



A Healthier Scotland: A Consultation on Creating a New Food Body

**UNISON Scotland's Submission to the Scottish Government A
Healthier Scotland: creating a New Food Body**

May 2013

INTRODUCTION

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union representing over 160,000 members working in the public sector – the majority of whom work in local government. UNISON represents the operational workforce of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) – predominantly meat inspectors and vets working in abattoirs and meat plants in England, Scotland and Wales. We also represent Local Government Environmental Health Officers, who are involved with the inspection of food premises and undertake food sampling and educational and advice services across Scotland.

UNISON Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government on their consultation on the creation of a New Food Body for Scotland. We have consulted widely with our members who have expertise in this field and set out their views in our response.

GENERAL COMMENTS

Meat Hygiene

UNISON members in the FSA are facing a huge number of challenges as they work to protect the public from contaminated meat and unscrupulous practice in the meat industry. Unfortunately, we believe that some of these challenges are as a result of policies put in place by their own employer – the Food Standards Agency.

The creation of a new Food Body for Scotland offers the Scottish Government the opportunity to end the dominance of the Food Business Operators (FBOs) in successfully lobbying for lighter regulation of the food industry and to establish lines of accountability to ensure that robust independent regulation is established and enforced across Scotland.

Scottish meat is a highly regarded brand across the world. UNISON believes that to be able to sell Scottish meat as a robustly regulated product, could even further enhance the brand. At present it is most unusual for any food producers to be investigated and even less likely, to be prosecuted, in a mistaken view that this would damage the brand. However, we would reiterate that robust, independent regulation should be a strong selling point. In our view it is not possible to have a high quality brand with low quality standards of inspection.

We believe that the new body must ensure that its aim is to protect the consumer and uphold high standards of animal welfare. The only way to ensure these two criteria are met is to move to a wholly provided state delivered service. Meat inspectors and official veterinarians working in approved premises must be truly independent state officials so that they can deliver consumer protection and protect animal welfare with total autonomy from the influence of the meat industry and with the full support of the Scottish FSA. History tells us that the meat industry will only protect the consumer if it is forced to do so. A recent report into the pig slaughtering industry states that in abattoirs, "*The present design is dictated*

primarily by a desire for ever higher speed/throughput and cost reduction but, to date their actual microbiological effects may appear as a secondary criterion". This is after six years of having in place a hygiene package that passed more responsibility on to the food business operators. Pig suppliers and the British FSA want to introduce visual inspections, instead of cutting the animals open to check for sickness or diseases. A no-knife policy cannot guarantee the animals are safe for consumption and will not guarantee that abscesses and other pathology the consumer would not regard to be meat will find its way into sausages, pies and other meat products.

One immediate change, brought about on the 1st of January 2006 by the new regulations, was that the responsibility for ensuring only clean livestock were slaughtered was transferred from officials of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS), to the slaughterhouse Food Business Operators. The enforcement of the "Clean Livestock Policy", one of the key recommendations of the first Pennington Report, which followed the E.coli outbreak in Scotland in the late nineties, had until that time been the responsibility of MHS official Meat Hygiene Inspectors (MHIs) and Official Veterinarians (OVs). Surveys of Meat Hygiene Service OVs and MHIs reveal that this and other changes created by the implementation of the 2006 regulations has left officials less sure of their role and in less control of hygiene in UK abattoirs. Our members report that the general level of faecal contamination in many slaughterhouses is high and has deteriorated under the new regulations. The new FSA in Scotland should include the immediate re-instatement of the clean livestock policy under the control of state employed officials.

The highest level of consumer protection will only be achieved by moving to a wholly state-employed workforce which includes the Official Veterinarians and the Meat Hygiene Inspectors. Any move away from this system would potentially leave the door open for pressure to be applied from very powerful trade bodies to lobby for a relaxation of controls, which, in our members experience would lead to a drop in standards. The livestock and meat industry is a key component of the Scottish economy; the consequences of getting the delivery of meat inspection services wrong could have a very negative impact on the whole economy, in addition to very serious implications for the public. There is a very real threat that we could once again be faced with a food safety problem on the scale of the Wishaw or South Wales E.coli outbreaks if hygiene standards are not maintained and enforced.

Workers in slaughterhouses and food suppliers would not be able to carry out thorough inspections if a lighter touch regulation was introduced. They would be compromised as their employers would expect them to follow the policies they wanted to introduce, such as quicker throughput to increase profits. Already training for slaughterhouse staff has been cut and only qualified, independent inspectors can guarantee good quality meat and meat products. We have already seen companies, such as Vion, pull

out of Scotland and are now slaughtering their pigs in Germany, using cheap labour from other countries.

In addition, any move to a separate system to deliver meat inspection in Scotland must be adequately resourced. There has been a move to a 'control body system' of delivery in the Netherlands which our connections in Europe tell us has been unsuccessful, resulting in falling standards and in some cases employees without the necessary qualifications performing the official function. We must be very clear that failures made at this, the very foundation of the food chain, will force the rest of the food industry to work with products that could potentially result in tragic circumstances.

Local Authorities

UNISON has surveyed its Environmental Health Officer (EHO) members on the effect the cuts in local government were having on the services they provide on two occasions recently, one in summer 2012 and one a snapshot survey early in 2013 which also consulted meat inspectors. In addition, we carried out an FOI request on all 32 Scottish councils.

Responses showed that the total number of Environmental Health Officers employed by 30 councils had fallen 13%, from 519 in 2008/9 to 450 in 2011/12. (Dumfries & Galloway and Highland provided incomplete data.) There has been an even bigger drop in other staff carrying out an enforcement role in environmental health departments, down from 507 to 423 in the same period - 17%. EHO numbers in Edinburgh went down from 46.5 to 37. In Renfrewshire, they went down by 50%, from 24 to 12, and in South Lanarkshire from 41 to 31.

These reductions came on top of a previous survey from the Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland, which found a 9% drop in EHO numbers and more than 20% fewer specialist Food Safety Officers between March 09 and Sept 2011. REHIS President Bernard Forteath said late last year: "Clearly the current financial climate is having a major effect on public services and this will undoubtedly affect our ability to be able to react to any public health emergencies thrown at us. But is this what the electorate wants?"

UNISON does not believe that reduced service and increased risk is what the public wants for these vital services that can literally be a matter of life and death. The Sunday Herald editorial on 17 February described the situation as "particularly disturbing", reporting that food sampling has gone down by more than a third. It said: "It only adds to the toxic mix that these reductions in sampling and job losses have come about because of public sector cuts. Among all the priorities of government, surely ensuring the integrity of the food its citizens eat is one of the highest? What has happened must stop and be reversed."

Results from our two surveys outlined above showed that almost 90% in the first and more than 95% in the second expected further cuts and job losses

in the coming years. This is not surprising given that councils are already under immense financial pressures and the worst of the so-called austerity measures are still to come. However, already 43% say that public health is being put at risk, with 75% saying that there are major cuts, but that the public will only see the impact when something goes wrong, such as the recent horsemeat scandal. One member said that they just don't have the time to do the thorough job that FSA & Pennington Reports quite rightly asking them to deliver.

Our members fear that preventive and educational work is being squeezed, with potentially severe consequences for the future. One said that reduced staff meant that most of their time was now spent in focusing on higher risk business activity, meaning that they were unable to spend time with businesses helping them comply with regulation but were more reliant on formal action such as notices or court action. This does not secure long term change, only education achieves that. The particular respondent recounted time spent with some parents whose child had been desperately ill with E.coli poisoning which, he believed could have been prevented by better inspection. He felt that inspection regime was deteriorating and believed that a rise in public health related illness and injury was inevitable.

Quality of Food

UNISON is also concerned with the supply of food to schools and hospitals across Scotland. Since 2003 we have campaigned on our Food for Good Charter which aims to promote sustainability, health, social justice, excellence and skills. Feeding the most vulnerable sectors in our society must never be part of a one-track, cost-reducing, race to the bottom.

We believe that food should be fresh, prepared locally and sourced locally where possible. Public bodies should produce annual reports giving clear 'global footprint' type information on all aspects of their food use, including details of the percentage of fresh, local food; progress on waste minimisation and recycling etc.

Universal free school meals should be recognised and adopted as a major contributor to improving health and tackling childhood obesity. The aim for all public sector catering should be to give a daily option of an organic/ethically produced main meal, ideally locally sourced. Vending machines on school/hospital premises should be used for healthy alternatives not junk/fast food.

Fair trade food should be used where relevant fair trade products were available. Decisions about menu options should give consideration to providing less meat-intensive diets, with more fresh, seasonal fruit and vegetables and sustainable fish. Animal welfare must be prioritised, with an aim for animal produce of using only recognised farm assured schemes or organic schemes. They should also meet the religious and cultural requirements of all pupils.

All food must meet quality nutritional standards, monitored by relevant regulators. This involves excellence in procurement and in staff training and conditions. The top priority must be the contribution of food to health and wellbeing, with recognition of the folly of previous policies that pursued Compulsory Competitive Tendering, privatisation, PFI and outsourcing - cutting standards and employment conditions, increasing the use of cook-chill and cook-freeze food, and allowing 'fast' and junk food in schools and hospitals. The public must have access to clear relevant information about food, including via labelling and annual reports.

Quality training and proper pay and employment conditions for the sector, must be introduced, including training in environmental factors as part of 'green workplaces'. Lessons for young people in primary and secondary schools about the food chain, sustainability and preparation of healthy meals should also be given. Public awareness campaigns on healthy diets, tied in with support to local food co-operatives and similar initiatives to improve access to quality food for the most vulnerable should also be introduced.

In 2008 East Ayrshire Council introduced the Charter with a belief that pioneering fresh, local and healthy school meals for children should be standard in all Scotland's schools, hospitals and prisons. They showed they could provide healthy sustainable meals at a cost no more expensive than they were previously paying for the non-healthy food.

In this regard, UNISON welcomes the recent announcement of the Government's Food for Thought programme which will provide more food education for pupils. The Food for Thought Education Fund is to help pupils learn about all aspects of food and to encourage teachers to develop projects inspired by the extensive programme of major events planned for 2014, such as the Commonwealth Games and Ryder Cup, hopefully creating a legacy for young people for years to come.

UNISON believes that all procurement contracts should incorporate the above principles, as well as providing the Scottish Living Wage for staff and refusing to accept tenders from companies who do not comply with the UK tax regime, or pursue aggressive tax avoidance tactics.

Additional Concerns

UNISON has concerns at the possibility raised in the Consultation that other areas, such as environmental health, public health, health prevention, etc. could be moved into a more centralised quango - the New Food Body. We strongly believe that these services should remain within the purview of the local authority and the NHS.

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

1: Should the scope of the new food body extend beyond the current scope of the FSA in Scotland? If yes, what specific extensions of scope would you suggest, and why?

- UNISON has concerns at the possibility raised in the Consultation that other bodies, such as environmental health, public health, health prevention, etc. could be moved into a more centralised quango - the New Food Body. We strongly believe that these services should remain within the purview of the local authority and the NHS.

2: Should the new food body and the Scottish Government continue the arrangements for independent and partnership work on diet and nutrition set out in Annex A? If not, what changes would you suggest, and why?

- Yes. We also believe that the new food body should be wholly independent of the Government and of the food business operators.

3: Are there any additional roles, responsibilities or functions in respect of diet and nutrition that you think the new food body could take on to help deliver an improvement to the health of the people in Scotland? Please give details and reasons.

- Comments

4: What steps do you think could be taken to ensure the new food body is able to access the best available independent expert advice it needs to underpin its work on food safety and public health nutrition in Scotland? Please give reasons.

- Comments

5: Do you consider that the new food body should focus its research and surveillance activities on issues that are particularly pertinent to Scottish citizens or should it also contribute to science and evidence programmes on wider issues which have relevance to the UK as a whole? Please give reasons.

- Comments

6: Do you agree that the new food body should be responsible for the coordination of all Scottish Government funded research on food safety and public health nutrition? What steps could be taken to raise the profile of the new food body as a research funder across the UK and beyond? Please give reasons.

Yes

7: Do you have any further suggestions for how the new food body could establish a strong independent evidence base for food safety, food standards and nutrition policy? Please give reasons.

- The new Food Body must take account of the best research and evidence possible.

8: Do you consider that the new food body would require any further statutory powers, in addition to those that the FSA already has, to equip it to deal effectively with incidents such as the recent horse meat substitutions, and to prevent such incidents happening? Please give reasons.

- UNISON believes that the current legislation is adequate but that it is the enforcement that is a problem. If there had been proper attention to the legislation, the horse meat problem might not have occurred.

Changes made in 2006, moving to limited and pre-arranged official inspections of meat cutting plants should immediately be reversed, to encompass daily visits from officials.

9: Do you have any further comments about how the new food body might ensure that it can deal effectively with contraventions of food standards and safety law? Please give reasons.

- The New Food Body must remain independent and have strong regulation by properly qualified, state employed Meat Hygiene Inspectors and Official Veterinarians. The Food Business Operators are a powerful lobby and robust reinforcement must ensure that they do not influence the FSA or politicians to turn a blind eye to their corner-cutting measures.

The food producers must be persuaded that robust inspection is a selling point which will protect the brand of Scottish meat, so that consumers throughout the world can be ensured they are receiving a quality product. Investigations and prosecutions are not a sign of "weakness" of the brand, rather an indication of an industry that is properly inspected and relegated.

10: Should the new food body take on any roles and responsibilities not currently fulfilled by the FSA in Scotland? If yes, please give details and reasons.

- We do not believe so, other than to ensure that as stated above, MHIs and OVs are state-employed and properly qualified.

11: Please tell us your views about these suggestions for changes to the delivery of official food and feed controls. Do you think that the new food body should work in a different way with local authorities? Please give reasons.

- The New Food Body must ensure that local authorities carry out their roles properly. Enough staff must be employed to ensure that the recommendations of previous FSA & Pennington Reports are delivered. As our members reported, EHOs do not have enough staff to carry out inspections or sampling, let alone providing the advice and education role for businesses that they are supposed to carry out.

We support the views expressed in Paragraph 47 that the current relationship with local authorities should not be altered, allowing Environmental Health services to remain within their purview. We would not wish to see centralisation of this function to the New Food Body. Nor would we wish to see public health or public analyst services taken away from their current homes.

12: Do you have any views on how the new food body should assure delivery of official controls and meet the relevant EU obligations? Please give reasons.

- The New Food Body must ensure that it is fully independent and not subject to lobbying by the food producers and suppliers.

13: Are there any additional or alternative relationships that you would suggest that would help the new food body achieve the Scottish Ministers' objective of longer, healthier lives for the people of Scotland? Please give details and reasons.

- As stated in previous answers above - by ensuring that the New Food Body can carry out its legislative requirements without influence from the Food Business Operators

14: Do you have any suggestions about how the new food body can engage effectively with consumers, both in developing policy and providing information and advice?

- Comments

15: Do you agree with the suggested approach to ensuring the new food body's independence from Government and the food industry? Do you have

any further suggestions for how the new food body could best establish and maintain its position as an arm's length part of Government? Please give reasons.

- UNISON supports the suggested approach for ensuring the new food body is independent from both the Government and the food industry. However, the New Food Body must be given the teeth to carry this out, to ensure transparency and be prepared to take the necessary steps to enforce the approach, and carry out proper inspections and prosecutions where necessary.

The new Food Body, although completely independent, should still be accountable for its actions.

16: Do you have any further comments, or suggestions, on the creation of a new food body for Scotland that are not covered by any of the previous questions?

- Comments

Conclusion

In summary the UNISON Scotland view is that the delivery module of meat inspection in Scotland should ensure it is protecting the public - not serving industry and be a wholly and directly provided public service. It must be adequately resourced and remain properly independent of industry. This means that it must have sufficient autonomy from major industry players and trade associations. It must also conduct the wider remit that the FSA currently delivers such as regulation of shellfish, wine and other foods. It is UNISON's opinion that the FSA Scotland should continue to seek and take account of the views expressed by FSA staff working at the heart of the meat industry in the abattoirs. If the Scottish FSA gets things wrong at this, the foundation level of the food industry it will have dire consequences for the public and the rest of the industry that relies on receiving a clean and wholesome product.

In addition, local authorities must ensure that their Environmental Health departments are properly resourced and allowed sufficient time to carry out inspections or sampling, let alone providing the advice and education role for businesses that they are supposed to carry out. Adequate staffing levels must be implemented to ensure that the recommendations of previous FSA & Pennington Reports are delivered

UNISON believes that the Horsemeat scandal if nothing else showed conclusively that strong government regulation of the food industry is necessary to protect public health. Left to their own devices, rogue elements in the industry have readily put commercial gain above consumer safety.

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