

EU AND INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY: UPDATE

Report by Paul Morrison

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1. Summary

- 1.1 As requested by the Board, this paper provides the annual update on the Food Standards Agency's progress against its International Strategy.
- 1.2 It sets out how circumstances are changing, and how we are preparing to use international engagement to achieve our ambitions at the end of the Transition Period and discusses the impact of COVID-19 on engagement.
- 1.3 The Board is invited to:
Discuss and endorse the direction of the FSA's international work against its International Strategy, and future priorities.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The Board agreed the FSA's International Strategy in June 2018. The paper can be accessed via this [link](#).
- 2.2 The Strategy sets out the FSA's approach to working internationally to ensure that food is safe and what it says it is. In January 2020, the Board agreed with the identified priorities for the FSA's international work. The paper can be accessed via this [link](#). The Board highlighted that a different skill set would be needed for influencing following EU Exit. The Board also asked for more detail on measuring the success of international work.
- 2.3 Due to the impact of COVID-19, we have been focusing on consolidating existing relationships and building our capability and resilience to collaborate and influence internationally.
- 2.4 A major focus of our international work continues to be preparing and positioning to achieve the FSA's strategic objectives post Transition Period, whilst balancing our role internationally as representatives of UK Government and working in line with the central government steer on EU and international relationships. At the time of writing, the UK's future formal relationship with the EU is not yet clear. The Board will have been sighted on the status of the negotiations with the EU and the trade negotiations the UK is pursuing with other countries.

3. Evidence and Discussion

- 3.1 The mission remains to support the FSA goals that food is safe and is what it says it is; consumers can make informed choices about what to eat; and consumers have access to an affordable diet, now and in the future, by working internationally to safeguard food entering the UK and being at the forefront of international developments. We do this by ensuring that we have good working relationships with key international organisations and countries and by building on the reputation we currently have.
- 3.2 The uncertainty of this period has underlined the importance of combining clarity of purpose with our flexible and differentiated approach to delivery. We will ensure that our international work continues to reflect both the UK Government's vision for the UK's role in the world, and the FSA's mission and vision.
- 3.3 Our changing relationship with the EU and the rest of the world has altered the institutional drivers for some of our international activities. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic has made international engagement more challenging. It is more important than ever that officials are clear on the benefits of international activities and how they contribute to achieving the FSA's mission and vision. The high-level measurement framework for the International Strategy, expressing the agreed aims of the Strategy as outcomes and our priority areas for the coming year as outputs, is included in the Annex.
- 3.4 Although our reputation and relationships are not outcomes in their own right, they play a foundational role. They ensure we are positioned to respond to changing trends and developments and achieve all of our international ambitions, regardless of changes in the external context. Therefore, when targeting resources and evaluating our international work, it is important that we recognise the value of activities which maintain and develop our international reputation and relationships. We take a qualitative approach to evaluating our international activities, analysing how our actions lead or contribute to international changes which in turn contribute to UK consumer interests, or how our actions mitigate risks to our delivery of food we can trust in the UK.
- 3.5 Further evaluation of our international reputation will be carried out following the end of the Transition Period, noting that a strong reputation with countries and organisations which are more influential in food and feed safety will deliver greater impacts. We will review our international activities and the response to these to ensure that our international persona is reflecting the International Strategy's vision of the FSA as a strong and influential voice, leading in approaches to regulatory modernisation and food safety.
- 3.6 Measurement and evaluation of international work underpins ongoing work to build international capability and resilience, recognising the need to develop our mindset and skills to reflect our changing international role. We continue to develop capability to influence to secure our interests outside the formal framework of EU membership, including through bespoke staff training and

guidance. This is a focus both of our internal work and of our collaboration with Food Standards Scotland and other government departments.

- 3.7 We have streamlined how we monitor international developments, providing early intelligence and analysis on issues which could have an impact on FSA interests. This ensures that we can be proactive rather than reactive on the international stage. Our approach in this area takes account of the impacts of the Northern Ireland Protocol, in line with the objectives laid down by the FSA Board in January 2020. A specific workstream has been established to monitor and analyse EU developments with a potential impact on the FSA.
- 3.8 Despite the limitations presented by the unprecedented and unforeseen events of 2020 in relation to COVID-19, we have achieved progress against some of our priorities.
- 3.9 During the COVID-19 pandemic, officials have quickly adapted their approach in order to maintain our reputation and relationships through both formal and informal virtual engagement. A positive impact has been the increased acceptance of virtual meetings, providing access to more countries.
- 3.10 For example, in June, Steve Wearne addressed a global webinar on voluntary third-party assurance organised by the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) and the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF). He shared a platform with Belize, demonstrating our support for the agendas of developing countries, as well as our expertise in voluntary third-party assurance.
- 3.11 Due to our continued participation in the Strategic Food Safety Dialogue (SFSD, an informal grouping of US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the EU and UK created to discuss food safety issues) we were invited to participate in weekly SFSD meetings to address some of the challenges presented by COVID-19. Alongside rapidly gaining intelligence on other countries' response, dialogue and collaboration with the SFSD members contributed to the development of proposals informed by international intelligence and supported by key international partners. FSA have also shared insights on COVID-19 and food safety through other fora, such as the international Food Safety Regulatory Economics Working Group.
- 3.12 Emily Miles attended the biannual Heads of Food Safety Agencies virtual plenary meeting which is an informal network of European food safety authorities (both EU Member States and neighbouring countries). We are engaged in working groups in the areas of private assurance schemes, food fraud, data, and sustainability. We took part in several additional meetings of this group to share intelligence on the various issues being faced due to COVID-19 and the response to these.
- 3.13 We have continued to be open to new opportunities for collaboration and to promote FSA and UK government objectives overseas. The FSA coordinated the UK's support for a resolution at the World Health Organization's Executive Board in Geneva. The resolution sets out an ambitious global food safety

agenda, aimed at improving national food safety systems, including benefits for UK consumers through safer imported foods. It has now been adopted by the World Health Assembly. The WHO is aiming to deliver an updated Global Strategy for Food Safety by 2022, working in coordination with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and in consultation with the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and Member States. The FSA is working with Defra to support the applications of several UK experts to sit on the WHO's Technical Advisory Group on food safety which will support this work, further contributing to UK expertise remaining at the forefront of international decision-making.

- 3.14 We have been working closely with the FSA's secondee to the FAO/WHO International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) to support the INFOSAN Working Group (IWG), which has met three times. The IWG brings together the INFOSAN members most frequently involved and engaged during international food safety incidents, and the meetings have been attended by UK, Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Brazil, Hong Kong (SAR CHINA), New Zealand, Spain, Singapore, Thailand, USA, UAE, Qatar, Japan, Ireland, WHO and FAO. The focus of the IWG is to improve the use of INFOSAN and food safety systems within countries across the network, by giving advice and sharing best practice to assist less active countries. This will contribute to ensuring effective food safety management and improved management of incidents and emergencies, ultimately benefitting UK consumers through safer imported foods and a co-ordinated multi country emergency response.
- 3.15 We continue to play an active role in the global food standards setting body Codex Alimentarius, as part of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) and as an active participant in multiple Codex General Subject Committees. The CAC has moved to working virtually during this period.
- 3.16 As Chair of the Codex electronic working group on the revision of the General Principles of Food Hygiene and its HACCP Annex, we led on the development of revised text which has now been formally adopted by the Codex Alimentarius Commission. This key text lays the foundation for food hygiene, facilitating consumers' access to safe food across the globe.
- 3.17 FSA is leading work on precautionary allergen labelling as part of the International Social Science Liaison Group (ISSLG) alongside Australia, New Zealand, the US, Canada, and the European Food Safety Authority. This innovative work will be the first-time social science evidence has fed into Codex Committee on Food Labelling.
- 3.18 A wider example of how the relationships we have built internationally benefit work domestically is how our engagement with New Zealand to understand its food regulatory reform journey has helped inform the Operational Transformation Programme (OTP). This engagement also demonstrates to potential overseas partners that the UK is committed to protecting public health and the consumer by using an evidence-based approach to any future change.

3.19 FSA staff have attended the first Scientific Conference on Risk Based Meat Inspection and Integrated Meat Safety Assurance (RIBMINS), held online in October 2020. More than 200 people from 40 countries and 5 continents actively attended the virtual meeting. The RIBMINS network allows exchange of ideas, experience and results of country-level research studies. Overall, the network aims to help the full development and implementation of the general principles of a meat safety assurance system across Europe for the benefit of consumers, industry and protection of animal health and welfare.

4. Conclusions and priorities

4.1 While the future priorities identified in the January 2020 International Strategy update paper remain valid, we have had to adapt our approach to delivery. The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on international engagement. The examples of some of the international engagement we have undertaken indicate that we are focusing our resources to address overall FSA priorities. We are building capability and investing in our relationships and reputation to ensure that we are well positioned to achieve our objectives in the future. We will continue to take a flexible approach in line with the changing external context.

4.2 We will keep the aims and approach of the FSA International Strategy in line with the FSA's strategic direction. This will ensure that we are pursuing the international reputation, roles, and relationships to contribute to our overall objectives.

4.3 Priority activities for the year ahead include:

- Working with Defra to promote the merits of a UK candidate (Steve Wearne, FSA Director of Global Affairs) for Chair of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the global food standards setting body.
- Working with Defra on the approach to future stakeholder engagement in Codex Alimentarius, reflecting our new role on the international stage following EU Exit.
- Continued food safety intelligence sharing with international organisations and countries, in relation to immediate challenges presented by COVID-19 and longer-term approaches to regulating the food system.
- Promotion of our approach to regulatory modernisation and consumer protection in line with the FSA's strategic programmes, building assurance of food exported from the UK and ensuring that we are a trusted voice in tackling foodborne disease.
- Working across government on delivering impact from the UK's participation at the UN Food Systems Summit and UK G7 Presidency, contributing to our international reputation and building support for a systems-based approach with a strong food safety element.
- Working internally and across government and the four countries to ensure we have the capabilities, systems, governance, culture and cross-government relationships in place to influence and collaborate internationally in a changing context.

- Maintaining and developing our roles in networks, working with international partners to develop capability to address challenges in the global food system.
- 4.4 The emergence of the “new normal” in international engagement following the pandemic and the end of the Transition Period will present a test for our approach, and we will continue to iteratively develop our approach to engaging and influencing in order to achieve our objectives. We will report on the impacts of this in future Board Papers.
- 4.5 The Board is invited to:

Discuss and endorse the direction of the FSA’s international work against its International Strategy.

ANNEX –HIGH-LEVEL INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK 2020-2021

