

Five years of the Food Standards Agency

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The Food Standards Agency (FSA) was set up as a "force for change" in the White Paper that created it five years ago. The "old climate of secrecy and suspicion" was replaced by "modern, open arrangements, which will help to command confidence." At the end of my period as Chairman of this new UK wide, non-ministerial government department, what progress had the Agency made?

It is notoriously difficult to measure trust and confidence, but several recent surveys suggest that the Agency has, as a result of both its actions and its way of doing business, begun to build confidence. For instance, a 2003 Norwegian study found public confidence in food safety to be the highest of six EU member states (Figure 1) and the Agency's own annual surveys of consumer attitudes shows that trust in the FSA has increased (Figure 2).

Trust is fragile and the Agency still has a long way to travel on its journey. To assess progress after five years, and learn from this for the future, the FSA Board recently commissioned a thorough and independent review, carried out by Baroness Dean of Thornton-le-Fylde. 125 organisations and individuals commented on the Agency's performance to date. The majority thought that the FSA has lived up to its promises. Expectations are now high, and the second five years will be even more challenging than the first. The Dean review also made 22

recommendations, all of which the Board has accepted, of ways to improve in the future.

One key promise was to be completely open about decision-making. Since the start, every board meeting at which food policy has been discussed and decided has been held in public. Typically, between 50 and 100 observers attend in person, and at my last meeting as Chairman, held in Edinburgh in March, a further 1,800 watched us on the live web-cast.

Another promise was that we would be open and honest about risk and uncertainty. I have always said "life is not risk free" and, in this regard, food is no different from crossing the road or getting out of bed.

In risk assessment, top quality science (including social sciences) is essential, and the Agency gets much of its expert advice from nine independent scientific advisory committees populated by leading experts from the UK and elsewhere. This rigorous, impartial, scientific approach is the crucial underpinning of the Agency's independence from particular interest groups, including politicians. It also, on occasions, brought us into conflict with those whose views are based on assertion and belief rather than evidence.

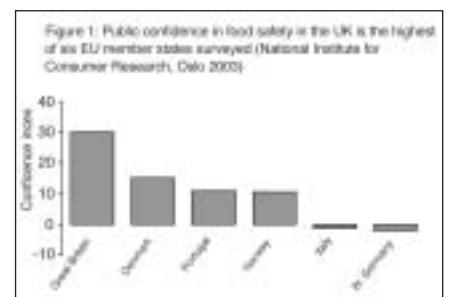
But, unlike the textbook science taught at school, the reality is often messy, with uncertainties or gaps in knowledge. In dealing with uncertainty, such as the possibility of BSE having infected sheep, the Agency is always honest about the limitations of the science.



By discussing the risks and uncertainties with a broad range of individuals and organisations with different perspectives, the FSA has improved its understanding of acceptable risk and therefore of ways of managing uncertainty. Experience has shown that this open and inclusive way of making decisions works better than the older approach of "decide, announce and defend".

While most people see a clear role for government and for regulators in the area of food safety, there is much less agreement about who – individuals, parents, the authorities – should take responsibility for tackling the risks from poor diet. Nutrition is part of the Agency's remit, but to what extent should it be involved in determining the choices on offer to people, and the information that goes with them?

As in all its work, the Agency has started by garnering the evidence. A report from the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) is the basis for the Agency's

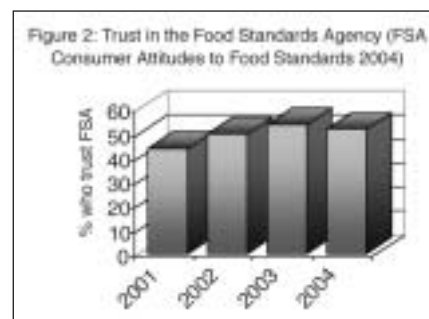


work, along with the Department of Health, on cutting people's salt consumption. The SACN report reaffirmed the link between eating too much salt, high blood pressure and hence heart disease. On average we eat 50 per cent more salt than we should, and much of this salt is added for us in food manufacturing. From what was more or less a standing start two years ago, action by the food industry has started to reduce salt in certain processed foods, and long term plans for further reductions are now being put forward. These commitments should, over five years, meet the Agency's target of reducing average salt intake from about 9.5 grams to the recommended 6.0 grams per person per day. As the President of the Food and Drink Federation, said in his recent annual address, this is an excellent example of the Food Standards Agency and the food industry working together to achieve benefits for public health. At the same time, the Agency launched a public education initiative, built around a character

called "Sid the Slug," to raise public awareness of the risks of too much salt, so that consumer "pull" and industry "push" work together.

The Agency is also basing its other nutrition work on evidence, including promotion and marketing of food to children, nutrient profiling, and the development of simple front-of-pack signposting for nutrition labelling. The Agency is involving the food industry, as well as consumer organisations, in this work as it progresses.

The FSA's role is public protection, and one of the tools it can use is regulation. However, rather than always creating new rules for the food industry, the Agency's preference, taking into account the level of risk, is to achieve its aim of consumer protection by a combination of support and recognition for businesses, voluntary action by the food industry and public awareness. The success of the FSA's approach is acknowledged in Philip Hampton's recent review of independent regulators.



In terms of choice and safety, the food lives of most people in the UK are probably better today than ever before. But at the same time, our food supply is complex and global, and many of the foods people eat are highly processed. The challenges for the food industry of managing risk and standards were shown clearly by the recent incident in which an illegal adulterant, the red dye Sudan 1, found its way into more than 550 different products. The industry is responsible for the standards and safety of the food it makes and sells, but both industry and the public benefit from the oversight of an independent and transparent Food Standards Agency that puts consumers' interests first.