

Consumer Engagement on Strategic Plan – Bristol 29th April 2009

1. This event was designed to provide consumers in Bristol with an opportunity to comment on the Strategic Plan consultation. The areas of the Strategic Plan that were closely linked to consumer behaviour and consumer influence were focused on during the two hour meeting.
2. Approximately 45 consumers came to the event and there was a good mix of consumers based on their socio-economic, age, ethnicity and gender classifications.
3. The event began with an overview of the Agency's strategic plan and then consumers were asked a series of open questions to generate debate and allow them to provide a view on the Agency's role and the Strategic Plan.
4. The notes of the discussion are attached at Annex A, provided by FSA staff acting as table facilitators.

Overview

5. There are concerns about the consistency/format/reliability of information generally available on healthy eating, and about the level of knowledge/understanding in industry and at home of nutrition and of food hygiene practices.
6. FSA should be focusing on provision of trustworthy information and influencing for change in children, general public and industry.
7. The main strategic messages appear to be:

Healthy eating (in and out of home), FSA should ensure:

- Education in schools and wider community;
- General awareness raising and specific campaigns;
- Provision of clear, consistent labelling and information at point of sale;
- Influence on businesses to provide and promote healthier choices;
- Training for cooks and chefs in preparation of healthier meals.

Food safety (in and out of home), FSA should ensure:

- Education in schools and wider community;
- General awareness raising and specific campaigns;
- Publicity of food hygiene results and information in relation to food premises;
- Confidence in hygiene standards through support of environmental health work.

Annex A – Table Facilitator Notes

Healthier Eating - what does it mean?

- General perception that healthier foods are more expensive. Cost and value for money is (increasingly) important. Food per se is expensive in the UK. Buy one get one free (BOGOFs) are usually for unhealthy stuff.
- Healthy eating perceived as being less appetising.
- Usually easier to eat more healthily at home, but time to prepare is an issue. Much more grazing and eating on the go. Families don't sit down together to eat meals and not eating breakfast is commonplace.
- Healthy eating starts at home and with children. Children should be the most important focus.
- Need more information on what actually goes into (some) highly processed foods (e.g. chicken nuggets)
- Fast foods are so easy to access – even toddlers in push chairs are being given fast foods / high FSS foods
- Lack of understanding about where food comes from - supermarkets have a huge influence on what we can buy and therefore, eat. Too much importance on providing standardised foods (fruits & vegetables) – misshapes etc can be just as good and nutritious
- The perception that supermarket Value / Basics ranges (meals and convenience foods) are generally healthier, but fruits & vegetables just as good as premium range.
- It is perceived that EU legislation has an impact on healthier eating and recognition that healthier eating is a complex issue.
- Healthier eating includes: fresh food, longevity of vitamins, variable diets, balanced diets, what suits you, getting right amount of meat and dairy and regular eating, hydrogenated fats, less sugar / salt, fibre, links between poor nutrition and long term illness.
- Respondents were generally dismissive of nutritional claims.

Barriers to Healthier Eating

- Cost and lack of time to prepare healthy meals at home – bad food is often cheaper and more accessible. Organisation, buying, planning and cooking.
- Industry and media provide misleading information - Conflicting messages – news / media, or too much info, such as fats – lots of different types, confusing which type is worse - all? Food labels are too small, inconsistent formats used. General feeling that food companies seek to deceive public and checking labels is time consuming and confusing.
- Knowledge about food and how to cook, Lack of cooking skills
- Lack of understanding of how to achieve a healthy diet and nutrition content of food.
- Unhealthy foods marketed to children – pester power
- Habit, craving bad foods, snacking culture, seeing sweet/ fast food as a treat
- Not having one responsible person in the family who 'controls' food

- Not having calorie info in catering outlets or simple way of working out calories for the day in retail outlets.
- Hidden ingredients, sugar etc, confusion around sugar. Understand that excess is not good for you
- Inappropriate portion size
- Advertises for fast food
- Choice. Limited in some local shops, Unable to purchase local produce, Loss of nutrients through food miles and through poor cooking skills / knowledge
- Healthy eating info gathered through magazines. Accessed websites.

Agency's Role

- Should be pushing for consistent format for labelling and for restaurants to adopt traffic light labelling. Very different reaction to the national chains e.g. MacDonald's providing such labelling vs. their local restaurant. The burden to small outlets of concern, but also the attendees didn't necessarily want to know the calories info for the venue they visited as a treat. Health warning on fatty foods like cigarette warning.
- Government should pay for small businesses to "traffic light" menu. Concept of a website discussed where general public could easily put in the details of their meal and access calorie info and / or construct menus with satisfactory calorie content.
- Subsidise healthier options, offering alternatives. Recipe books given out by supermarkets for healthy meals.
- More education and awareness raising is needed – nutrition, tips to achieve a healthy diet, portion sizes (5 A DAY), provenance, growing, cooking etc. and schools should teach all these to pupils and the wider community
- More healthy eating campaigns to clarify and reinforce messages, clearer labelling of fat in foods.
- Ensure clear easy to read labelling on foods
- Influence supermarkets to have offers on healthier foods; have smaller packs / portions that are appropriately priced and sized (to cut down on waste)
- Positioning healthier foods more prominently / less healthy - less grab-able out of children's eye line.
- Not allowing promotion using cartoon characters or celebrities or giveaway toys/freebies
- Offering smaller portion sizes in supermarkets and restaurants

Food Safety

Main Points

- One of the main points raised was the risk of eating out of the home rather than at home, though retailers were trusted to store and sell safe food.
- Concern about a lack of knowledge of basic good hygiene practice, both individually and in the industry. Only a small number of consumers were aware of hygiene information being displayed on food premises, though all agreed that this would be very helpful / essential
- Some of the group had fridge thermometers, but a number admitted to eating food past its use by date

- Some confusion between Use By dates, Sell By dates and 'Use within x days of Opening' and this information is often not easy to find on the packets.
- Cookery programmes and celebrity chefs don't exhibit good practice – they should be setting a good example as role models
- General trust in environmental health teams, though some wondered if they could take action quicker in some cases.
- Take-away and fast food outlets were mentioned as being of particular concern, 'Dodgy' restaurants -Not something people always think about when they eat out - Convenience / hunger / impulse buying rather than thinking of safety. Cheap food in catering outlets, probably means:
 - Cutting corners / poor std of staff
 - kitchen cleaners not properly trained
 - Bad kitchen practice, e.g. keeping food longer than is safe
- Bad purchasing practice –buying cheap not quality, maybe not in-date. Credit crunch implications i.e. buying things which have been reduced and not eating them whilst still safe.
- Some concern that imported foods could be less safe, jobs in the food industry are lower paid plus high turnover – employees might not be fluent in English/ training issues.
- Not taught in school
- Cultural issues – how we are brought up
- In some chains – Food is prepared centrally & transported out – is food safety controlled for the entire length of chain –from prep to delivery and storage
- In the home –how long can food be left out? Should it cool before going in fridge? How long can it be stored in fridge? People rely on sense of smell, appearance etc may not be good indicator, and can all foods be reheated? Hospital food / prison food / schools/ old people's homes) – particularly where there are vulnerable people. In some food is pre-cooked before - risks with re-heating foods properly
- Food safety issues included pesticides, GM, antibiotics in food, food scares as well as food poisoning (FP) (diarrhoea and vomiting). FP not an issue which prompted concern or worry for some. F.P (Diarrhoea and vomiting) seen as a greater worry for older and young people

Barriers

- Lack of understanding of the 4 Cs'
- Confusion between Use By and Best Before dates, Once opened use by date shorten and often packing gone and you can't read use by date
- Lack of information on a food business's hygiene levels
- Lack of guidelines, e.g. freezing, baby food, reheating, Cooking meat – don't always know what to do
- Too much info/detail on labels gets confusing
- Assuming that eating out is safe, don't see kitchen and nervous of complaining
- Economic, don't want to waste
- Generation, WII, food shortages affects how people treat food
- No corner shops don't but daily, Size, difficult to cater for single people

Solutions

- Add year to dates on labels. Better education – increase knowledge of Use By / Best By / Sell By / Display Until. Or make all shops only label with dates for consumers and have different ways for them to manage their own stock rotation that doesn't confuse customers. Make it simple, bigger and more visible.
- Better environment to work in, Better ventilation in kitchens
- Have money incentive - Food safety courses for kids (like they are now given an incentive to stay on in school) Cooking and food hygiene compulsory on curriculum
- Don't allow potentially dodgy takeaway vans near to pubs at night! Food safety a "lottery" when eating out. "No choice when you eat out." Note: Despite the attendees living in Bristol, only one resident was familiar with the SOTD system operated by Bristol CC. When discussed all agreed star system would be helpful in making a decision.
- Already trust government to be making sure food safety is adequate. Training for staff - Govt to advise on best practice. Thorough / frequent spot checks to make sure they are meeting legislation. Issues of training raised by an attendee – all very surprised to learn that no formal training necessary for people working in / opening a food business.
- Implement a good whistle-blowing scheme and publicise well (a phone number ?) particularly for workers who know what's going on behind the scenes
- Maybe not a one size fits all approach –look at different cultures and pick up cultural distinct issues to address
- Cooking guidelines, i.e. only heat once, on packet or government TV campaign or post campaign, Public awareness campaign – understanding what guidelines are and why. Basic cooking and food hygiene class's for adults - free.
- How long can you keep stuff when its frozen, guidelines needed on freezing
- Attendees used sight, smell, date labelling to determine if food is safe when eating / preparing food in the home. Confidence expressed by all on using these parameters.
- Perception that "local" food will be fresher and safer.
- Lack of knowledge /understanding over GM foods and therefore seen as a food safety issues.
- Concerns expressed that general public only get to hear re FP after the event.
- Issue of food wastage was discussed under Food Safety – not happy to waste food.
- General view expressed that media mislead public

What can FSA / Government do?

- Ensure environmental health have the resources to be thorough
- Publicise hygiene results and display food hygiene information prominently on food business premises. More education and campaigns of food safety and issues – 4 C's, Use By / Best Before dates. Provide single / trusted web site. General agreement although interesting comments were given that the only 2 people who accessed the internet / Agency's website were the 2 younger females, both students.

- Principles of Which magazine mentioned in respect of rating / highlighting food safety issues.

Nutrition Information Out of the Home

Main Points

- General discussion about Traffic Light Labelling – not understood / used / liked by all
- The move to provide nutrition information in catering settings was generally welcomed and all would find it useful.
- Good to be aware of healthy choices. To eat more healthily you always need to ask to have something removed (butter, dressing, sauce etc), rather than these being served on the side as standard practice. Good to know about salt, fat etc and possible alternatives on menus. Include fat, salt and sugar as well as calories. Use percentages and traffic light approach and show all nutrients like in supermarkets in all restaurants not just calories.
- Some views that a meal out is a treat and an opportunity to indulge in foods not normally eaten – in this case nutrition information might not be welcomed
- Huge inconsistency between portion sizes – consider up market nouvelle cuisine restaurant against a high street pub
- Concern that customers didn't know how meals had been prepared
- Staff training needed in restaurants on nutrition of food
- Possible financial benefits for fast food outlets if healthy details shown
- Need daily amounts of all nutrition's to put in context

Front of Pack labelling

- Want a standardised system, used everywhere - Support colours and FOP scheme
- Want a standardised reference system on each food pack so the consumer knows whether the product meets nutritional guidelines
- Want info on portion sizes
- Concerns expressed over potentially confusing labels if more info added
- Concerns expressed over the literacy / numeracy ability of general public to understand info.

Barriers

- Lack of information at point of sale/purchase
- Unhealthy foods are the standard offer in the majority of places

What can FSA / Government do?

- Provide information at point of sale / purchase – clear and easy to understand. Have some system to allow confidence that any info provided is accurate – regular checks etc.
- Ensure there is one consistent, easy to use system, preferably across the whole food supply chain. Consider using colours that are not allowed on packaging / menus. Have calorie labels on drinks, or clearly displayed in pubs – alcohol and coffee for e.g. can significantly contribute to calories (plus may stop binge drinking by young women...) Any info needs to be simple. Separate info on fat, sat fat, salt, sugar... may be too much info, especially with places

- Ensure all chefs and cooks have training in how to prepare and cook meals healthily. Ensure focus is not just on caterers that provide less healthy foods – so everyone can be compared. Healthier options section on menus or boards as long as they are tested/analysed/genuinely healthier
- Always offer healthier versions of most popular dishes on the menu and make them slightly cheaper.