

## TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY'S POSITION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

### Executive Summary

1. The Agency is working to implement its commitment to take sustainable development into account in all of its activities and policy decisions. This paper focuses on policy making, rather than on operational matters. Key underpinning work on the policy side has been the development of guidance to staff on how to undertake sustainability assessments. The Board has requested a review of how sustainability assessments are working in practice and how they are affecting policies.
2. Part I of this paper reports on the review. It concludes that the staff guidance is working well, with assessments impacting on decisions in some, but not all, cases reviewed. The reasons for this are explored in the paper.
3. Part II of the paper flags up the challenges that the Executive will be considering over the next few months in order to articulate what sustainability means for the Agency – what it looks like in practice and how we might embed sustainability fully into our policies and policy making. The Executive proposes that once this work is done the Board will have the opportunity to discuss the outcome early in 2008.

### Board Action Required

4. The Board is invited to:
  - **note** the conclusions of the review of the application of sustainability assessments and the progress made so far;
  - **note** the challenges highlighted;
  - **agree** that the Executive should undertake further analysis of the challenges and report back to the Board in early 2008.

#### **LABELLING, STANDARDS AND ALLERGY DIVISION**

##### **Contact:**

Michael Wight	Tel: 020 7276 8483
	Email: <a href="mailto:michael.wight@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk">michael.wight@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk</a>
Alison Spalding	Tel: 020 7276 8460
	Email: <a href="mailto:alison.spalding@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk">alison.spalding@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk</a>

## TOWARDS IMPLEMENTING THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY'S POSITION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

### Issue

1. To review progress on implementing the Agency's commitment to take sustainable development into account in all of its work, focussing on:
  - (i) a review of the use of sustainability assessments and the affect they are having on policies;
  - (ii) highlighting a number of issues that need to be tackled if the Agency is to fully embed sustainability.

### Strategic Aims

2. Contributing to the Government wide policy by taking sustainable development into account in all of our activities.

### Background

3. The Agency is committed to taking sustainable development into account in all of its activities. Our Sustainable Development Action Plan details how we will achieve this and includes a series of targets and milestones against which we can measure our progress<sup>1</sup>.
4. The Action Plan covers operational matters (ie how we run our business) as well as how to embed sustainable development into the taking forward of our remit. Sustainability assessments help to underpin this wider Agency policy on sustainable development. Guidance<sup>2</sup> has been developed to help staff undertake sustainability assessments. This guidance is primarily aimed at policy making, although it is good practice and can read across to other activities.
5. The Board has requested a review of how sustainability assessments are working and the effects they are having on policies. This review forms part of our learning process and will help inform future Agency policy on sustainability.

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<sup>1</sup> The Sustainable Development Action Plan can be found at [www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/susactionplan.pdf](http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/susactionplan.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The guidance can be found at: <http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/susstaffguideaug06.pdf>

## ***Part I: Review of Sustainability Assessments***

6. All divisions (as well as FSA Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) were invited to submit up to three examples of sustainability assessments carried out between April and September 2006. Thirty one assessments were submitted. It should be noted that these did not represent all the assessments carried out by the Agency during this time, but they did provide a reasonable indication of how the guidance was being applied in practice. Staff involved in these assessments were asked about the extent to which they informed decisions, as well as the usefulness of the guidance for assessing options, resource implications and any problems encountered.
7. Details of the review and its findings in relation to the effects of sustainability assessments on policy and other decisions are given in Annex I. Website links to 3 examples of sustainability assessments are also given.
8. One of the targets in the Agency's Sustainable Development Action Plan was that 90% of all staff should have attended training on sustainability by May 2007. This target may be missed (68% of staff have attended to date). However, a recent survey in December 2006 indicated that over 80% of staff involved in policy development do already consider all three aspects of sustainability (environment, social and economic impacts). The review of assessments will assist in honing some of the messages to ensure that the training is directly applicable to Agency staff.
9. The review revealed that there are some resource implications for the Agency with assessments taking an average of four person hours to complete. However, a proportion of these costs would have been incurred under existing policy/option analysis. Overall the estimated additional cost to the Agency (including FSA Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but excluding the Meat Hygiene Service) of undertaking sustainability assessments on policy or how we run the business is £14 – 15K per annum. Added to this would be the one-off cost of training (approximately 1 hour per person), which is estimated as £24 - 25K and the ongoing costs of the advisory functions of the Standards and Sustainability Branch.
10. In summary, conclusions of the review are that :
  - sustainability assessments are a useful tool for examining options as they require decision makers to consider a wider range of impacts than they would have previously. The guidance ensures this wider consideration;
  - assessments are having effects on policy and other decisions. In some cases this effect results in a different decision, in others the effect is to ensure that the decision is more broadly based and more fully justified;

- assessments are most likely to result in different decisions where there are significant negative impacts in areas, such as the environment or wider social issues, which have not previously formed part of the assessment and decision making process;
- resource costs are proportionate and manageable within existing budgets;
- further encouragement of use of the guidance is required to ensure application across Agency work. The Standards and Sustainability Branch is continuing work on training packages, advice and encouragement of ownership of sustainability by policy managers.

## ***Part II: The Way Forward***

11. The Agency faces a number of challenges to the delivery of its commitment to take sustainable development into account in its policies. Several of these potential barriers to progress were highlighted by the review of sustainability assessments. The challenges include:

- Deciding what sustainability means for the Agency. This is probably the most difficult and fundamental question that needs to be tackled. All of the elements of sustainable development should be taken into account, but what should be the relative weighting that we give to environmental, social or economic impacts in making final decisions? To what extent should the Agency's strategic aims be balanced against sustainability considerations?
- Further embedding sustainability considerations into how the Agency takes its remit forward. Much of this would centre on further staff training and awareness raising activities, but will also require greater emphasis on governance arrangements. Currently the Management Information System (MIS) includes reports to the Board on progress in relation to implementing sustainability into operational matters. Reporting procedures now need to be developed for monitoring progress on policy development aspects.
- How to obtain expert advice. The Agency does not have expertise in all of the areas that need to be considered when assessing sustainability, particularly in relation to environmental issues, wider social aspects and international development.
- Ensuring external challenge. External challenge, which is closely linked to obtaining expert advice, is vital to good governance and the production of sound policies and advice.

- Dealing with legal constraints, such as the obligation to implement EC legislation. This can limit the extent to which sustainable development can be taken into account in decision making.

12. The Executive will be further analysing these challenges and developing approaches to tackle them. This analysis might usefully include a Board Workshop. We would propose to report back to the Board in early 2008 on the outcome of the analysis so that the Board has an opportunity to discuss the issues further. Once the analysis has been completed it may then be timely to undertake a further review of the impact of sustainability assessments.

### **Implications for the Devolved Administrations**

13. The Food Advisory Committees for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were invited to consider the issues raised in this paper, both in relation to the review of assessments and the challenges faced. The Welsh Food Advisory Committee pointed out that the weighting given to different aspects of sustainable development could vary from country to country within the UK. No other implications specific to these countries were identified.

### **Risks and Benefits**

14. One particular risk may be that any decision the Agency makes that does not take forward the most sustainable option is open to challenge. Maintaining an open and transparent approach, with full explanation for decisions, and ensuring external challenge, should minimise possible risks from these presentational challenges.

15. The policy on sustainable development, once fully implemented, will yield benefits to the Agency. It will result in more transparent and rounded policy making, reduced costs (in terms of how we run the business), and, under the social pillar of sustainable development, better skilled and motivated staff. There are some additional resource implications in carrying out sustainability assessments as highlighted at paragraph 9, but these are minimised because much of the work is required as part of the existing policy making process.

16. Consumers, both now and in the future, should benefit from more policies which further the Agency's remit in relation to consumer protection, whilst minimising the risk of unforeseen effects in other areas such as the environment, economy or wider society.

## **Board Action Required**

17. The Board is invited to:

- **note** the conclusions of the review of the application of sustainability assessments and the progress made so far;
- **note** the challenges highlighted;
- **agree** that the Executive should undertake further analysis of the challenges and report back to the Board in early 2008.

## **Annexes**

Annex I – Outcome of the Review: Decision Making

Annex II – Summary of the Board's Discussions on Sustainable Development

**OUTCOME OF THE REVIEW: DECISION MAKING**

1. A total of 31 sustainability assessments were received covering a range of activities from how we run our business to policy development. Of the 17 participants who provided feedback over a third thought that taking sustainable development into account had affected the ultimate decision. The *Incidents Database* assessment<sup>1</sup> is one such example.
2. It is worth noting that some decisions were believed to be no different to what would have previously been the case without sustainability assessments and the reasons for this were examined further. One common reason for the sustainability assessment not resulting in a different decision was where all of the impacts identified in the assessment were those that would have also been identified under previous assessment and decision making processes. Examples illustrative of this included *Target Nutrient Specifications for Manufactured Products in School Meals* and *Voluntary Guidance on the Provision of Allergen Information*. The examples concerning *Recycling of Food Contact Plastics* and *On Farm Enforcement for Food Hygiene Legislation*<sup>2</sup> were also in this category, but had interesting twists in that the environmental impacts, which would not have previously been considered, were positive. In these cases although the decisions were no different to those that would have been previously expected, the outcomes were better justified through the identification of additional benefits.
3. Another reason for sustainability not affecting a decision was that in several cases the assessment was performed retrospectively. In each case the assessment provided additional supporting evidence for the decision. One example (*Pesticide Residue Minimisation Guides*) noted environmental benefits and another (*GRAIL Database*) highlighted where future improvements can be made to further improve sustainability.
4. Two cases (*EU Food Hygiene Amending Legislation & Communications with Investigation Officers*) highlighted another important point. Namely that legal constraints can affect the Agency's ability to choose the most sustainable option. In the first case, European legislation limited the scope for flexibility in implementation. In the second case, which was about the use of electronic communication systems, legal requirements in relation to the use of original paper copies limited the ability to move to a more sustainable system.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/incidentdb.pdf](http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/incidentdb.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/sustaineufarm.pdf](http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/sustaineufarm.pdf)

5. An example concerning *Authorisations for the Capenhurst Site*<sup>3</sup> illustrates further important points. The first is that it can be difficult to decide which option is the most sustainable, especially where it involved trading off economic and environmental impacts. The second point is that the Agency's role in such cases is to advise on the food safety implications of what is being proposed and not its sustainability, nor is it our role to advise on alternative options. The option proposed was acceptable in terms of food safety and so was supported.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/suscapenhurst.pdf](http://www.food.gov.uk/multimedia/pdfs/suscapenhurst.pdf)

## SUMMARY OF BOARD'S DISCUSSIONS ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

1. The Board first considered how the Government's policy on sustainable development should be implemented in relation to the Agency and its work in 2004. In May 2004 (paper FSA 04/05/03) the Board discussed the following aspects:
  - assessing the sustainability of the Agency's policy development, decision making and advice; and
  - the sustainability of how the Agency runs its business, including estates management and the Agency as an employer.
2. It was emphasised that the Agency's approach to sustainable development had to be consistent with the Agency's role of protecting consumers' interests in relation to food safety and standards, nutrition and helping consumers to make informed choices.
3. In October 2004 the Board considered a paper (FSA 04/10/02) which focused on two main issues:
  - overall Agency policy in relation to sustainable development; and
  - the mechanisms for its implementation into policy development, decision making and advice.
4. The importance of working with others to complement the specific remit and limited expertise of the Agency in this area was recognised. Board members also referred to the importance of judgement when weighing up the impacts of a policy (i.e. judgements about the trade-offs between, say environmental protection and benefits for consumers). Proportionality was also seen as an important issue.
5. The Board agreed a proposed mechanism for taking sustainable development considerations into account in policy making and other activities, along with plans to further develop and pilot the mechanism and associated guidance on a range of policy issues and projects across the Agency. The Board also agreed the following Position Statement:

*"The Food Standards Agency's remit is to protect the interests of consumers in relation to food, both now and in the future. In doing so the Agency will take sustainable development into account in all of its activities and policy decisions."*

6. The Board received a progress report on the delivery of the above Position Statement via an intersessional paper issued in June 2006. This was followed by a briefing session at a Board meeting on 14 June. The briefing covered sustainability assessments and the associated guidance to staff.