

UK FOOD ENFORCEMENT WANTS MORE MONEY, BUT DOES IT NEED IT?



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A system originally designed to ensure food safety 150 years ago needs revitalising. Food is no longer produced and adulterated locally. A world-wide web of distribution coupled with scientific opportunity to alter what we eat, the way it is produced and the source provides plenty of opportunity to defraud, necessitating improved ways of working.

DISCUSSION

The call for more resources:

Enforcement, like every public service, calls for more resources to increase effectiveness, but in a time of austerity can it justify the additional spend?

A system of charging and competitive tendering and successive efficiency initiatives through the latter part of the last century reduced enforcement's

capacity to monitor food composition, a fate avoided by those undertaking microbiological testing. This has led to reduced investment in training and technology. The number of enforcement officers has diminished at what some would describe as an alarming rate since the 1950s.

"In 1959, 150 public analysts worked out of 45 laboratories. In 1997, there were 32

laboratories". (Dr Brian Iddon MP)

In 2000, with the discovery of BSE, a new focus on food safety arrived. Across the EU food enforcement was co-ordinated, remodelled and defined. Organisations were set up and given responsibility for Food, for example risk assessment (EFSA), risk management (DGSANCO) and regulations (FSA).

... reduced enforcement's capacity to monitor food composition ...

Comprehensive spending reviews since 2008 have led to further reductions in expenditure on food enforcement. A 37% fall in spend by UK FSA (FSA consolidated accounts) and a 32% fall in samples submitted to Public Analysts for testing has led to three laboratories closing in 2011, leaving only 18 laboratories in the UK.

... no prescriptive levels for sampling ...

There are no prescriptive levels for sampling in the UK. As a result Local Authorities striving for increasing efficiency or simply lower costs will consider reducing the numbers of samples to as low a level as possible. Currently the UK samples at a rate of 2 samples per 1000 population. In Germany there is a prescribed rate of sampling of 5 samples

per 1000 population (German framework of food control).

PERFORMANCE OUTCOMES

Demand for enforcement is increasing. In England, the number of registered food premises, the number requiring interventions and actions all increased in 2010/11, however, the resources available fell

(LAEMS 2011). Consumers eat on average one in every six meals outside the home. They demand a more cosmopolitan diet and purchase more "ready meals" for consumption within the home (DEFRA, 2008). This necessitates a world-wide web of food distribution which facilitates non-compliance and fraud. Around 78% of our food in the UK is sourced from within the EU, with the remainder sourced from regions beyond EU regulatory enforcement.

There is no single benchmark to judge the performance of enforcement in regard to food safety. The media and public look for non-conformance by the food industry and use this to judge Government effectiveness. Enforcement uses a system to communicate when a food or feed fails to comply with EU legislation – the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed

... demand a more cosmopolitan diet ...

... an increase of detections ...

(RASFF). In 2006, 80% of food alerts on the RASFF database related to the 23% of foods sourced outside the EU, showing that the majority of issues now relate to food sourced from outside EU enforcement. The RASFF system is not designed to facilitate comparison of enforcement, but an analysis of the RASFF notifications (RASFF Portal) has led to peer reviewed papers which compare, using the number of detections noted by a Member State (MS). Italy, Germany, UK and Spain lead the way (Petróczy 2010). Since 2004, despite falling sampling numbers, the UK has improved its position in the league table. These data also show a reduction in the numbers of detections of transgression “on the street” and an increase of detections, particularly in

in 2012 there was a fall of 7.8% in the number of notifications. This is the first fall in these numbers, and also in the EU’s defence against adulteration. Border Rejection saw numbers fall by 6%. In 2012, for the first time, the UK produced the most RASFF notifications in the EU (15% of the total): 517 original notifications matching Italy. Thus the UK maintains a strong position.

HOW COULD ENFORCEMENT IMPROVE?

Several opportunities exist for improving food enforcement which include:

- Decide the mission: Does food enforcement (FSA) want to be seen as responsible for food safety or should it adopt a similar stance to that of the Health and Safety

... Freedom of movement of food ...

Germany and UK in the numbers noted by large food businesses, suggesting an opportunity to work more closely with industry, in particular, as resources are reduced.

The EU is only as strong as its weakest link. Freedom of movement of food within the EU offers a threat to food security if one MS does not maintain an adequate focus on border enforcement. An analysis of Ports across the EU (Taylor 2013) revealed a 129-fold difference in the effectiveness of enforcement at the ports with the Netherlands and Belgium being gateway ports into the EU. The Annual report of RASFF (RASFF 2012) has revealed that

Executive and others. Then publicise a “business-consumer and regulator pact”.

- Improve Strategic Leadership: The local agenda for food enforcement needs to change. Better centralised strategic coordination is required which sets clear expectations and responsibilities for Local Authority enforcement, perhaps through National Boards like the National Trading Standards Board. Local knowledge is vital to an enforcement service, but given the complexity of food enforcement, the local agenda may be best served through a

more regional framework and the technological challenges through coordinated centres of excellence.

- Closer working with industry: Share information with industry, particularly the largest organisations that have expertise, resources and technical capabilities.

Encourage and share innovation: technological and business eg shared services across Government.

- A focus on resilience: Future failure is inevitable, if we continue to expect zero risk/failure. Food enforcement will need to identify issues and respond quickly.

... improving food enforcement ...

Develop Earned recognition systems which are thorough and can be used to reduce the needs for enforcement.

- Involvement of the public – the wisdom of the crowd.

Encourage whistleblowing and provide information for the public to help enforce standards, eg make the Food Hygiene Rating System mandatory.

Engage with the public to educate, communicate and learn.

- Improve Learning: Learn from other organisations outside the food industry, look at audit and counter fraud measures. Separate media and crisis management in the event of a crisis.

References:

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- Petróczy 2010: Gate keepers of EU food safety: Four states lead on notification patterns and effectiveness. A. Petróczy, G. Taylor, T. Nepusz, D.P. Naughton. Food and Chemical Toxicology, Volume 48, Issue 7, July 2010, Pages 1957–1964.
- DEFRA 2008: Family Food Survey; www.defra.gov.uk/statistics/files/defra-stats-food-family-annual-2008.pdf
- Cabinet Office 2008: Food: an analysis of the issues, The Strategy Unit, January 2008, (Updated & re-issued August 2008)

... Encourage whistleblowing ...

Learn from major failures: undertake risk and reliability analysis avoiding tick-box ratings which simply restate the previous thoughts – “inflated confidence of man”.

Think like a criminal: Consider opportunities to defraud using waste products, eg horsemeat, leather and melamine.

Taylor 2013: The Procrustean bed of EU food safety notifications via the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed: Does one size fit all? G. Taylor, A. Petróczy, T. Nepusz, D. Naughton, Food and Chemical Toxicology Volume 56, June 2013, Pages 411–418.

RASFF Portal: <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/rasff-window/portal/?event=SearchForm>

RASFF 2012: http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/rapidalert/docs/rasff_annual_report_2012_en.pdf

... Local knowledge is vital ...

