

Chief Executives Report

1. Covid-19 - Return to Pilgrim House

1.1 In January, the First Minister announced a move towards “hybrid working”, a relaxation from the previous “work from home” directive. On Monday 31 January 2022, Pilgrim House opened to all office-based staff, as an optional location to work from.

In line with Scottish Government, staff are being assured that the return is a transition towards hybrid working, rather than a wholesale return to office. Further work is being undertaken on how FSS intends to transition into a hybrid approach and this will be supported with relevant communications.

With relevant training and support in place, we are ensuring a safe and welcoming return to office for our staff. Positive feedback received, alongside the successful trial of systems such as inductions, booking systems and Corporate Governance support, has also enabled us to reduce an initial 7 day advance restriction on booking desk space to 24 hours.

Since re-opening to all staff there continues to be an increase in uptake of staff booking desks for working in Pilgrim House, including repeat bookings. Feedback is being collated, from those who attend, to ensure lessons learned are captured and incorporated into our return to office approach.

2. Meetings in Brief

2.1 Geoff attended the New Zealand HM Commissioner’s Reception following the signing of a trade agreement with them; we have had close ties with New Zealand since we started and have worked on a range of issues together.

3. Salmonella Enteritidis in Feeder Mice

3.1 A Salmonella Enteritidis outbreak associated with feeder mice imported from Lithuania was initially reported to FSS in April 2018 and has been closely monitored by FSS over the years. Since April 2014 there has been over 950 cases reported across the UK with 61 in from Scotland. Unfortunately, over 400 of the cases are related to children under the age of 9. Poor handling and the sheading of snake skin have been identified as possible causes of contamination.

In Summer 2021, UKHSA (formally PHE) identified a spike in cases which led to proactive communications being issued to raise awareness of hygienic handling and safe use of the product and information leaflets were also made mandatory at point of sale in stores. However, as cases continued to rise concerns were raised and further action was deemed appropriate.

The UK wrote to the Lithuanian Authorities on a number of occasions to request investigation and improvements to control measures, however no responses were received. The importer suspended the importation of feeder mice from 7th December 2021 and the local authority carried out additional sampling on batches of mice. Sampling results confirmed the outbreak strain by whole genome sequencing which led to a product recall being issued on 9th December and again on 11th December to remove the feeder mice from the market.

A letter was sent on 2nd December to the EU Commission expressing concerns, requesting urgent action to address the issues in Lithuania and that failure to provide a satisfactory response would result in further action. The response from the EU Commission did not address the concerns and assurances sought by the UK and as a result, a recommendation paper was taken to the Animal Disease Policy Group (ADPG). The group agreed to apply safeguarding measures under The Trade in Animals and Related Products (TARP) to restrict the importation of feeder mice and rats from Lithuania. A Declaration was prepared and signed by FSS to suspend the entry into Scotland of mice and rats originating in or dispatched from Lithuania. DEFRA, Welsh Government and DAERA signed similar declarations in the rest of the UK. The declarations came into force on 17th February 2022, along with a web story published on the FSS website. Public Health Scotland have reported 1 Scottish case in 2022, however, as mitigation actions have been put in place, FSS has closed the incident, however the situation will continue to be monitored closely in conjunction with FSA, PHS and UKHSA.

4. Regulated Products

4.1 Regulated products work is focused on those applications which were submitted to the EU while the UK was a member state and takes into account the opinions issued by the European Food Safety Authority. While these products also require authorisation under the GB system, the applications are classed as routine and therefore not automatically brought to the Board's attention. The first batch of recommendations, including FSS opinions, have been submitted to the Minister. This is for a decision on the authorisation of 9 GM food and feed applications. If authorised, legislation will be introduced in April to give effect to the Ministers decision.

The consultation on 6 novel food opinions closed in February and work is ongoing to submit recommendations to the Minister in March or early April. If authorised, legislation will be introduced on 21st April.

Consultation on 11 feed additives applications was launched on 7th March and will run for 8 weeks. Stakeholders will have the opportunity to highlight other legitimate factors that may be relevant to applications and help inform Scottish Ministers in taking authorisation decisions. The authorisation process involves a GB system and where applications raise significant or Scottish specific issues, these will be highlighted to the Board.

5. Update on CBD Products

5.1 At the ELT meeting on 7 March the issue of CBD was discussed. This is a challenging environment as the industry has grown on the basis of the requirements of the old novel food regulations. However, in 2019 the CBD was classified as novel foods by the EU so requirements have changed. ELT are considering a number of options to ensure compliance with the novel food regulations in Scotland. This includes the possibility of introducing legislative transitional measures for businesses to ensure compliance with the authorisation process.

6. Out of Home Action Plan Update

6.1 It is anticipated that the Scottish Government consultation on mandatory calorie labelling in the out of home sector in Scotland will be published in early spring 2022. FSS has been providing significant support to Scottish Government in reaching this milestone including stakeholder engagement, drafting of the consultation document, and preparation of impact assessments including Business and Regulatory, Equality and Fairer Scotland. Regulations for out of home calorie labelling in England commence on 6th April 2022. These regulations were able to be progressed at a faster pace as they were able to develop them using secondary legislation. Primary legislation is required in Scotland to create regulations for calorie labelling in Scotland and therefore, the parliamentary process is much longer. A consultation is expected to be published in 2022 on alcohol labelling, including calorie labelling of alcoholic drinks, which is being taken forward on a four nations basis.

7. Good Food Nation Bill and Scottish Veterinary Service

7.1 The Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill was introduced on 7 October 2021. It requires the Scottish Ministers and certain public bodies, referred to in the Bill as 'relevant authorities', to create Good Food Nation Plans. Geoff Ogle gave evidence to the RAINE committee on 19 January in support of FSS' written evidence to the Committee. We are now awaiting the Stage 1 Report from the RAINE committee which Ministers will then consider. Organisational decisions will no doubt be part of Ministers' considerations.

7.2 On the Scottish Veterinary Service, Geoff Ogle attended a meeting with a number of officials from other organisations and SG to discuss the Milne review. A SVS programme board has been set up which Ian McWatt sits on.

8. Scottish Public Service Award

8.1 At the Scottish Public Service Awards on the 8 December 2021 FSS Operations team won the Commercial Partnerships award for their outstanding work in setting up the Scottish Seafood Exports Hubs. The award recognises a team or individual that has demonstrated exemplary commercial practice, achieving better outcomes for public bodies through contract negotiations and management, commercial policy development, smart procurement, best practice supplier management, or new models of delivery.

9. Global Alliance on Food Crime

9.1 The 6th meeting of the Global Alliance (GA) on Food Crime took place in December. There was great turn out, with colleagues from USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand along with ourselves and FSA in attendance. FSS currently chair the group so this is another example of how we are raising the organisation's profile with international partners. The GA's vision is to address food crime through international collaboration in order to protect consumers from intentional acts of fraud or misrepresentation wherever it may take place within global food supply chains. Strategic objectives of the group include building global enforcement capability and capacity in this area and developing a global information sharing network. The members have a real desire to deliver outcomes and planning had already begun on joint operational activity for early 2022.

10. Civil Service People Survey Results

FSS had a 79.2% response rate for the 2021 People Survey, with an engagement score of 73%, which is a 3% increase from 2020. The overall Civil Service engagement score was 66%, so this puts us in the High Performing bracket and is a fantastic response rate, the higher the response rate means the more confidence we can have in the results. The next step is for the Heads of Division to discuss the survey results with HR and staff to review the results in more detail so that we can get a good sense of what is important to staff. This will contribute to the formulation of an action plan. It is only through transparent accountability that we will continue to improve our organisational potential and inspire further engagement.

11. Sustainability Strategy

Our sustainability strategy work is well underway, with our contractors (WSP Global) currently finishing a series of interviews with FSS staff, Board members and representatives from key stakeholder organisations. These have allowed us to build an understanding of sustainability across the organisation, as well as what our stakeholders expect from us in this area. The next phase is the development of a draft strategy, which will be tested at the beginning of April via some internal workshops.

12. Communications

12.1 The Eat Well Your Way campaign is now live across many channels, including STV/ C4, online and outdoor, and will run until 31 March. Making drastic or significant dietary changes is often unrealistic and unsustainable. This campaign signals a change in how we will communicate with consumers to encourage healthier food and drink choices. We are encouraging people to make small and manageable changes that, over time, could make a big difference. Media pick up has been good and an article by Gillian Purdon was featured as an agenda piece in the Herald.

12.2 A second burst of PPDS / MenuCal activity is underway with advertorial including in the Scottish Grocer encouraging businesses to store and track the information required for allergen labels for food sold PPDS.

12.3 Imminent proactive communications are planned regarding some quite stark findings that have emerged from the FSS situation report around purchasing and eating habits through COVID. This further emphasises the need for our current healthy eating campaign and dietary guidance tool and allows us to highlight future work in the diet and nutrition space.

12.4 The findings of the Consumer Tracker Survey Wave 13 have been shared internally and some findings indicate increased concerns about food affordability/availability, not strictly in our remit to influence, but interesting context to have. When published, the report will be shared with key stakeholder groups and will help to inform future campaigns where the aim is to influence consumer behaviours. A highlight within the results is that 84% of respondents have heard of FSS – this is the highest percentage of all waves and a 5% uplift from wave 12.

12.5 Finally, later in March we will be rolling out some 'on farm prevention' targeted media communications to raise awareness of how to protect animals from dangers associated with fly tipping and potential lead poisoning.

For queries contact:
Geoff Ogle, Chief Executive
Geoff.ogle@fss.scot
16 March 2022