CHIEF EXECUTIVE REPORT TO THE BOARD

Report by Catherine Brown, Chief Executive

1 GENERAL ACTIVITY UPDATE

1.1 As always I have been grateful to a large number of stakeholders who have made time for useful meetings to discuss issues important to consumers and of mutual interest since the last Board meeting. Particular highlights have included the second meeting of our Strategic Liaison Panel, designed to give us the chance to engage at a senior/head of service level with colleagues in Local Authorities (LAs). It was very useful to have the chance to sense check developing thinking on the regulatory strategy for example and to discuss our work developing the intelligence hub, and how it will best join up with both Trading Standards and Environmental Health capabilities in the field. I also held a regular update meeting with the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and Trading Standards Institute.

1.2 As well as these strategic level discussions with Local Authority delivery partners I enjoyed the opportunity this month to visit Cotswold District Council and go on an inspection visit with an Environmental Health Officer and meet the front line team there and engage with them, as well as hearing about the particular challenges they face in terms of managing large scale events from a food standards and safety point of view.

1.3 From further afield I was also pleased to meet the Chief Executive of Food Standards Australia and New Zealand, during his recent visit to London. We discussed building on our history of collaboration in the areas of economics and social science and agreed to review and update our Memorandum of Understanding to reflect this. It was nice to hear again from international colleagues, as we did from our visitor from Greece at the last Board meeting, how much they value and use our website and materials to support their own endeavours. As our developing strategy recognises, food systems are highly globalised, and building the right links and shared approaches internationally will be increasingly important to protecting UK and world-wide consumers.

1.4 I met with colleagues at the Department of Health and both Una O’Brien, the Permanent Secretary, and Felicity Harvey, our lead contact in the department, were very supportive of our work on campylobacter and keen to support our efforts.

1.5 As well as focusing on external relationships, there has been a lot of important organisational development activity over the last few weeks. The Organisational Development Group, under the leadership of Lynne Bywater, has launched the “Icing on the Cake” awards in the last quarter. This scheme, which recognises the efforts of colleagues who “go the extra mile”, has so far been very well received, and is part of our strategic efforts to build the confidence of staff and the organisation to make us even more effective for consumers.
1.6 We have also begun a piece of work designed to support the development of an information strategy and delivery plan, which will come to the Business Committee when it has been developed to a suitable stage, and will form one of the important underpinnings to the overall strategic plan.

2 CAMPYLOBACTER CAMPAIGN

2.1 Work has continued unabated on our campaign to reduce the level of campylobacter on chicken and the level of risk associated with it to consumers. In light of the last Board meeting’s desire to bring forward the publication of robust retailer specific data that was useful to consumers on campylobacter levels, we had a constructive meeting and agreed what I think is an excellent way forward. The outcome of that meeting in terms of the timeline of activities until the end of the survey is attached to this report (Annexe 1).

2.2 I was also very pleased that the cross-Government response to our decision emphasised their support for publication of retailer specific information as soon as we had appropriate sample sizes. We are thinking how we can take up other Government departments most usefully on their offers of support for the campaign.

2.3 Meanwhile discussions with industry and retailers continue.

2.4 Since the British Poultry Council (BPC) Board meeting that I attended (mentioned in my July Board Report), the Managing Directors of the major chicken companies have committed to a delivery strategy for those interventions found to be most likely to reduce campylobacter. As part of that strategy, each company will be introducing a number of new interventions and sharing the results so as to ensure that best practice can be disseminated as widely as possible. BPC has established a management structure to drive this work forward, which includes regular meetings of managing directors to set priorities and timescales and monitor progress. The Joint Working Group on Campylobacter is being renewed to ensure that it can play its part in supporting this delivery work.

2.5 We have had discussions with Sainsbury’s, Marks and Spencer, Faccenda, and Two Sisters about their developing plans, and will continue to challenge all the key players to do more to reduce risks to consumers.

3 SALMONELLA OUTBREAK

Multi-country Salmonella Enteritidis PT14b outbreak potentially linked to eggs

3.1 FSA has been collaborating with colleagues from Public Health England (PHE) and international bodies regarding an outbreak of salmonella in England potentially associated with eggs from a supplier in Germany. 247 primary cases (non-travel related) of the outbreak strain (Salmonella Enteritidis PT14b) have been reported with specimen dates on or after 1 June, 54 of the cases have been hospitalised though some of these
hospitalisations were prior to Salmonella infection. To date, there have been no reported cases in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland linked to this outbreak. The number of cases appears to be declining, suggesting the outbreak may be ending.

3.2 Cases with the outbreak strain have also been seen in Austria, France and Germany. Evidence to date indicates that the cases in Austria and France have been associated with eggs from the German supplier and the outbreak strain has been isolated from shell eggs sampled by the French Authorities. However, in the UK the exact source has not been identified but there is strong circumstantial evidence to indicate that the source is likely to be the same supplier.

3.3 The FSA does not believe that potentially affected eggs from this company are on sale in shops and supermarkets. From the initial information from the German authorities there is no planned further direct supply of eggs to the UK from the implicated German supplier. FSA has issued messages for caterers and Local Authorities to advise of the issue, and to re-emphasise the importance of thorough cooking and appropriate hygiene measures, which would effectively mitigate the risk. We have also issued a web story with these messages. FSA is continuing to work with PHE and colleagues in Europe and investigations are progressing at national and European level.

4 E.COLI CROSS CONTAMINATION GUIDANCE

4.1 The eight week review period for the revised E.coli cross-contamination guidance ended on 29 August and the responses are currently being considered in detail. The overall response to the revised guidance has been positive, with the majority of respondents finding the revised guidance easier to understand and follow, and the key messages on how to control cross-contamination clearer.

5 REVIEW OF THE EU REGULATION ON OFFICIAL FOOD AND FEED CONTROLS

5.1 These European Union (EU) rules set the framework for delivery of our core functions, ensuring safe food and protecting consumers. The rules govern official controls carried out by the FSA and other food chain regulators, including those in the devolved countries. We lead for the UK Government and the devolved administrations on negotiating revisions to this important legislation, which is a component of the European Commission’s wider review of agri-food chain rules. The Government's objective is to secure simpler, risk-based rules that can adapt to the different circumstances across the agri-food chain around Europe. There is still some way to go before completion of negotiations, which resume in September after the summer break. Charging for official controls is a key issue. The European Parliament (EP) supported a flexible approach to charging in its first-reading opinion. The new EP will vote on whether to confirm this position in September.
5.2 This negotiation has potential to deliver less prescriptive, more flexible and proportionate rules that protect consumer interests without unnecessary red tape for businesses and consequent costs for consumers.

6 INTELLIGENCE/SURVEILLANCE

6.1 One of the principal themes of the Elliott Report is the need for a more coordinated and proactive approach to food crime and the roles for central government, Local Authorities and the food industry in this area. We have been engaged in cross-Government liaison in considering the recommendations in the report so that we can continue to build on current arrangements to detect and deter food fraud.

6.2 We established an Intelligence Hub in December last year which considers issues of food safety and integrity including economically motivated adulteration. Greater emphasis is being placed upon more effective sharing of information and intelligence and a number of additional stakeholder networks and communication channels involving other Government Departments, Local Authorities and industry are being developed. This will increase our capability to capture and act upon intelligence which may be indicative of future risks. As part of these activities, we are also developing additional facilities to aggregate and analyse intelligence thereby producing strategic and tactical assessments which will undergo further investigation, be shared with relevant enforcement authorities and acted upon.

6.3 At a European level, we are engaging with the European Commission Food Fraud Team and its network and are now sharing intelligence to support cross-Europe investigations. We have seconded a member of staff to be part of this team in Brussels.

6.4 We have also initiated a programme of work to improve our food systems intelligence capability. The programme will look at the whole feed and food system, in terms of safety and standards, research, science and evidence from identifying information needs, gathering and analysing information and agreeing and implementing responses. In the coming weeks, as we define the programme, we will use an external provider to help us understand our business information needs, which will inform the information strategy and delivery plan referred to in the first section of this report.

7 PUBLICATION OF THE FSA’S REPORT ON A FOOD AND FEED LAW ENFORCEMENT STOCKTAKE IN WALES AND FINAL RESPONSE TO PENNINGTON RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 In Wales, Welsh Government published on 23 July, the report from the FSA on a Food and Feed Law Enforcement in Wales and Final Response assessing the extent to which the Pennington recommendations had been implemented by Local Authorities
http://wales.gov.uk/topics/health/publications/health/reports/?lang=en
7.2 I am pleased to report that Mark Drakeford, Minister for Health and Social Services, has expressed his gratitude to the FSA for undertaking such a robust review. The Minister is pleased with the thoroughness of the review undertaken by the FSA and reassured by the findings that Professor Pennington’s recommendations in respect of food hygiene enforcement have become embedded in Local Authority policy and practice. He also welcomes the significant improvement in compliance with food hygiene law by food businesses in Wales, and the risk-based approach Local Authorities are taking to interventions with food businesses. The Minister also finds it reassuring to note that the FSA will continue to work with Local Authorities towards the delivery of an effective risk-based food standards enforcement service.

7.3 The Minister has noted the less positive outcome with regard to official feed controls and the Report’s conclusions that there has been little improvement in this area across all Local Authorities in Wales since the FSA’s last report of 2011. I am encouraged that the Minister has acknowledged that further work needs to be undertaken to secure a way forward in this important area and I welcome the Minister’s intention to engage with his key Ministerial colleagues to secure a resolution to this matter by April 2015.

8 STRIKE ACTION

8.1 FSA Meat Hygiene Inspectors, Official Veterinarians and support staff who are members of the union UNISON were called out on strike in August after a vote over consolidated basic pay rises implemented in 2013 and paid into August salaries for 2014. The two mornings of strikes had only a minor impact on UK food businesses. Although about a quarter of field-based staff took strike action, around 72 per cent of plants operated as normal on both days and 12 per cent operated a partial service. The remainder either worked on other days or do not ordinarily require employed Meat Hygiene Inspector services.

8.2 I am very grateful to all our front line operations staff who came in and kept things running during the strikes. It was extremely disappointing that these strikes were called by UNISON at a time when we were involved in what we believed were constructive talks, but highly encouraging that so many people turned up for work despite the call for action.

8.3 Whatever UNISON decides to do next, we will continue to seek to maintain meat inspection services and minimise the impact of any action on food businesses, their employees, and the reputation of the FSA and our staff.

9 BARBECUE WEEKEND

9.1 As a follow up to the successful ‘Don’t wash your chicken’ campaign at the start of the summer we ran a short UK wide BBQ awareness campaign over the August Bank Holiday. We conducted a survey which showed that 94% of people admitted to not following at least one piece of recommended good hygiene practice at barbecues. Over a four day period the story was widely covered in both mainstream and social media, including a feature on Good
Morning Britain, and we also gave interviews to both national and regional radio stations explaining good hygiene practice when having a BBQ. The campaign also resulted in prominent, national, regional and trade press coverage. On social media the use of our hashtag #lovebbq and #bbqhero encouraged local councils, retailers and the public to promote and share our campaign and bloggers included our campaign details on their blog sites.

10 FOOD HYGIENE RATING SCHEME (FHRS)

10.1 I’m pleased to report that the Royal Borough of Greenwich launched the FHRS at the end of August. This is timely as the Borough is hosting the Tall Ships Festival from 5 to 9 September when even more visitors than usual are expected in the area. This means that the scheme is now operating in 373 of the 374 local authorities in the three countries and marks a transition into a new phase for the FHRS.

10.2 As part of this, a new programme of grant funding for Local Authorities in England has just got underway. Grants are being made available for authorities to undertake short visits to food businesses with ratings of 3 and above that are not displaying their rating to highlight the potential benefits and to encourage them to do so. This follows a successful pilot earlier this year where nearly 50% of those visited subsequently put the sticker up in the window or door.

11 EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOOD AND VETERINARY OFFICE DRAFT REPORT ON HACCP FACT-FINDING MISSION

11.1 We have received the draft report of the European Commission Food and Veterinary Office fact-finding mission on HACCP carried out in the UK from 11 to 20 June 2014. The mission was part of a project to obtain an overview of HACCP implementation and control across Member States and to identify and exchange good practice.

11.2 The report is largely very positive about the UK implementation, recognising the risk-based systems we have in place to assess and ensure business compliance with HACCP. The report acknowledges the measures taken by the FSA, LAs and industry to make sure businesses have good HACCP based food safety, especially UK initiatives to support small and medium-sized businesses, for example the ‘Safer Food Better Business’ pack which is being used by an estimated 80% of small businesses in England and Wales. The report is also very positive about the structured training programmes in place for UK inspectors.

11.3 There are some issues raised in the report, which we will be considering, and FSA officials have been asked to present some of the UK initiatives at a proposed FVO meeting of Member States to consider good practice, later in the year.
12 FOOD STANDARDS SCOTLAND (FSS)

12.1 Work to establish the new food body for Scotland, Food Standards Scotland, is progressing well. The FSA is committed to achieving a smooth and effective transition to the new body. We are working collaboratively with Scottish Government to ensure that Food Standards Scotland is able to operate effectively from day one and that consumers in Scotland and across the United Kingdom remain protected both during and after the transition process. The Chair and I met with Scotland’s Public Health Minister most recently on 12 August who was appreciative of our efforts in this area.

12.2 FSA staff in Scotland are increasingly engaged in joint work with Scottish Government colleagues on all aspects of the transition.

13 COMMONWEALTH GAMES, GLASGOW 2014

13.1 I am delighted to report that the 2014 Commonwealth Games was a great success and that it passed without any significant food related incident. I should nevertheless add that the FSA’s joint preparations with Glasgow City Council and other bodies were in place prior to the games to ensure the level of resilience that we had worked towards. Preparations included two desk-top emergency exercises and one full exercise run by the FSA aimed at testing response by the FSA, Local Authorities, the Games organisers and others to Games-time food incidents.

13.2 The FSA ran a Games-themed promotion of the Food Hygiene Information Scheme in Scotland between 14 July-10 August targeting locals and visitors to the games. The poster campaign locations included buses, train stations and two Scottish airports where the Chair and I were delighted to find prominent posters welcoming us on our visit to meet the Minister.