

HM Government

Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Note of meeting with Which?

Venue: MWB Victoria

Date: 17 July 2013

Attendees:

Sue Davies - Chief Policy Advisor - Which?

Professor Chris Elliott – Independent Reviewer – Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Mary Newman – Secretary - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

David Foot – Assistant Secretary - Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

1. Chris Elliott introduction

Chris Elliott (CE) explained the background to the Review. He said the need to improve consumer confidence was crucial. He was keen to understand from Which? how that might be achieved.

2. Consumer attitudes and food fraud

Sue Davies (SD) said that experience from recent surveys was that consumers seemed to be rather disconnected from food and it was initially hard to get them to think about food production issues, although once explained in more depth people became very engaged. What was clear was that consumers had put a lot of trust in the major retailers as powerful organisations and many expected those companies to deal with problems and to ensure consumers were protected when purchasing their products. Horsemeat had brought this into question. Which? had been tracking consumer confidence in food. There had been a dip in February 2013 following the horsemeat incident but it was slowly recovering. Consumers said they were trading up on meat products, buying fewer processed products with more purchases from butchers as a result of the incident, although price was a key issue in general. CE noted that butchers in Northern Ireland claimed to be selling 20% more fresh meat following the horsemeat incident.

SD provided a copy of a recent Which? report on the true cost of meat in processed products which demonstrated the need for consumers to have appropriate information on ingredients in order to make informed choices.

3. Enforcement of food law and consumer protection

SD said that enforcement was an important issue. EU food law legislation which had been put in place since 2000 had largely closed legislative gaps, although a few issues still remained. The focus had primarily been on food safety but labelling and food standards had always been important issues. Which? was concerned that food standards had, however, been neglected in recent years.

Which? had concerns about the negative impact of some Government policies to reduce the regulatory burden on businesses and to have a light touch enforcement approach. Which? had concerns about financial pressures on local authorities (LA) which was having a negative impact on their ability to undertake enforcement work. Which? had recently reviewed the position on LA enforcement activity using data from the Food Standards Agency. This had demonstrated that there was an inconsistent level of enforcement with some LAs doing little or no sampling. That had been picked up also by the EFRA Committee in their recent report. There was also very limited information about what products LAs were testing. The FSA needed to do more to ensure LAs undertook their enforcement duties. Which? had noted that with the pressures on funding, LA food standards work which would always take second place to food safety was becoming even less of a priority. Another concern was that Defra's Food Authenticity Programme was not sufficiently forward thinking and innovative and the FSA's UK Surveillance System was not used by many local authorities although it was important for identifying trends and ensuring co-ordination.

4. Sharing of information/intelligence and risk assessment

SD said that food supply chains had become much more complex and Which? believed it had become much more difficult for food businesses to ensure the integrity of food they supplied - for example, the role of food brokers who were responsible for moving around large consignments of products. CE queried consumer attitudes to shortening supply chains to improve integrity and assurance. SD said that many consumers wanted to buy British, but choice and price were also important – and short chains were not a guarantee against fraud or poor practices. CE questioned whether they understood that GB suppliers would not be able to meet domestic needs alone and complex supply chains would continue to have a role. SD agreed that this was a potential issue.

Which? wanted to see more horizon scanning by regulators to pick up potential risks. Working with industry would be important, but there had to be more economic analysis of food chains and vulnerabilities for fraud. CE said that one outcome of the Review would be to ensure it was much more difficult for fraudsters to operate in the UK. He questioned whether if fraud became more difficult in the UK the problem would simply move

elsewhere in the world. SD said that this may be an issue but it was already happening in other parts of the world and this was not a reason not to tighten controls within the UK and EU. More would need to be done to help other countries deal with the problem.

SD said that there had to be better intelligence sharing between industry and regulators. CE suggested that a 'safe haven' body holding and sharing information might provide a workable solution. He described the system operated by the Institute for Global Security in Northern Ireland. SD felt that would be a step in the right direction. But there would also be a need to improve intelligence supplied by LAs. Currently FSA had problems co-ordinating LA activity. The idea of regional co-ordination had been considered but had been off the agenda for some time. SD noted the negative impact of the loss of LACORS which had had a regulatory co-ordinating role in England.

CE sought views on the idea of categorising food frauds, on say a scale of 1 to 5 with the highest priority relating to frauds with a clear food safety risk. SD said it might be a workable approach but consumers would have different views on which were important.

5. Machinery of Government changes

SD said that Which? had concerns about the impact of the machinery of Government changes in 2010 when FSA had lost food authenticity and food composition policy responsibility in England to Defra, and nutrition to Department of Health. The changes should be reversed as they had led to confusion - as demonstrated during the horsemeat incident. SD felt that FSA had become a more timid organisation and was not as proactive as it had been. She highlighted differences emerging around the UK – for example the introduction of introducing mandatory hygiene ratings for food premises in Wales, but not England and the use of Remedial Action Notices in the rest of the UK, but not England. It seemed it had lost the will to fight for things in the same way that it had in the past. It had also become less active on food standards surveillance work. Nutrition policy had also become confused.

6. Which? view of potential Review outcomes

CE invited SD's views on outcomes Which? would like from the Review. SD noted that the legislative framework was now generally satisfactory, particularly now that the European Commission had made progress on issues around improving information for consumers. She stressed that forthcoming reviews of key legislation would however be crucial for consumer protection. This included the review of hygiene legislation and meat controls, official controls and the novel foods regulation. Defra should no longer go forward with their plans to de-criminalise food labelling offences. Nor should they proceed with other proposals to change national provisions including the QUID and name of the food derogation on labelling of loose products. The Review could perhaps influence those policy positions.

There had to be better testing of food and improved traceability in supply chains. FSA needed to gain a better understanding of food supply chains in order to better understand future risks. There had to be better information sharing between industry and regulators. The overall approach to reducing regulation and light touch enforcement should be re-considered. Enforcement should not be seen as a burden as it had a consumer protection role as well. The machinery of Government changes needed to be reversed so that FSA was once again clearly an independent arms length body that had a focus on consumer protection. The benefits of that remit needed to be re-enforced.

Finally, SD noted that there needed to be a more strategic approach to food and that there should be a UK food strategy. There was no longer a Cabinet Sub-Committee on food. There needed to be a more joined up approach as it seemed that workstreams on the green economy, sustainability, climate change and food security were being taken forward separately, as indeed was the food fraud issue.

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