Waitrose response to Elliott Review call for evidence

What measures need to be taken by the UK food industry and government to increase consumers trust in the integrity of the food supply systems?

More transparent communication around food supply chain structures and controls.

Enforcement: EHOs to be given more time to spend in food production facilities with better training (in line with retail standards) to drive continuous improvements. There should also be a far more vigorous system of unannounced inspections at manufacturing and processing facilities.

The Terms of Reference for the Review require an approach that is proportionate to the risks involved to the consumer. What does this mean in practice?

The review should not simply consider a hazard (i.e that fraud may be attempted or take place), but moreover the risk of this arising, the risk that fraud(s) pose to the consumer from a health perspective and the risk that those fraud(s) pose from the perspective of consumer in the sector.

Any subsequent actions should be based upon on risk assessment across these areas.

Manufacturers should extend the application of HACCP principles to consider possible fraudulent activity and the impact this have upon food safety, quality and consumer trust in the brand and generally.

How can government, food businesses and regulators better identify new and emerging forms of food fraud?

Improved collaboration and intelligence sharing across industry and between EU & global regulators / food safety authorities. This should include a focus on resolving any real or perceived conflict between Government commitment to transparency and industry concerns about confidentiality.

Food supply chains have variable economic factors impacting on price at every stage. Which factors in relation to risks of potential fraud are most influential and are there trends developing?

Increasing costs and tighter profit margins are apparent throughout the supply chain. The risk of fraud is most likely where there is greatest disparity in cost/price of inputs and sale price.

Do consumers fully understand the way industry describes the composition and quality of the products on sale?

A minority of consumers may understand the ingredients listed on labels. However, very few understand the nature of large scale food manufacture, the complexity of supply chains or the commodity trading of food ingredients and products.

Has the consumer developed unrealistic expectations of the food industry and if so, what role is there for the food industry and government in doing something about it?

No - it reasonable to expect safe food and that food is as described on pack. Increasingly there is an expectation on provenance. However, given the gap in perception on supply chain complexity outlined above, consumers expectation that ingredients and products are generally locally sourced is unrealistic in the global market place that exists for some supply chains. Their expectation is frequently of short supply chains rather than the frequent complex and far-reaching chains that are commonly in place.

Do government decisions about regulation and inspection get the balance right between producer, processor, retailer and consumer when it comes to food? Do further measures need to be taken by the EU or by the UK government to increase consumer trust?

There is a disproportionate focus on retail versus wholesale, food service, hospitality, SMEs etc.

Government /Commission often constrain industry in managing incidents by not sharing data that allows more informed decision making (e.g. in the dioxin incident, names of implicated farms were withheld).

RASFFs are only published anonymously; naming companies who are repeat offenders or behind the most serious issues would help industry protect consumers. Government funded surveillance programmes are too slow and unwieldy and there is a tendency towards silo working between different government departments.

What impact could fraud have on the safety of food consumed in the UK?

Fatalities in worst case scenario (e.g. melamine in baby milk); far reaching product recalls (dioxin contaminated eggs and meat due to non food grade oil in feed, Sudan 1) to loss of consumer confidence. All have the potential to deeply damage the economic viability of the food sector.

What implications do the recent changes to the public health responsibilities of English local authorities have for food inspection and enforcement regimes?

Risk of silo approaches between departments, duplication and inconsistency in application of process/activity.

What control systems do food businesses have in place for assuring themselves that the food they supply is of the nature and quality they expect? How have these systems been tightened since the horsemeat fraud was identified?

Product testing and supplier/supply chain assessment with specific focus on ingredient traceability. Since the fraud, most businesses have increased testing and expanded the scope of that testing to consider the newly identified risks. Many are aiming to shorten supply chains to give more confidence in provenance.

How can large corporations relying on complex supply chains improve both information and evidence as to the traceability of food?

Stronger relationships and reviews within supply chains, avoiding treating food as commodity and regular robust testing of the supply chain in every sense.

Should there be legislative requirements for tamper proof labelling, and/or to advise competent authorities of mislabelling if it is discovered in the supply chain?

Tamper proof labelling has been demonstrated to be ineffective in many cases.

Mislabelling, where fraud is suspected, will already have been pointed out to relevant authorities.

Fraud, and especially where this puts public safety at risk, must be dealt with as a significant criminal offence.

What additional information does the public need to be offered about food content and processing techniques? How can this information be conveyed in an easy to understand manner?

More balanced reporting and also communication to build awareness of food supply and manufacture more broadly.

How this is communicated meaningfully given the reluctance of most journalists to report in a balanced and measured way is difficult to see. The 'wild west' nature of some areas of social media also presents a challenge to meaningful, accurate messaging.

Whose responsibility is it to give the public assurances about the safety and quality of food?

All actors in the food chain including government.

How should information about traceability be presented to the public? What level of public understanding is there about traceability and food adulteration?

There needs to be a significantly greater degree of explanation around published information, to clarify the workings of supply chains.

Similarly, any data on hazard needs to be supported with an easily understandable explanation of risk. For example, not simply commenting on ppm or other such measures, but explaining that in the average diet you would need to consume x ppm to be exposed to the suggested risk.

Where multiple ingredients are used in food processing to create a dish, should country of origin information be made available for them all? What do the public care most about?

The public care about the safety of their food. Any information needs to relate to the hazard and then more importantly the risk. Whether this is a composite product or not is less important to them.

Should caterers/restaurants and those providing food ready to eat direct to the consumer be required to provide more information? For example, should an item such as 'Fish and Chips' on a menu always state which fish has been used?

They should.

Are there shortcomings in the inspection and enforcement tools available to the FSA and local authorities?

Generally speaking, enforcement is under resourced and, as a result, is unable to readily access the areas it needs to. In addition, we need to improve knowledge of supply chains and scale manufacturing. These can frequently focus on hazard rather than risk.

Can substitution or adulteration ever be considered 'harmless'?

This depends on the definition of harmless. If it is defined as "no impact on human health", then adulteration with a cheaper 'food grade' product, assuming there is no allergen issue (e.g. sunflower oil instead of olive oil, addition of sugars to fruit juice, switch of fish species etc) could be considered harmless. However, there may still be a wider impact, potentially economically or having implications for sustainability, distortion of markets, consumer confidence etc.

Is it appropriate to base inspection and enforcement action on perceptions of risk, or should a zero tolerance approach be taken to all food fraud?

It should largely be a risk based approach although there are obvious baselines beneath which a zero tolerance approach is the only acceptable position.

A risk based approach can target activity, looking at extent (across a product sector or origin), level of substitution/adulteration (% in a given product) and likely impacts (hazard).

It is Important to differentiate between deliberate fraud and adventitious cross contamination - generally agreed thresholds offer a pragmatic solution (e.g. 3% non durum wheat permitted in durum wheat pasta, 7% non basmati varieties etc).

Also need to differentiate between deliberate mis-representation versus ignorance led mislabelling. SMEs may benefit from improved training (from TSOs?), particularly as legal definitions and labelling requirements become more complex and subtle.

Problem with setting "zero" tolerance is that analytical limits of detection continue to decrease so issues that may have been undetectable a year ago may now be detectable.

Does current intelligence make best use of the evidence available, and take adequate account of risk factors such as commercial reputation and public confidence?

Intelligence is managed in silos (within organisations and between organisations) which makes seeing the big picture very difficult. Significant logistical and legal

issues with assimilating all potential sources of information and sharing intelligence with third parties in any meaningful way (confidentiality, FoI requests etc).

Does the Five Point Plan proposed by Commissioner Borg contain the necessary levers to achieve effective change? What further actions might be needed?

Broadly, yes.

Is there evidence that the machinery of Government changes in 2010 for England (which led to Defra taking over responsibility for authenticity and compositional policy) have made food supply networks more vulnerable to fraud?

Certainly since that change, accompanied by increased pressure on local government budgets, there have been less visits and testing by local authorities.

Are there gaps in analytical approaches to support food testing, to verify authenticity and to enforce food law? Which areas in food authenticity should be prioritised for method development and validation to support testing?

Much authenticity verification testing relies on sophisticated, specialist and expensive laboratory methods, undertaken at relatively few labs. Also the shift from more objective conventional analytical techniques to hypothesis led methods (e.g. isoscape mapping, metagenomics) relies on more subjective interpretation of data / comparison against ‘norms’.

Fast moving supply chains need robust rapid methods that can be used in the field/factory on a routine basis to screen incoming raw materials. Improved/simplified sampling and sample preparation techniques need to be developed in parallel to help ensure result is representative of large consignments / lots (ml or µl aliquots only often used as analytical sample).

DEFRA Authenticity Groups too focussed on developing methods for LA enforcement which is the very tip of the food control pyramid. There needs to be far greater knowledge transfer and facilitated method development for the wider industry where the greatest volume of testing is undertaken and the greatest impact can be had. Need more engagement with commercial labs.

Significant gaps in the knowledge base of many food industry technical managers who are responsible for commissioning such testing, to understand the availability, scope, limitations of methods and meaning of results. Decision making often made in collaboration with less specialist commercial test labs already used for routine micro/nutrition testing.

What are the cost burdens and financial benefits to food businesses of current approaches to assurance, information and regulation? What have been the financial and other impacts of recent food frauds?

The Government demanded response to horsemeat crisis was to test all applicable products irrespective of risk, which had huge cost burdens on business (typical annual testing budgets spent within weeks).

What impact does increased sourcing of locally produced foods have on food authenticity and food prices? Is a shortening of supply chains likely to improve traceability?

Shorter supply chains will support improved traceability, but increased testing requirements and associated costs will inevitably impact SMEs and so need to be based on risk.

If additional testing of food products for authenticity is required across a wide range of commodities, can this be kept proportionate, relevant and timely?

Potentially, if the overriding principle is that testing is not a control measure in itself but just one part of an assurance programme. However as methods get more sophisticated the costs per sample increase and the speed of results decrease which are not compatible with routine testing, perishable or just in time supply chains. Important that businesses maintain control over own testing risk assessments. A statutory minimum level of testing could result in resources being directed in the wrong areas according to an individual business' risk assessment of their supply chain, at the expense of other 'riskier' areas.

Additional testing for food authenticity across a wide range of commodities will have a significant cost. Who should be responsible for absorbing these costs?

Typically raw material testing is more robust, reliable and relevant than testing complex, processed finished products. Therefore, the main focus of testing needs to be within the sourcing/manufacturing base rather than at retailer level. Naturally costs will be passed on to the retailer in such circumstances, whether this is visible or not.

Other than for allergens, how significant are the issues raised by trace contamination from carry-over from equipment previously used for other food types? What can be done to reduce the level of carry-over while ensuring that the response is proportionate? At what level of trace contamination is there a need to require separate production lines for different products?

Need to differentiate between reasons for controlling cross contamination i.e. food safety vs religious beliefs vs lifestyle choices vs 'just because'.

Expecting factories to manage all conceivable forms of cross contamination will detract from the main focus which should be food safety. Factories already have colour coded equipment, ordered production schedules etc to manage allergens, overlaying other cross contamination considerations introduces complexity and inevitably the potential for errors.

Adding additional unnecessary costs into production could conceivably lead to cost cutting elsewhere and disadvantage British manufacturing in the global marketplace.

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