

HM Government

Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Note of meeting with Chair of the Food Standards Agency

Location: Aviation House, London

Date: 28 November 2013

Attendees:

Tim Bennett – Chair, Food Standards Agency

Professor Chris Elliott – Independent Reviewer – 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. Introduction

Professor Elliott (CE) welcomed the opportunity to discuss with the Chair of the FSA key findings of the Review in advance of publication of his Interim Report. Tim Bennett (TB) said he was keen to ensure the FSA had provided all the information requested and that it had been helpful during the review.

2. Discussion

CE said that his interim report would make clear his support for an independent FSA, but it had to be more robust in dealing with food crime. Food crime was a big issue and could account for a significant proportion of the food sold in the UK. The ultimate victim of food crime was the consumer. They had to have trust in the food supply chain. Their normal assumption was that the food they bought was safe and was what it claimed to be. The UK probably had the safest food supply in the world. TB agreed that food safety had been the focus but consumers saw authenticity as just as important. CE said that FSA had to stand on the pillars of food safety and authenticity which reflected the fact that food crime had to be considered a food safety risk until proven otherwise. This was in line with the precautionary principle approach. CE said that he had reviewed the machinery of government changes in 2010 and had decided that responsibility for policy on authenticity should return to FSA from Defra. Defra would retain policy responsibility for Country of Origin Labelling, PDO and PGI because the policy was more about the marketing of products. FSA would be responsible for policing the legislation. TB agreed FSA should not have policy responsibility for Country of Origin Labelling, PDO and PGI. CE said that food crime was complex. Discussions with the Metropolitan and City of London Police and the National Crime Agency had confirmed they would not lead on investigations. His interim report would recommend the creation of a new food crime unit to be hosted by the

FSA. This would involve all the key enforcement players. It would probably take around two years to put a fully functioning unit in place. The review would continue to draw on the experience of crime units in other European countries, in particular the unit in Denmark which had had a significant impact on food crime. TB said he would be interested to see further details of the proposed unit.

TB said it is important to find the best way for industry to be able to share intelligence with the FSA in a precompetitive manner. CE said that he did not believe industry would ever share intelligence with the FSA because of fears that it would get into the public domain, for example from freedom of information requests. Industry wanted to share information but their lawyers had cautioned against them doing so. His solution was a 'safe haven' repository of sanitised information which could be shared within the industry and with regulators. He believed that industry would be content to meet the costs of running a system. TB agreed that his discussions with industry had shown plenty of goodwill existed and they were keen to improve assurance systems. He had been working with the FSA's Chief Executive on better partnership with industry and better cross government relationships. CE said that it was important that FSA re-assess its relationship with government in the light of the horse meat incident where there had been confusion about who had been in charge. His interim report would recommend the creation of a new cross government food group which could discuss issues of common interest including food security and tackling food crime.

3. Conclusion

CE confirmed that his interim report would be published in mid-December. In early 2014 he would work with all those who had contributed to the review on implementation of his recommendations. His final report in Spring 2014 would review progress and the need for any further action to facilitate implementation of the recommendations.

12 December 2013