



# **THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY**

## **STATEMENT OF GENERAL OBJECTIVES AND PRACTICES**

### ***Putting the consumer first***

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#### **Chairman's Introduction**

This document is a statement of the general objectives that the Food Standards Agency intends to pursue and the general practices it intends to adopt in carrying out its functions under the Food Standards Act 1999.

Food safety is an issue which affects every man, woman and child in the United Kingdom. It is a high priority for the Government and devolved administrations. Just as those who produce and sell food are responsible for its safety, consumers have a role to play in ensuring that the food we eat is handled safely. As the Chairman of this new organisation I recognise that gaining and retaining the trust and confidence of consumers are vital to our success. We will be judged by how we act, and we are clear that our behaviour must match our intentions. Our core values - putting the consumer first, openness and independence - underpin the delivery of our primary aim of protecting public health and the interests of consumers in relation to food.

These core values determine the key principles underlying every aspect of our work and describe the behaviour expected of each Board member and every employee in the Agency in the conduct of its business. This includes the Meat Hygiene Service which, as an Executive Agency of the Food Standards Agency, is an important part of our organisation. We have procedures and guidance to help the Agency's staff apply these principles effectively in their everyday work. We shall publish Codes of Practice in key areas such as openness and enforcement, which will be subject to consultation and review.

The Board will, as a top priority, ensure that all their staff are aware of and act in accordance with the spirit as well as the letter of this statement. The statement will be reviewed from time to time so that it continues to reflect our most up to date thinking and is modified in the light of our experiences of operating the Agency in practice.

**Professor Sir John Krebs**

**Chairman of the Food Standards Agency**

October 2000

## **OUR GENERAL OBJECTIVES**

1. Our primary aim is to protect the health of the public, and the interests of consumers, in relation to food.
2. Our general objectives in relation to this overall aim and the functions it covers are:
  - To develop effective policies relating to food safety and to other interests of consumers in relation to food. These policies will be based on close consultation with those who stand to be affected, and with other interested individuals and organisations.
  - To provide clear, practical advice, information and other forms of assistance to all stakeholders. Our stakeholders are all the individuals and representative organisations who have a direct interest in our activities, or are likely to be affected by them.

- To build and maintain a reputation for expertise and excellence in matters connected with food safety and other interests of consumers in relation to food.
- To maintain effective working links with devolved administrations, other public bodies and stakeholder organisations with an interest in food safety and standards, in the UK and elsewhere.
- To make decisions and take action proportionate to the risk, and with due regard to costs and benefits.
- To ensure that the interests of UK consumers in relation to food are effectively promoted within the European Union and in other international forums.

These objectives apply to all aspects of the food chain, from primary producers to final consumers.

1. By being an independent voice and making public health in relation to food our top priority, we will ensure that we always put the consumer first. By giving consumers information we will enable them to make informed choices about the foods that are best suited to their needs. By making information publicly available, we will also ensure that stakeholders know why decisions are being taken, allowing them to respond constructively.
2. We will set ourselves published targets covering the full range of our activities in relation to food safety and standards, including our work on food labelling and on nutrition, where we will work closely with Health Departments. These targets along with our financial and policy objectives will be set out in a series of published documents including our annual report, our strategic plan which includes our Service Delivery Agreement with the Treasury, and our annual business plan.

## OUR WORKING PRACTICES

3. We will :

- be **accountable** – To the Westminster Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies, and consumers
- be **open and consultative** – Our activities will be open, transparent and clear

- be **consistent** and **proportionate** – We will base our decisions on the best scientific advice, taking account of costs and benefits
- adopt **best practice** – We will seek out and adopt best practice for all of our activities, ensuring in particular that our actions and decisions are targeted effectively.

1. **These general practices apply to every aspect of our work, and all our staff are expected to work in accordance with them.**

## **Accountability**

2. The Board of the Agency is collectively responsible for all of the Agency's activities across the UK. The Board is accountable to the Westminster Parliament through the Secretary of State for Health, to the Scottish Parliament through Scottish Ministers, to the National Assembly for Wales through the Assembly Secretary for Health and Social Services, and to the Northern Ireland Assembly through the Northern Ireland Health Minister.
3. We will produce an annual report of our activities and performance which will be laid before the Westminster Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, and the Northern Ireland Assembly.
4. We are also fully accountable to the public and will put procedures in place to ensure that all our stakeholders are able to see and comment on the way in which we conduct our business.

## **Openness and consultation**

5. We are committed to operating in an open and transparent way. As an organisation we will be 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 will include a report on our performance in relation to our openness policies in our Annual Report. Our Code of Practice on openness will set out in more detail how we intend to implement our openness policies, including our policy on publication of advice and information.
6. We will consult widely on our activities. We will ensure that all relevant parties are given the opportunity and, whenever possible, the time to make their views known, including representatives of those affected by any proposed activity and the public. We undertake to maximise the effectiveness of our consultation process by using a range of consultation methods, appropriate to the issue under consideration, in addition to formal written consultation. Our aim is to ensure that we listen properly and establish

productive dialogues. Our consultation policy will be published.

7. Equally we will seek to promote links with other public bodies who have responsibilities affecting food safety and other interests of consumers in relation to food to ensure that we are, in turn, consulted, both formally and informally, on all relevant matters. Our relationships with other government departments are underpinned by concordats which set out clearly how we will work together in areas of mutual interest. We expect other public authorities to consult us as a matter of course when their activities might affect our responsibilities. We shall put the necessary arrangements in place to make it as easy as possible for them to do so.
8. We shall work in close partnership with enforcement authorities to ensure the effective and consistent enforcement of food law.

### **Consistent and proportionate: the Agency's approach to risk**

9. We will develop and publish our approach to risk. In essence, we will maintain a policy based on the following principles. We undertake to adopt a consistent approach in all our decisions and actions. We will make decisions and take action that is proportionate to the associated risk. In doing so we will take due account of the nature and magnitude of the risks involved, to the costs and benefits of proposed actions, to the information provided by the relevant independent advisory committees and to any other appropriate sources of expertise. Decisions will be based on sound scientific advice, and we will commission programmes of research and surveillance specifically targeted to addressing our policy aims and objectives.
10. We recognise that there is often uncertainty in the science underlying our decisions and we shall explain these uncertainties and make sure it is clear how we have taken them into account. Where there is a risk of serious damage to public health, we will adopt a precautionary approach by acting quickly to implement appropriate measures to reduce health risks. Scientific certainty is rarely achieved in practice and we will not allow the absence of certainty to delay proportionate action. Equally, we will not use the absence of scientific certainty as an excuse for taking action other than that needed to protect public health and well being. Such action will be reviewed if new evidence becomes available.

### **Best Practice**

11. Our decisions and actions will take full account of the obligations placed on the UK under domestic and international law, treaties and agreements. We will also take account of specific circumstances arising from the devolved nature of food safety and standards in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
12. We are fully committed to efficient and effective ways of working, and our Chief Executive has a statutory responsibility to ensure that all of our activities are carried out in this way. We value our employees and are committed to having a forward looking organisation which sees development of staff as a top priority. We will seek Investors in

People accreditation within two years of the Agency's establishment.

13. In all our activities, we shall have regard to the Government's commitment to sustainable development.
14. We have set service targets and will produce a charter in response to the Government's Service First initiative. We will establish an effective and fair complaints procedure. We will strive to make our services equally accessible to everyone, including people with particular needs. We will ensure that our operations are in line with best practice in the UK, whilst seeking to learn from best practice elsewhere.

## **Better Regulation**

15. Regulatory work is an important aspect of our remit as we will be responsible for preparing legislation in addition to developing policies on food safety and standards. The principles of Better Regulation, as set out in the Government's Guide to Better Regulation, are incorporated into our working practices. We will strive to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of the regulatory framework. We will monitor the activities of our Executive Agency, the Meat Hygiene Service, to ensure that they are following the principles of better regulation. We will also work with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development in Northern Ireland, to ensure that the activities they undertake on our behalf also reflect the principles of better regulation.
16. We will be signing up to the principles of good enforcement as set out in the UK Government Enforcement Concordat.
17. In addition to enforcement activities, the Food Standards Act 1999 also gives us powers of entry to carry out surveillance programmes in order to gather information on food safety and related matters, and to monitor relevant enforcement actions. We will publish guidance on how these new powers will be used.

## **OUR PLEDGE**

18. Our pledge is to put the consumer first in everything we do.
19. We will strive to gain and maintain the trust, respect and confidence of all our stakeholders. We will learn from experience and actively seek feedback to improve continually the ways in which we work.
20. We aim always to provide the best possible service.