

The Food Standards Agency
Speaker: Geoffrey Podger
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The Food Standards Agency

Areas in which the agency will act

Food safety on the farm; the agency will normally work with the Agriculture Departments to ensure that they have adequate controls in place where farming practices potentially affect the safety of food. The Agency will have safeguard powers to take action to prevent contaminated food from entering the food chain, and will be able to recommend that health ministers introduce additional statutory controls if necessary in the interest of public health.

Surveillance and control of pathogens in live animals; The Agency will play a leading role in developing and implementing a national policy to control animal diseases which may be passed through the food chain.

A new committee, formed by the Agency, Agriculture Departments and other interested bodies, including the Public Health Laboratory Service, will have powers to carry out its own surveillance.

Animal feedstuffs; policy responsibility for animal feed will be divided between the Agency and Agriculture departments, with the Agency taking the lead on issues which potentially affect the safety of human food. A new independent committee is now being set up to advise the Agency (once established) and Agriculture Departments on all matters relating to animal feed that are not covered by existing advisory bodies, including the implications of feed for human health.

Pesticides and veterinary medicines: Lead responsibility for the Pesticides Safety Directorate and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate will remain with the Ministry of Agriculture. However, the Agency will take a full part in the assessment of the independent Advisory Committee on Pesticides and Veterinary Products Committee of applications for the authorisation/licensing of products, as well as in developing general policy in these areas.

The Agency will work with PSD and VMD in carrying out surveillance for residues of pesticides and veterinary medicines in food and will also have the power to carry out its own surveillance.

Meat and milk hygiene; the Agency will be responsible for licensing fresh meat plants, and for measures to prevent the transmission of BSE agent through the human food chain. The agency will take over responsibility for the Meat Hygiene Service, which will retain its existing functions. It will also take responsibility for the dairy hygiene enforcement work carried out by Agriculture Departments in England and Wales.

Other areas of food safety: the Agency will take over the agriculture Ministers' responsibilities for all matters concerning novel foods and processes (including genetically modified foods), food hygiene, food additives, chemical contaminants, food and radiological safety.

Food standards and nutrition: the Agency's responsibilities will cover the compositional standard of foodstuffs and the labelling of food including negotiating changes to EC labelling regulations to inform the public of possible risks from allergens. It will also undertake surveillance programs of food authenticity in coordination with enforcement authorities to ensure that consumers are not misled.

The Agency will provide authoritative and unbiased information to help people to decide for themselves what they wish to eat, including advice about the nutrient content of foods and the diet as a whole. It will provide the definition of a balanced diet for use in health education material. Where appropriate, it will propose legislation relating to nutritional aspects of food, such as labelling, health claim, and dietary supplements sold as food.

The agency will need to work together with Health Departments in defining the health education message on nutritional issues and in developing policy advice to ministers. Health Department will remain responsible for health issues where nutrition is one of a number of the Agency's risk factors such as obesity.

The structure of the Agency

It is proposed that the Agency will be a non-ministerial government department comprising a Commission of 10-14 independent members, who will be responsible for all the operations of the Agency and supported by a substantial executive staff headed by a chief executive.

The commissioners will provide a broad balance of relevant skills and experience and will act collectively rather than representing specific sectors. A majority will, however, be drawn from a wider public interest background. The Commission will take expert advice from the independent advisory committees and deal with food and, as a general rule, will consult widely with all interested groups before taking action.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

The Food Standards Agency is being set up against a background of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The White Paper proposes that the FSA should operate on a UK basis to ensure a consistent approach to food safety throughout the whole of the UK, but with special arrangements to take account of the devolution of responsibility for food safety and standards and the needs of devolved administrations.

The Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales and Northern Ireland Assembly, when established, will need to be consulted on these arrangements.

The UK Commission will include members who have special responsibility for Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish interests in addition to providing skills or experience in areas which are relevant to the Agency's national role.

The new advisory committees will be set up in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to advise the UK Commission on food standards and safety matters as they affect these parts of the UK. They will be chaired by commissioners with special responsibilities for the interests of the country concerned.

Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish executives will be established, with their own director. These executives will take over responsibility for the existing work on food carried out by the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Offices, operating within the overarching policy framework established by the UK Agency, and will advise the relevant ministers under devolution in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Funding the Agency

The central government financial provision for the activities to be carried out by the Agency will transfer along with the responsibility for the work.

The government intends to shift the burden of the cost of food safety work from the taxpayer to the industry. It is therefore developing proposals for a mandatory levy to recover the costs of additional work undertaken by the Agency.

Details of which businesses and/or sectors are to be covered by the scheme, the level of the fee and the method of collection have not been finalised, but the objective is to produce an administratively simple transparently justifiable scheme that does not discriminate against small businesses. Whatever system is chosen, the maximum amount that will be recovered from industry will not exceed £50 million per year in the year covered by public expenditure plans..

What happens next

Work on the draft legislation and also on the proposals for the levy scheme is continuing. Both of these will be published for public consultation when finalised. Following these consultations, a Bill to establish the Agency will be introduced into Parliament as soon as parliamentary time is available.

Although the legislation to establish the Agency has not been finalised, the government is already taking forward preparatory work wherever possible. Those parts of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Department of Health dealing with food issues have already been brought together to form the Joint Food Safety and Standards Group, in effect creating an embryonic Agency, reporting to the ministers in both departments.

A new culture of transparency is continuing to be fostered within the group and wherever possible, the philosophy and working practices which it is expected that the Agency will adopt are being introduced.

The group has also been taking a number of initiatives to improve the quality and quantity of information available in the public domain, and it will continue to look for improvements.