

Annual Communications Report

FSA 23-12-10 This Board paper provides the annual update on communications and engagement.

1. Summary

1.1 This Board paper provides the annual update on communications and engagement. It covers:

- the context for our communications and engagement activity in 2023;
- an update on progress made on our previous commitments, including from Board meetings in December 2021 and 2022; and
- our communication priorities for 2024-25
- the Board is asked to review and discuss the summary of our communications and engagement activity and comment on our priorities for 2024-25.

2. Introduction

2.1 The FSA's communications function is a team of 33 staff in the Strategy and Regulatory Compliance Directorate, with an annual programme budget of £640,000. In addition, FSA in Wales and FSA in Northern Ireland have small communications teams funded by the Welsh Government and Department of Finance NI respectively, with a programme budget for Wales of £55,000 and Northern Ireland of £103,000. The communications teams in all three countries work closely together in a 'one nation' approach, to ensure common purpose and sharing of expertise. All FSA communications staff participate in the Government Communication Service (GCS) and uphold its standards of professional practice. There was a change of leadership in the team over the summer, with the departure of former Director of Communications Steven Pollock and the arrival of new Director, Claire Forbes.

2.2 The FSA's communications and engagement supports its overall mission: that food is safe, food is what it says it is and that food is healthier and more sustainable. It does this by driving awareness and promoting food safety amongst different public audiences, convening stakeholders to increase advocacy, influence and insight, explaining new policies and legislation and speaking out on food issues to protect consumers' interests.

2.3 The communications team operates 24/7, including proactive and reactive media relations, incident communications, digital communications and web publishing and stakeholder engagement. In addition, the scope of the communications function includes internal communications within the FSA, campaigns targeting consumers and business, brand management and parliamentary engagement. The teams also ensure that all the FSA's channels are fully accessible.

2.4 The teams work closely with colleagues in Food Standards Scotland (FSS), collaborating on UK wide activity such as food safety guidance and the publication of the Annual Food Standards Report, as well as with other government departments and agencies, including the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department of Environment Food and Rural Affairs and the Health

3. Context for FSA communications in 2023

3.1 Visibility is an essential driver of trust. FSA communicates across different channels to drive awareness and promote food safety amongst consumer and business audiences. Latest data from our flagship Food and You 2 survey (October 2022-January 2023) indicates that consumer trust amongst those with some knowledge of FSA remains high (78%) and has remained broadly stable since tracking began in 2020. Confidence in food safety is also high (93%) and has remained stable since 2020.

3.2 Our research shows that, in the last year, consumers' primary concern in relation to food has been about the cost of living. This has led to increased use of FSA's published consumer guidance, particularly with regards to food safety and hygiene. For example, after the publication of media stories about retailers dropping 'Use By' dates to help reduce food waste, visits to the relevant guidance on our website increased to nearly 250,000 - an increase of 71%.

3.3 The new authorisation framework to regulate the use of precision bred organisms in food and feed products in England, along with the draft Border Target Operating model for imported food and feed products entering the UK, shaped much of our work with UK government during the year. We also increased our Parliamentary engagement, and in the summer submitted written evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs committee inquiry into food security.

3.4 The meat fraud scandal relating to Operation Hawk was a big media story earlier in the year with blanket coverage of the allegations brought by Farmers Weekly. Following an appearance by Chief Executive Emily Miles on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme to explain our approach, we developed a proactive stance releasing a news story describing our role and actions and with a quote from Emily Miles offering reassurance to consumers. This resulted in over 15 pieces of coverage with a reach of 9.7 million people.

3.5 2023 also marked 10 years since the horsemeat scandal and some media commentary drew links between Operation Hawk and the widespread substitution of meat products with horse in 2013. While recognising the importance of remaining vigilant, we were able to address these issues head-on with interviews with the trade press highlighting the achievements of the National Food Crime Unit and pointing to the increased co-operation and support we have from industry.

3.6 It is also 10 years since mandatory display of Food Hygiene Ratings in Wales. The FSA has partnered with the Welsh Government and Local Authorities to launch a campaign on 28 November to celebrate the success of the scheme. The campaign will use media opportunities, case studies and social media content to remind consumers to check ratings and remind businesses of the importance of a good rating - a good rating is good for business.

3.7 Elsewhere in the news media, the volume of reporting on 'ultra processed food' (UPF) ([footnote 1](#)) has more than tripled year on year (source: Lexis UK). These stories have focused predominantly on health issues related to UPF, the use of additives and, to a lesser extent, on issues of affordability and sustainability. In October, our Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Robin May, took part in a panel briefing on UPF, co-ordinated by the Science Media Centre, which resulted in widespread press coverage, highlighting the complexity of the issues and including benefits that UPF can bring. Quotes from Professor May appeared in 13 articles, reaching an estimated 22.8 million people. However, the complexity of the debate also carries controversy, and the briefing led to media scrutiny of other members of the panel, with stories on conflicts of interest and funding for research from the food sector.

3.8 There was some diversification of social media channels during the year, including Meta's launch of Threads. The FSA has a presence on all major social platforms except TikTok, which is restricted because of government security concerns. Our content continues to reflect changing

trends in social media use, with a focus on short-form video and audio content and an increasing use of micro-influencers (who have fewer followers but may be perceived as more authentic than celebrity influencers). We have also responded to broader digital lifestyle trends; for example, food delivery aggregators Just Eat, Deliveroo and Uber Eats are the top sites for referral to the Food Hygiene rating website.

3.9 The impact of artificial intelligence on communications has developed at pace in the last year, with use of language model tools such as Chat GPT becoming more commonplace.

Several members of the FSA's communications team are learning from GCS about opportunities that this may create for our communications. We are also alert to the risks from AI, such as the dissemination of mis- or disinformation about food and food safety.

4. Progress on previous commitments

4.1 At the Board meeting in December 2021 we set out our ambition to be bolder in our communications, highlighting media engagement and a more agile reactive and responsive approach to campaigns as opportunities to react to issues and topics, making use of intelligence from the FSA's consumer insight team.

4.2 We have been more proactive in our engagement with the news and our messaging, setting out our expectations of the roles that food businesses and local authorities play as two of the 'three lines of defence' that keep food safe. We have also been clear about our expectations of business in tackling food fraud. This includes fostering more opportunities to work in partnership, including with the Science Media Centre.

4.3 Last year in our report to Board, we committed to going further in four areas: Parliamentary engagement; building our digital consumer communication; using our communications to support business and internal communications. Here we highlight some of our work in each of these areas over the last 12 months:

Parliamentary engagement

4.4 We have taken the first steps in increasing our engagement with Parliament. We launched a fortnightly bulletin for our staff about relevant Parliamentary debates in Westminster and the Senedd about food and food safety. This insight has enabled us to provide proactive updates to individual Parliamentarians on issues where they have expressed an interest, such as the classification of shellfish harvesting areas or the regulatory framework for precision bred organisms. In addition, we wrote twice to all MPs, explaining the action we are taking on issues raised frequently by constituents. The first letter explained our action on food hypersensitivity and the second explained how we respond to foodborne disease and incidents of food contamination.

4.5 In November, we hosted Parliamentary receptions in Westminster and Cardiff for the launch of the second edition of our Annual Food Standards Report, produced jointly with FSS. The launch in the House of Commons was attended by MPs and Peers from all parties and supported by Defra Minister Mark Spencer who commended the work of the FSA and FSS in keeping food standards high year on year.

Building our digital consumer communications

4.6 As part of our ambition to be more agile and responsive in our campaigns, we developed 'Always On': a series of small low/no budget social media campaigns which piggyback on external events, such as the King's Coronation or Valentine's Day to promote food safety and hygiene. Engagement in these campaigns has grown year on year, including an allergy and alerts campaign in 2023 that increased sign ups to our alerts by 126%.

4.7 Digital and social media remain our primary owned and shared channels, enabling us to target audience groups. For example, in Wales we offer consumers content in their preferred language through our work with bilingual micro-influencers, including lifestyle influencer [Shnwcs](#) who helped promote our summer food safety campaign, and gardening influencer [Adam yn yr Ardd](#) who provided advice on foraging.

4.8 We are increasingly using targeted and paid for social media in our incident communications. In early July, we issued a recall notice for Sci-Mx Nutrition Ultra Muscle Strawberry Flavour, which contained a potentially lethal amount of caffeine. The seriousness of the recall required us to reach particular groups quickly and we developed a social media campaign with advertisements targeting adults with an interest in body-building, weight lifting and fitness. We also compiled a list of gyms on social media to contact and worked with other partners, including government, to promote the recall widely.

4.9 The use of social media paid advertisements increased our reach to 786k, with a total of 1.5m impressions. This is six times the average reach of posts on our own social channels. With a total spend of £785, the 'cost per click' was 7 pence. Alongside our social media activity, the news story about the recall resulted in 16 articles reaching an estimated 57 million people.

Supporting businesses

4.10 Our work with business and other stakeholders aims to drive behaviour change around food hygiene and to influence business to play their part as the first line of defence in food safety.

4.11 In response to Operation Hawk, we convened the Food Fraud Working Group to deliver joint action with industry. The group achieved consensus with industry partners and harnessed media and public scrutiny to drive change including industry commitments to combat food crime better. The group also supported joint working in our communications activity to increase our reach and strengthened ties between teams to support future announcements.

4.12 Direct channels to stakeholders have grown this year. Subscribers to our stakeholder bulletin have increased to 8,506 (a 74% increase year on year). The bulletins provide a useful channel for more targeted and nuanced messaging in comparison with press releases. Popular bulletin stories included Precision Breeding, the School Food Standards Pilot and the Horsemeat crisis ten years on. Convening and briefing stakeholders remains a powerful tool to manage stakeholder reaction and leverage support such as through our regular Consumer Forum. We continue to reach all Local Authorities directly through our SMARTER communications platform, sharing consultations and updates on our Achieving Business Compliance Programme.

4.13 At the end of 2022, we introduced a new Science Newsletter, providing a quarterly update on the FSA's science, evidence and research. Aimed at external stakeholders and with over 1,800 subscribers, this update has now become the top performing external FSA newsletter, with an engagement rate of 46%, and an important channel for how we communicate our science to those outside of the FSA.

Internal communications

4.14 Our internal communications focus on ensuring all our people are kept informed and engaged, and on supporting the FSA's culture and values. Levels of staff engagement are illustrated by an 82% response rate to our annual people survey and continued high attendance and engagement at our monthly all staff call. An average 45% of the organisation attend the call, with more watching the recording afterwards. Our internal communications team also supported campaigns to relaunch the FSA's ASPIRE values as well as Black History Month and Southeast Asian Heritage Month.

5. Priorities for the year ahead

5.1 Over the next 12 months, we aim to build on what has been achieved over the last year, using our communications to maintain the FSA's visibility and engagement with different audiences. In particular we aim to:

- improve longer-term strategic planning and evaluation of our communications so we can be more responsive to public debates about food and food safety and changing consumer priorities. For example, we aim to be a trusted and authoritative voice for consumers on UPF. processed foods.
- using research and the work of our priority programmes, identify themes and topics where we aim to set the agenda externally, consistently explaining the work that the FSA is doing to keep our food safe and that it is what it says it is. We will continue to integrate the work of our Northern Ireland and Wales teams to promote 'one FSA,' as well as working in partnership with Food Standards Scotland.
- develop more targeted approaches to consumer communications, using insight to target specific audiences. In particular, we will work to enhance our consumer communication during incidents, increasing our reach amongst affected audiences.
- continue to build our stakeholder relationships with food businesses, local authorities and others across the sector to influence their work as one of the key lines of defence in food safety. Here, we will seek more opportunities to work in partnership in our communications, for example with allergen charities to promote allergen advice, or the BiteBack Ambassadors to understand and communicate better with young consumers.
- ensure our communications are inclusive of all the audiences we serve. This means improving our understanding of different audience groups, their lifestyles and media habits, as well as continuing to prioritise the technical accessibility of all our content.

Appendix: Communications metrics (all metrics relate to October 2022 to October 2023, unless otherwise specified)

Food.gov.uk

- **Visitors:** 9,314,255 (21% increase year on year)
- **Page views:** 13,561,555 (16% increase year on year)

The most visited page on the website was the 'Food additives' page. Other popular pages include Allergen Guidance for business and The Safer Food Better Business Guidance Hub as well as our consumer guidance on best before and use by dates.

Most downloaded documents from food.gov.uk (year-on-year comparison in brackets):

- [SFBB Safer food, better business for Caterers - full pack](#) - 73,140 (down 2%)
- [SFBB Safer food, better business – Introduction](#) - 70,318 (up 4%)
- [Safer food, better business - diary refill 4-weekly review](#) - 56,292 (up 1%)
- [Allergen and Intolerance sign \(colour\)](#) - 48,563 (up 31%)
- [Dishes and their allergen content - menu chart \(also known as the Allergen Matrix\)](#) - 33,008 (up 10%)

Food Hygiene Ratings online service

- **Visitors:** 4.2 million
- **Page views:** 18.5 million

Visitors to the online Food Hygiene Ratings service remained broadly stable year on year. While nearly half of all visitors come to the site via search engines, the top three referring sites were food aggregators, Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber-Eats.

Social media

Our social media followers increased year on year across all platforms, with Linked In seeing the biggest rise as our most popular platform. The difference in demographics across the platforms is illustrated by the popularity of different posts, for example, posts about food safety training are most popular on LinkedIn, while posts about consumer recalls generate more attention on Facebook and Instagram.

- **LinkedIn:** 133,393 followers (up 17% year-on-year)
- **X (formerly Twitter):** 61,362 followers (up 2%)
- **Facebook:** 54,721 followers (up 6%)
- **Instagram:** 9,133 followers (up 17%)

Top performing social media posts

- [Sniff test for milk / home food fact checker post for World Food Safety Day, Facebook:](#) 176,300 impressions and 12,800 engagements for a 7.28% engagement rate
- [Enoki mushroom warning](#), X (formerly Twitter): Impressions: 146,100 impressions and 429 engagements for a 0.29% engagement rate
- [New glycerol in slush ice drinks guidance](#), Linked In: 41,600 impressions and 2,000 engagements for a 4.79% engagement rate.

Always on campaigns

Always On are small low/no budget campaigns which tap into external events to help draw attention to food safety and hygiene. This approach helps us to be agile and responsive, capitalising on conversations already happening on social media. We ran eight campaigns in the first nine months of 2023 (FHRS Valentines, Food Waste Action Week, Alerts and Recalls, Spring Cleaning, King's Coronation, FHRS May and two summer campaigns).

- total reach: 1.5 million
- total impressions: 1.2 million
- total engagement: 47,000
- totals spend on paid for advertising: £3,600.
- total cost per click: 17 pence

Communication and engagement case studies

Here, we set out two examples of some of the proactive communications work we have undertaken during the year, reaching different audiences.

Case Study: Lough Neagh

- **Aim:** to provide information and reassurance to consumers in Northern Ireland about the safety of fish caught in Lough Neagh
- **When:** September 2023
- **Spend:** Nil

Activity and results

Lough Neagh is largest freshwater lake in the UK, providing drinking water to 40% of households in Northern Ireland and accommodating several fisheries. In summer 2023 the lake was covered by the largest amount of algal bloom since the 1970s. The public were advised not to bathe in the affected waters, and to protect pets from coming into contact with it.

Media coverage of the issue in Northern Ireland was extensive, including questions about the safety of the consumption of fish caught in the Lough. FSA advice stated fish caught commercially was safe to eat, however consumers should avoid consuming fish caught recreationally. While there is no conclusive scientific evidence of risk to human health from eating fish from affected water, there are no regulatory limits established for toxins in fish, meaning there are no limits to test against.

BBC Radio Ulster's Nolan Show led with the story every day for a week, challenging the FSA for not undertaking testing, and suggesting that the food safety advice was unclear. We moved quickly to respond, using media and social media monitoring to listen to consumers' concerns.

Following a series of media briefings about the challenges involved in testing, FSA Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Robin May, took part in a lengthy live interview on Radio Ulster's Nolan Show.

The FSA was credited by the presenter for its approach and the interview provided the opportunity to explain the action we were taking to test the waters and fish, the first testing of its type in the UK. This showed that the FSA was taking the issue seriously and taking significant steps to address a new and emerging issue.

Case Study: Here to Help campaign

- **Aim:** the campaign was aimed at helping make it easier for food businesses to comply with food hygiene requirements
- **When:** May 2023
- **Spend:** £23,922

Activity and results:

Here to Help was a low-budget campaign aimed at food businesses with the objective of making it easier for them to do the right thing. The campaign did not use any paid for advertising; instead, we used partners, media, and social media to help us share case studies from food businesses and environmental health officers.

A newly launched Business Guidance Hub on our website collated the most popular guidance and advice for food businesses and became the sixth most visited page on food.gov.uk.

The campaign achieved over 690,000 opportunities to see our content via partner channels, and 44,900 opportunities to see content via news media outlets. The campaign also contributed to a 12% rise in food business registrations, compared with the previous year. Despite no ad spend, we secured over £44,000 worth of coverage through our partnerships: for every £1 spent generated £2.45 worth of coverage.

1. The term 'ultra processed food' comes from a food classification system known as NOVA, which defines ultra-processed foods as those made by industrial processing and that often contain additives such as colours, flavours, emulsifiers or preservatives. The Food Standards Agency uses scientific evidence to ensure that additives used in food are safe to consume.