a low amount of asbestos: from 2017/18 we will be able offer our Low Asbestos Content Scheme (LACS) to all participants (replacing TEMS). Participants will be able to analyse samples qualitatively and quantitatively (optional).*
- AISS
  - *Participants would like to receive samples containing ACM's: it has proved challenging to achieve homogeneity using ACM's compared to free fibre, but we are hoping to provide these samples in the near future.*
- RICE
  - *Timescales for counting and submitting results: some laboratories find the timescales for counting their slides and submitting results too narrow. This may be due to them having large number of counters, or counters in different laboratories. Unfortunately, due to the design of the scheme, we are unable to extend the timescales for labs as we would then be unable to administer 3 rounds a year. The PT administration team try to notify participants if they're Lab 1 or Lab 2 as soon as possible and deadlines are clearly displayed on the emails and scheme schedule.*
  - *Timescale for receiving certificate is too long: unfortunately, due to the way the scheme is designed, we are unable to issue certificates until the final deadline (lab 2 deadline) has passed and all slide investigations have been carried out. We are aware that participants like to receive their certificates in a timely manner and we endeavour to complete this within 2-3 weeks of the final deadline date.*  
*Our ideal solution would be to have only 1 lab in each group, which would help alleviate both of these issues, however, this make take some time to achieve.*
- SEMS
  - *The polycarbonate filters are difficult to remove from the backing - unfortunately, this is the case. Try using a thin, blunt stick to carefully push through the narrow tubing connector.*
  - *Unclear if participants have passed/ failed the round - the laboratory is not formally assessed, although some indication is given in relation to the results of other participants. In summary, scoring mainly A's & B's is good, scoring mainly C's requires improvement. Further details are available in our Information Book for Participants available on our website.*
  - *A more realistic composition and density range is required - we will endeavour to add more complex samples in future rounds and increase the number of particles. Sample densities are influenced by the steering committee - the requirement is generally for low density samples close to the clearance indicator.*
- Courier
  - *There have been a few instances where samples have been delayed or delivered to incorrect addresses. We are in constant contact with our courier and are working hard to rectify these issues. Labs are emailed when the samples are despatched and advised to contact the PT administration team if they haven't been received within 10 working days. The PT team will now email laboratories 5-10 working days after the samples have been despatched to check if they have been received in good condition - we are*

*hoping this will help to highlight any potential issues sooner so that we can get samples to you in a timely manner.*

- Software
  - Generally participants are happy with the online data entry system we have for our schemes, however, we are still waiting for RICE to be included: *we have been working towards this with our software engineer, but it has proved difficult due to the vast amounts of data involved with the scheme. However, we are now working on the production of the certificate, so hopefully this will be available very soon!*
- Quality Control Samples
  - We have a vast range of QC samples for our schemes, including a few new ones which we've added over the last couple of year: Fibre Counting QC Slide (HSL055) - supplied with 2 counts by our analysts for laboratories to add their counts to and determine the reference value. AIMS samples of a known concentration (HSL042). Asbestos Reference Samples (HSL043) individual pots of amosite, chrysotile, crocidolite, UICC amosite, UICC chrysotile and UICC crocidolite. Individual Past AIMS samples (HSL040) can be chosen to help build up a laboratories QC supply.

### **Discussion**

This is the fourth feedback gathering exercise and the response rate remains high. The main aim of this survey was to determine if the schemes, and the process, are of an acceptable standard for our participants.

Participants have made very positive comments regarding the quality of the schemes and how they are administered, as demonstrated above. They have also provided valuable constructive feedback where they feel improvement could be made. Although not all answers to comments/ suggestions has been provided in this report, the survey has been collated and distributed within the team so that we're all aware of where we are doing well and where we could improve.

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 PT Management Meeting in February 2017 and the FPTSC in June 2017.