

‘A bright future for the profession’: Address to the Association of Meat Inspectors

Emily thanked meat hygiene inspectors for their efforts over the last year in managing the impact of COVID-19 and the vital part they play in helping the FSA deliver on its mission of ensuring food we can trust. She also reaffirmed the FSA’s commitment to supporting development of the profession.

Transcript of the speech as follows:

Introduction

I’m very pleased to be joining you today. This is not just an opportunity for me to outline some of the FSA’s current activity and future plans, but to also thank you for all of your efforts over the last year, during what has been an extraordinarily challenging time for MHIs

Since I spoke at your last annual conference it has been a difficult time for MHIs across the country and we are very grateful for your role as key workers during the pandemic.

You went out to work when others were able to work from home. You helped to maintain the supply of safe food throughout these difficult months, with 100% service attendance in the plants that were operating.

Today I would like to reiterate the FSA’s on-going commitment to support MHIs. For the FSA, MHIs are both valued and valuable and this view has only been reinforced by the challenges of the last year.

The role of the MHI is not going anywhere and, in fact, we see a bright future with more responsibilities. We see your work as playing a vital part in helping us deliver on our mission of ensuring food we can trust.

Many MHIs work for the FSA, or our sister regulator Food Standards Scotland, on the line or in other areas of our organisations, and some of you work in the private sector. I hope my thoughts on the MHI role will be of interest to you all.

Valuing MHIs

You have all displayed dedication, hard work and flexibility throughout the last year as we responded to the impact of the pandemic. This hasn’t been easy, and I know this has meant many of you working additional days and longer shifts. Some of you have had to balance your work with care for family members, and many of our colleagues from overseas have not been able to visit home because of the travel restrictions. I am exceptionally proud of what you have all achieved and grateful for your on-going support.

I would also like to thank you for your help in managing the extra demands placed on the industry during this year’s Eid al-Adha festival. A huge amount of preparation went into planning for the festival to meet the extra demand it means for directly supplied meat.

Many FSA and Eville & Jones regional managers worked on the line to cover positions, as well as utilising some of our back-office personnel to ensure plants were fully resourced throughout the period. That back-office cover has continued during the August holiday period, so it's been a busy few months. Thanks to the hard work and dedication of Field Ops teams, all plants were able to operate through the long hours that the festival demanded. So, well done to all of you involved.

The Future is Bright

We know that there has been some anxiety about the future role of MHIs, but I want to reassure you that we see a bright future for the profession.

As our Operations Transformation Programme moves us towards a more proportionate risk-based method of engagement with industry, we are committed to continuing to develop a skilled, resilient workforce with improved and rewarding career pathways.

The OTP is modernising the way we deliver Official Controls in the meat, dairy and wine sectors. We want to make it easier for businesses to do the right thing. As a regulator we shouldn't be making things difficult for businesses nor standing back and waiting for them to make mistakes.

Our aim is to drive and support legislative compliance. We should be using the vast expertise and experience within the FSA to influence and educate where needed, supporting businesses to make informed, reasoned decisions to drive compliant behaviours. Not that we will shy away from the proportionate use of sanctions if necessary, but ultimately helping businesses to protect consumers. Enforcement should be a means to achieve compliance as part of a wider range of tools.

For MHIs, there will be opportunities to undertake new and different activities as we adapt to changing business requirements. As with all transformational change, some front-line job roles will evolve. I am pleased to say that Colin and Richard will be talking in more detail this evening about the Operations Transformation Programme. We will also be discussing this at our Board meeting next week which is a public meeting and accessible via our website for all to watch.

I also know a number of you work in small abattoirs and are concerned for the future of this crucial infrastructure, so I want to update you on some of the work we are doing in this area.

Throughout the last 18 months the importance of the small abattoir network has perhaps been underlined more than ever before, with the pandemic driving up local demand. We have been working closely with small abattoirs, Defra and other government departments, to look at what we can do within the existing legislative framework, and in the Future Delivery Model, to support these businesses.

We have begun a pilot across nine small abattoirs looking at simplified HACCP systems and paperwork. We are also in the process of assessing a new mobile abattoir for approval, with a second site under consideration. Lots of work has gone into supporting this project and I am extremely grateful to all those involved.

We are also looking to improve the way enforcement decisions are made by bringing these in-house and clarifying the roles between FSA vets and contracted Official Veterinarians. Following a review of the way we carry out enforcement activity in meat operations, we are modernising our delivery approach to align with the latest legislative framework contained in the official controls regulations.

A working group has been established to develop options for the new process. The group is actively engaging with the veterinary community and trade unions so that together we can shape

the most effective way to implement the new requirements. Although there is no implementation date yet, we are working at pace.

We also continue to champion diversity and inclusion in the operations team and I've been impressed by the efforts you have made to listen and understand each other's experiences over the last year, especially if it's different to your own. Fairness and equality are an integral part of our culture and we must strive to ensure that all staff are treated with dignity and respect.

To that end, I am pleased that the Field Ops Fair Treatment and Inclusion group was relaunched in August and we are working closely with our Inclusion lead Keela Shackell-Smith to deliver the action plan across Ops.

I would also like to take this opportunity to say well done to Eddelle Allen, Area Manager for the East of England, who was shortlisted for the Meat Business Women of the Year Awards. Eddelle was one of seven women shortlisted for this year's 'One to Watch' award, the annual prize for emerging talent, awarded to a female aged 35 or under, working in the meat industry in the UK and Ireland. We're all very proud of the recognition Eddelle received for the impact and innovation of her work.

Our Mission

MHIs play a vital role in delivering our mission of food you can trust. We have seen this in the high standards of consumer protection and animal welfare which have been achieved over the last year, despite the enormous pressures of the pandemic and Brexit.

For our part, the FSA is always looking at ways we can build on those standards. On the animal welfare side, the issue of halal slaughter and stunning is an area, for example, where we are endeavouring to improve regulation with the development of the Demonstration of Life Protocol. The protocol has been developed by an industry and multi-agency working group and aims to encourage the use of Halal-compatible stunned slaughter for sheep and goats. It has the potential to reduce the number of animals that are subject to slaughter without prior stunning.

The date of the first trial of the protocol is imminent and will be overseen by FSA Veterinary Leaders who have undergone specific training for the protocol application.

Animal welfare is an important area from the public's perspective. In our most recent Food and You survey of consumer attitudes to food, we find consistently that animal welfare is one of the top three concerns amongst consumers (57%) - after the amount of sugar in food (60%) and food waste (60%). The findings show that 92% of people think it is important to buy meat, eggs and dairy which are produced with high standards of animal welfare.

Achieving our mission of food you can trust is of course only possible with the right resources in place and we know that resourcing for the late Summer period remains challenging for both OVs and MHIs due to impacts of COVID-19 and EU Exit.

A cohort of MHIs coming in from overseas is forecasted to return MHI capacity to optimum levels by the Autumn, and E&J are also commencing an MHI apprenticeship programme to support longer term MHI resource planning.

We understand how hard front-line teams are working to maintain the service we provide, working overtime, being flexible, working at different locations when required and even cancelling annual leave. Appropriately trained back-office staff have also been contacted to request availability to support front line service delivery.

We will also continue to engage across government and with the Royal College to look at solutions to address the UK vet shortage. A new Temporary Registration measure was also triggered from the 1 June to enable veterinarians, who have a minimum of level 5 English Language, to temporarily register with the RCVS for a period of 12 months. Under supervision, they will be able to work as OVs and improve their standard of English to be able to compete the level 7 qualification later.

Conclusion

I hope this has been a useful update on the FSA's current priorities.

I also hope I have been able to relay to those of you who are MHIs, irrespective of whether you work in the public or private sector, that the FSA is absolutely committed to doing what it can to develop the MHI profession. That is a message that the FSA has been consistent about over recent years and I reiterate it again this evening.

And in response, I ask that in addition to the brilliant work you do every day, I would like us to all continue to work together to make the profession a great one to work in. While the impact of the pandemic has been truly awful, one of the positives to come out of it is the care we have shown each other over the last year.

You have been covering shifts for colleagues, keeping in touch with each other, and welcoming new arrivals. There has been a real sense of community. We must try and continue the positives of the last year, while hopefully saying good-bye to the worst of it.

Thank you.