

Report of 11 March 2024 Business Committee Meeting

INFO 24-03-01

The Committee considered the following:

Chief Executive's (CE's) Report to the Business Committee (FSA BC 24-03-03)

Discussion of the CE's report included updates on the budget underspend; incidents; and veterinary resourcing. Business Committee Members asked about issues in resolving the incident involving Mrs Kirkham's Cheese in Lancashire; budget forecasting in the FSA; the operation of the FSA's reward and recognition scheme; and prosecutions.

With regard the incident involving Mrs Kirkham's Cheese, a clear link to the outbreak strain found in humans was established to a strain found in faecal matter taken at the farm. Following corrective action by Kirkham's, Environmental Health Officers had now agreed to the company recommencing sales and so the incident was now closed from an FSA perspective.

On the budget underspend it was explained that HM Treasury rules did not allow departments to overspend at all, so it was usual for departments to underspend to some degree, and it was necessary to leave some headroom for audit adjustments at the end of the year. However, it was acknowledged that any underspend meant that there was resource not being utilised. This year some elements of underspend came as a surprise, such as the National Diet and Nutrition survey not going ahead. However, one of the most difficult issues to forecast for the FSA related to staffing costs. The underspend here was due to a combination of factors including a higher number of leavers than the budgets assumed, the time taken to fill posts and secure start dates, and the relatively high proportion of vacancies being filled internally, thus creating more vacancies. Considerable work had been done within the Executive to improve forecasting in the past couple of years, and this would continue, particularly with the new integrated financial and HR system which the agency would be using in the future.

It was noted that the number of awards made within the FSA's rewards and recognition scheme seemed to be very high, and it was important to ensure the scheme functioned effectively as a reward scheme for exceptional work. Further information on the scheme and awards made would be provided to Committee Members.

Priorities and Budget (BC 23-03-06)

The Business Committee heard an update covering the key priorities and deliverables for 2024/25; the focus on the regulator and policy maker roles and delivery of the FSA's statutory functions; and activity where maximum impact could be made. The Committee asked about resource for future food law reform; and the school food pilots under the Health and Sustainability pillar of the Strategy. It was noted that on future food law reform most of the FSA's policy resource was currently directed toward Regulated Products Regulatory Reform, and it might be necessary to pivot to other areas later. The Business Committee approved the annual budget and business plan.

Performance and Resources Report Q3 2023/24 (FSA BC 24-03-05)

The Committee discussed the report including the second iteration of the new version of the dashboard covering the following areas:

Operational Delivery

On operational delivery, the Committee heard about the progress with FBO audits; the RAG rating around wine visits carried out over the year; Official Veterinarian and Meat Hygiene Inspector attrition; and the new Key Performance Indicators for incidents.

Committee Members asked about the figures for incidents, noting that they appeared to be up over the last quarter. It was explained that this was due to the cyclical nature of the figures throughout the year and, while they were up over the previous quarter, the year-on-year figures showed a reduction. The number of outbreaks, and incidents, which were considered high priority, however, had increased.

There were also questions around the Polish poultry products incident and the UK's access to the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF). There had been a decline in the number of RASFF alerts relating to poultry products from Poland containing salmonella and the Border Target Operating Model (BTOM) coming into force would also help facilitate swifter measures in the event of a similar incident. The system that had been developed to mitigate the partial loss of access to RASFF meant that the UK now had a growing and evolving level of intelligence about incidents following Brexit.

Local authority budget challenges could risk a higher number of food related incidences from reduced resources. There was, however, no indication that Food Hygiene Rating Scheme scores were slipping although there was a risk of more incidents as the new Food Standards model was introduced, due to more targeted sampling. It was noted that FSA was aware of delays from local authorities when responding to incidents.

Local Authority Delivery

The data considered by the Committee was the same data seen by the Board in December. However, the Committee heard an update on progress since the December Board. The Chief Executive had written to all local authority chief executives to remind them of the importance of delivering statutory food controls. The FSA has engaged actively with local authorities as part of the performance management process, with some local authority food teams having successfully bid for additional resource without support during that process. The FSA local authority resourcing project was taking forward other measures to support with capability and capacity, including the introduction of more flexible routes to qualification. The Committee welcomed the impact of the FSA's performance management measures and raised concerns around the levels of delivery shown in the report. The Committee noted that while the FSA was doing what it could to help, the scale of the challenge was great, and it was important to engage with other departments and regulators on longer term solutions.

People and Resources

The update on People and Resources covered the headcount position; the declaration rate and possible reasons for low levels of responses; comparisons to civil service benchmarks; and the current limitations of the current HR system to capture socioeconomic background.

Science

On Science, the Committee heard about the process of evaluation of the metrics used in the dashboard; the work and membership of the Scientific Advisory Committees (SACs); success in the leverage of external funds; PATH-SAFE funding; and recruitment.

On the leverage of external funding, it was clarified that while the successes here should be celebrated, it could result in some circumstances where the FSA had less control over the outputs. Allocating internal money to research would still be necessary to allow the FSA to direct resource to exactly the areas of specific interest.

On the use of external experts, it was noted that SAC recruitment had gone well but there was still a large workload for them and bringing in external experts could, on occasion, be helpful. There would be thorough due diligence to conduct around this, particularly being mindful of any commercial conflict of interest. A greater proportion of the risk assessments were being conducted by officials to ensure that the workload for the SACs did not become unmanageable.

The Committee suggested that the future KPIs could helpfully include more measures relating to impact.

On the communication of science outputs, it was explained that there was a challenge forming a KPI around this due to a lack of a natural, quantifiable metric. As just one channel of communication, it was noted that the science newsletter audience subscribers list was growing.

Regulated Products

For this section of the meeting, Mark Rolfe joined to deliver an update on the discussions of the Board subgroup on regulated products delivery. The Business Committee agreed that the Board should be invited to consider the preliminary recommendations proposed by the sub-group.

Veterinary Resourcing Programme Update (INFO BC 24-03-01)

An information paper was presented to the Business Committee and Members heard about the pace of progress with resourcing; the progress being made to reduce reliance on the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons programme for Temporary Registration; the retender of the existing Delivery of Official Controls contract; alternative resource sources; extra mural studies week pilots; stakeholder engagement and communications activity.

The Committee asked about risks to the tender process emerging from the timing of an election. It was explained that the level of risk was dependant on the timing of the election but if Ministerial approval was received when expected, the necessary communications work should be completed ahead of any pre-election period. A later election could also have impacts on the approval of the full business case, though it was not certain yet that this would require Ministerial approval.

ANNEX A

Business Committee Papers – 11 March 2024

- [Minutes of 4 December 2023 Business Committee Meeting](#)
- [Actions Arising - March 2023 Business Committee](#)
- [Chief Executive's Report to the Business Committee](#)
- [FSA Priorities and Budget for 2023-24](#)
- [Performance and Resources Report Q3 2023/24](#)
- [Veterinary Resourcing Programme Update](#)

