

FSA Board: ‘Protecting the consumer interest comes first’

At its meeting on Tuesday 21 January, the FSA Board considered how the regulator is likely to receive an influx of requests for changes to current food and feed safety regulations, and product approvals, after the UK leaves the EU.

The Board noted there would be three main routes to trigger changes to authorisations on food and feed:

1. The terms of trade agreements agreed by UK Government could trigger the FSA’s risk analysis processes into action, to consider currently unapproved products or processes
2. An individual business, in the UK or internationally, could make an application for product approval direct to the FSA, as could a trade association or a foreign government
3. The outcome of a dispute at World Trade Organization (WTO) level over a particular product might require a risk analysis to be undertaken by the FSA.

The Board, reviewing its new risk analysis process, noted that preparations were on track for all of these eventualities and reassured the public that this would allow the FSA to build on its existing 20-year commitment to managing food and feed risks on the basis of science and evidence, whilst remaining open and transparent.

Meanwhile, the Board laid down the objectives that will direct FSA input to the UK Government’s negotiations on free trade agreements, framed around ensuring that public health protection and consumer’s interests are put first. These are to:

- ensure there is no reduction in public health protection for UK consumers, including maintaining and upholding the current regulatory regime
- enable improvement of public health protection for UK consumers, where appropriate
- safeguard consumer confidence and interests by putting the consumer first.

The Board also responded to calls from the National Farmers' Union (NFU) and Friends of the Earth for a new ‘Food Standards Committee’ to advise Government on food production standards applying to food imported to the UK.

Heather Hancock, FSA Chair, said:

“The FSA already has a statutory duty to provide advice to public bodies, and others, on the wider consumer interest in relation to food. This is not a duty limited to food and feed safety, it is the entirety of consumer interests in food. If another entity is created in this space, it will lead to public and industry confusion and risks duplication of advice.”

The meeting then heard from Henry Dimbleby, who is leading the creation of a National Food Strategy for England.

Whilst welcoming the Strategy as an overdue statement of direction and intent, members expressed their concern that domestic consumers and politicians take food safety for granted,

and stated that it was essential that the harm caused by past scandals such as BSE and salmonella in eggs were not forgotten.

The Board also emphasised the benefits in the non-ministerial FSA model, which members said enabled long term, public interest decision-making without the constraints of short-term political interests – thus assisting with high levels of public trust in food, alongside business certainty about the regulatory environment, and enabling international trade.

The Board felt that the National Food Strategy would achieve most impact by putting the consumer interest first in trade decisions.

The meeting also saw the FSA Board agree a long-term strategy to improve quality of life for people with food allergies and intolerances. Of particular concern to Board members were the needs of young adults – a group known to be subject to particular risks and disproportionate harm.

The FSA Chair said:

"We want to protect people, but we want them to have as wide and as fulfilling food lives as they possibly can, and we will call it out when we think this is not being supported by industry."

Other Board business included:

- approvals for CBD-containing products
- strategic priorities for the FSA
- major advances in surveillance of food and feed risks
- nutrition health claims in Northern Ireland after EU Exit
- EU Exit planning, including the implications of the Northern Ireland protocol
- the next priorities to modernise the regulatory regime in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The full agenda and Board papers are [available on the FSA website](#). A recording of the meeting will be available later in the week.

Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the FSA Board will be on 11 March 2020 in London.