# REVIEW OF THE FOOD WITHDRAWAL AND RECALL SYSTEM IN THE UK FOOD RETAIL SECTOR

**Report by Simon Dawson (Head of Operations Assurance/Project Senior Responsible Officer)**
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## 1 SUMMARY

1.1 This paper provides an update on the project to review the withdrawal and recall system in the UK food retail sector. The research phase of the project has now completed and this paper provides an overview of findings from the research, along with proposed outcomes, actions for improvement and a delivery plan.

1.2 The Board is asked to:

- **Note** the findings from the research phase of the project; and
- **Discuss and confirm** the proposed outcomes and the high level delivery plan for this work.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

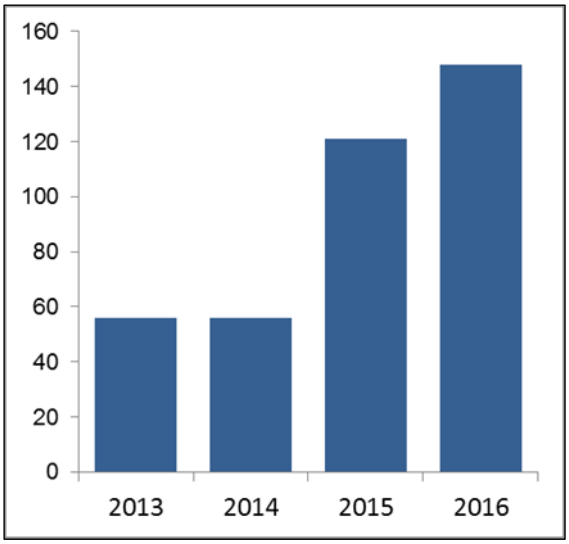
2.1 In July 2016, the FSA Board were informed of a joint FSA/Food Standards Scotland (FSS) project to review and better understand the food withdrawal and recall mechanisms operating within the retail sector in the UK, and make recommendations for improvement. The scope of this project includes withdrawal and recall processes in UK food retail businesses and by association suppliers to retailers, including manufacturers, distributors and wholesalers. Withdrawal and recall processes relating to feed and the service sector i.e. catering, hospitality, public sector catering such as schools and hospitals were out of scope.

2.2 An External Stakeholder Reference Group (ESRG) was established to assist the FSA/FSS with the project. Membership included representatives from industry trade associations, regulators and their associate bodies and consumer groups (current membership attached at Annex A).

2.3 There has been an increase in the number of food alerts issued over the past 3 years and, although the strengths of the current system have been recognised

by independent reviews,[1] improvements proposed in this paper will enhance the overall effectiveness and resilience of the system, as well as help maintain public confidence in food as the UK exits the EU.

**Figure 1 – Number of FSA/FSS food alerts per annum**




2.4 Both the FSA and FSS have statutory responsibilities to inform the public about risks to health from food and feed. One of the mechanisms FSA/FSS use to inform the public of these risks is by publishing food alerts. Food business operators are legally obliged under Regulation (EC) 178/2002 to notify the relevant authorities if they have placed food on the market that is unsafe. They must withdraw the food from the market and where it has reached the consumer, they must effectively and accurately inform them of the withdrawal and if necessary recall product already supplied. Requirements for local authorities to notify the FSA/FSS of food incidents are set down in the Food Law Code of Practice and associated Practice Guidance.

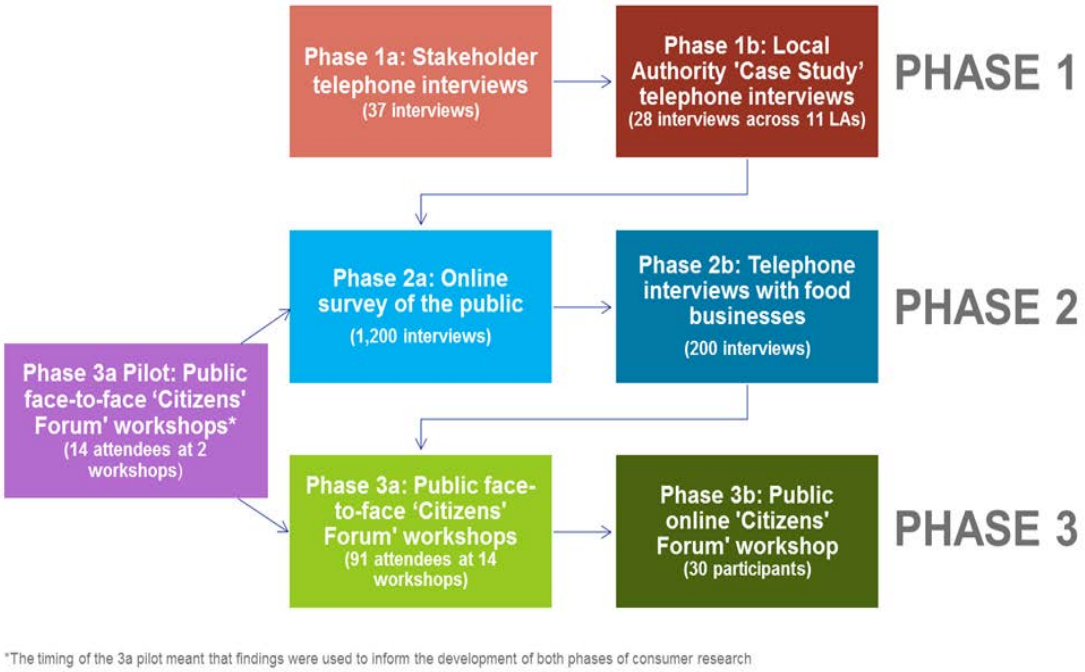
2.5 The current withdrawal and recall system in the UK has not been reviewed in its entirety since its introduction in 2007, and there was little evidence on the application or effectiveness of legal requirements for food businesses and competent authorities against which to base decisions for change and improvement. In addition we did not have a clear understanding of consumer awareness of recalls and behaviours in relation to the current food recalls system.

[1] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consumer-product-recall-review

## 3 EVIDENCE – RESEARCH PROGRAMME

3.1 Kantar Public were commissioned to carry out research using qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The research[2] gathered views from industry, local authorities, consumer groups and consumers to provide a baseline of the existing withdrawal and recall system. The research also sought to identify public awareness and understanding of the current recall processes, including their experiences and behaviours around recall.

**Figure 2 – The three phases of mixed method research**




3.2 This work was supplemented by three research projects conducted internally within the Agency's Science, Evidence and Research Division:

- **An analysis of FSA/FSS food alert data from 2013 to 2016,**[3] to broadly characterise major features and investigate trends over time.

- **Live case reviews** [4] that involved tracking ten food incidents resulting in a food alert to obtain: in-depth information about how the recall process operated in practice; identify and understand in more detail the types of

[2] www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/recalls-efficacy-report.pdf
[3] www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/food-alerts-data-analysis.pdf
[4] www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/recalls-case-studies.pdf

issues that may arise as incidents progress; and to collect information on the display of notices in store/on-line and related social media activity.

- A qualitative **international benchmarking exercise**[5] comparing six countries' food recall systems (UK, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, US and Canada) based mainly on published guidance documents produced by the competent authorities. The specific elements examined included food recall procedures, traceability procedures, and available guidance, and the criteria for assessment were based largely on the World Health Organisation (WHO) 2012 document entitled 'FAO/WHO guide for developing and improving national food recall systems'[6].

3.3 Although not all strands of the research give statistically representative findings across all sectors of the food industry or the wider population, they do provide an indication of strengths and weakness in the process. The findings were presented to ERSG who validated them and agreed priority areas for improvement.

## 4 ANALYSIS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 The research findings highlighted the key strength of the current UK system as it being a centrally co-ordinated system, where the FSA/FSS provide a key leadership role in the oversight of the withdrawal/recall system, and both organisations' websites provide a central place for trusted information on all food safety recalls. This was also recognised by Lynn Faulds Wood who conducted the independent 'UK consumer product recall review' carried out on behalf of the UK government in 2016[7].

4.2 The research identified areas for improvement, which have been validated by external stakeholders and agreed by the FSA/FSS executive teams. These are:

- Clearer roles and responsibilities;
- More accessible and consistent information;
- Increased consumer awareness;
- Introduction of more systemic root cause analysis and feedback loops to aid prevention.

These have been further developed into four proposed outcomes, details of which are provided below.

[5] www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/recall-systems-comparison.pdf
[6] http://www.fao.org/docrep/017/i3006e/i3006e.pdf
[7] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consumer-product-recall-review

***Proposed Outcome 1***

***A withdrawal and recall system that is founded on a clear and distinct set of roles and responsibilities, agreed and commonly understood by all participants***

4.3 The research found there was no agreed standard or level of understanding on roles and responsibilities and expectations of key players in the system. The international bench marking exercise included a comparison of different countries recall arrangements as set down in competent authority guidance. Compared to other countries the UK does not have sufficient publically available guidance from the Central Competent Authorities. The FSA's current guidance[8] dates back to 2007 and concentrates on interpretation of Regulation (EC) 178/2002 only, rather than additionally providing guidance on the necessary requirements for an effective withdrawal and recall system. Guidance is an important part of the process as it ensures that all parties know their (and other's) responsibilities and the appropriate way to fulfil them.

4.4 The Kantar research identified varied knowledge among food businesses on recall processes in a number of areas including: a lack of understanding on roles and responsibilities; a lack of clarity from some businesses on when to inform/notify the competent authorities; and uncertainty from some businesses on what should be communicated to consumers in the event of a recall. Some businesses also reported perceived variation in the application of guidance and decision making by FSA and FSS, particularly in the conduct of risk assessments.

*Supporting Actions*

*Action 1: FSA/FSS should work with industry and local authorities to develop a comprehensive UK guidance document that takes account of the principles detailed in The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2012) document "FAO/WHO guide for developing and improving national food recall systems".*

*Action 2: The Regulating Our Future (RoF) target operating model should include regulatory requirements and assurance criteria for food businesses in relation to the effective withdrawal and recall of unsafe food. In relation to FSS this recommendation will be considered as part of the future delivery & assurance elements of the FSS Regulatory Strategy programme.*

[8] https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/multimedia/pdfs/fsa1782002guidance.pdf

***Proposed Outcome 2***

***Information to consumers is consistent and accessible, based on proven best practice and underpinned by cross-industry sharing of approaches and impact***

4.5 Information directed to consumers about food recalls and trade to trade notifications on withdrawals/recalls was not always available in a format that was consistent and accessible.

4.6 Food business participants in the Kantar research that had been involved in a food recall within the last 12 months had used point of sale notices and email/letters as the most used methods of communication to inform consumers about the recall. Those businesses participating in the research that didn't have their own consumer notification template were unclear what they should include in recall notifications.

4.7 Consumers confirmed that the three key sources of information currently informing them of food recalls were from the news, in store notices and through social media. Consumer suggestions on preferred channels of information for recall information largely mirrored existing methods. However, they indicated a preference for recall notifications to be consistent and standardised throughout, so that they were instantly recognisable as a food recall notification, regardless of where they were seen. The case review study also highlighted that in store notifications were not always prominently displayed, often being more difficult to find in larger stores and located in the customer service areas which would not be visited regularly by consumers. Equally online recall notifications on company websites were not considered to be obvious and consumers would actively need to search for the information.

4.8 The international benchmarking exercise highlighted best practice, where other countries provided standardised templates for consumer notifications, supported by guidance on where these should be displayed in store or on line and guidance on proactively communicating recall notifications.

4.9 Research identified issues with trade to trade notifications, where information does not always reach small and independent retailers. The research demonstrated that methods of trade to trade notifications vary, unlike in some other countries where standardised templates are used for trade to trade notifications.

*Supporting Actions*

*Action 3: FSA/FSS should work with industry to agree a more consistent approach for industry communications both to consumers and trade-to-trade on product recalls which reflects consumer insight and exploits latest digital technology.*

*Action 4: FSA/FSS should work with industry and others to develop and publish best practice guidance on where notifications should be displayed (both in store and digitally) and on active consumer communications, taking account of new technologies/potential solutions. This would include measures to encourage adoption of best practice guidance.*

*Action 5: FSA/FSS should review their food alerts templates to ensure they also align with the key principles from the consumer insight. Any proposed changes to FSA/FSS food alert templates will be tested with consumers.*

*Action 6: FSA/FSS should work with industry to explore possible solutions to ensure that withdrawal and recall notifications are shared effectively within the food industry, including reviewing application of solutions used in other countries.*

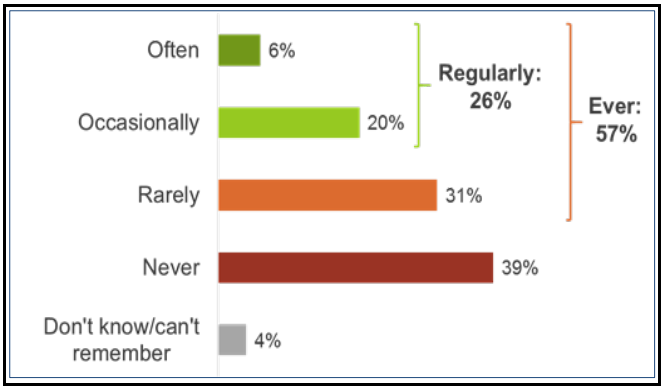
***Proposed Outcome 3***

***The public are aware of the recall process and what actions they should take***

4.10 The Kantar research found that consumer awareness and proactive engagement with food recalls is low. Consumers generally have a view that the recall system is working but they are unsure how the process works and who the key players are. One third of consumers were not sure why a recall would be triggered. It is important that consumers are aware that FSA/FSS food alerts are issued for food safety reasons and action will be required.

4.11 Few consumers check or look for food recall notices/alerts on a regular or even occasional basis, with only a quarter of consumers claiming to having ever proactively looked for food recall information. 70% of consumers confirmed they had never or rarely looked for the information. Only one

**Figure 4 – Claimed frequency with which consumers look out for food recall notices**



in ten consumers mentioned the FSA or FSS website as a source of this information.[9]

4.12 Consumers with any allergies or intolerances (or who prepared food for people with one) were significantly more likely to look for the information, although even among allergy sufferers, only a minority claimed to take proactive action. Only 13% had visited a government website and only eight percent had signed up for allergy and text alerts.

*Supporting Action*

*Action 7: FSA/FSS should develop systematic, regular communications messages and products to increase public awareness of the food recall system including messaging to explain why recalls would be issued, where consumers can get necessary information along with actions expected from them.*

***Proposed outcome 4***

***Feedback loops and a philosophy of continuous improvement amongst all stakeholders underpins the withdrawal and recalls system***

4.13 Approximately 70% of the businesses involved in the Kantar research claimed that they would be involved in root cause analysis of an incident and reviewing the withdrawal/recall success, with food manufacturers most likely to be involved. However, only half had any methods to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness and success of any withdrawal/recall.

4.14 Industry confirmed that reviews/root cause analysis would be carried out internally/in isolation and that sharing of learnings and feedback between industry was limited. Through the Kantar research, industry suggested that sharing of learnings should be done more routinely to prevent similar incidents occurring in the future.

4.15 Currently there is no mechanism for information on root cause analysis of incidents to be fed back to the competent authorities after an incident and this prevents the FSA/FSS having oversight of trends or issues impacting on the food industry. The international benchmarking exercise identified that competent authorities in other countries have built in feedback loops to assess what caused an incident and whether corrective actions and the recall have been effective. This included either requiring businesses to send a post recall

[9] Statistics are from the Kantar Public consumer online panel, comprising 1,200 participants.

report to the competent authority or the competent authority conducting a post recall audit.

*Supporting Actions*

*Action 8: A feedback process should be introduced where information on the root cause of an incident that results in food being withdrawn or recalled for food safety reasons, and potentially information on recall effectiveness is fed back to the FSA and/or FSS.*

*Action 9: FSA/FSS incidents and resilience teams should work with stakeholders to establish a programme of work to better understand what causes incidents and to share good practice.*

## Conclusion and Next Steps

5.1 As part of FSA's commitment to the consumer to ensure 'food is safe and what it says it is' and FSS's equivalent strategic objectives, the FSA/FSS have a key leadership role to play as an excellent, accountable and modern regulator, in making sure all food businesses are clear about their responsibilities when producing and supplying food.

5.2 Successful delivery of this programme will improve the overall effectiveness of the UK food withdrawal and recall system, will increase consumer awareness of the system and improve confidence in its effectiveness. We believe implementation of the majority of the programme before EU Exit in March 2019 would help mitigate any risk of reduction in consumer confidence in the effectiveness of the UK product recalls and withdrawal system.

5.3 The programme team has identified and agreed with ESRG and the FSA/FSS executive teams a coherent programme of work to deliver these recommendations as a coherent package of improvements with a number of critical interdependencies. We believe it is important to manage these as a unified programme of work, even though delivery responsibility may rest with different parts of the organisation or industry.

5.4 A cross-stakeholder Steering Group will support the SRO in successfully delivering this programme, with membership drawn from the existing External Stakeholder Reference Group. The Steering Group will meet bi-monthly and will review status of the programme and individual work streams, consider risks and associated mitigation and contingency arrangements, and review and resolve outstanding cross-work stream issues escalating to FSA/FSS executive

teams where necessary. A summary of recommendations (Annex B) and outline high level plan (Annex C) are attached.

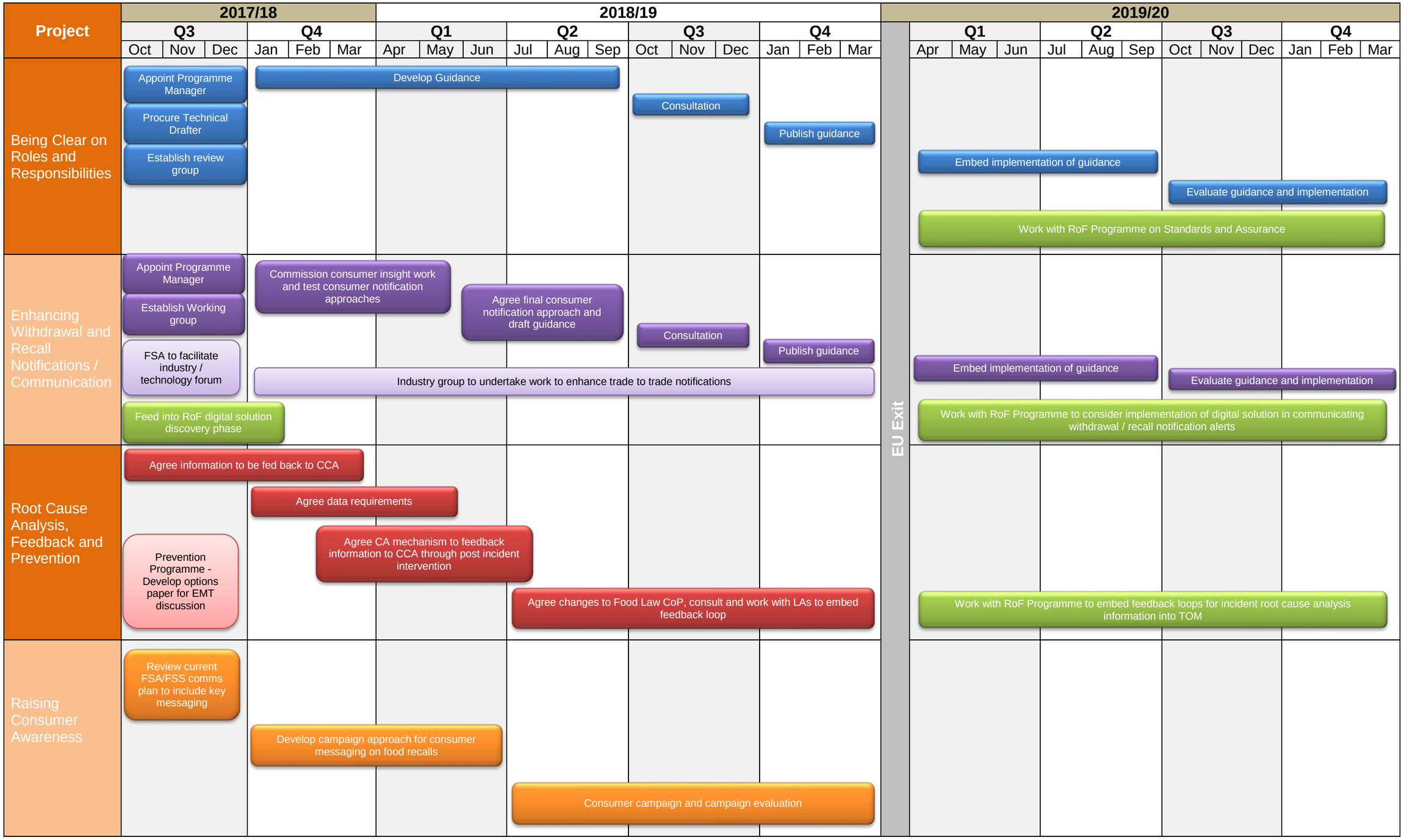
5.5 The Board is asked to:

- **Note** the findings from the research phase of the project; and
- **Discuss and confirm** the proposed outcomes and the high level delivery plan for this work.

**Annex A**

| **External Stakeholder Reference Group Membership [June 2017]** | |
|---|---|
| Simon Dawson (SRO) | Food Standards Agency |
| Richard Hoskin | Food Standards Agency |
| Kathryn Baker | Food Standards Agency |
| David Lowe | Food Standards Agency |
| Tracy Bishop | Food Standards Agency |
| Kathryn Miller | Coeliac UK |
| Sue Davis | Which? |
| Julie Byers | Association of Convenience Stores |
| Holly Shaw | Allergy UK |
| Martin Forsyth | British Frozen Food Federation |
| Moira Austin | Anaphylaxis Campaign |
| Kerina Cheesman | Food and Drink Federation |
| James Bielby | Federation of Wholesale Distributors |
| Sian Thomas | Fresh Produce Consortium |
| Simon Wright | Gluten Free Industry Association |
| Andrew Kuyk | Provision Trade Federation |
| Elizabeth Andoh-Kesson | British Retail Consortium |
| Kaarin Goodburn | Chilled Food Association |
| Sue Powell | Oxfordshire County Council |
| Tony Lewis | Chartered Institute of Environmental Heath |
| Karen O'Connor | Cambridge City Council |
| Andrew Morrison | Scottish Food Enforcement Liaison Committee |
| Ron McNaughton | Food Standard Scotland |
| Andrew Collinson | Wycombe District Council |
| Earl Legister | Southwark Council |
| Corrine Lowe | Chartered Trading Standards Institute |

**Annex B - Summary of Recommendations**

| | Outcome | Proposed Actions |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Clarity of Responsibilities | FSA/FSS should work with industry and local authorities to develop a comprehensive UK guidance document that takes account of the principles detailed in The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2012) document "FAO/WHO guide for developing and improving national food recall systems" |
| 2 | | The RoF target operating model should include regulatory requirements and assurance criteria for food businesses in relation to the effective withdrawal and recall of unsafe food. In relation to FSS this recommendation will be considered as part of the future delivery & assurance elements of the FSS Regulatory Strategy programme. |
| 3 | Accessible and Consistent Information | FSA/FSS should work with industry to agree a more consistent approach for industry communications both to consumers and trade-to-trade on product recalls which reflects consumer insight and exploits latest digital technology |
| 4 | | FSA/FSS should work with industry and others to develop and publish best practice guidance on where notifications should be displayed (both in store and digitally) and on active consumer communications, taking account of new technologies/potential solutions. This would include measures to encourage adoption of best practice guidance. |
| 5 | | FSA/FSS should review their food alerts templates to ensure they also align with the key principles from the consumer insight. Any proposed changes to FSA/FSS food alert templates will be tested with consumers |
| 6 | | FSA/FSS should work with industry to explore possible solutions to ensure that withdrawal and recall notifications are shared effectively within the food industry, including reviewing application of solutions used in other countries. |
| 7 | Increased Consumer Awareness | FSA/FSS should develop systematic, regular communications messages and products to increase public awareness of the food recall system including messaging to explain why recalls would be issued, where consumers can get necessary information along with actions expected from them. |
| 8 | Systematic root cause analysis and feedback loops | A feedback process should be introduced where information on the root cause of an incident that results in food being withdrawn or recalled for food safety reasons, and potentially information on recall effectiveness is fed back to the FSA and / or FSS. |
| 9 | | FSA/FSS incidents and resilience teams should work with stakeholders to establish a programme of work to better understand what causes incidents and to share good practice |

## Annex C – High Level Delivery Plan and Timeline