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COMMUNICATING FOOD SAFETY REGULATIONS AND RISK MANAGEMENT: INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION OF CONSUMERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

THE UK EXPERIENCE

SUMMARY

The Food Standards Agency recognises the importance and value in involving consumers and other stakeholders effectively in the decision-making process. The involvement of key stakeholders at an early stage has helped the Agency to develop effective policies.

The Agency recognises that it can be difficult for consumers to contribute effectively. The Agency has implemented a number of initiatives targeted specifically at helping consumers. In addition the Agency recognises that being open and accessible has helped build trust in the decision-making process and helped to stimulate a wider debate on food issues.

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BACKGROUND

Genuine safety issues (and food scares) over many years had led UK consumers to lose confidence in the safety of food and in the arrangements for ensuring its safety. This led to the establishment in April 2000 of the Food Standards Agency (FSA). It is charged with protecting the public's health and consumers' interests in relation to food.

Not only does the FSA aim to deliver real improvements in food safety and standards, it is recognised that the way in which the FSA operates is also very important. In the past a climate of secrecy – or even a wish to 'protect the public from being worried by bad news' – led consumers to doubt whether they were being told the whole truth. The FSA aims to operate in an open and accessible manner and aims to consult on all issues where possible. These approaches will help rebuild consumer trust.

FSA CORE VALUES

The Agency protects the interests of consumers by following three core values:

- Putting the consumer first;
- Being open and accessible;
- Being and independent voice;

In carrying out its functions, the Agency:

- Bases its decisions and advice on the best evidence available;
- Consults widely before it takes action and makes recommendations unless urgent action is essential;
- Obtains independent expert advice from its advisory committees;
- Commissions research to support its functions
- Is prompt in making public its advice to the Government.

EFFECTIVE CONSULTATION

The Agency is committed to improving communication on food matters, particularly with the general public. The Agency is committed to consulting on its activities in an open, timely and fair manner. The Agency consults on all policy proposals and draft legislation, except where circumstances preclude this. We always try to involve a wide range of stakeholders in the development of our policies. We recognise that reaching out to ordinary consumers is going to take time and effort. However it is essential to building trust in the Agency's work.

The FSA is developing advice on how we should consult effectively with stakeholders, including consumers. In developing the guidance, we have actively sought the views of consumers on what they wanted, rather than imposing our own ideas.

To promote effective consultation, we aim to:

- Consult as early in the decision-making process as practicable;
- Promptly distribute publications to stakeholders;
- Always include contact names and telephone numbers in our publications;
- Use the consultation method(s) best suited to the consultation's purpose (e.g. meetings, workshops, written consultations etc);
- Use a clear and accessible format for written consultation;
- Hold periodic meetings with interested parties to update them on developments relating to policy and legislation

We recognise that consultation may not be possible when we have to act swiftly to protect public health; or in areas which are commercially sensitive.

INCREASING CONSUMER INVOLVEMENT

The Agency recognises that consumer groups can find themselves at a disadvantage due to their limited resources at their disposal. It makes it difficult for the FSA to obtain a fully developed consumer viewpoint on all issues because consumer bodies are often unable to devote the necessary resources to examine all the issues in sufficient detail. The Agency also recognises the difficulties in consulting those from disadvantaged groups. In light of these difficulties, the Food Standards Agency has advanced the following initiatives:

A CONSUMER SECTION

The FSA has created a team of staff working on consumer issues. Their principal aims are:

- To develop policy on the consumer-related work of the Agency and to provide an internal consultancy service for staff so they are better able to understand the implications of Agency policies on consumers, including disadvantaged groups such as low income and minority ethnic groups;
- To help UK consumer organisations and representatives engage effectively in the work of the Agency where a consumer voice is required;
- To act as the Agency's link to Other Government Departments on consumer views and consumer education on food matters.

THE CONSUMER COMMITTEE

In order to help the Agency identify consumer needs and views, particularly on cross-cutting and strategic issues, the Agency is establishing a Consumer Committee. The Committee's role is:

- To provide the FSA with feedback on the effectiveness of its policies in responding to consumer concerns;
- To comment on the Agency's strategic objectives and forward plan;
- To advise on consultation methodologies, including ways of reaching vulnerable and hard to reach groups, and on the value of relevant consumer research;
- To review the work of consumer representatives on advisory committees;
- To facilitate joint-working between the Agency and consumer groups;
- To offer advice on any other issues that may be referred to it by the Board.

TRAINING FOR CONSUMER/LAY REPRESENTATIVES

The FSA is developing training courses for consumer and lay representatives on Agency advisory committees. The training aims to ensure that the consumer/lay representatives understand their role and are fully equipped to participate effectively in the Committee environment.

OTHER INITIATIVES - CODEX

12. In light of the large volume of technical papers circulated by Codex, we have taken forward two new initiatives to help facilitate improved consumer input into the UK consultation process:

- i. The Agency periodically commissions expert consumer analysis of key Codex papers. The work is carried out by a consumer consultant specialising in food safety and standards work and with a knowledge of Codex. The consultant prepares a draft consumer analysis of key Codex papers as a basis for stimulating informed debate within and among consumer organisations. The consultant then prepares a final Report for the FSA highlighting the key consumer concerns, as an input into the wider UK Codex consultation process.
- ii. The Agency has established a Codex Consumer Group which provides advice to the Agency on Codex issues of importance to consumers. It is able to take a view on broader policy issues within Codex and advise officials of issues of key interest to consumers.

OPENNESS AND TRANSPARENCY

While effective consultation helps to facilitate consumer input, the FSA believes that the way we operate as an organisation plays a key role in rebuilding consumer confidence. In the longer term the FSA believes that consumers are more likely to provide constructive input and participate effectively in the decision-making process if they have trust in the Agency.

The FSA operates in an open and transparent way. As an organisation we are accessible to and actively communicate with all our stakeholders. Our decisions and the information on which they are based will be recorded and accessible, so that any organisation or individual can make informed judgements about the way in which we are carrying out our functions. We have developed our own Code of Practice on Openness

Examples of openness include:

- Holding meetings of the FSA Board in public;
- All members of the Board and our expert advisory bodies are required to declare any personal or business interest which may, or may be *perceived* (by a reasonable member of the public) to influence their judgement;
- The Expert Bodies that provide scientific advice to the Agency each include a lay/consumer member.

THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

The Communication strategy of the Agency aims to increase the public's awareness of the Agency, its messages and what it is doing for consumers. Success in increasing this awareness will reinforce efforts to generate consumer interest in consultations and provide a valuable knowledge base for respondents.

In communicating promptly with the public, we have had to address the issue of communicating uncertainty. This is a key part of our overall risk analysis strategy. The FSA has taken the approach of being honest and open about uncertainty. Where information is uncertain, we have found that we are

able to say to the public “We don’t know for certain, but we are examining the issue. This is what we are doing about it and, in the meantime, here is our advice”.

In being open about uncertainty the Agency has not created public panic, media hysteria or a collapse in demand for certain foods. The Agency is learning to trust people with information, even when the scientific data is incomplete. We intend to continue learning.

CONCLUSION

The FSA recognises the value and importance of involving consumers and other stakeholders in the decision-making process. The FSA has made great efforts to ensure that consultations are carried out effectively.

The FSA believes that involvement and participation of consumers and other stakeholders will increase as they gain confidence in our organisation. Our policy of openness, including our communication strategy, and accessibility should help facilitate this confidence.

Further information on the UK Food Standards Agency, visit our Website at <http://www.foodstandards.gov.uk>