

How can Scotland's new food body help all Scotland's people live longer, healthier lives?



A note of the roundtable discussion between the third sector and the Scottish Government, held on Thursday 2 May 2013

Background

In 2010 the UK Government decided to move responsibility for nutrition and food labelling and standards in England from the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to the Department of Health and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Scottish Ministers then commissioned an independent review, to examine arrangements in Scotland; the Scudamore review.

In June 2012, Scottish Ministers accepted the recommendations from the review, and decided to form a single independent public body with clear responsibility for all aspects of food safety and standards. Ministers also have an overarching ambition to help people in Scotland live longer, healthier lives through eating safe, healthy food and they are open to ideas that will increase the efficiency or effectiveness of the new food body.

The Scottish Government is currently consulting on proposals for the new food body. As part of the consultation Voluntary Health Scotland and the Poverty Alliance organised a roundtable discussion between the third sector and the Scottish Government. Participants are listed in Appendix 1.

Specific points of clarification concerning the proposals

- The food body will replace the FSAS and encompass all food safety, nutrition, labelling and advice.
- The Scottish Government currently funds the FSAS and will also continue to fund the new body.
- Legislation will be required, and subject to parliamentary timetabling the Scottish Government aims to have the new food body in place in 2015.
- The FSAS will continue until the new food body starts functioning, there will be no gap in food safety or standards. The transition will be as seamless as possible, with the new food body retaining current FSAS staff and locale.
- The consultation closes on 22 May 2013.

Main themes

Food advocacy

The group acknowledged that there has been discussion over food advocacy in previous policy discussions. Food advocacy as a strategy can engage private and public groups to work together on the key themes of the national policy which range from public health and nutrition, education and skills, food production and agriculture, climate change and the environment to sustainable economic growth and employment. However, there are currently different definitions of food advocacy, which require clarification. The independence of the new food body would be a good opportunity to address these issues.

European food labelling

Discussion included the regulatory functions of the new food body and the Scottish Government confirmed that Scotland will continue to work within European food labelling

regulations. It was also noted that the new food body would also have its own aspirations and if additional labelling is required, this will be addressed. This offers potential for further guidance on saturated fats, sugar and salt in foods.

The group also highlighted the increasing issue around food waste and the application of sell-by dates in food labelling, and recommended this as a potential area for the new food body to address. There needs to be an examination of the use of use-by or sell-by dates on food packaging and awareness-raising/increased understanding about food and discerning whether food can be safely eaten outwith sell-by dates. The group highlighted that a potential remit of the food body could be around research to inform future action.

Messaging

The food body will have remit exclusively for Scotland. However this has implications over food industry messaging. Decisions taken by the food body could mean that there are inconsistent messages across the UK. Recent reports, for example, Knowledge, attitudes and motivations to health, 2008-11, by NHS Health Scotland and the Scottish Public Health Observatory (<http://www.scotpho.org.uk/publications/reports-and-papers/1004-knowledge-attitudes-and-motivations-to-health-2008-11>) have found that people are aware of the messages about healthy eating. However, there are varying levels of engagement and disengagement and a real need to look at messaging, including accessible, understandable, consistent information on food. The group acknowledged that the Scottish Government person-centred support programme will be undertaking work around health literacy – this will include scope to make connections and identify gaps.

The group criticised the language used in official documentation, particularly the term 'consumers'. This implies that people are passive users rather than active citizens engaged in their own health. The food body could play a role in ensuring the voice of the public is heard. There was also discussion about understanding the evidence around obesity and medical definitions vs. public perceptions. The group acknowledged the work of local authorities at developing food education programmes, but highlighted that this can result in multiple approaches across different areas in Scotland. The group asked questions over consistency of approach and whether the new food body should be issuing guidance around the links to education and home economics programmes.

Structural issues

There was a consensus that structural issues in the food industry should be addressed to help people make healthier choices. Research suggests that people know the messages about healthy eating and there have been successful initiatives in communities. However, this can be hindered by food industry sales and marketing strategies. While major retailers have undertaken work to offer promotions on fruit and vegetables, and provide advice on healthy food, the balancing of promotions in supermarkets is inequitably in favour of unhealthy choices.

The group discussed the idea of increasing the price/taxation of unhealthy food choices. However, it was recognised that as food is a basic need, this could have a detrimental effect on communities; evidence from Denmark suggests that reducing access to energy dense foods could lead to increasing food poverty. Suggestions for action included the development of a framework to ensure that healthier food is the easier purchasing option. Any such framework would require supporting legislation – for example, the levels of saturated fats, sugar and salt in foods. Scottish Government noted that work is currently underway to look at a gradual reformulation of food, with the expectation that a new framework will be published in the near future. The group discussed integration of this framework with the development of the new food agency.

Food poverty

The group explored issues surrounding food poverty and barriers related to this. In particular:

- Access to information about welfare – there should be consideration of how wider context changes can influence people’s situations, eg welfare reforms. More information is also required around food poverty and food crisis and how to reach people before they hit food crisis and need to access food banks.
- Access to healthy food - the group discussed the availability of food in local communities and highlighted that local stores did not always have a range of ‘edible’ healthy choices. The cost of transport to access appropriate food choices was also unsustainable for some communities, especially rural communities. This means that the more deprived areas have limited access to affordable healthy options which could exacerbate issues of food poverty and health inequalities.
- Access to resources – where healthy food is available, there are still gaps around practical activities and training on how people can prepare healthy foods. There is an assumption that people have facilities to cook healthy food or have the fuel to do so. More vulnerable households frequently lack the skills and equipment to prepare and cook basic, affordable food.
- Access to accurate nutritional information. The group also identified initiatives such as Healthy Start offer vouchers to spend on milk, plain fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables, and infant formula milk and vitamins for people on limited incomes. However, the group highlighted issues concerning lack of information and how people can access these schemes.

There was also discussion around the definition of food poverty – one definition is included in the CHFS report; Hard to Stomach (<http://www.communityfoodandhealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/hard-to-stomach-5100.pdf>). Suggestions for the food body involved including a specific research remit to understand food poverty, how to address it, and help people make healthier food choices within limited resources.

The new food body could include a research function to identify the issues, alongside a remit and responsibility to make recommendations to Scottish Government for further action. This could include mapping food poverty, making links between deprivation and food/health issues and taxation on non-essential items.

Co-ordination of services

The discussion further built on the food work undertaken at a community level and highlighted the need for co-ordination of information; a place or a national network where people can get advice, information and support, and get involved with local initiatives. The group highlighted the need for recognition of the work undertaken in communities and also mechanisms for interaction between the food body, producers, SG, local authorities, the third sector and social enterprise. This should include community development and asset-based approaches.

There are various initiatives at the moment to improve engagement and co-ordination:

- www.discoverthethirdsector.org.uk – this is a resource to build closer relationships across sectors to help improve health and social care, produce better outcomes for individuals and families, support co-production, person-centredness and preventative approaches.
- www.aliss.org – this is a directory of directories of organisations and services that aim to make it easier to share and find local self-management support.
- [MILLO](#) – this is a new ICT platform for third sector interfaces and national intermediaries in Scotland.

The Scottish Government, CHEX, Community Food and Health Scotland and Voluntary Health Scotland have also undertaken Learning Exchanges between the third sector and public sector. These exchanges involved interaction between community projects and Scottish Government. They created opportunities for structured dialogue between community-led and voluntary health organisations and civil servants, and aimed to increase the understanding of each other's role and the potential for joint working on the planning delivery of policies on health outcomes. Work to set up new Learning Exchanges is currently underway.

The group also discussed the following specific areas of co-ordination for the food body were also discussed:

- Integration with other issues, for example, alcohol use.
- Working with the Department for Work and Pensions over the impact of welfare reforms.
- Working with Local Authorities to develop education programmes.
- Working with the Health Inequalities Ministerial Task Force.
- Working with the GIRFEC team around early years. Children in Scotland are also hosting an event on healthy diet and physical activity for children on 14 May 2013. (<http://www.childreninScotland.org.uk/html/tratshow.php?ref=1787>)

Main recommendations

The general consensus of the roundtable was that a central hub was required to facilitate activities, create an evidence base and consult with the Scottish Government on what needs to be done around food advocacy, food labelling, food messaging, food poverty, structural issues relating to the food industry and the co-ordination of services. The new food body could usefully extend its remit to explore these functions.

Next steps

Scottish Government is currently undertaking a series of roundtables with other interested organisations and sectors to inform the activities of the new food body.

The consultation closes on 22 May 2013 and the group were encouraged to submit their consultation responses and detail why their suggestions would have an impact on public health. Response forms and details how to complete the forms are accessible through the Scottish Government website: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/02/2691/0>

Further information

For more information on the consultation, contact Karen McCallum-Smith at Karen.McCallum-Smith@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

For more information on Voluntary Health Scotland, contact Susan Lowes at susan.lowes@vhscotland.org.uk or visit the website www.vhscotland.org.uk

For more information on the Poverty Alliance, contact Fiona McHardy at Fiona.mchardy@povertyalliance.org or visit the website www.povertyalliance.org

Appendix 1

Organisations, interested parties, and Scottish Government departments involved in the roundtable on 2 May 2013:

British Heart Foundation
CHEX (Community Health Exchange)
Children in Scotland
Citizen Advice Scotland
Community Food & Health Scotland
Edinburgh Community Food
Edinburgh Voluntary Organisations' Council (EVOC)
Healthy Valleys
Nourish Scotland
NHS Forth Valley
Pilton Community Health Project
Poverty Alliance
Scottish Allotments & Garden Society
Scottish Government, Food & Drink Industry Division
Scottish Government, Public Health Division
Scottish Government, Quality Unit
Scottish Government, Third Sector Unit
Scottish Government, Welfare Division
The Eric Liddell Centre
The Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland (REHIS)
TRELLIS
University of Aberdeen
Voluntary Health Scotland
Wester Hailes Health Agency