

HM Government

Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Note of meeting with British Standards Institution

Date: 8 January 2014

Attendees:

Dr Scott Steedman – Director of Standards – British Standards Institution

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

Rebecca Kenner – Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

Nick Hughes – Review into the Integrity and Assurance of Food Supply Networks

1. Introduction to BSI and standards

BSI is the UK's National Standards Body (NSB), working under a Royal Charter and a Memorandum of Understanding with UK Government. Its role is to coordinate the development of voluntary standards for business and industry, through a formal consensus process of stakeholder engagement and public consultation.

SS explained that the development and maintenance of standards is of vital importance because internationally agreed standards enable trade and the opening of markets by promoting interoperability and mutual understanding, and providing the benchmark for 'what good looks like'. Standards underpin the World Trade Organization's Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement (WTO TBT), to which the UK is a signatory. Standards should not be confused with regulations, which place mandatory minimum legal requirements on people and organisations.

Compliance with business standards is voluntary under the WTO TBT Agreement. Standards enable performance improvement, accelerate growth and drive innovation. British Standards (BS) are created through a rigorous consensus-building process which requires open public consultation and full stakeholder involvement. This sets them apart from private standards developed by industry or the professions directly, which do not have to meet these requirements.

Standards for business are typically developed in three different forms, firstly to set out product or service technical specifications, secondly to describe business processes (such as quality management) and thirdly to promote better behaviours through agreeing values and principles.

BSI is a permanent member of the Council of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), representing the UK. SS explained that national standards can be adopted as ISO standards through a collaborative process, working with experts from other countries under an established, formal international process recognised by the WTO. BSI is widely acknowledged to be a leading NSB in the development of international business standards.

SS noted that standards developed by BSI in the UK in its role as NSB may follow one of three routes : international (e.g. ISO), European (e.g. the European Committee for Standardization, CEN) and national level (BS or PAS standards).

The PAS model is an increasingly popular route to developing standards. PAS standards are sponsored and are developed through a consensus process with full stakeholder engagement, but compared with BS the consultation is of a shorter duration. They are quicker to create, taking 9-12 months rather than the 18 months-2 years it takes to agree a BS.

A PAS has the added advantage of being piloted over a two year period, during or following which it can be reviewed and amended and then, subject to market interest, either continued, proposed for conversion into a British European or international standard, or even withdrawn, depending on the circumstances.

SS explained that both PAS and British Standards are developed by a formally constituted group of experts that is managed by BSI. Every BS must be reviewed at least every five years, and its committee remains active until the standard is withdrawn in order to remain up to date with any relevant changes to technology or other developments, such as public comment or changes in policy.

SS noted that BSI manages around 1,200 Committees representing 10,000 experts. There are around 7,000 standards projects in development at any time. BSI publishes around 2,500 standards each year and also withdraws around 1,000 which are either not needed any longer or are replaced by new European Standards under the rules of the European single market.

Over 93% of all standards that BSI publishes are international or European.

In the food industry sphere a PAS standard for food safety in food retail was published in February 2013 and a PAS on food safety during transportation and storage has also been proposed. These sector-specific documents both support the implementation of ISO 22000, the international standard that defines the requirements of a food safety management system covering all organisations in the food chain from “farm to fork”.

SS noted that not all PAS standards in the food industry are fully aligned with ISO 22000. One example of a standard that was commissioned to meet specific industry needs outside of ISO 22000, is the food security PAS, PAS 96 “Defending Food and Drink”.

2. The role of voluntary standards

SS noted that there can be a temptation for regulators to seek to use standards as quasi-regulation, but this is confusing for the market and the public and undermines the potential for voluntary standards to deliver real performance improvement. BSI's position as the UK NSB is to promote the role of voluntary standards to drive up performance and thereby to address consumer concerns, business needs and national policy requirements.

He stressed that government departments need to draw a clear distinction between what constitutes setting minimum binding requirements (through regulation) and what constitutes encouraging better performance (which is best achieved through voluntary standards).

SS explained how in new areas, where the role of voluntary standards is being considered as part of the solution to a given issue, it may be relatively straightforward to agree the values and principles that would deliver improved behaviours and business performance. It may, however, still be more challenging for the relevant stakeholder group to agree on firm specifications (e.g. for a new business procedure), even if it were considered to be relevant. Whilst the vast majority of business standards concern technical specifications for products (and increasingly, services), it is process standards and standards describing values and principles that have the potential to transform organisational and human performance.

SS gave examples of business standards such as ISO 9001 for Quality Management that had been transformational in their impact on business. New standards such as BS 13500, a code of practice for delivering effective governance, published in 2013, is another such example which is expected to deliver real benefits for the organisations that choose to take it up or are required to do so through contractual obligations.

Similarly, the new PAS 1192-2 on Building Information Modelling, also published in 2013, is already reducing the cost and time of those construction projects where it is being used. This PAS standard will become a contractual requirement from 2016 on all UK government funded building projects.

SS noted that when developing a new national standard (PAS or BS) by this process it is important for the interested community to establish a clear 'direction of travel' and then to engage the widest possible stakeholder group (including regulators, business, industry, consumers and public interest bodies) to agree the scope and provide comment.

3. Food standards

Professor Chris Elliott (CE) suggested that within the food industry private standards have very much been focused on food safety management and that until recently certification or enforcement bodies had not given nearly so much consideration to food fraud detection. He noted that since the horsemeat scandal multiple retailers

had been rethinking how they audit their supply chains in order to consider the risk of fraud.

SS cautioned that auditing or testing against a standard should not be considered in any way a substitution for evidence-gathering by the proper authorities. The value of demonstrated compliance with voluntary standards in the food sector, for example by accredited certification, could however be recognized by enforcement authorities. A company that uses certification is arguably more likely to pay closer attention to its legal obligations too, compared with one that cannot demonstrate compliance to standards. Some enforcement authorities have used such accredited certification to reduce the frequency of inspections, a practice known as 'earned recognition'.

CE asked what would be the driver for a European Standard for food fraud detection. SS suggested it would most likely need to be the European Commission, which could request that CEN develop a new voluntary standard using its established processes through its member organisations, i.e. the NSBs of all the EU member states. The initial proposal could also come from a member state such as the UK or from industry directly or via an NSB such as BSI.

CE suggested that many countries would see an international standard for food fraud as a good thing but a minority may see it as a barrier to trade. In response, SS pointed out that to propose an international standard, a minimum number of countries would need to agree to work on the proposal. Once published, the use of such standards would be voluntary, but as with many management standards, the weight of industry use can mean that companies who adhere to the standard are seen to be good or responsible operators: industry can adopt the standard from within. Standards bodies may choose to adopt the international standard as their own national standard if they wish, and national authorities may also choose to make reference to it.

SS noted that it was European policy to seek to work at the ISO level first and then the ISO standard can be adopted across all European countries under an existing agreement between CEN and ISO. Once published as a European Standard, all member states would be obliged to adopt it as a national voluntary standard and to withdraw any conflicting national standards. Outside Europe, international standards are adopted by many but not all countries, even if experts from those countries participate in the drafting exercise.

CE asked whether there would be a willingness on the part of BSI to promote a European standard for food fraud detection. SS said that subject to demonstration of stakeholder commitment BSI would be pleased to promote such a new standard either at European or international level. He added that this activity and the subsequent support for the development and maintenance of the new standard was at the core of BSI's role as the UK NSB.

SS stressed that it was very important to engage the right people early in the process to bring the key stakeholders around the table in order to demonstrate that there was market support for the idea. Key stakeholders would include industry trade bodies such as the BRC and FDF and it would also be important to solicit the opinion of the European Commission. It was noted that the Directorate-General for

Enterprise and Industry is BSI's principal point of contact (via CEN) for discussions over standards with the European Commission.

CE felt that it would be useful for the Secretary of State to write to the Commission suggesting a European Standard for food fraud. SS agreed, adding that it was important to use the correct technical language in any such letter in order for the proposal to be swiftly routed through the Commission system.

ACTION: SS agreed that BSI would assist CE in the drafting of such a letter to DG Enterprise and DG Health and Consumers (SANCO) to ensure that it was clear and used the appropriate language.

SS also noted that although Denmark holds the secretariat for the management standard ISO 22000 in the food sector, he hoped that the UK would be able to take a leadership role in developing the new standard. He agreed that other, process-based standards, such as for analytical testing, could be incorporated into the new European or international standard provided that an appropriate general framework was established early on.

CE asked whether BSI worked closely with LGC on standardisation of analytical testing.

ACTION: SS said he would look into this (BSI's work with LGC on standardisation of analytical testing).

4. Elliott Review

SS said he had considered the interim report an interesting and valuable piece of work and suggested that it would be beneficial if some of the language used when talking about the role of standards was tightened up. He stressed that it would be vital to make clear the distinction between the role of regulation and the role of standards in the final report.

ACTION: SS offered to assist drafting of any references to standards in the final report in order to ensure they are sufficiently clear.

5. Conclusions and further action

CE thanked SS for his time and said he would be in contact, through the secretariat, to further discuss BSI's role in promoting a European Standard for food fraud detection.

ACTION: Secretariat to follow up with SS about next steps.

31 January 2014