

CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT: GATHERING CONSUMER EVIDENCE

Executive Summary

1. This Information Paper focuses on the mechanisms that the Agency currently uses to seek and collect consumer evidence and draws on examples of new approaches that the Agency has been piloting over the last six months. It also sets out how the Agency could further develop its work in this area.

Board Action

2. The Board is invited to:
 - **note** the current activity taking place to gather consumer evidence.

COMMUNICATIONS DIVISION

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CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT: GATHERING CONSUMER EVIDENCE**Strategic Aim**

1. We need to engage with consumers in order to 'put the consumer first' and to deliver on our objectives as set out in the 2005/2010 Strategic Plan¹.

Issue

2. The Board agreed to receive an update at its July meeting on the work the Agency was taking forward on consumer engagement. This update will be in two parts. The first update [i.e. this Information Paper] focuses on the mechanisms that the Agency currently uses to seek and collect consumer evidence and draws on examples of new approaches that the Agency has been piloting over the last six months.
3. A more comprehensive paper outlining the possible options for a consumer engagement model and how the Agency could assure the Board that its work in this area is rigorous and robust will be presented to the Board at its October 2006 meeting.

Background

4. In December 2005, the Board agreed that:
 - The Agency's current Consumer Committee² should be discontinued.
 - Creative and experimental ways of engaging with individual consumers, including 'feeling the pulse' of consumer opinion should be explored.
 - A conceptual model for consumer engagement should be developed.
 - Further consideration should be given to quality assurance and evaluation issues.

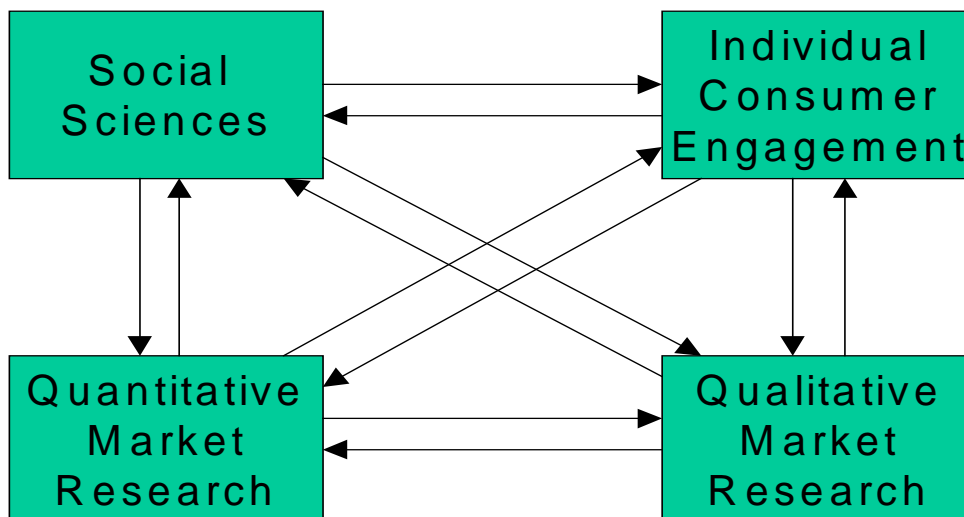
¹ Strategic Plan 2005/2010 Putting consumers first (March 2005).

² The Consumer Committee was set up in 2002. It consisted of 6 representatives from consumer organisations and 6 individuals recruited through the public appointments process. The Committee's Terms of Reference were to: alert the Agency to key issues of current or emerging consumer concern; comment on the Agency's strategic objectives and forward plan; provide the Agency with feedback on the effectiveness of its policies in responding to consumer concerns; advise on consumer consultation methodologies; review the work of consumer representatives on advisory committees; facilitate joint-working between the Agency and consumer groups and offer advice on any other issues that maybe referred to it.

5. The Agency has a history of seeking and gathering consumer evidence. This is in part due to our responsibility as enshrined in the Food Standards Act, for protecting the public's health and their interests in relation to food³. This Information Paper does not attempt to capture all the work we've undertaken to date but does set out how we collect consumer evidence and the mechanisms we currently make use of. It also briefly describes the approaches we've piloted over the last six months for reaching out to individual consumers and outlines how the Agency could further develop its work in this area.

Gathering Consumer Evidence

6. The Agency gathers consumer evidence through four main routes. These include the social sciences⁴, market research (both quantitative and qualitative) and through individual consumer engagement. This is summarised on the chart below.



Social Sciences

7. The Agency already makes some use of the social sciences. The recent studies for example investigating the existence of “food deserts”⁵ and the psychosocial basis of food choice⁶ are just two examples of the work the Agency has commissioned to date.

³ See the Food Standards Act, 1999

⁴ The term social sciences commonly refers to a wide range of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, social statistics, economics, human geography, social policy etc

⁵ This study made use of socio-economic, dietary and retail data to investigate behaviour and consumption patterns and found that to tackle food poverty organisations need to address both knowledge and skills, as well as retail access, for those without a car or other forms of transport (Do Food Deserts Exist? University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2003)

⁶This review which was conducted by the British Nutrition Foundation led to the identification of tools to effect positive food choice (A critical review , July 2005)

8. There is no doubt that the Agency needs to make greater use of the social sciences if it is to enrich its consumer evidence base in the future. The recent Social Sciences Seminar ⁷ has helped to develop a greater understanding of the role the social sciences can play in terms of framing policy questions and moving away from simplistic notions of segmentation such as gender and race to more sophisticated analysis that takes into account social variation and difference.⁸

Market Research – Quantitative and Qualitative

9. As well as the social sciences disciplines, there are other disciplines that attempt to explain consumer attitudes and behaviours. Social and market research⁹ techniques are well used within the Agency to provide consumer insight on specific policy issues. Recent examples have included:
- Quantitative research to establish consumption patterns and understanding of labelling on products containing plant sterol ingredients.
 - Qualitative research (or reconvened workshops) to facilitate informed deliberation amongst consumers about the possible fortification of flour with folic acid.
 - Qualitative research amongst mothers and healthcare professionals to establish awareness that powdered infant milk formula is not sterile and to assess whether there is a demand for better labelling to communicate risks.
10. Much of this research feeds directly into the policy-making process and over the last year we've been working hard to ensure that information from social and market research studies is shared across the Agency via the Foodweb pages on the Intranet. Further work needs to be undertaken to draw out key themes from all the research we've commissioned to date and to disseminate significant issues and trends back to policy officials.

⁷ The Seminar was held on 28 April 2006 to further the Agency's and the Board's understanding of the role that social sciences can play in helping us deliver the objectives set out in our 5 year Strategic Plan. FSA Staff, Board members, external social scientists and the Government's Social Research Unit based in the Treasury, participated in the event.

⁸ Taken from the speech made by Mike Kelly (NICE) at the recent Social Sciences Seminar.

⁹ Social and market research are technically two separate categories and are often confused because they use the same techniques. Social research has developed from the academic disciplines and traditionally includes some form of literature review, fieldwork and in-depth analysis. Market research has developed from the business perspective and tends to be used more in marketing, customer relations, product development, advertising etc. It tends to be focused on a single issue and does not include a literature review and results tend to be more action –orientated.

Engaging with Individual Consumers

11. Following the Board's recommendation in December (to 'feel the pulse') and the Dean Review¹⁰ (which stated that the Agency did not do enough to seek out the views of "less vociferous" groups of consumers), we've been piloting various approaches that can directly capture the views of consumers, especially those that are hard to reach.
12. Our engagement work has evolved and changed considerably over the past six months (as Annex A illustrates), but our work has centred around 3 core themes (see Annex B for further information):
 - Feeling the pulse events
 - Working in partnership with existing networks on significant policy issues
 - Using new technology

Stakeholders

13. Finally, stakeholder organisations have also made a significant contribution in terms of collecting and sharing consumer evidence. Since its inception the Agency has sought to collect (and organisations have freely expressed) their views via consultations, open forums and through ad hoc as well as established sets of meetings. In more recent years, we have also begun to seek the views of civic society (NGOs, health charities, and public interest groups). These groups have been able to provide us with very specific intelligence about their client groups and how we as an Agency should take their needs into account when developing policy and communicating messages¹¹.

Next Steps

14. In recent months, the Agency has investigated and piloted a number of innovative ways of engaging with consumers. It's now clear that a more structured model of engagement is required if the Agency is to develop its work in this area in the future. This will ensure that we gain a clearer understanding of consumers, which is needed to underpin all our stakeholder relationships, especially with our work with industry and consumer groups, where we must have a sound evidence base.
15. The Agency must therefore have more rigorous, planned and consistent direct consumer engagement. If we are to understand consumer views and, more importantly, what changes consumer behaviour then we need to make better and more appropriate use of the social sciences and social & market research.

¹⁰ The Review of the Food Standards Agency (Baroness Dean, 2005)

¹¹ For example, the Agency's work with the Stroke Association and the British Heart Foundation, as part of Phase1 of the Salt Campaign.

Currently the boundaries between the social sciences and social & market research are blurred but by making links with the work of the Acting Chief Scientist this will help to ease the uncertainties around the use of, and the validity of, the various social sciences disciplines.

16. Finally, to make this a reality a fully costed Consumer Action Plan will need to be presented to the Executive in the autumn. This will help to ensure that additional resources are put into consumer contact and making use of consumer research as part of our stakeholder management.

Board Action

17. The Board is invited to:

- **note** the current activity taking place to gather consumer evidence.

CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT: THE PAST SIX MONTHS

Our challenge over the last six months has been to understand more fully people's relationship with food. Is it for example all about necessity? Or is the relationship more complex? Do they care about their own health and well being? Do they care about the health and well being of their children, their family, society in general? Is food therefore a major influence or factor in their lives?

Over the past six months we have tried to tease out and wrestle with these issues and our own thinking has changed and developed over that time. We started in January 2005 thinking about consumers as sub groups – i.e. as men, women, old, young, rich, poor, white, black, minority ethnic, rural, urban etc and we set up structures that could capture the views of these different groups.

After the Social Sciences Seminar our views changed considerably as people may fall into these groups, but they don't all think or all act in the same way. Not all women for example are interested in food; not all ethnic minorities are socially excluded; not all rich people eat healthily and that by simply pigeon-holing people into these groups we were already making enormous assumptions about their views, their attitudes and how they think and relate to food.

More recently, we came up with 3 groups that we thought best captured the different consumer perspectives when it comes to food. Interestingly these groups cut right across the sub groups that we've already referred to and we identified these 3 groups as being:

- Those consumers that know they should eat healthy and do it.
- Those consumers that know they should eat healthily and don't do it.
- Those consumers that don't know they need to eat more healthily and therefore don't do it.

The second group is the one that we have spent the most time focusing on, people that know they should be eating healthily but don't do it. As one consumer stated "...if I don't make healthy eating a priority, no amount of government campaigning will" (Elderly resident in Manchester at a You Speak, We Listen! event).

The last group is perhaps the most difficult to reach and the hardest to penetrate. They don't recognise food as an issue and they may not understand that they might need to change their diet or behaviour. In the events we've organised we've had a mixture of people that fall into the first two groups, our challenge, as an Agency, is to understand those in the third group a great deal better.

FEELING THE PULSE EVENTS

You Speak We Listen! Events

Our 'You Speak, We Listen! Events were designed for consumers to come and have their say and tell us what they thought about food in general. We held 3 events in socially deprived areas of Manchester, Hartlepool and Dudley¹². Whilst these events did not have a direct input into policy, we were able to understand that for some consumers (and a majority of the consumers we listened to where on low incomes) choice had become another barrier. Some were baffled with the array of 'healthy eating' choices now available to them and many felt that because of this they were unable to decide what was really healthy and what was not. For others, there was no choice. It was a myth, "something for the rich" as they had a limited budget and their 'choices' depended on what was cheap, affordable, child-friendly (i.e. their children would eat it) and filling. Looking at labels, eating nutritious and well-balanced meals was an aspiration not a reality.

All of these issues were fed back to the appropriate Divisions within the Agency and although they were not directly linked to a specific policy outcome they did give us unique consumer insights. We are considering feeding back the findings to the rest of the Agency though a lunchtime seminar and inviting input from policy officials on the next series of events we organise.

People's Forums

We also set up listening mechanisms in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Some of the communities we spoke to were living in rural, often isolated parts of the country. The overwhelming feeling was that their needs were overlooked compared to people living in the bigger towns and cities. When asked if they knew anything about the Agency some could recall our television adverts. Interestingly, not one person we spoke to would ever think about contacting the Agency (they didn't realise for instance that we had a consumer helpline) and no-one had heard of our objectives or the phrase 'putting the consumer first'.

Working in partnership with existing networks

We have begun to make better use of existing networks, such as local community food initiatives that are working with some of the most socially deprived communities in the UK. Where possible we've also worked with projects that have either won, or have been shortlisted for the Dame Sheila McKechnie awards and where a

¹² These events drew on some of the approaches used as part of the Pensions Summit and the Your Health, Your Care, Your Say events, where members of the public were invited to come and have their say.

connection has already been made between the Agency and a local community¹³. Working in partnership with existing networks has 3 main advantages:

- We can quickly gather information about what individual consumers think about a range of food issues
- Our contact with people working locally (not just regionally) is improving, hence increasing our understanding of the issues that a particular community faces
- The feedback loop is greatly improved because we are working with a trusted and single point of contact.

Recently we worked with the Hartcliffe Health and Environmental Group in Bristol and the Buttershaw 'Eatwise' Project in Bradford and discussed the theoretical risk of atypical scrapie and BSE in sheep. Information from these projects and 7 other qualitative focus groups were fed back to the TSE Division who are looking at managing the risks if such an incident were to occur. Further work is being planned for later this year to work with community food initiatives on the folic acid debate and to seek views about the possible consultation options.

Using New Technology

Over the last six months we've also piloted the use of new technology, such as web blogs and on line deliberative forums to encourage more participation from stakeholders on issues as diverse as campylobacter and salmonella and the Safer Food Better Business initiative.

We've worked in partnership with the Hansard Society who have advised us on the technical and practical implications of this work and the Department of Constitutional Affairs, who have provided the funding. If these forums are a success, further work in terms of engaging with individual consumers will also be considered and will build on the on-line polls that we've from time to time set up on our main **www.food.gov.uk** website.

¹³ Every year, two awards are made to community food initiatives in the UK. Projects receive £15,000 of funding over 3 years and are encouraged to become more sustainable and self-financing.