

MINUTES OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S CONSUMER STAKEHOLDER FORUM, FIFTH MEETING – 21 NOVEMBER 2005

CHAIR: DR JON BELL, CHIEF EXECUTIVE

INTRODUCTION

1. Jon Bell welcomed attendees to the fifth meeting of the Consumer Stakeholder Forum and reinforced why the forum was taking place.
2. Separate forums would be held for industry and enforcement stakeholders and the minutes of all the fora meetings would be available on the Agency's website. No amendments or comments had been received on the minutes of the last meeting.

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Salt Update

3. Rosemary Hignett from the Agency's Nutrition Division updated stakeholders on the continuing work on salt reduction. The salt targets consultation closed in October and the Agency was now in the process of reviewing comments and finalising the targets. The second phase of the Agency's salt campaign was launched in October with the key message to consumers being to eat no more than 6g of salt a day and always read the label. Seven NGOs had helped the Agency deliver key messages to target audiences.
4. An attendee raised a question on salt replacers. Rosemary Hignett informed stakeholders that the Agency wanted to encourage people to eat lower levels of salt rather than use alternatives. It was important to re-educate consumers' taste buds to improve public health.

Signposting

5. The Agency had launched a consultation on proposals for a voluntary front of pack signpost labelling scheme. The scheme had been developed by the Agency as a contribution to the Government's initiatives designed to improve the overall balance of the national diet. The recommendation was for a multiple traffic light format which would indicate whether the product was high, medium or low in fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt.
6. An attendee welcomed the proposal for a voluntary front of pack signposting scheme to help consumers make healthier choices. It was important to avoid confusion in the marketplace caused by the range of different food retailer and manufacturer signposting schemes which were currently being applied. Rosemary Hignett commented that the Commission was interested in the Agency's work and a meeting of EU member states chaired by the Agency was planned which would provide an opportunity to discuss how the approach to front of pack information could be standardised across Europe. Another stakeholder said it was important to encourage organisations "to spread the word".
7. An attendee asked why signposting had been restricted to certain categories of food. It had been agreed that the first phase of signposting should be introduced on foods where consumers had most difficulty assessing nutritional quality.

Nutrient Profiling

8. The Agency's Board had agreed that the current nutrient profiling model was suitable for use to support regulation of broadcast advertising of foods to children. The model had been recommended to OFCOM and it was expected that OFCOM would consult on proposals for further controls on broadcast advertising aimed at children early next year.

Taskforce on Incidents

9. Jon Bell updated stakeholders on the Agency's Taskforce on Incidents. The taskforce was established following the findings earlier in the year of contamination of spices with illegal colours. It would consider ways of strengthening controls in the food chain to reduce such incidents occurring and ways of managing them better if they do. A progress report to the Board was expected in December.
10. A framework for revising the Agency's guidelines on dealing with incidents was being completed which would include the roles of all key stakeholders. Engagement with the European Commission to develop procedures for complex incidents across the European Community was also being co-ordinated.

E-Coli

11. Jon Bell referred to the recent e-coli outbreak in Wales. There was an ongoing police investigation and the Welsh Assembly would be carrying out reviews over the coming months.
12. An attendee asked about labelling of unpasteurised milk and unpasteurised cheese and commented that consumers should be aware of what they were purchasing. Food labels were packed with information and advice that potentially helped consumers make healthier and safer choices.
13. Another delegate asked for an update on Sudan 1. Jon Bell commented that action was being taken to reduce the risk of significant incidents occurring and on the action for improving the Agency's response to them. Food operators must comply with the requirements of general food law and stakeholders had been encouraged to be more open with the information supplied to prevent another incident on the Sudan 1 scale. The food industry was particularly vulnerable but with tighter monitoring and accurate notification no further signs of contamination had been reported.

Agency's Work with Schools on Food

14. Rosemary Hignett updated stakeholders on the Agency's work with schools on food. The Agency continued to work with UK education and health departments and other partners including the School Food Trust to encourage schools to adopt a whole school approach to food and nutrition to improve children's dietary health. The Agency had been observers on the DfES School Meals Review Panel and a report was now out for consultation. Linked to this work the Agency had proposed voluntary target nutrient specifications for a range of manufactured food used in school meals. This

would help caterers provide meals that were more likely to help meet recommended intakes for children.

15. The School Food Trust, chaired by Suzi Leather, would consider further how to deal with school food other than meals, including what minimum nutritional standards should be mandatory by September 2006. The restrictions would cover food available at breakfast clubs and in vending machines and school tuck shops.
16. An attendee asked why it was necessary to have a School Food Trust as well as a School Meals Review Panel. The Panel was introduced as part of the Government's drive to improve school dinners and had created guidelines that would reduce pupils' intake of fat, salt and sugar at school lunches. The Trust would lead on supporting that change and looked at standards in all other food areas to further improve the health and well being of school children.

Hampton and Better Regulation

17. Fareed Ahmad updated stakeholders on the Agency's work on better regulation following the Arculus and Hampton reports published earlier in the year. The Agency was keen to drive up compliance with its regulations as this improved consumer protection. One way of achieving this was by making its regulations easier to understand and comply with. It was therefore engaged in a cross-government project to map and measure the administrative burdens regulations place on business. This would be subject to a target reduction and would feed into a wider simplification plan that would be published next year. The simplification plan could include consolidation, rationalisation of regulations and look to promote consistency in the implementation and enforcement of Agency regulations. The plan would seek to reduce unnecessary paperwork and the time taken to deal with information requests. The Agency and Government agreed that some regulations were required to provide protection. Consultants would be contacting businesses to arrange interviews to assess the administrative burden of relevant regulations.
18. An attendee commented that better regulation was welcomed but the Agency should not confuse better regulation with less regulation. The Agency recognised there was an administrative burden placed on UK businesses, charities and voluntary organisations. This exercise however was not looking to assess the legitimacy of the policy objectives of the regulations; rather it focused on the way business was required to comply. If compliance could be achieved in a simpler way then that would ensure that the protections offered by the regulations remained whilst the administrative burdens were reduced. The Agency had set up a Monitoring Group that included representatives from consumer, enforcement and business stakeholders to keep all key stakeholders engaged. It would also consult on any simplification measures proposed to allow stakeholders the opportunity to comment. The Agency's objective remained to maintain and improve consumer protection.
19. Another attendee who was part of the Agency's Monitoring Group said it was reassuring what the Agency was trying to achieve and it was important that the terminology used was appropriate for consumers' use.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT ACTION PLAN

20. Karen Dell from the Agency's Standards and Sustainability Branch introduced this agenda item on the Agency's goal for sustainable development and how it intends to incorporate sustainable development into policies, business planning and procurement. It would also show how the Agency monitors, evaluates and reports on progress. The Draft Action Plan was produced through engagement with staff and stakeholders through seminars and public consultation. The Plan was an evolving document and views and comments were invited on the content on the Plan, including its target and milestones.
21. An attendee welcomed the opportunity to comment on sustainable development and said how encouraging it was to see on the Forum's agenda. A question was raised regarding existing policies and whether they would be revisited in the light of this Plan. Karen Dell confirmed that the Plan would be incorporated into new policies only. A further question on the Agency's catering arrangements was raised. The Agency's catering arrangements should be leading the way across Government and some stakeholders thought that this was not the case.
22. Another attendee referred to the promotion of sustainability of food and consideration of environmental issues and also commented that the Agency should include food as an area it applied sustainable development principles to. The Plan needed to highlight the Agency's remit of protecting consumers and explain that the Agency's priorities remained unchanged.
23. Further comments from attendees included that sustainable development was a world issue and consumer protection was a long term interest and should not be compromised. A report on the Agency's progress against this Plan would be available on the website at the end of 2006 and attendees were invited to forward any comments to Karen Dell.

SPECIFIC ISSUES RAISED BY ATTENDEES

24. Delegates were asked to let the Agency know of any specific issues they wanted to discuss. A number of topics were raised which included avian flu, nutrition and health claims, OTM-BSE, food allergy and food supplements.

Avian Flu

25. Two attendees requested an update on avian flu and its impact on the poultry trade. The Agency had been monitoring development since avian flu was first reported in the Far East. On the basis of current evidence the Agency considered that there was not a food safety risk for UK consumers and to date the Agency was not aware of any reports of people handling poultry meat becoming infected. Defra were taking the lead but the Agency's advice was consumers should ensure poultry and eggs were properly cooked and raw poultry meat and eggs were handled in accordance with good hygiene rules to avoid any risks of food poisoning.

Nutrition and Health Claims

26. Proposed EU Regulations on nutrition and health claims was raised. An agreement had been made at the Health Council in June and at first reading in the European Parliament, with the next step being second reading in both

places. The Agency would lobby the European Parliament on nutrient profiles and for a system which delivered consumer protection.

BSE-OTM

27. On introduction of BSE testing in the UK of OTM cattle born after July 1996, replacing the previous ban on all such animals entering the UK food chain went ahead on 7 November. Defra and the rural affairs departments had responsibility for managing the BSE testing system with the Agency having an oversight role to ensure that the public health safeguards were maintained. Generally implementation appeared to be going well and the number of OTM cattle going through the system was expected to increase over the coming weeks. A key element of the robust system was the process of approval of abattoirs before they were permitted to slaughter OTM cattle and only those abattoirs that met certain pre-requisites advised by the independent group were considered for approval.

Allergens

28. In response to the new food safety legislation coming into force at the beginning of 2006 the Agency had published various food safety packs throughout the UK which included sections on food allergies and practical advice to businesses. In general these food allergy methods had been well received by Environmental Health Practitioners and the Agency had also worked with LACORS to improve the understanding of new allergen labelling rules. Food allergy labelling had also been included in the Agency's training courses for enforcement officers and further training materials were being developed.

Food Supplements

29. An update was requested on food supplements. The Food Supplements Directive came into force in August 2005 with respect to the substances that could be used in vitamin and mineral supplements. Dossiers were submitted for 375 substances and these were still available on the UK market pending safety assessment by the European Food Safety Authority. The next stage in the Directive would be to set maximum levels for vitamin and mineral supplements.
30. The Agency's Board has proposed a two-tier approach based on risk assessment. The first tier would comprise an agreed level for trade across the EU and the second tier would allow national Governments to agree levels for their own markets taking to account consumption through the diet. In the UK this level would be based on the advice provided by the Expert Group on Vitamins and Minerals.

SIX MONTH FORWARD LOOK

31. Jon Bell outlined some of the work the Agency would be taking forward over the next months. An update is attached as an Annex. No forward look issues were received from attendees.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

32. The sixth meeting of the Consumer Stakeholder Forum would take place on Monday, 15 May 2006 from 12.30pm to 3.30pm in Aviation House.

**CONSUMER BRANCH
NOVEMBER 2005**