

## ANNUAL 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 the communications team activity since its last update to the Board in June 2019;
  - the communications response to the COVID-19 pandemic;
  - a brief look at the communications priorities for 2020/21.
- 1.2 The Board is asked to review the activities of the communications division and consider its priorities for 20/21.

#### 2. Introduction

- 2.1 The FSA communications function is a team of 26 staff in the Strategy, Legal, Communications and Governance (SLCG) directorate. In addition, the FSA in Wales and FSA in Northern Ireland have their own small communications teams funded by the Welsh Government and Department of Finance NI respectively. All three countries work closely together to ensure common purpose and expertise. Communications staff are members of the Government Communication Service (GCS) and uphold its standards of professional practice.
- 2.2 The purpose of the team is to be a strategic enabling function that supports delivery of the FSA corporate priorities, as well as providing trusted professional advice and challenge to the organisation. Much of the team's work over the last few months has been on supporting the FSA's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as preparations for the end of the EU transition period, where there is a growing focus on food standards, and the drive to increase understanding of the FSA's role in relation to risk assessment and risk management.

#### Context

- 2.3 The FSA was established 20 years ago in direct response to the BSE crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. The crisis precipitated a collapse in trust in government and science amongst consumers leading to a perception that government had protected industry at the expense of consumer interests - <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20060802142310/http://www.bseinguiiry.gov.uk/>. The establishment of the FSA meant that for the first time, consumer interests would be represented independently, without being

influenced or being perceived to be influenced by economic or political factors that might work (unintentionally or otherwise) against public health interests.

- 2.4 Over the past two decades the FSA has worked hard to establish trust among consumers. This has been achieved through the use of science and evidence coupled with a strong commitment to openness and transparency. The COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed the importance of this commitment, with the media's forensic focus on how decisions are arrived at and the science that supports those decisions. It has also underlined the importance of "honest uncertainty", telling the public what is known but also being clear about what is not known.
- 2.5 In communications, the overarching performance measure is consumer trust in the FSA, which currently stands at 73%.<sup>[1]</sup> Although communications and engagement is not the sole determinant of trust, the regular Reprtrak report published by the Reputation Institute indicates that the following factors are important in driving trust:
- awareness of the FSA (the more people have heard of it, the more it is trusted)
  - familiarity (the more people understand what it is the FSA does in practice, the more they trust it).
- 2.6 Key media and digital metrics that drive trust – awareness, familiarity and favourability – are monitored on a quarterly basis. In addition, the team, working with colleagues, is planning to track consumer confidence in the safety of food, and whether this is impacted by high profile major food incidents.

### **3. Outcomes**

- 3.1 The following are some of the key metrics that have been have focussed on in the last 12 months:
- The Reprtrak score has reached an all-time high of 80.2 % – this compares with a public sector average of 71.4%. The Reprtrak survey benchmarks against PHE (who score 79.5) and the Environment Agency (who score 72)<sup>[3]</sup>.
  - An increase in the FSA's trust scores with SMEs from 58% to 64%<sup>[4]</sup>.
  - An increase in the proportion of SMEs who believe the FSA understands their needs from 29% to 40%<sup>[5]</sup>.

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<sup>[1]</sup> [Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker](#)

<sup>[3]</sup> Understanding the Food Standards Agency's Reputation (Reputation Institute, December 2019)

<sup>[4]</sup> [FSA Small and Micro FBO Tracking Survey](#) (BMG Research, April 2020)

<sup>[5]</sup> [FSA Small and Micro FBO Tracking Survey](#) (BMG Research, April 2020)

- An increase in the proportion of MPs who say they are favourable towards the FSA, from 39% to 47% (with the remainder neutral)<sup>[6]</sup>.
- An overall increase in our engagement score in the Civil Service People Survey from 64% and 67%, and an increase in response rate in identified low response areas of between 8 and 12 percentage points<sup>[7]</sup>.

#### **4. General update**

##### **Media relations and campaigns**

- 4.1 The team provides a 24/7 service 365 days a year, responding to enquiries from the media, social media engagements and supporting the drafting, publication and reaction to recalls and food safety alerts. On the proactive side the team has worked this year on widening its reach and getting attention to FSA content. Two high-profile examples were the publication of consumer health advice and information for industry on cannabidiol (CBD) and the findings of the NoVAS (Norovirus attribution study) research which revealed a rise in the number of cases of foodborne disease.
- 4.2 Both these announcements secured widespread coverage, using not just existing relationships with science and consumer editors, but through the Press Association and local news networks. In terms of outputs the CBD announcement generated 165 million opportunities to see the media coverage, with an estimated 64% of the UK adult population reached. The team is also working closely with key trade outlets – for example the Grocer and New Food Magazine – to increase the FSA share of voice to its audiences.
- 4.3 The team continues to receive high levels of media, social media and other enquiries and requests responding to around 160 contacts each day. Proactively it has published between 1 July 2019 and 30 June 2020:
- 80 news releases;
  - 39 scientific research reports; and
  - 17 consultations.
- 4.4 In May the team launched the FSA blogging platform on GOV.UK, a new initiative that will help to amplify and promote FSA content away from the often adversarial environment of the news media. Since the launch more than 500 subscribers have signed up (compared to Defra with 482 and the Environment Agency 347).
- 4.5 In Northern Ireland the team ran the successful ‘Check the Label’ campaign which encouraged the target audience to make healthier choices by encouraging them to ‘Check the Label’ of foods they commonly purchase. This

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<sup>[6]</sup> MPs Winter Survey (Ipsos MORI 2019)

<sup>[7]</sup> Civil Service People Survey, (Jan 2020)

campaign secured 5 million opportunities to see among the target audience through partnership amplification and paid advertising.

- 4.6 A significant amount of preparatory work was done on Christmas consumer-facing campaigns and a major campaign on allergens aimed at businesses. Unfortunately, a combination of pre-election restrictions in December and the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic meant that both campaigns had to be withheld.
- 4.7 Incident management is a large part of the communications team's day-to-day activity and it works closely with colleagues in incidents branch, providing advice and guidance on both high and low-profile issues. The scale of this work is considerable. In 2019, the FSA investigated 2,474 food and feed incidents and 154 of these incidents developed into an allergy alert or product recall that required publication, some of which needed substantial media and stakeholder handling.
- 4.8 More difficult to measure, but a hugely important function of the team, is the range of media stories that are prevented due to the teams' efforts in talking to journalists and engaging with their enquiries. Although time consuming and often resource intensive this is an essential part of the team's key role in protecting the FSA's reputation and challenging inaccurate or misleading reporting or social media content

### **Stakeholder engagement**

- 4.9 Stakeholder engagement activity has expanded over the year. As well as staging successful engagement events at the Westminster and Cardiff parliaments the team has supported a significant FSA presence at key events such as the Royal Welsh Show and the Eisteddfod . It has increased the profile of the FSA with senior staff speeches in key fora such as the Westminster Food & Drink Forum and many other high profile stakeholder conferences, events and seminars.
- 4.10 Last year's update highlighted the importance of building contacts across governments in all three countries and the team continues to build and maintain strong working relationships with communications colleagues. The experiences during COVID-19 demonstrated how important this engagement is and further strengthened these relationships.

### **Digital engagement**

- 4.11 The commitment was made last year to growing the FSA presence on all its digital channels. Stand out statistics from the year are:
  - Visitors to the website (food.gov.uk) are up 33% year on year from July 2019, with 407,990 visitors in July this year.
  - LinkedIn followers have increased by 48.5% to 62,526 followers.
- 4.12 The FSA now has more followers on LinkedIn than any of its other digital channels. In line with the social media policy, all content is developed and

targeted on a channel-specific basis in order to best reach the different audiences.

4.13 The FSA is active on all major channels: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter. For example, 821 posts were published on Twitter and 276 on LinkedIn in the last year (June 2019 to July 2020) and the intention is to continue to publish engaging, consumer and business friendly information about all the FSA's work. The engagement rate for this activity runs at an 2.1%, which is slightly above industry average. LinkedIn has been a particular area of growth for our messaging to business and the scientific community, with an annual increase in followers of 48.5% and an engagement rate of 3.28%, significantly above the industry average of 2%.

### **Internal communications**

4.14 An important objective over the course of the year was to strengthen the role of internal communications as a strategic partner to the FSA leadership in terms of internal corporate engagement. This has been particularly important during the pandemic and targeted activity with field operations staff and the wider workforce has resulted in rises in key metrics, based on questions asked in the civil-service wide annual People Survey. Compared to the October 2019 survey results there was a:

- 25 percentage point rise in people feeling senior management were visible;
- 27 percentage point rise in people feeling informed; and
- 42 percentage point rise in people having the opportunity to give feedback amongst others.<sup>[8]</sup>

4.15 Engagement with FSA staff to support organisational and cultural change remains a top priority and to support this the internal communications team:

- Published an average of 50 stories a month on the internal FSA platform, known as the Digital Workplace.
- Held 15 all-staff events run across our five offices and digitally.
- Had 10 all-staff calls with average attendance of 426 (est. 50% of total staff available to attend per call).
- Recorded and promoted these calls through our internal channels.
- Supported Field Ops with tailored communications to frontline colleagues through local Q&A sessions, the monthly National Engagement Call and introduced a Field Management Group weekly email update.
- Secured a two percentage point rise in the people survey response rate to 87%.

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<sup>[8]</sup> Internal Communications COVID-19 comms impact survey (June 2020)

## 5. COVID-19

- 5.1 The scale and scope of the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown meant a swift transition to different ways of working and sudden extra pressures on staff particularly those in field operations. The internal communications team reacted quickly to the challenge of the FSA becoming a “virtual” organisation almost overnight, using multiple channels and platforms to ensure staff were kept in touch with developments. The team created the #hiddenheroes campaign to recognise and pay tribute to the extraordinary effort of FSA operational staff as key workers. The wider communications team promoted this externally (and the national #foodheroes initiative) across all FSA social channels as part of the nationwide celebration of all those who kept essential services going during lockdown.
- 5.2 A major challenge in the early stages of the crisis was engaging with the central clearance processes to ensure that relevant guidance could be published on the central GOV.UK hub. The communications team established good working relationships with colleagues at PHE and DHSC and with colleagues in the Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Assembly – including facilitating connections for FSA science and policy colleagues – which enabled an improvement in the pace at which content was cleared and published subsequently.
- 5.3 Using insight generated by the FSA horizon scanning and other external research the communications team was able to anticipate issues and demand for guidance and information. This enabled it to develop content aimed at businesses and consumers, some of which was COVID-19 specific, but also important messaging around hygiene and compliance.
- 5.4 An example was advice for food businesses affected by coronavirus. This was launched in late March and in the first three days of publication received over 37,000 unique page views. A dedicated page with consumer advice followed in April with a comprehensive risk assessment on the safety of food in relation to COVID-19. The guidance advised people about food hygiene, food packaging and social distancing when shopping, as well as advice on food storage and avoiding waste. The page received over 34,000 views in the first three days of publication.
- 5.5 This initial rate of interest was more pronounced than with comparable pages from other government departments at the time, for example guidance for UK businesses trading internationally received slightly less than 16,000 views. In terms of favourability 97% of 1,242 responses marked our consumer guidance as useful, compared to an average rating of 78% across comparable government advice, with most pages receiving significantly less responses and engagement.
- 5.6 As the lockdown restrictions eased, a one-stop business portal page was created to assist businesses returning to operation after a period of closure. To date the portal has received over 250,000 page views (which is almost double the next most popular non-COVID-19 content on our website).

- 5.7 Building on the success of this the team developed and launched the 'Here to Help' campaign which gives businesses starting up again, or changing their business model, all the relevant food safety help and advice in one place. This has involved significant partnership working with a range of stakeholders including the Institute of Food Science and Technology, the Nationwide Caterers Association and Just Eat.
- 5.8 The response to the COVID-19 pandemic continues, and the re-imposition of lockdown restrictions in various parts of the UK is to be expected as well as preparing for Winter. The team remains ready to respond to ensure that staff are fully aware of all the implications of ongoing outbreaks of COVID-19; that for consumers and businesses the best and most up to date science and evidence available continues to be published and to make sure businesses have the information they need to serve their customers safely.

## **6. Conclusions**

- 6.1 The pandemic has shown how important it is to have clear and concise messaging that people can easily understand. Working with science and policy colleagues the team has been developing over the last few months a risk communication toolkit that offers practical, user-friendly guidance to communications practitioners so the FSA can communicate risk with clarity, focussing on the correct audience and using the most appropriate channels.
- 6.2 As preparations for the end of the EU transition continue a key focus for the FSA will be risk analysis and its enhanced role as risk assessor, risk manager and risk communicator.
- 6.3 This is likely to bring a sustained level of intense scrutiny – political, media, science, industry and stakeholder – that will thrust the FSA into the spotlight with very public discussion of evidence and advice. To address this the communications team is working with policy and science colleagues on a programme of engagement to enable partners and stakeholders to understand the enhanced role of the FSA from January 2021.
- 6.4 Against this backdrop, perhaps more than at any time in its history, the importance of openness and transparency in the way the FSA operates will be vital. Communications will have an essential role in this as the organisation seeks to maintain the high levels of trust in the FSA, and the UK food system both domestically and internationally.
- 6.5 In addition to the risk analysis work the communications team has continuing to deliver its communications and engagement plan for 2020-21. This reflects the FSA's key priorities and includes the delivery of communications activity around:
- EU Transition;
  - regulatory reform;

- internal engagement;
- food hypersensitivity; and
- COVID-19.

6.6 In July this year the Government Communication Service (GCS) launched a comprehensive review of government communications. One of the key proposals of the reform is the creation of a single employer model for the profession. Although in its early stages the programme is moving at pace with the aim of having the first phase of the reforms in place by April 2021. The FSA communications functions is in scope and the Director of Communications and the team is engaging fully with the process. It is too early to determine whether the proposed approach and operating model will be appropriate for the FSA communications function but EMT will continue to keep the situation under review as the programme continues and the Board will be updated regularly.