

Tuesday, 20 July 2010

FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY TO KEEP CRUCIAL SAFETY ROLE

Public confidence in food safety issues will be protected, as the Government confirmed its intention to retain the Food Standards Agency (FSA) with a renewed focus on food safety.

The FSA in England will focus on its core remit of food safety policy and enforcement. The Department of Health will become responsible for nutrition policy in England, and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will become responsible for Country of Origin Labelling, and various other non-safety-related food labelling and food composition policies in England.

The FSA was established as a non-ministerial Government Department in 2000. Its primary purpose was to secure food safety and provide vital advice to Government and to the public; a role that the Government believes must remain independent.

Reorganising in this way will contribute to the Government's objectives to improve efficiency, and is paramount to the key priority of improving the health of the nation by creating a public health service. To achieve this coherence, some policy-based functions can be brought 'in house' to give a more coordinated approach on health and food issues.

Ministers and officials at the Department of Health and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs are working closely with the FSA to implement the following changes:

Food Standards Agency

- Retains a clearly defined departmental function focused on its core remit of food safety. This means that, on crucial issues of food safety, the independent advice from FSA experts would be final.
- Retains current responsibility for nutrition and labelling policy in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- Approximately 2,000 staff will remain at the FSA.

Lord Rooker, Chair of the FSA, said:

“Food safety and hygiene have always been at the heart of what the Agency does. They are our top priorities in protecting the interests of consumers.”

Department of Health

- Nutrition policy will be transferred to the Department of Health. This includes front of pack nutrition labelling, such as Guideline Daily Amounts.
- The transfer of nutrition policy into the Department of Health directly contributes to the Government’s plans for public health. In the long-term, bringing policies ‘in house’ will enable better services to be created and clearer information to be given to the public.
- The Department of Health will, as a result, be able to press industry to contribute more on improving the health of the nation. This includes reformulation, and provision of nutrition information in supermarkets and restaurants.
- Approximately 70 policy posts will move to the Department from the FSA.

Secretary of State for Health, Andrew Lansley, said:

“Our ambition is to create a public health system that truly helps people live longer and healthier lives. To achieve it, we can’t stand still. Changes are inevitable.

“It’s absolutely crucial for the Food Standards Agency to continue providing independent expert advice to people about food safety. But bringing nutrition policy into the Department makes sense. It will enable a clear, consistent public health service to be created, as our Public Health White Paper later this year will set out.

“I believe – in the-long term – we’ll have a clearer and less bureaucratic system for public health. The end result will focus on turning expert advice and support into better health.”

Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs

- Country of Origin Labelling will transfer to Defra. This will support delivery of the Government’s commitment to deliver

honesty in food labelling and ensure that consumers can be confident about where their food comes from.

- It will also support delivery of one of Defra's top priorities: Ministers' firm commitment to support and develop British farming and encourage sustainable food production, and promote increased domestic food production.
- Other policy areas that will transfer to Defra include composition policy which is about agreeing the components and standards for characterising products such as honey, jam, chocolate, ice-cream or meat content of sausages).
- Approximately 25 policy posts will move to Defra from the FSA.

Caroline Spelman, Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said:

“It makes perfect sense to bring policy on food origin and associated labelling to Defra to sit with wider food policy. The Government has made very clear its commitment to clear and honest labelling – particularly origin labelling.

“These changes will enable the FSA to focus on food safety and it is right that this should stay in the hands of an independent body.”

Notes to editors

1. The following policies in England will be brought into the Department of Health: leading on nutritional labelling and EU negotiations on this; health and nutrition claims, dietetic food and food supplements; calorie information in catering establishments; reformulation to reduce salt, saturated fat and sugar levels in food and reducing portion size (including in catering); nutrition surveys and nutrition research; scientific advice and secretariat to Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN).
2. The following policies in England will be brought into the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: food labelling, where this does not relate to food safety or nutrition; food composition standards and labelling, where unrelated to food safety; and leading on EU negotiations for all non-safety aspects of food labelling, except for nutrition.

3. The FSA will remain a non-ministerial department reporting to Parliament through DH ministers. All three departments are working together closely on this to ensure a smooth transition. For Defra, the policy transfer will be immediate, with affected staff reporting to Defra ministers and joining the Food Policy Unit at Defra from today, though they will continue to work from the FSA offices for now. Physical moves for staff between offices will take a little longer, and the departments will work closely to coordinate these and limit disruption for staff. Exact timing for the transfer from FSA to the Department of Health, as well as the exact numbers of staff and posts transferred to both Departments will be available in due course.
4. These changes can be put in place without primary legislation
5. For media enquiries please contact the Department of Health news desk on 020 7210 5221.