

# **Strategic plan event: note on discussion groups and plenary**

**Prepared for: Food Standards Agency**

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# Introduction

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) held a stakeholder event on 27<sup>th</sup> April 2009 in London to discuss the focus and priorities of their strategic plan. Two core objectives were examined: improving food safety and improving the balance of the diet. The event was chaired by TNS-BMRB and moderated by FSA staff.

The strategic context was highlighted by presentations from Dame Deirdre Hutton, Chair of the FSA, and the Chief Executive, Tim Smith.

Presentations were then given by four stakeholders to set the scene for the debate:

- A food industry stakeholder highlighted the need for the FSA to focus on food safety, and to build trust and share information with industry so that new initiatives could be planned effectively
- A consumer stakeholder noted that the FSA has a statutory remit wider than public health risks (for example standards and labelling) and highlighted the need for the FSA to include standards in its strategy in addition to an emphasis on sustainability and new technologies
- A local government stakeholder highlighted that budgetary pressures meant that authorities were being expected to do more for less – which underscored the need for much more effective partnerships with the FSA at a local level
- A dietary health stakeholder highlighted the profound challenges for FSA in helping to shape diet choices, particularly in terms of improving the health of low income and marginalised groups.

After presentations, participants were invited into one of nine groups, focusing on either food safety or improving the balance of the diet. Here the outcomes that the FSA sought in relation to each overarching objective were discussed and potential interventions prioritised (a summary of this discussion is provided in appendix 1).

After the group discussions, participants were convened for a final plenary where issues raised in the group were debated.

# 1 Stakeholder views on the strategic plan

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## 1.1 Improving food safety

In the group discussions the need for a strong evidence base to improve food safety was highlighted by stakeholders. Improving the safety of food entering the UK market and on sale in the UK was also very important. Helping consumers to make informed choices about food safety was less of a priority.

Specifically, the group discussions highlighted the following views on the FSA's draft priorities:

### **Outcome 1: Imported food entering the UK market is safe to eat**

- The need to increase horizon scanning and forensic knowledge, together with intelligence of global food chain was viewed as important. There was a particular need to develop better understanding at the source of the food chain.
- The need to apply enhanced knowledge and understanding of imported food risks to controls at ports was also a high priority. The need for good intelligence and communications with industry, together with greater consistency and controls across the EU, was highlighted in this regard.
- The monitoring of imports at retail and food services was also viewed as important, though the need to ensure consistency of standards in domestic and imported food was highlighted.

### **Outcome 2: Food produced or sold in the UK is safe to eat**

- The need to continue to reduce foodborne disease through tackling campylobacter and salmonella in poultry was viewed as a priority, with resources also needed to tackle E.Coli and Listeria.
- The need to work in partnership to develop knowledge of what interventions worked was underscored. While increased compliance of food businesses around food safety was a priority, there was more contention as to whether this should be done through a hazard or risk based approach.
- Delivering risk-based, proportionate meat controls was a high priority. There was a clear need for the FSA to develop a robust

evidence base to underpin this priority. There was also seen to be the need for a more credible system of auditing across the EU.

- Whilst tackling contamination in the supply of food was a priority requiring effective working with the food industry, traceability was viewed as less important for the FSA to focus on.
- The need to improve knowledge about the use of new technologies in food production was seen as important, though the use of formal horizon scanning to achieve this was less of a priority.

### **Outcome 3: Consumers make informed choices about food safety when eating outside the home, prepare and cook food safely at home**

- The need for continued reduction in foodborne disease was not seen as clearly related to this outcome – and hence was a low priority for stakeholders.
- Raising hygiene standards in foodservice outlets was a high priority, particularly in terms of the FSA developing knowledge of what interventions work.
- The need to implement a single *Scores on the Doors* scheme was a low priority – though the importance of consistency in improving consumer understanding was noted.

## **1.2 Improving the balance of the diet**

The second set of group discussions focused on improving the balance of the diet. While all key outcomes in terms of improving dietary health were viewed as important; the priorities underpinning the delivery were more contested. Specifically:

### **Outcome 4: Making retail products and catering meals healthier**

- While the priority relating to continued reductions in saturated fat, salt and sugar in mainstream products was supported, there were concerns around the scope of the FSA's work in this regard and the increasing pressures it placed on food businesses.
- Greater availability of healthier options in retail and food services was also supported – with certain stakeholders advocating that healthy options should be norm rather than the exception. However, the issue of affordability for consumers was important.

- The priority around increasing the pace of change in eating out settings was not well understood by stakeholders and needed more detail before it could be discussed effectively.
- Understanding dietary habits and nutritional status of the UK population; modelling the effect of changes to consumer habits and products was viewed as very important - providing the evidence base to underpin the strategy.

#### **Outcome 5: Retailers, manufacturers and caterers provide the nutrition information consumers need to make healthy choices**

- A single, simple and effective front of pack labelling approach adopted by the whole food industry was seen as the higher of the two priorities to deliver this outcome – though the tension between simplicity and conveying useful information to guide dietary choices was highlighted. The role of the EU in this area was noted in relation to the optional nature of nutrition labelling.
- Increased provision of nutrition information in a wide range of catering outlets was seen as a medium priority – though it was also viewed as cutting across a range of FSA work to improve the balance of the diet.

#### **Outcome 6: Consumers understand about food and a healthy diet, prepare and cook healthy meals at home**

- While the potential for all food businesses to deliver a single set of key healthy eating messages was seen as important, again a tension was highlighted between the need to keep messages simple and the effectiveness of single messages given the diversity of the population
- Increased consumption of healthier foods, especially fruit and vegetables was also seen as important – though there was a need to take account of sustainability and environmental issues in delivering this priority. The FSA would also need to take into account the role of the Department of Health in this area to ensure that efforts were not duplicated and there was a clear lead within government.
- The need to promote the FSA as a trusted source of information was contested as a priority. While certain groups thought it was very important for consumers to get clear and impartial advice, the significant costs to deliver this was a concern for certain groups.

- The development of integrated government advice for consumers on food issues, though seen as important, needed to be joined up with messages around sustainability.
- Stimulating demand for lower salt and sat fat products was a low priority, with stakeholders questioning how the FSA could do this effectively given their role.

### **1.3 Risk based regulation**

A final cross cutting outcome focused on the need for a proportionate, risk based regulatory regime to achieve wider food safety and dietary health goals. This outcome was a high priority in managing food safety; and a lesser priority for dietary health. Specifically:

#### **Outcome 7: A proportionate, risk based regulatory regime relating to food, which is clear about the responsibilities of food business operators and others, and which generates public confidence in food**

- Delivering an effective, risk-based inspection and enforcement regime was viewed as a high priority – with a key role for local authorities in ensuring effective delivery.
- Better, more proportionate regulation was seen as a medium to high priority – though the role of the EU in driving this area was highlighted.
- The need for the FSA to have a stronger EU presence was contested. Whilst seen as a priority by certain groups, others were concerned around the costs of a permanent presence in Brussels.

## 1.4 Plenary discussion

**The first part of the plenary discussion focused on improving the balance of the diet.** After a recap on the key findings from the discussion sessions, the following points were made:

- The need to develop more consistent data and information in relation to diet and health; and help create more consistent messages for the public in this area. *[Health stakeholder]*
- The need to target messages in relation to diet and health toward particular communities, particularly those 'hard to reach' and most at risk of diet related health issues; together with the challenge of getting people to change their eating habits before they have had a diet related illness. *[Health stakeholder]*
- The difficulty of gaining hard scientific information on the dietary and nutritional balance of different subgroups of the population in order to develop effective evidence based policy. *[Food business stakeholder]*
- The potential for local government bodies to play a greater role in the advocacy and championing of diet and health to various communities, was highlighted: for instance through local strategic partnerships *[Local Government stakeholder]*
- A concern that dietary strategies that purely focus on the reduction of salt, saturated fats and sugar would ultimately impact on product taste and desirability. A greater focus should be placed on over eating and portion size *[Food business stakeholder]*
- The need for the FSA to work more effectively with Department of Health and the other partners around dietary health. *[Food business stakeholder]*
- The need for the FSA to take into account the views of ethnic minorities in relation to diet *[Consumer stakeholder]*

**In response the FSA highlighted the following:**

- The evidence base in relation to consumer behaviour, diet and health is very important – and the FSA currently runs a diet and nutrition survey. One of the key issues facing the FSA is the balance between initiatives with industry versus those with consumers to promote behavioural change. Despite the success of campaigns such as salt reduction, the associated costs were high. A key question going forward is whether this communications role should be left to other government departments.
- The FSA needs to address the issue of how it engages with local authorities. For instance, there are particular opportunities to join up local authority roles around dietary health and food safety, for instance by providing greater scope for involvement in nutritional advice at local food establishments.
- Although there is a tension between the FSA taking a reductionist or whole diet approach to promoting dietary health: the key is to ensure interventions are evidence based and maximise impact on health outcomes. While portion sizes are an important part of consumer education, overall there is a need to get people to focus on eating sensibly through small and realistic changes to their diet.
- It was highlighted that the FSA has taken account of the views of ethnic minorities through advisory groups as well as directly through research into consumer views and behaviour on different dietary health matters.

**During the second part of the plenary, discussion focused on food safety. The following issues were raised.**

- There was a concern highlighted over the concept of 'proportionate risk based' regulation. The term 'hazard' was thought to be more appropriate. The need to acknowledge uncertainties was also seen to be important in developing risk management strategies. *[Academic stakeholder]*
- Another key issue was for the FSA to understand the impact of the credit crunch on food choices amongst consumers and the behaviours of manufacturers. A big challenge for the FSA was to ensure that cheap food was safe. *[Consumer stakeholder]*
- There were a number of issues raised in relation to Horizon scanning. This included the need for the FSA to share information and data with businesses, and increase the effectiveness of partnerships with industry in this regard *[Food business stakeholder]*; to the need to embed issues such as climate change and sustainability in the horizon scanning process *[NGO stakeholder]*
- It was questioned how easy will it be in 2015 to judge success in terms of how priorities are met. *[Food business stakeholder]*
- It was highlighted that the FSA could do more to liaise with schools, hospitals and so on to promote consumer education and communication on food safety. *[Consumer stakeholder]*

**In response the FSA highlighted the following:**

- It was agreed that wording around risk can be used to loosely and that 'hazard' may capture these issues better. However, getting evidence to understanding and managing hazards in a globalised food chain was difficult.
- Although the FSA needed to be vigilant on the impact of the economic downturn on the food chain, it was highlighted that cheaper food does not necessarily mean unsafe food.
- In relation to horizon scanning, it was acknowledged that a tremendous amount of information resides with food manufacturers and retailers. Whilst there may be sensitivities around the disclosure of information by food businesses, it was hoped that partnerships

could be developed that did not compromise commercial interests. It was also agreed that horizon scanning should take account of broader sustainability issues and climate change.

- In terms of judging success, the next phase of the strategy will develop SMART objectives to measure progress against the outcomes. The need to have tough measures in place to ensure delivery was underscored.

The event ended with closing remarks from the Chair Dame Deirdre Hutton, who highlighted the following challenges:

- Whether the FSA should try and capitalise on the changes in consumer behaviour in relation to changing external conditions
- That if the food economy is being reshaped, whether the FSA should lead or react to this
- How the FSA takes account of wider social, environmental and economic issues without overstressing themselves
- Whether the FSA should be responsible for cross government, consistent messages on dietary health
- The need to get parties to agree on the consistency and detail on information given to consumers. Greater differentiation of messages for different groups of the population was also needed.
- Understanding what works in terms of regulation to deliver food safety outcomes was important. FSA devotes a lot of resources to compliance – it was questioned whether there should there be a more hazard based approach management.

## 2 Appendix: Stakeholder views on outcomes and priorities for the FSA

O U T C O M E S	Objective: Improve food safety			Objective: Improve the balance of the diet			
	1. Imported food entering the UK market is safe to eat.	2. Food produced or sold in the UK is safe to eat.	3. Consumers make informed choices about food safety when eating outside the home, prepare and cook food safely at home.	4. A proportionate risk-based regulatory regime relating to food, which is clear about the responsibilities of food business operators and others, and which generates public confidence in food.	5. Retail products and catering meals are healthier.	6. Retailers, manufacturers and caterers provide the nutrition information consumers need to make healthy choices.	7. Consumers understand about food and a healthy diet, prepare and cook healthy meals at home.
	COMMENTS						
	H – Whole food chain approach	H – To include toxicological issues	L – Eating in/out of home different	H	H	H	H – Consider affordability

PRIORITIES	
QUESTION	Comment
1. Increase horizon scanning and forensic knowledge and intelligence of global food chain.	Impact, priority 1-3 interlinked. H - More activity at food source.
2. Apply enhanced knowledge and understanding of imported food risks to controls at ports.	H - EU consistency. Quality intel. Good communications with industry.
3. Monitoring of imports at retail and food services.	Consistent standards domestic/imported.
4. Continued reduction in foodborne disease: tackling and campylobacter & salmonella in poultry as a priority	H - E.coli, Listeria resource = risk. Is this priority and outcome.
5. Develop our knowledge of what interventions work; and take a risk-	H - Partnership working. H. Hazard or

<b>based approach to increase compliance.</b>	risk based?
<b>6. Delivering more risk-based proportionate meat controls.</b>	Needs evidence base. H - needs credible audit EU wide issue.
<b>7. Tackling contamination in the supply and traceability.</b>	Consumer impact. Supply and product. Strong industry/regulator working. Traceability not important.
<b>8. Improved scanning and knowledge about the use of new technologies in food production</b>	Ensure consistency in E.U L New tech important. Scanning low importance.
<b>9. Continued reduction in foodborne disease.</b>	Not linked to outcome.
<b>10. Develop our knowledge of what interventions work in raising hygiene standards in foodservice outlets</b>	H
<b>11. Implement a single 'Scores on the Doors' scheme.</b>	L - Focus resources, consistency, and consumer understanding.
<b>12. Delivering an effective, risk-based inspection and enforcement regime.</b>	H - LA role acknowledged. H - Needs to be risk based.
<b>13. Better, more proportionate regulation.</b>	M and H – Better regulation, EU driven.
<b>14. Stronger EU presence for negotiation and collaboration</b>	L - Affordable? H.
<b>15. Continued reductions in saturated fat, salt and sugar in mainstream products.</b>	L and H - when does it end.
<b>16. Greater availability of healthier options in retail and food services.</b>	Affordability. Healthier should be the standard.
<b>17. Increase the pace of change in eating out settings.</b>	Lack of understanding.
<b>18. Understanding dietary habits and nutritional status of the UK population; modelling the effect of changes to</b>	Evidence base? H – key to strategy. M - important across outcomes.

<b>consumer habits and products.</b>	
<b>19. A single, simple and effective front of pack labelling approach adopted by the whole food industry.</b>	H - Simplicity and EU
<b>20. Increased provision of nutrition information in a wide range of catering outlets.</b>	M - supports all FSA work.
<b>21. All food businesses to deliver a single set of key healthy eating messages.</b>	H - single set? Population is different. Very important consistent.
<b>22. Consumption of healthier foods, especially fruit and vegetables.</b>	H - sustainability included. DH role?
<b>23. Promote FSA as a trusted source of information.</b>	L and H.
<b>24. Develop integrated Government advice for consumers on food issues.</b>	Sustainability not FSA's remit. One strategy consistency. Health and sustainability.
<b>25. Stimulate demand for lower salt and sat fat products.</b>	How? L.