

**CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT: NOVEMBER 2009**

**Chief Executive's visit to New York and Washington DC**

1. I visited New York City, New Haven (Yale) and Washington DC from 28 September to 2 October. I had an extensive – and hectic – round of meetings, for which I am grateful to British Consulate and Embassy staff for arranging. A full list of all those I met will be put on the FSA website in due course, and I am grateful for the time they all gave so freely to meet me.
2. The purpose of my visit was to share experiences and future plans on food safety and healthy eating, and to promote the UK approach. What struck me most, and indeed was impressed upon me, by almost all of those I met is that the UK is much further ahead than in the States in our policies to promote healthy eating. There is, to the visitor at least, a confusing array of players in the regulatory and advisory world. Those I met were most interested in our work on front of pack (FoP) labelling and salt reduction. As a direct result of my visit we will be seconding an FSA colleague to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to help them develop a FoP labelling scheme and give assistance on their salt reduction work.
3. In New York City there is mandatory point of choice calorie labelling for business with 15 or more businesses across the United States. Discussions I had on this issue with both businesses and consumer groups raised some interesting challenges which we would need to consider if such an approach were to be considered for the UK. Our own approach of collaboration and co-operation linked to measured commitments were of great interest to our hosts.
4. In New Haven/Yale I met Kelly Brownell and colleagues at the Yale Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. There we had a very interesting debate about soda (soft drink) taxes. This is very live and controversial topic in the US. It will be interesting to see how the debate plays out. All those we met and discussed this topic with mentioned the relevance of how the debate on tobacco played out.
5. In Washington DC, aside from meetings with food industry representatives I met delegates and staff from the both the House of Representatives and Senate, the US Department for Agriculture, and our counterparts at the FDA. The focus of those meetings was largely the Food Safety Bill making its way through the House and the Senate. If passed, this legislation will represent the first significant food safety legislation in the US for a number of years.

6. I was in Washington DC again on 21/22 Oct when I spoke at the Institute of Medicine joint US/UK workshop on tackling obesity. This was a further valuable opportunity to exchange ideas and experience of tackling this important issue.

### **GM Dialogue: Update**

7. In September I informed the Board that the FSA was undertaking a programme of public engagement on GM food, and that a steering group was being set up to oversee the work. The steering group is being chaired by Professor John Curtice from the University of Strathclyde.
8. The membership of the steering group is being finalised and will be announced later this week. It will comprise representation from different stakeholders groups as well as experts in public dialogue. The first meeting of the steering group will be held on 25/26 November, when it will agree the invitation to tender for a contractor to carry out the engagement activities, and separately for a contractor to evaluate the project.
9. The FSA has received confirmation from the Sciencewise-ERC that it will co-fund this project to a maximum of £300K. In addition to the FSA providing funding we are seeking contributions from other government departments. It is envisaged that the total budget for the project will be £750K.
10. The Sciencewise Expert Resource Centre for Public Dialogue in Science and Innovation (Sciencewise-ERC), funded by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, provides assistance to policy makers to carry out public dialogue, a two-way conversation with members of the public, to inform their decision-making on science and technology issues.

### **SACN Advice on Mandatory Folic Acid Fortification**

11. In May 2007 the Board agreed unanimously that mandatory fortification with folic acid of either bread or flour should be introduced, with controls on voluntary fortification and advice on appropriate supplement use. This was based on advice from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) that mandatory folic acid fortification would reduce the number of pregnancies affected by neural tube defects. In October 2007, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) of England, on behalf of all UK CMOs, requested that SACN further consider some evidence that suggested folic acid might increase the risk of colorectal cancer.

12. In September this year, SACN notified the Agency of the outcome of its review of recent evidence on folic acid and colorectal cancer risk. SACN concluded that the new evidence does not provide a substantial basis to change its previous recommendation for the introduction of mandatory fortification with folic acid, with controls on voluntary fortification. However, SACN's recommendation has been amended to clarify advice on supplement use.
13. Last month I wrote to the CMO to advise him of the outcome of SACN's review. I also reminded him of the Agency's original position, the status of which had not changed since SACN's advice regarding mandatory fortification. A summary of SACN's report and my letter to the CMO was made public shortly afterwards.
14. The CMO has advised me that he and the other UK CMOs will now fully consider SACN's report and recommendations before advising Health Ministers. He thanked SACN for its careful analysis and deliberations on the issue. If mandatory fortification is approved by UK Health Ministers, it will be the Agency's responsibility to lead its implementation. The Board will be invited to attend a recorded briefing before Christmas to provide those members who require it with the full background to what has been a long process.

### **FVO General Audit**

15. The Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) of the EU has spent this year conducting an intensive series of missions as part of the first year of the General Audit programme for the UK. General Audit represents a new approach for the FVO, with a structured three-year cycle of missions replacing the stand-alone missions focussing solely on a single sector. With this new approach comes a broader scope – the purpose of General Audit is to verify that official controls are being carried out in compliance with Community law and in accordance with the UK National Control Plan. The General Audit missions examine both specific matters pertaining to the subject of the mission (such as feed, food hygiene or animal welfare), and the wider implementation of Regulation 882/2004 in the UK.
16. As the Central Competent Authority for feed and food, the FSA has led on a number of the ten missions that have taken place this year and worked closely with colleagues in Defra, the MHS, local authorities and other agencies. The General Audit approach is new but has so far proved to be a very useful and constructive process, highlighting where our procedures are robust and effective and identifying areas in which we can improve and develop our official control regime.
17. The programme for the first year is drawing to a close, with one outstanding mission (for BSE) due to take place in late January 2010. Some of the mission reports, including those for food hygiene (red meat and milk), have been published on the

FVO website. Other reports are yet to be received or are still at the draft stage awaiting comment. Once the BSE mission has been completed we anticipate that a draft General Audit report, assessing the implementation of Regulation 882/2004 in the UK, will be available for our consideration and comment around April 2010. I will update the Board further when the in-depth findings of the FVO become available.

### **LA Monitoring Scheme**

18. Board members will be aware that a report on 2008/2009 Local Authority Enforcement Activity is scheduled for the March 2010 Board meeting. I thought it would be useful to provide an update on the current position in relation to the 2008/2009 local authority returns.
19. As at the end of October, 353 UK authorities (75%) had completed their LAEMS return for 2008/2009. Officials are now working directly with the remaining authorities, providing support and advice where necessary.
20. LAEMS is a web based system developed with local authorities based on automatic data transfer from local authority databases to the Agency. Whilst this ultimately makes their returns to the Agency less burdensome and more accurate, adapting to the new monitoring system has undoubtedly been challenging with many authorities needing to do substantial work on their databases.#
21. On a visit to the North West last week I heard firsthand about some of the issues and difficulties experienced by those on the frontline. Our own staff have been closely involved in guiding those with problems.
22. LAEMS will collect, as before, data on the numbers of food premises and interventions, and enforcement actions taken. However, the new arrangements will enable, for the first time, information on business compliance levels and officer numbers to be collated.
23. It is pleasing to record that local authorities have generally responded positively to the changes necessary, recognising the benefits. Whilst it is likely a small proportion of authorities will be unable to provide the necessary data in the first year, by working directly with authorities over the next month and in some cases accepting manual returns as a fall-back, we aim to keep this number low.

## **Irish Dioxin Incident: Update**

### ***Northern Ireland Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) Committee Review of the Dioxins Incident***

On 24 September, staff from our offices in Belfast briefed the ARD Committee on the evidence submitted as part of the Committee's inquiry into the dioxins incident at the end of 2008. The Committee also heard evidence from Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), and the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters' Association (NIMEA). A full transcript of the meeting will be published in due course. The committee also took evidence from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food at later meetings.

### ***Dioxin De-brief for Northern Ireland District Councils***

A de-briefing exercise for Northern Ireland District Councils in respect of the 2008 dioxin incident was held at the College for Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), Loughry, on the morning of 25 September. The event was independently facilitated by Steelhenge, who conducted the FSA external review into its handling of the incident. The main objective of the exercise was to give the councils an insight into the incident and the challenges colleagues in Belfast experienced during the early investigative stages of the incident. Presentations were given by FSA staff on the nature of the problem and the background to dioxins, the initial phase of the incident in respect of pork, and an overview of the second phase in respect of beef and dairy cattle. Steelhenge presented the findings on the Incident Management Reviews and Incidents Branch, and London-based colleagues gave a presentation on the proposed changes to communication routes during incidents, which is now out for public consultation.

**Tim J Smith**  
**Chief Executive**