

## MINUTES OF THE FSA BUSINESS COMMITTEE MEETING ON 17 JUNE 2020

Via Zoom from the Chair's Residence, Arncliffe, North Yorkshire

### Present:

Heather Hancock, Chair; David Brooks; Margaret Gilmore; Ruth Hussey; Colm McKenna; Mary Quicke; Stuart Reid; Timothy Riley; Mark Rolfe.

### Officials attending

Emily Miles	-	Chief Executive
Martin Evans	-	Acting Chief Operating Officer
Sam Faulkner	-	Head of Strategy (for paper FSA 20/06/12)
Chris Hitchen	-	Director of Finance and Performance
Maria Jennings	-	Director of Regulatory Compliance, People and Northern Ireland
Paul Morrison	-	Director of Strategy, Legal & Governance
Rick Mumford	-	Deputy Director of Science
Julie Pierce	-	Director of Openness, Data & Digital, Science and Wales
Guy Poppy	-	Chief Scientific Adviser
Rebecca Sudworth	-	Director of Policy
Colin Sullivan	-	COVID-19 Incident Director

### 1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

### 2. Minutes of 11 March 2020 Business Committee Meeting (FSA 20/06/08)

2.1 The Chair noted that Business Committee members had seen the minutes in draft and, in the absence of any comment, confirmed that the minutes were accepted as an accurate record of the March meeting.

### 3. Actions Arising (FSA 20/06/09)

3.1 The Chair noted that there was one action in progress.

### 4. Chief Executive's Report to the Board (FSA 20/06/10)

4.1 The Chair invited the Chief Executive (CE) to present her report.

4.2 Further to the information on senior staff moves laid out in the report, the CE added that Steve Wearne had been expecting to stand for election for Chair of Codex Alimentarius in July. However, the COVID-19 pandemic had meant that the secret ballot election which had to take place in person had been postponed for twelve months. Steve would continue in his part-time role as the FSA's Global Affairs Director, supporting Defra, and as Vice-Chair of Codex Alimentarius.

- 4.3 The CE said the FSA would be losing its current Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), Professor Guy Poppy, this month but we looked forward to welcoming Professor Robin May as the new CSA in July. Professor May's expertise on pathogens and host organisms would be of great use to the FSA, particularly at this time.
- 4.4 The CE drew attention to the outline in the report of the impact of COVID-19 on the FSA internally. Staff were already accustomed to working flexibly and we were grateful to IT and digital colleagues who had supplied staff with the equipment they needed to be able to work from home. We had been offering support to our black and ethnic minority staff who faced particular risks and to all who had lost friends and family members. The CE had been doing all-staff video calls once a fortnight and there had been calls with operations staff in the evenings as people were doing shift work. There had also been lots of traffic on the intranet.
- 4.5 Finally, the CE stated that the FSA had withdrawn service from three abattoirs in the last few weeks where there had been alleged bullying and harassment of our staff, which we considered to be completely unacceptable. In most, we had gone back having taken assurances from the food business. Bullying and harassment of our staff was an ongoing matter of concern to us.
- 4.6 Mary Quicke asked if the upcoming quarantine restrictions on people entering the UK would create an additional burden on the availability of staff in slaughterhouses. Colin Sullivan said we had been prepared for a much higher staff absence rate than we had experienced. We were also alive to the potential impact of test and trace, the upcoming summer leave period and Qurbani on staff availability. The CE said Eville and Jones were the FSA's main supplier of Official Veterinarians (OVs) and 95% of their staff came from outside the UK, primarily the EU. Eville and Jones welcomed 10-15 new OVs each month and these OVs would be exempt from the quarantine restrictions. That said, the first week of work for new OVs was spent doing online training and then we would test them before they would be allowed to start work in a slaughterhouse.
- 4.7 Mary also asked about indications of internal bullying and how that was being dealt with. Colin stated that we had a zero-tolerance policy towards bullying and harassment internally and externally. Internally we were alive to occurrences of bullying through the results of the People Survey upon which we acted immediately. The CE said we had a team that conducted deep dives with teams if there appeared to be an issue with bullying and we ran a management fundamentals programme to improve the skills of our managers. Maria Jennings added we had a team of volunteers, should anyone want to talk to someone outside their own management structure, whose role was to signpost individuals on where to get further advice and support. Martin Evans mentioned the FSA's Moodchecker survey which asked staff three simple questions and had been very useful to help focus attention in Operations. Bullying and harassment continued to be an important issue for us to address and the FSA's Health, Safety and Wellbeing team were keen to do more.

4.8 The Chair reiterated that, as ever, the Board supported the Executive's approach in terms of their intolerance of bullying and harassment of FSA staff by third parties or colleagues - it was not an acceptable way for anyone to behave. The Board gave its active support and backing for all those measures outlined during discussion.

## **5. Performance and Resources Report (Q4 19/20) (FSA 20/06/11)**

5.1 The Chair asked Chris Hitchen to introduce the Performance and Resources Report for Quarter 4 (Q4) 2019-20 which ended on 31 March 2020. Chris said overall the Agency's performance was strong. He drew attention to the following facts:

- COVID-19 had only been an emerging priority for the Agency at the end of Q4 and the impact of COVID-19 on the work of the Agency would be discussed in more detail during the next agenda item;
- the Agency's position in relation to EU Transition had already been discussed during the Board meeting;
- the Board had also touched on our work on Achieving Business Compliance (ABC) through the discussion of the impact of COVID-19 on local authorities' capacity;
- in terms of business as usual, slide 5 on foodborne disease, which only appeared in the report once a year, showed a downward trend for all four foodborne diseases; and
- regarding resources, the publication of the Annual Report and Accounts was on track pending pension information.

5.2 The Chair commended the FSA's finance team for managing the FSA's finances so well.

5.3 Timothy Riley highlighted the decrease in cases of foodborne disease and the use of Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs) to help better understand the metrics. Timothy wondered if there was an opportunity to represent this in a more publicly digestible form so that people could understand the good progress the FSA had made, particularly at a time when we were concerned about unnecessary or unavoidable loss of life or morbidity.

5.4 Chris said there was a lot of work went on and several reports published on foodborne disease. These reports were not published annually due to the amount of resource involved. The Infectious Intestinal Disease (IID) study was where we got most of our metrics on foodborne disease. While Chris supported Timothy's suggestion, it was with the caveat of the resource it would require.

5.5 The Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) suggested that of all the downward trends in foodborne diseases, the one that stood up to rigorous statistical analysis was salmonella. The successful vaccination of flocks which had led to the FSA's updated advice on safe consumption of runny eggs for vulnerable consumers

made for a good working example. The CSA cautioned on using the metrics for other foodborne diseases because they were too noisy.

- 5.6 Rick Mumford agreed that Timothy's suggestion deserved consideration. There was already a significant amount of work going on in terms of our cost of illness model, the foodborne disease estimates, the NoVAS work, and the work with international comparisons. The IID 3 study had been delayed due to COVID-19. Rick suggested it could be a good time to take a review of the state of the nation around foodborne disease.
- 5.7 Mary Quicke reflected on the animal welfare statistics in slaughterhouses and the recent all-party Parliamentary Group report on animal welfare that came out recently in support of small abattoirs and made recommendations about the differential use of OVs. Mary asked if we had any comments on the report and those recommendations.
- 5.8 The CE said she wanted to pay tribute to FSA colleague, Glenn Portman, who died in March, and who had done a huge amount of work on small abattoirs. The CE said she was worried about small abattoirs and the challenges they were facing, such as market forces and regulatory requirements, that may put some businesses at risk. While the FSA did not have responsibility for all these matters, given our presence in abattoirs, we were often the face of government to small abattoirs.
- 5.9 In addition to the way that official controls were delivered on meat hygiene, there were also animal welfare requirements that Defra owned, such as mandatory CCTV, which the FSA was enforcing on behalf of Defra. In terms of market forces, the price of hides and skins was falling; this turned them into waste products with a cost to dispose of them – and the economic impact of this on small abattoirs was not a matter for the FSA. The FSA was looking at whether we could run controls for less cost, by using skilled resource in different ways, including segmentation for risk and introducing earned autonomy, thereby making it slightly cheaper. But other departments also needed to play their part.
- 5.10 Martin Evans thought there were good points in the report for us to work on. We had spent a lot of time working closely with Defra, the Sustainable Food Trust, and the National Craft Butchers, on ways of working together and Glenn Portman had been a wonderful asset to that. The next regular meeting of the group was scheduled for 25 June. COVID-19 had been an igniter of small abattoirs as far more people were shopping locally. More people realised the value of what they could buy from the local butcher and where the meat came from so some small abattoirs were busier than they had been. The FSA would remain vigilant to see where we could help. Martin said he did not think the cost of the OV was the biggest issue for a small abattoir; the cost of disposing of hides, skin, and by-products was one of a whole number of issues for small abattoirs.
- 5.11 The Chair said she had heard a lot of positive feedback from stakeholders about FSA leadership and contribution in this area, but the FSA did not have

responsibility for the viability of small abattoirs therefore we had to encourage Defra to take responsibility for resolving that viability issue. There had been a similar issue in the past with animal welfare for which we deliver the controls on behalf of Defra but do not have policy responsibility. The Chair said from a Board perspective, we wanted to do what we could to enable that sector to support consumer choice and diversity. Meeting consumer expectations effectively was important, but it was not for the FSA to lead the charge on economic viability. The Chair said it was important that the FSA was clear about where our mission began and ended on the economic viability of small abattoirs.

- 5.12 On the local authority performance slide Ruth Hussey asked if, given that we recognised the pressures on local authorities due to COVID-19, we had some agreement as to how the local authorities at stage 3 would act upon the communications that they had had with the FSA and the path way to de-escalation. Maria Jennings replied that since the end of March, we had been in contact with both local authorities and we had been continuing to monitor their progress. We had had positive reports back from both authorities and we were looking at de-escalation soon.

## **6. COVID-19 BUSINESS PRIORITISATION (FSA 20/06/12)**

- 6.1 The Chair noted that the Board did not normally get involved in resource allocation as that was for the Chief Executive and her Executive Team to manage. The Business Committee was however involved in approving the annual business plan and, given the impact of COVID-19, that plan did need to be revisited. This paper was a chance for the Board members on the Committee to confirm that they agreed with the Executive Team's reprioritisation in the light of COVID-19 and that it honoured the priorities the Board set.
- 6.2 Sam Faulkner introduced the paper saying it was designed to give the assurance that, given the pressures of COVID-19, we had examined our proposed work plans for the year and remained committed to delivering as much as possible in the original plans. The Executive Team had undertaken a clear prioritisation of our work, laid out in paragraphs 3.1-3.4 of the paper. This placed COVID-19 and EU Exit as the highest priority areas for the organisation. The impact of COVID-19 on our cross-cutting programme was laid out in paragraph 3.3 and annexe 1. In some of these programmes a significant amount of work had been affected. However, in several cases we remained confident of meeting delivery milestones prior to March 2021.
- 6.3 Sam drew attention to paragraphs 3.5 and 3.6, showing the underspend we were forecasting due to COVID-19 on account of delays to delivering work, delays for equipment, and a reduction in our carbon subsistence expenditure. However, Sam said the demand for the use of this money was already outstripping the available funding we had. We had a long pipeline of work that we needed to continue to prioritise, and we would do this in line with the priorities the Executive Team had set, hopefully to be agreed by the Board, and

we would make sure that we continued to use any available funding prudently and ensure value for money.

- 6.4 David Brooks said it was encouraging to see in paragraph 3.7 that we had additional funds which we had not yet allocated and that we would make sure to spend them wisely. David asked if we were able to bring in any additional resources to help us, particularly if we could think of some investments which would bring financial benefits in future years.
- 6.5 Sam replied that when we went through the prioritisation exercise, one of the things we were conscious of looking at was which parts of the organisation were impacted by COVID-19 and which parts were not because it was not a universal impact. For example within the ABC programme we had been able to get additional support externally and use some of this funding to make sure the programme continued to deliver the parts that were not as dependent on our Regulatory Compliance Directorate, which had been heavily affected by COVID-19 due to impact on local authorities. The CE added that there were two limiting factors: one was senior bandwidth because this input did need proper strategic direction and oversight; and the second was where we had dependencies on others such as local authorities and other government departments. Bearing those two restraining factors in mind, we were looking at what we could do to bring in additional capacity.
- 6.6 David also said that a crisis could sometimes encourage people to run towards it so he was seeking assurance that we had the appropriate level of resources still working on COVID-19 rather than allowing people to think that it was the most important area to make their contributions to the organisation.
- 6.7 Sam replied that we were continuing to resource work on COVID-19 as fully and effectively as possible. We were still running some of the structures around the COVID-19 incident, and as they eventually started to unwind, we would make sure we continued to keep it as one of the biggest priorities to the organisation as we moved forward. Colin added that while COVID-19 was still the number one priority at present, in terms of the frequency of meetings and the level of new issues arising, they were significantly reducing and as a result not so many staff were involved in COVID-19 related work. The CE said one of the things she had learned from being around crises in government was the approach of the Environment Agency which was to think big and act early. The fact was we did know more about COVID-19 now because we had had three months of dealing with it. Colin and his team had been working on a forward plan to get us into a more settled state. Lots of our crisis response activity such as daily and weekly meetings would get moved into business as usual, which was less resource intensive, and would start being governed in the normal way through the business.
- 6.8 Mary turned to the three months delay in delivering our campaign for food hypersensitivity. She said we had spoken about the importance of hitting the late summer, early autumn period in terms of the 16-24-year-olds whom we had hoped, even at this time, would be getting to experience their first taste of food

freedom away from their families. Mary asked if whether we would still be able to hit that milestone.

- 6.9 Rebecca Sudworth said the campaign was one of the aspects of the food hypersensitivity programme that had been most affected by COVID-19. The whole environment into which we would have been placing those campaign messages had completely changed. We were particularly conscious of the pressures on the hospitality industry and the difficulty of reaching them at this time, when most of that industry was closed. For young people it was particularly important that we reached them at a specific time of year, and although it was a little bit too soon to see how, for example, the university terms would be shaping up, we were currently revising our plans and the campaign was one of the first things that we wanted to reshape precisely for the reasons Mary mentioned.
- 6.10 Rebecca added that although in the paper it was mentioned there had been a short delay to recruitment, the food hypersensitivity team had been one of the first areas to restart recruitment several weeks ago and the Board would be pleased to hear that we were now appointing people and had had a really positive response to the recruitment campaign. From a team which had been no more really than the equivalent of around three full-time people, we were recruiting up to 12 full-time members of staff, including a couple of people who would be working on the science and evidence base, which was a really important part of the development of the programme going forward.
- 6.11 The Chair concluded that the Committee were happy to agree the prioritisation proposals as set out in the paper and confirmed that they did reflect the Board's position in terms of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Agency's work.

## **7. Any Other Business**

- 7.1 The Chair said there was one other piece of business as this was Martin's last FSA Business Committee and Board meeting and she wanted to put on record the Board's significant appreciation for his contribution to the work of the Agency.
- 7.2 Martin's combination of charm and substance and inner core of steel had served the FSA incredibly well in the difficult and challenging area of working in meat official controls. The Board wished Martin well in his eventual retirement and especially appreciated him stepping up and finishing his career by giving us a level of trust and confidence that had served consumers and the industry very well.