



Scottish Government Consultation Response

A Healthier Scotland: Consultation on creating a new food body

May 2013

www.unitescotland.org

Industry overview

Unite is Scotland's most industrially diverse trade union and the biggest in the UK with 1.5 million members. We have a robust membership across Scotland's food and drink sector from workers in abattoirs to meat processing, agricultural employment to distillers.

Over 115,000 are employed in the Scottish food and drink industry and it supports one in five manufacturing jobs in Scotland and sustains over 1,200 companies – from small family businesses to multi-national corporations.

In 2012, Scottish food and drink exports generated a massive £5.31 billion – the second highest earning year for exports on record. Food exports amounted to just over £1 billion while the drinks industry, largely as a result of the whisky exports, was worth over £4.2 billion.¹

Standards matter in terms of product quality, safety and working conditions. Unite firmly believes the role of a Scottish food standards body and more widely, that of the Scottish government is to ensure these standards are maximised wherever possible.

The need for a new food standards body

The creation of a new Food Body for Scotland offers the Scottish Government the opportunity to ensure that robust independent regulation is established and enforced across Scotland.

The Scottish food industry is highly regarded across the world but the high standard of the product must be regulated accordingly, further enhancing the brand. At present it is most unusual for any food producers to be investigated or even less likely, prosecuted, in a mistaken view that this would damage the brand. However, we would reiterate that robust, independent regulation should be a strong selling point. In our view it is not possible to have a high quality brand with low quality standards.

We believe that the new body must ensure that its aim is to protect the consumer and uphold high standards of product quality and welfare. The only way to ensure these two criteria are met is to move to a wholly provided state delivered service.

This belief is particularly reinforced against the backdrop of austerity and industry practices which point towards serious concerns of declining standards across the sector, with serious ramifications for public health and employment standards.

¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-business-22338828>

Impact of austerity on food safety and standards

In 2010 the FSA had 2,000 employees and an annual budget of £135m but this was reduced as a result of the coalition government's spending cuts.² The FSA's budget has been cut by £11m over the past year alone, reducing its capacity to detect contaminated food.

At the same time, the swingeing scale of Government cuts to local government has seen funding for local trading standards services plummet by a third from £213 million in 2011-12 to around £140 million this year.³

This is not sustainable. Inevitably, we will see the same impact of deep budget cuts by the UK Government on the FSA as we already have on other enforcement organisations like the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) and HMRC. However, the cuts agenda is also impacting on local enforcement – a double whammy on food safety standards.

The number of council Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) in Scotland fell by 11.5% and the number of food safety officers by nearly 21% since 2009, according to the Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland (REHIS). The figures were collected from all 32 Scottish local authorities.

REHIS announced the figures as a report by Audit Scotland found the number of food safety interventions, including inspections, monitoring and surveillance, had decreased by 4% and the number of food samples analysed decreased 12 %.⁴

This was reinforced by recent research from the public sector union Unison, showing there has been an even bigger drop in other staff carrying out an enforcement role in environmental health departments, down from 507 to 423 in the same period – roughly 17%.

Invariably, this strain on resources will have consequences on issues of compliance and prevention when it comes to safety and quality standards and this raises further concern for standards in public health.

Issues of public health have already been highlighted as a result of the recent horse-meat scandal where contamination of meat products was found in the food supply chain. Industry cost-cutting, retail standards and product traceability (exacerbated by murky supply-chain practice) fuelled manipulation which led to widespread incidence of horse-meat contamination in meat products from the supermarket shelves to school-meals in Scotland.

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-21476813>

³ <http://www.ehn-online.com/news/article.aspx?id=8372>

⁴ <http://ehn.cieh.org/news/article.aspx?id=8380>

Improving working conditions in the food industry

Across Scotland's lucrative food and drink sector, workers' job security, terms and conditions are frequently under attack as a result of cost-cutting and an increasingly aggressive corporate agenda in a sector already defined by low-wages and hazardous working conditions.

In food manufacturing the last twelve months has been particularly fraught. Dutch food giant VION's decision to 'focus on its core markets in Germany and the Netherlands' resulted in the closure of the Hall's meat processing plant in Broxburn and the loss of 1,700 jobs overnight. The remainder of VION's Scottish interests in pork, poultry and red meat - covering some 1,500 -are now at the mercy of the new employer 2 Sisters.

The threat of cuts has also loomed over other renowned food companies in Scotland, notably in Dumfries and Galloway with seafood manufacturer Pinneys of Scotland in Annan and the former Caledonian Cheese Company, Lactalis in Stranraer. These companies support over 600 local jobs but have also been subject to redundancy situations as standard over the last few years as the demand for lower costs across the supply chain increases.

Not only does this impact on jobs, terms and conditions have also come under fire. Basic wages across the industry are less than £7 an hour, significantly below the Scottish Living Wage of £7.45 an hour.

This is exemplified in the basic pay agreement of the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board (SAWB) covering 25,000 workers at the coal-face of the supply chain, for 2013/14. Workers with over 26 weeks service will receive only £6.96 an hour, while workers with less than 26 weeks service (commonplace in a sector reliant on seasonal and temporary labour) will get 1p more than the national minimum wage (NMW) at £6.32 an hour.

More broadly, the food industry is also a notoriously challenging working environment where workers' health and safety is constantly under the spotlight. This ranges from mild but chronic conditions such as rhinitis and skin disorders to the other extreme such as emphysema and cancer as a result of exposure to additives and micro-organisms in the manufacturing process and supply-chain delivery.

Also, the increasing demand on production and low-cost is increasing pressure on food industry workers. A recent report by the International Union of Foodworkers Federation shows that a bullying culture and pressure to increase work speeds in the food chain is leading to reductions in clean up time, increased danger of food contamination and reluctance by workers to speak out when they witness poor practice and reduced food standards.

Working towards meaningful change

Unite supports the suggested approach for ensuring the new food body is independent from both the Government and the food industry. However, a future food standards body in Scotland must be given the teeth to carry-out the full-range of its enforcement duties, from transparency to prosecution.

Its work must also extend beyond the stated target of consumer protection and public health. The role and responsibilities should also overlap with other enforcement agencies such as HSE Scotland to ensure working conditions across the industry are upheld to the highest standards.

Furthermore, in tandem with the creation of a new food body, the Scottish Government also has crucial part to play in the improvement of the terms and conditions of workers who are pivotal to the delivery of a billion pound industry.

The scourge of low pay can be tackled with a multi-faceted approach. For example, procurement reform can ensure that all food sector companies tendering for public contracts must provide a living wage for its employees. Furthermore, the Scottish Government can commit itself to the retention of the SAWB and work with trades union and the employer's lobby to lift Scotland's 25,000 agricultural workers out of the low-pay trap.

Unite agrees that the utmost should be done to protect public health and safety and defend consumer interest. However, Scotland's food industry cannot legitimately brand itself as world-class if it is not underpinned by the highest standards for workers with regards to pay and working conditions also.

ENDS