

## COMMUNICATIONS UPDATE

### Report by Steven Pollock

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### 1. Summary

- 1.1 The Board paper and presentation provides the annual update on communications and engagement. It covers:
  - a summary of communications and engagement activity in 2020-21;
  - an update on progress made on our commitments set out in the September 2020 board discussion;
  - outlines our proposals for improving public and stakeholder awareness and trust with a more proactive communications strategy
  - sets out our communication priorities for 2021-22.
- 1.2 The Board is asked **to review** the activities of the communications division and comment on its priorities and approach for 2021/22

### 2. Introduction

- 2.1 The FSA communications function is a team of 26 staff in the Strategy, Legal, Communications and Governance (SLCG) directorate with an annual budget of £680k. In addition, FSA in Wales and FSA in Northern Ireland have small communications teams funded by the Welsh Government and Department of Finance NI with a programme budget for Wales of £43k and Northern Ireland £74k. All three countries work closely together to ensure common purpose and expertise and all communications staff are members of the Government Communication Service (GCS) and uphold its standards of professional practice.
- 2.2 The communications team provides a 24/7 service throughout the year. On average it receives around 100 enquiries and contacts a day, publishes more than 50 research reports in an average year, along with more than 100 news stories, and issues more than 170 allergy and food alerts
- 2.3 The teams also work closely with colleagues in Food Standards Scotland (FSS), sharing insight and expertise in line with the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two organisations, and collaborating on UK-wide activity such as managing and responding to incidents and the recent joint conference on food regulators and sustainability timed to coincide with COP26 summit.

2.4 Communications is a strategic enabling function that supports delivery of the FSA corporate priorities, as well as providing trusted professional advice and challenge to the organisation. Its overarching objectives can be summarised as:

- **protecting and improving public health** – through campaigns and other activities focused on consumers and businesses, and supporting incident response and effective risk communication;
- **growing reputation among key stakeholder groups** - which is important in building trust and reach to businesses and consumers;
- **improving staff engagement** - working to the four principles of Engage for Success an evidence-based approach to internal communications and engagement.<sup>1</sup>

2.5 Communications plays a key role in building both trust in the FSA and its reputation. The regular Reprtrak survey, carried out by the Reputation Institute suggests that those who are more familiar with the FSA are more likely to trust the organisation. Much of the communications team's work focuses on improving awareness of the FSA among its audiences and improving understanding of the Agency's role. Internally, communications helps to drive high staff engagement rates through ensuring the visibility of the leadership team, connection with the FSA's core purpose and values and ensuring staff can engage actively in the direction of the FSA, and that their voices are heard.

2.6 During 2021, the FSA has seen:

- **continued high trust rating** - 78% of people say they trust the FSA to make sure food is safe and what it says it is<sup>2</sup>;
- **strengthening reputation** - the most recent Reprtrak survey places the FSA 7th overall among public sector organisations (compared with 11th in 2019)<sup>3</sup> ; and
- **stronger staff engagement** – the 2020 annual Civil Service People Survey rates the Agency overall engagement at 70% (an increase from 67% in 2019) making the FSA one of the high-performing government departments<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> (<https://engageforsuccess.org/>),

<sup>2</sup> [Food and You 2](#) (FSA July 2021) (note that the methodology of the survey changed in 2021, so while 78% represents a significant increase in numerical terms, it is not comparable to previous data on trust)

<sup>3</sup> Reprtrak Study (Reputation Institute, Jan 2021)

<sup>4</sup> Civil Service People Survey 2020 (Cabinet Office, January 2021)

- 2.7 Such positive trends are encouraging and a priority for the year ahead is to maintain these alongside increasing familiarity and trust in the FSA in other key audience groups such as parliamentarians and food industry leaders.
- 2.8 This paper sets out some of the communications outputs since the last update to the FSA Board in September 2020. Where possible or applicable, these outputs have been benchmarked against similar or related organisations to provide context.
- 2.9 There has been a significant increase in many of the metrics that are monitored. These have been driven by several factors. The team has pursued a more proactive approach (particularly to broadcast and online media) over the last twelve months, and this is reflected in the increase in the proportion of coverage gained. During 2021, the communications team has also managed communications for a series of complex incidents (from pancytopenia in cats to recalls of breaded chicken). The focus on food shortages and labour disruption post-pandemic has also put the work of the FSA firmly in the public eye.

### **3. Examples of delivering on our objectives**

#### **A. Campaign activity across England, Wales and Northern Ireland**

- 3.1 Key campaign activity has included Speak Up For Allergies which was launched in February this year to raise awareness among 18 to 21-year-olds and their friends and family of the importance of speaking to takeaways about food allergies when ordering. **See case study one in Annex A.**
- 3.2 In March this year the team ran a campaign to help people understand the difference between use by and best before dates. This activity was driven by findings from the FSA COVID-19 tracker and segmentation research that showed that a sizeable minority of people, particularly young families and those aged over 65 were ignoring the use-by date on food. **See case study two in Annex B.**
- 3.3 In advance of the allergen labelling rule changes on October 1 (commonly referred to as Natasha's Law) the FSA ran a campaign to alert relevant businesses to what changes they needed to make when preparing pre-packed food for direct sale and to highlight the benefits of the rule change for hypersensitive consumers. **See case study three in Annex C.**

#### **B. Incident response and risk communication**

- 3.4 The FSA has handled 13 non-routine incidents since September 2020 and the communications team works closely with colleagues in the Incidents Response team to inform consumers about potential threats and ensure public health is protected.
- 3.5 One of these was the outbreak of feline pancytopenia in June, potentially linked to cat food, which generated considerable national, trade and local coverage across print, online and broadcast media.

- 3.6 A major part of the communications challenge was that much of the engagement, sharing of content and commentary particularly among cat owners, was happening via social media, notably Twitter and Facebook. As a result, the initial recall notice about this incident in June was the FSA's highest-performing tweet that month. On Facebook the shared recall reached nearly 100,000 users with an 8.5% engagement rate (significantly higher than the 3.1% average).
- 3.7 In response the team focussed its efforts on a targeted approach via social media, ensuring that it was reaching the channels where the key audience was engaging and minimising the potential for the story to attract widespread mainstream media attention. This included working with the British Veterinary Association on content, with very high engagement rates and launching a social media advertising campaign targeted at cat owners (identified using online audience demographics) which also achieved rates of engagement well above the average

### **C. Growing FSA's reputation among key stakeholder groups**

- 3.8 The restrictions on face-to-face engagement during the pandemic has resulted in the widespread use of online platforms and technology to engage stakeholders. Chief among these were the series of webinars used to introduce businesses to the new risk analysis (RA) process and the engagement to explain to food businesses the new allergen labelling laws across all three countries.
- 3.9 These meetings were a success with more than 750 attendees across the two RA webinars and more than 1100 delegates at the labelling events. A dedicated Northern Ireland webinar in August on the allergen law change attracted over 160 businesses.
- 3.10 A new regular stakeholder message from the Chief Executive and Chair was launched in May 2021. This was in direct response to stakeholder research carried out in 2020, which found that some stakeholders wanted more regular, proactive communications from the FSA. The team also wanted to create more opportunities to speak to key opinion formers about important work that may not attract media attention and build a narrative over time about the FSA's role and priorities. Early evaluation of the stakeholder message shows that it is out-performing government benchmarks for engagement, with subscriptions increasing threefold from 520 to more than 1600 in six months.
- 3.11 Because of the pandemic-related pressures that the FSA's stakeholder audience have been under, annual research into their views of the FSA was delayed until October 2021. Early findings from the interviews with stakeholders spread across the food industry, other government departments and representative trade bodies suggest that stakeholders broadly feel their engagement with the FSA is good, with particular strengths including:

- the frequency and level of engagement;

- the FSA's stance as a collaborative, consultative organisation;
- the skill and expertise of FSA staff.

3.12 There were some areas identified for improvement, including the FSA taking a more proactive role in engagement, and a need to join up better between FSA teams and share information. As these findings have only recently been received the team will look at them in detail with colleagues across the Agency to formulate an action plan.

3.13 Turning to parliamentarians, insight shows that familiarity with the FSA among MPs remains broadly unchanged since 2018, with about two fifths of MPs saying they know something about the FSA. However, the FSA's favourability has returned to a similar level to 2018. While this is largely a shift to neutrality it is a clear indication of the need to ramp up engagement with Westminster parliamentarians.

3.14 In Northern Ireland the EU Exit update bulletin was established to collate the latest guidance from FSA in Northern Ireland and partners across government for the key Agri-food industry associations in NI. The initiative was welcomed by recipients and there have been four editions issued.

#### **D. Improving staff engagement**

3.15 During the pandemic the team has focussed on enabling all FSA staff to engage with senior leaders, to understand their decision-making process and see the outcomes of their conversations. This has helped lead to significant improvements in the visibility of leaders and people feeling that they are being listened to as measured by the annual Civil Service People Survey. Key highlights from the October 2020 survey include:

- 86% of respondents said that senior managers are sufficiently visible (up from 75% on 2019);
- 78% of staff members feel informed about matters that affect them (to check)
- 81% of FSA staff feel proud when they tell others they are part of the FSA (up from 76%).

The team also runs regular 'temperature checks' with staff during the year which indicate that these improvements have been sustained. The FSA also launched its annual staff awards initiative this year. **See case study four in Annex D**

## **4. Key Outputs**

### **Accessibility**

4.1 The communications team is responsible for making sure that all of content on the FSA website ([www.food.gov.uk](http://www.food.gov.uk)) meets the new accessibility standards that became a legal requirement in September 2020. One in five people in the UK has a disability, and many need to use assistive technology to read PDF files, for example. The team led and undertook a major programme of work across the FSA to ensure that more than 6000 pieces of existing content were converted to meet the legal deadline. Since September 2020, the communications team has continued to work to make sure both new and old content is accessible to all users.

### **Social media and online channels**

4.2 In line with our ambitions for the year, communications has increased reach and engagement rates across all social media channels with the aim of increasing familiarity with the FSA among varying audiences, introducing the Agency to a wider group of people and helping to drive up trust.  
In line

4.3 Audiences have grown across Facebook (12%), Twitter (3.5%), LinkedIn (31%) and Instagram (38.6%) and engagement and interaction rates are higher than industry benchmarks. For example, on LinkedIn, the FSA engagement rate is almost 1% higher than our closest comparator Defra, and over 1.5% higher than an international comparator, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). On Facebook, the interaction rate (users liking, sharing, commenting on content) is more than double that of both comparators.

4.4 A key objective this year was to deliver increases in the number of people who subscribe to the FSA food alerts service which sends out food and allergy alerts when they are published. More than 35,000 people have subscribed to the FSA food alerts service and almost 27,000 to the allergy alert service (September 2021), on average 19% year-on-year increase for both alerts.

### **Media engagement**

4.5 There has been an increase in the FSA media profile between September 2020 and September 2021. Key highlights include:

- An increase in reach – the estimated number of people reached by FSA coverage and the average frequency of their exposure to this coverage - of 15 percentage points from 65% between October 2019 and September 2020 to 80% between October 2020 and September 2021
- An increase in the favourability of media coverage of 12 percentage points from 34% between October 2019 and September 2020 to 46% between October 2020 and September 2021.

4.6 This activity has included targeting specific publications on particular stories for more in-depth understanding and coverage of FSA issues. For example, in March the team hosted a media briefing event to profile the FSA's new risk analysis process post-Brexit. The event drew a number of national correspondents with whom the team have developed some new and close working relationships.

### Looking forward – the next 12 months

4.7 Building on these strong foundations in its current communications plan, the team set out some proposals for improving impact, including:

- **“Always On”**: a more agile, reactive and responsive approach to campaigns, reacting to issues and topics via enhanced social media listening and having capacity to respond more to intelligence gleaned from the work of the consumer insight team. This would be in addition to existing campaign plans around encouraging food business registration planned for Jan 2022 and the next phase of the Food Hypersensitivity campaigning set for February/March 2022.
- **Bolder media engagement**: This approach includes building relationships with more journalists in sectors outside food safety, for example, environment and countryside correspondents, political journalists and consumer specialists. In addition, working with policy and science teams colleagues to target stories more specifically at particular publications to get more in depth and rounded coverage.
- **Other government departments and political stakeholders**: insight suggests that the FSA role post EU Exit is not consistently understood. Plans are being developed to improve awareness, favourability and advocacy with parliamentarians in all three countries through more consistent, routine contact (from 1-2-1 meetings, constituency-level briefings). This could include issue based webinars with MPs and peers, promotion of the upcoming Annual Report on Standards and wider engagement with All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs).
- **Strategic engagement focused on our regulatory reform priorities**: during 2021 a more joined up approach to engagement was developed on our priority programmes, including the Achieving Business Compliance (ABC) and Operational Transformation (OTP). The team plans to build on this over the next 12 months with dedicated communications resource for more frequent and deeper engagement on the FSA's regulatory reform priorities.
- **Staff engagement and FSA strategy**: to boost further staff engagement, and in particular, engagement in the strategy, the team will continue to support greater visibility of the senior leadership team and grow “employee voice” increasing the proportion of staff who feel they can successfully contribute to and influence the direction of the FSA, and that

their voices are heard on a range of key issues, including diversity and inclusion.

### **Government communications reform programme**

- 4.8 In July 2020 the Government Communication Service (GCS) launched a comprehensive review of government communications. As part of the review process the GCS introduced a recruitment freeze in January 2021, which meant that several FSA posts remained vacant until the restrictions were lifted at the end of September 2021. The process is underway to recruit into these roles which will be important in helping deliver our ambitions for the year ahead.
- 4.9 The reforms initially included the creation of a single employer model for the profession. While this proposal is no longer part of the GCS reforms there are likely to be significant changes to the funding process for campaigns which will have an impact on the FSA and its plans.
- 4.10 The FSA Director of Communications and the team have engaged fully with the reform programme throughout and will continue to do so.

## **5. Conclusions**

- 5.1 It has been an exceptionally busy year for the FSA and the communications team – both in terms of external scrutiny on the food system (and consequently the work of the FSA), and internal demand for communications support.
- 5.2 Since the last update to the Board there has been growth in the FSA's trust rating, improvements in reputation, and staff engagement, and the delivery of award-winning campaigns. There have been improvements across the majority of the metrics we monitor. As set out above, there is more that can be done to improve understanding of the FSA's role, and the impact of the Agency's public health campaigns. and with the additional resources now secured, the team is confident that even greater impact will be delivered in the year ahead.



## ANNEX A

### Case study one

#### Speak Up For Allergies

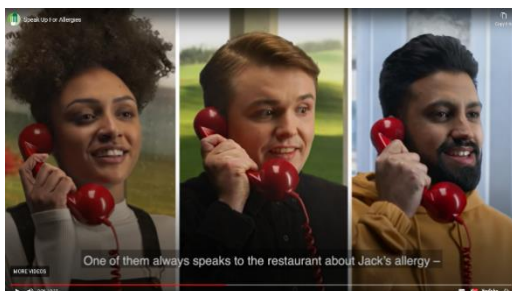
**Aim:** To raise awareness of the importance of speaking to takeaways about food allergies when ordering among 18 to 21-year-olds and their friends and family.



**When:** February to March 2021

**Spend:** £95,000

**Activity and results:** Given the target audience, the approach was digital first, and the team worked with six social media influencers on TikTok and Instagram to deliver the content in an engaging and relevant way. This activity reached 412,600 people and generated 25,600 engagements, including many positive comments from young people on the importance of the messaging.



**Campaign video:** A campaign video was created which ran in a paid campaign across Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube and Facebook in English and Welsh. Across all of the channels there were 534,262 video views which was 45.7% higher than the initial estimation of 366,555.

**Northern Ireland:** Specific Northern Ireland activity included a competition with Cool FM, and media partnership with Belfast Live and BBC NI radio interview with Northern Ireland case study.



**Partnership working:** We worked with partners such as Just Eat, Uber Eats, Dig In, NUS, Ulster University, South Eastern Regional College (SERC) and Mumsnet to engage with businesses, parents and young people themselves. Through these channels nearly a million young people and consumers and 200,000 food businesses operators were reached

Examples of this work include Just Eat and Uber Eats who shared content with their 65,700 restaurant delivery partners, Mumsnet who hosted an FSA led expert panel Q&A and student engagement app Dig-In who reached over half a million students with allergy themed polls.

**Awards:** The campaign has gone on to win the NI CIPR PRide Gold Award, Silver Stevie Award and most recently the PRCA (Public Relations Consultants Association) Award for Best Public Sector Campaign, Value for Money. It was commended it for its ambition, impact and effective targeting of public funds.



Through this work communications has established excellent relationships with some key restaurant partners who were unable to participate as their businesses focuses on 'eat in' and were therefore closed due to COVID-19 restrictions but have expressed a desire to continue with this work in the future.

## ANNEX B

### Use-by dates

**Aim:** To increase awareness of the behaviours consumers can undertake to avoid eating food past its use-by date.

**When:** March 2021

**Spend:** £40,000

**What we did and the results:** Findings from our [COVID-19 tracker](#) and segmentation research demonstrated that a sizable minority of people, particularly young families and those aged over 65 are ignoring the use-by date on food. We therefore developed communications to target these audiences, so they know why it is important to stick to the use-by date and to them help understand the difference between use-by and best before dates.

The campaign comprised of two strands, one social media focused to reach young families and a traditional broadcast media-based strand to reach the over 65s and beyond. We created a dedicated webpage: [www.food.gov.uk/useby](http://www.food.gov.uk/useby)



**Broadcast day:** On 23 March 2021, targeted regional TV and radio. This was fronted by Robin May our Chief Scientific Adviser and Narriman Looch our Head of Foodborne Disease Control Branch, alongside celebrity doctor, [Dr Dawn Harper](#). This resulted in 26 interviews (20 radio and 6 TV) with regional and national broadcast outlets and reached an audience of 3.5 million at a cost of £0.01p per person. A news story ran in over 40 national and regional titles including: The Telegraph, The Times, London Evening Standard and Mail Online, through which we reached 30% of the UK population with 48,768,135 opportunities to see (OTS).

**Social media:** We recruited five Instagram influencers who focus on parenting and food to help us engage with the younger audience. These included our first ever Welsh language

influencer and a Northern Ireland influencer duo on Instagram and Facebook. Our five influencers delivered a combined reach of 199,000 with an average engagement rate of 6%.

**Partnership working:** To engage further with parents we partnered with [Mumsnet to deliver a live Q&A session](#) – this comprised of FSA and Love Food Hate Waste experts answering live questions posted by Mumsnet participants. During this session 75 questions were asked

Overall, our food.gov page received 10,810 views with an average dwell time of nearly four minutes. This activity superseded all our Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and influencer benchmarks with a total audience reach of over 3.7 million. Feedback across all activity was very positive with some having learnt something new and for others, it was a useful reminder.

## ANNEX C

### Allergen labelling law change



**Aim:** Ensure widespread awareness and provide practical advice and support for businesses that sell pre-packed for direct sale food to implement the changes.

Make consumers aware of the changes and how they will support food hypersensitive consumers to make safer food choices.

**When:** October 2020 to October 2021

**Spend:** £85,000

**Activity and results:** The campaign was split into stages to help focus the messaging and ensure that businesses were targeted in a timely manner with relevant messages. Below are some highlights of the campaign.

**Dedicated hub:** A dedicated hub was created on food.gov. This hub was used to upload helpful resources for businesses including a decision tool; labelling guidance; technical guidance; sector guides for bakery, butchers, fast food and takeaways, mobile sellers, restaurants, cafes and pubs, and schools; advice on precautionary allergen labelling and a checklist. The decision tool in particular proved to be popular with over 67,000 visits from 1 Jan – 31 October 2021.

**Online advertising:** In order to reach a wider spectrum of businesses the team ran online advertising on Google, Facebook and Instagram for 2 weeks in March 2021 and September 2021. This was hugely successful and combined secured 9.3 million impressions generating 83,000 click throughs to the information hub.

**FSA Explains Video:** An FSA Explains video for businesses was launched in October 2020 and has had over 20,000 views making it one of the most viewed Food Hypersensitivity videos on the FSA YouTube.



**Partnership working** was a critical aspect of delivering this campaign. The team provided regular email updates (12 in total) promoting key resources and updates and engaged with a variety of trade body organisations speaking at bespoke events. Greggs who spoke at the business webinar, wrote a blog which was the FSA's 2nd most read blog of all time - only second to Emily's blog on self-doubt for International Women's Day.

Blog  
**Food Standards Agency**

Organisation: Food Standards Agency

**How Greggs prepared for the new Prepacked for Direct Sale (PPDS) food legislation**

Clare Flynn, Food Safety and Quality Assurance Manager at Greggs, 27 August 2021, Business Assistance, Case Studies



**Webinars:** In July & August 2021 three webinars were held dedicated to engaging with food businesses and local authorities. The food business webinar was attended by almost 400 people and has since had over 1600 views on YouTube. 800 Local authority officers attended from all three countries, with an additional 1400 views on YouTube. Over 200 questions were received and 90% of businesses who attended the webinars rated the overall experience as excellent or good.

**Illustrative example 3 – Who does PPDS affect?**

**Question:** We are a school. At lunch time food is plated on demand, do we have to list all ingredients? As we already do for the 14 allergens.

**Answer:** If you are plating freshly cooked food (not prepacked before the point that it is ordered) there is no need to list ingredients. You must be able to provide information, in writing or orally, on the presence of any allergens in the food you are serving. Any food that is packed on the same site before being ordered by the student will need to provide:

- The name of the food, and;
- An ingredients list with allergens emphasised on its packaging or a label fixed to its packaging.

Due to the varied nature of each food business model, we encourage all food businesses to review the PPDS guidance and obtain business specific advice from their local authority.

In addition to this, FSA in NI, along with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Environment (CAFRE) and district councils, held a webinar for NI businesses. Over 160 local food businesses and caterers attended the event and a further 150 people have viewed a recording of the event which was made available on the CAFRE website.

**Media day:** On 1 October 2021, the team worked closely with the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation on a widespread media campaign to announce the implementation primarily aimed at consumers to bring about awareness of the new allergen labelling law. 89 pieces of coverage were secured including 10 national papers, 21 media interviews with FSA spokespeople from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This coverage generated 876,767,128 opportunities to see, potentially exposing everyone in the UK to an FSA mention an average of 4 times during that day – this led to an increase in traffic to the Hub page of 250% (compared to the week before).





## ANNEX D

### FSA awards 2021



**Aim:** Increase staff's awareness of the strategic narrative, and the guiding principles that will shape the organisation's future by bringing the high-level aspirations set out into an everyday context. This would make it feel more real from the frontline to the back office.

Communications also wanted to improve capacity to share successes by celebrating the people, teams and pieces of work that exemplified The FSA at its very best.

**When:** October 2021 – January 2022

#### Activity and results:

We put our people at the forefront by ensuring that they every stage was guided by them from nominations to judging. We aligned categories to guiding principles and organisational priorities plus being applicable in both an internal and external context. We look to secure judges from every grade and business area.

We tested with the categories with staff groups and brought existing awards including MHI, Vet of the Year and Digital awards into the overall campaign.

We have used bright, disruptive and engaging visuals/digital assets across all organisational internal platforms to reach as many people as possible. All information was designed to be accessible in terms of both content and ability to engage (e.g., operational colleagues using smartphones).

We had ambitious targets including securing 100 nominations (in terms of benchmarking DWP secured 370 nominations with a staff group of 100,000).

When the awards closed we had 204 nominations and 35 judges from right across our organisation.

