

# Annual Communications Update

FSA 24/12/09 - Report by Claire Forbes

## 1. Summary

1.1 This paper provides an update on the work of the FSA's communications team. It covers:?

- The context for FSA communications in 2024;?
- Progress against the commitments made last year to the FSA Board; and?
- Priorities for the next 12 months. ?

## 2. Introduction

2.1 The FSA's communication function is a team of 35 staff in the Strategy and Regulatory Compliance Directorate, with an annual programme budget of £540,000. FSA Wales and FSA Northern Ireland teams are funded separately by the Welsh Government and the Department of Finance (NI). FSA NI has a communications budget of £46,000, with five members of staff, one of which is focussed on our nutrition remit and one of which is an internship for a university student studying communications. FSA Wales has a communications budget of £34,000 with four staff. All three teams work closely together in a 'one nation' approach and are part of the Government Communications Service and work to its professional standards.

2.2 The FSA's communications and engagement supports our overall mission: that food is safe, food is what it says it is and that food is healthier and more sustainable. The teams operate 24/7, driving awareness and promoting food safety amongst different consumer and business audiences; convening stakeholders to increase advocacy, influence and insight; explaining new policies and legislation and speaking out on food issues to protect consumers' interests.

2.3 All three national teams work closely with colleagues in Food Standards Scotland (FSS), as well as with other government departments and agencies, including the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Health Security Agency.

## 3. FSA Communications in 2024

3.1 Over the last 12 months the delivery of our annual plan of campaigns and engagement has been balanced alongside other, unexpected events, including the outbreak of Shiga Toxin producing E.coli (STEC) in lettuce, a summer general election, and a change of leadership in the FSA. This work has also taken place against the backdrop of notable consumer trends, such as concerns about ultra-processed food, and food insecurity. During this time, we have:

- Delivered multiple campaigns to consumers and businesses. These range from our most successful ever allergen campaign, to meeting consumers face to face at the Royal Welsh Show, or stakeholder and media work in Northern Ireland to improve the health standards of children's menus in restaurants.
- Broadened our stakeholder engagement. We have supported the FSA's efforts to build strong relationships with new and returning parliamentarians following the general election, and the restoration of the Northern Ireland assembly. We have also extended our engagement with business, trade bodies and charities, working in collaboration to protect and inform consumers of food safety risks.
- Promoted regulatory reform and our day-to-day work on enforcement, setting the agenda with business and consumer audiences. For example, in September, we worked in partnership with the Science Media Centre to explain how we will be assessing the safety of cell cultivated products, using funding provided by the Department of Science, Innovation and Technology.
- Responded to several major incidents, helping to inform consumers and to manage risk. Our communications response to the outbreak of STEC in lettuce was the most prominent FSA news story of the summer, with 159 media articles across national, regional and trade press.
- Maintained high levels of staff engagement. Following the departure of Chief Executive Emily Miles, we increased the visibility of senior staff, including interim Chief Executive, Katie Pettifer, to provide a message of continuity across the FSA. Research revealed that our internal communications are received positively overall and utilised well by staff. The engagement score of FSA colleagues in our 2023 People Survey is very positive at 69% (the same as 2022), being 5% above the Civil Service average. Connection with and understanding of our organisation objectives and purpose remains high at 89% (up 1% from 2022).

## 4. Progress on commitments made last year?

4.1 In our last update to the Board, we said we wanted to make progress on the ambitions listed below:

### 4.2 **Improve longer-term strategic planning and evaluation of our communications so we can be more responsive to public debates about food and food safety and changing consumer priorities.**

- The FSA's strategy highlights the importance of trust in the food system and that food is what it says it is. While communication is not the sole driver of trust, familiarity builds trust; making it a key focus of our communications. In April 2024, our Food and You 2 publication covering fieldwork conducted between April – July 2023 revealed that the FSA's trust rating had fallen from 78% to 69%. More reassuringly, fieldwork undertaken six months later (October 2023 – January 2024) and published in October 2024 revealed a slight rise to 72%. Other research, including measures of visibility and familiarity with the FSA and our role, reveals more consistent results, and we continue to explore every

avenue to promote trust in the food system. This includes improving our use of research and insight to ensure we are reaching the right audiences in the most cost-effective way. In September, we issued urgent allergy advice about the risk of mustard products contaminated with peanuts and used research to understand the reach and impact of this messaging amongst those most at risk. The results, highlighted in the case study at Annex 1, provide a useful benchmark for the future and insight into the most effective communication channels.

#### **4.3 Developing more targeted approaches to consumer communications, using insight to target specific audiences.?**

- Consumers living with allergies have been the focus of some of our biggest communication campaigns this year. In the spring, we ran an extensive preventative campaign, raising awareness amongst consumers with allergies, their friends and families of the risk of using vegan food labelling as a means of managing allergies. For the first time, we worked in partnership with Allergy UK, Anaphylaxis UK and the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation on the campaign, and these partnerships helped to increase public engagement with our advice on allergen labelling by over 3,000%. These partnerships came to the fore once more during the peanut/mustard contamination incident, highlighting the crucial role partners can play in helping us reach specific audiences.
- We have used targeted, paid-for social media more consistently during our incident response and campaign planning. This means we can reach particular audiences, such as young people leaving home for the first time, or people living in particular geographic areas. And a greater use of analytics has helped us to pin down the most effective time of day for posting messages (10am, weekday mornings) as well as the least effective time (late evening).

#### **4.4 Using research and the work of our priority programmes to identify themes and topics where we aim to set the agenda externally. We will continue to integrate the work of our Northern Ireland and Wales teams to promote 'one FSA,' as well as working in partnership with Food Standards Scotland.**

- We have helped to make the case for regulatory reform, particularly around market authorisations. The launch of the sandbox programme for cell-cultivated products set the agenda by generating significant national media attention, with our Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Robin May, featured in 189 media articles.
- We have also promoted the role of vets in public health, by ensuring that our concerns about the numbers of vets working in meat plants and slaughterhouses have had a wide hearing. Our former Chief Executive, Emily Miles, took part in an interview for BBC Countryfile, and we gave evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee hearing on vet shortages.

#### **4.5 Continuing to build our stakeholder relationships with food businesses, local authorities and others across the sector to influence their work as one of the key lines of defence in food safety.**

- We have seen a growth in follower numbers to over 250,000 followers across all our channels. The rate of growth is largely driven by the success of LinkedIn (over 10% growth) which enables us to reach a predominantly business and stakeholder audience. (This compares with growth on X, formerly Twitter, which was lowest at 1%). LinkedIn also remains our most successful channel when measured by volume of engagement, and we have launched an FSA Northern Ireland LinkedIn channel to more effectively reach and engage NI audiences.
- Working more closely with industry and other stakeholders has paid dividends. For example, we now regularly offer industry and stakeholder briefings during incidents and in advance of our campaigns. This resulted in one leading UK supermarket sharing materials from our vegan labelling campaign with over 50,000 staff in-store, magnifying the campaign's reach. We have also seen the benefits of these relationships play out in our digital channels: 4.2 million people visited our Food Hygiene Ratings Scheme (FHRS) ratings website, and the top referrers are food aggregators such as Deliveroo and JustEat. We continue to encourage businesses to display their FHRS ratings online and in store, with campaigns during the year supporting businesses through FHRS registration and promoting the value of online display to consumers.
- Our stakeholders in the devolved nations are important partners for us. The Northern Ireland communications team worked in partnership with local councils and the NI Hotels Federation to engage chefs and other hospitality professionals in a campaign aimed at improving the healthiness of children's menus in restaurants and other out of home settings.

**4.6 Ensure our communications are inclusive of the different audiences we serve. This means improving our understanding of different audience groups, their lifestyles and media habits, as well as continuing to prioritise the technical accessibility of all our content.?**

- Ensuring the accessibility of all our communications content remains a top priority for us. During the year we have supported the embedding of the new Scholastica tool for publishing science and research. This is a quicker and more automated mechanism for publishing FSA science and research, while maintaining high accessibility standards.
- There is more for us to do to ensure our communications reach and are accessible to relevant audiences – both in terms of how we reach consumers in vulnerable circumstances during an incident, and how we reach different groups of people. Our plans to improve our understanding of different audiences, particularly vulnerable groups, are outlined below.
- Use of research is becoming more embedded in our communications practice. More frequent use of targeted social media advertising is enabling us to reach specific audiences during campaigns and incidents. For example, our paid-for Instagram posts about the peanut/mustard incident were the most successful of all channels during this incident, although our Instagram following is the smallest of all the FSA's social media accounts. Budget constraints mean that our paid-for advertising is limited to social media, and while this is an effective way of reaching particular groups, there is also a risk that large sections of the population could be excluded from seeing our messages.

## 5. Priorities for the next 12 months?

5.1 Over the next 12 months, we will focus on the following areas:?

5.2 Making the case for and supporting implementation of regulatory reform:

- The FSA's agenda for the coming year includes a range of regulatory reforms to improve protections for consumers and to ensure that regulation keeps pace with a fast-changing food system. The FSA's Chair, Professor Susan Jebb, outlined the breadth of these reforms in a keynote speech to City University in November. We will be working to ensure that these reforms and their benefits are understood by stakeholders and the public, and to drive support and engagement in their implementation.

5.3 Continuing to improve our incident communications:

- The increasing complexity and duration of incidents demands fresh thinking about how we communicate risk to different audiences. Over the next year, we plan to complete a project which will ensure that the way we communicate during incidents keeps pace with a changing media landscape and changing consumer habits and behaviours. This includes ensuring we understand our audiences better, developing robust partnerships with industry and other stakeholders, and expanding our preventative communications, for example by issuing warnings to consumers and industry of food safety risks.

5.4 Targeting our communications:

- One important priority for the next year will be to develop tried and tested means of reaching vulnerable audiences. This means understanding the nature of vulnerability in relation to food, and ensuring that we have the right partnerships, channels and knowledge to reach audiences most at risk in different circumstances. For example, we need to be able to rapidly put in place communications that can reach older people, or those who are immuno-suppressed, or pregnant.

5.5 Partnership working:

- As detailed above, our growing communications partnerships have been an important success factor in the last few months. Over the next year we will seek to strengthen and broaden our communications partnerships with a wider range of organisations (including other government departments, manufacturers, retailers, aggregators, charities) to help drive understanding of our work and decision making, and to help us reach specific audiences, to manage risk. As we move forward with different areas of regulatory reform, we will use this engagement to ensure that stakeholders are aware of the context and rationale behind our reform proposals ahead of the Board's public decision making, and that they are able to provide input ahead of those decisions being made.

5.6 FSA 25:

- 2025 marks 25 years of the FSA, and this provides a lens through which to reflect on what's changed and been learned during this time, to celebrate our achievements, and to set out a strong vision for the FSA for the next 25 years.?

## **Annex 1. Case study: Mustard ingredients and peanut contamination**

5.7 In September 2024, the FSA, working with FSS, began coordinating investigations by several Local Authorities into the food supply chain of mustard ingredients which may have been contaminated with peanuts. As part of this, we worked to make sure that people with peanut allergies were aware of the risk of contamination and knew what steps they needed to take to keep themselves safe. There were three strands to our approach:

- **Timeliness/ location:** alongside a comprehensive media approach, we focused on reaching consumers with peanut allergies at the point they are making decisions about buying food. This included working with online ordering and delivery platforms, which have a substantial reach both to consumers and food businesses. We also shared communications materials with school, hospital and care home caterers to help protect more vulnerable consumers.
- **Trusted voices:** we amplified our allergy alerts and key messages using influencers in the allergy community, and charities, which helped us reach many more consumers with allergies. Some influencers generated their own content to share our message.
- **Trust and confidence:** we set out clearly to stakeholders and the media our reasons for acting and responded quickly to new questions and concerns. We regularly briefed stakeholders on the incident, monitored stakeholder and consumer sentiment, and used the insight to shape our communications approach.

5.8 The campaign was delivered in house, with a total spend of £1,965.

### **5.9 The results**

5.10 In research conducted in October, 45% of people with a peanut allergy said they were aware of the contamination issue, compared with 29% of the general population. For both groups, the news media were the primary means of hearing about the risk, but those with peanut allergies were significantly more likely to have heard about the issue through word of mouth and our allergy alert service. This reflects the choices we made to amplify our messages through influencers, allergy charities and community voices, and shows the value of a multi-channel approach when reaching a very specific target audience.

5.11 Of those with peanut allergies who were aware of the issue, 65% acted –for example, by checking ingredients or asking about mustard when eating out. This rose to 75% of those with a moderate or severe allergy. While we don't have a recent comparator for similar activity, the actions we took – in particular, the conversion of awareness to behaviour change – delivered strong results in a very short timeframe and represented good value for money.

## **Annex 2: Communications metrics**

Food.gov.uk	?April to October 2024?
Visitor numbers??	5,146,799? 4% increase on the same period last year??
Page views??	7,131,911? 8% increase on the same period last year??
<p>Most popular pages on food.gov.uk?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. News and alerts?</li> <li>2. Search?</li> <li>3. Homepage?</li> <li>4. Allergen Guidance for Food Businesses?</li> <li>5. Safer Food, Better Business?</li> <li>6. Best before and Use-by dates?</li> <li>7. Online food safety training?</li> <li>8. Food additives?</li> <li>9. Report a food problem?</li> </ol>	
<p>Top news story: Urgent allergy advice: Mustard ingredients contaminated with peanuts (Published September 2024): 105,606 page views??</p>	

**Social Media: Linked In, Facebook, Instagram, X?**

Number of impressions across all channels??	6,127,522? (4.7% increase on same period last year)
Engagement rate across all channels?(this is the % of people seeing a post who take action, such as liking, or clicking)?	3.7%?(0.2% increase on same period last year)
Our top performing post across Facebook, Instagram and X was in relation to the peanut/mustard incident. Here, Instagram was the most successful, with the relevant post generating nearly 200,000 impressions, compared with 190,000 on Facebook and 88,000 on Twitter.??	

<b>Stakeholder Messages</b>	
Number of messages sent??	42 (up from 16 for same period last year)??
Total recipients??	139,639 (165% increase on same period last year)??
Engagement Rate??	39.9% (2.2% down on same period last year)??

<b>Media??</b>	
Pieces of coverage??	22,100 (34% increase on same period last year)??
Opportunities to see the coverage??	5.53bn (30% increase on same period last year)??
Coverage split across National / Regional / Trade and Industry (last year's figures in brackets)??	National 71% (76%)?? Regional 13% (9%)?? Trade 5% (6%)??



