



OPEN  MOUTHED

**REPORT FROM THE SEMINAR ON THE
IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSED
FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY
FOR THOSE WORKING AT COMMUNITY LEVEL.
HELD IN THE RENFIELD ST STEPHEN'S CENTRE,
GLASGOW ON 5 FEBRUARY 1998**

**ORGANISED BY
SCOTTISH COMMUNITY DIET PROJECT**

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INTRODUCTION

Martyn Evans, Director, Scottish Consumer Council

The Scottish Consumer Council has a long standing interest in the price, availability and quality of food. We are clear that the views and experience of consumers are critical to ensure food producers and food retailers are delivering the right products at the right price to consumers. I regret to say that all too often these consumer views and experiences have not been heard or listened too. The result is a serious lack of confidence in the food chain. In addition consumers with the least purchasing power in the market: low income consumers: those living in remote and rural Scotland: those with special dietary needs, have found themselves liable to be eased out of effective and efficient food distribution markets and left with very poor access to affordable and healthy food.

There is a great deal of pride taken in the mass production and mass distribution of food within the UK. We are often told that “margins” on food -in other words the profit- is one of the lowest in the developed world. However low margins can have a cost in terms of choice, availability and local production as small scale operators are eased out. Many of you here today are working in food initiative which seek to redress the imbalance in the food markets that have arisen in the second half of the 20th Century.

What we are going to hear about and discuss together today is the proposal for taking one major part of the food story into the next millennium. The Food Standards Agency is

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intended to be a powerful new body which will be responsible for protecting public health in relation to food by promoting a safe food supply and ensuring consumers have the information they need to make informed choices about the food they eat.

Will it be relevant to you and your group? Will it be accessible to you and your group? Will it have the right powers and remit? Who will control it? It is to try to answer these questions, and many more, that the Scottish Community Diet Project has organised today.

I am very pleased to have two speakers of such quality to start off our day. We shall hear first from Stephen Rooke, Chief Food and Dairy Officer with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries at the Scottish Office and Leslie Sutherland, Education Officer with the Transport and General Workers Union.



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PRESENTATION

Stephen Rooke, Chief Food & Dairy Officer, Dept of Agriculture, Environment & Fisheries, Scottish Office.

Stephen gave a detailed and factual summary of the White Paper proposals.

THE AGENCY'S GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. The essential aim of the Agency is the protection of public health in relation to food.
2. The Agency's assessments of food standards and safety will be unbiased and based on the best available scientific advice, provided by experts invited in their own right to give independent advice.
3. The Agency will make decisions and take action on the basis that:
 - the Agency's decisions and actions should be proportionate to the risk; pay due regard to costs as well as benefits to those affected by them; and avoid over-regulation;
 - the Agency should act independently of specific sectoral interests
4. The Agency will strive to ensure that the general public have adequate, clearly presented information in order to allow them to make informed choices. In doing this, the Agency will aim to avoid raising unjustified alarm.
5. The Agency's decision making processes will be open, transparent and consultative, in order that interested parties, including representatives of the public:
 - have an opportunity to make their views known;
 - can see the basis on which decisions have been taken;

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- are able to reach an informed judgement about the quality of the Agency's processes and decisions.
6. Before taking action, the Agency will consult widely, including representatives of those who would be affected, unless the need for urgent action to protect public health makes this impossible.
 7. In its decisions and actions, the Agency will aim to achieve clarity and consistency of approach.
 8. The Agency's decisions and actions will take full account of the obligations of the UK under domestic and international law.
 9. The Agency will aim for efficiency and economy in delivering an effective operation.

WHAT THE AGENCY WILL DO

Policy Advice and Legislation

The Agency will be responsible for providing policy advice to Ministers on food safety and standards and aspects of nutrition, for preparing legislation, and for providing the public with information and advice.

Research and Surveillance

The Agency will base its policies and decisions on the best available science.

General food law enforcement

Local authorities will remain responsible for day-to-day food law enforcement. The Agency will work with them to encourage consistency in enforcement practice.

Public information and education

The Agency will work closely with other bodies in providing public information and undertaking health promotion and education activities. The Agency will have its own expert Communications Unit, which will develop a two-way exchange of information with the public at large, consumer organisations, industry, enforcement bodies and the media.



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WHERE THE AGENCY WILL HAVE A ROLE

Food Safety on the Farm	Surveillance/Control of Pathogens in Live Animals
Animal Feedingstuffs	Pesticides/Veterinary Medicines
Food Hygiene	Meat/Milk Hygiene
Food-borne Illness	Novel Foods (inc Genetically Modified foods)
Food Additives	Chemical Contaminants in Food
Radiological Safety	Food Intolerance
Food Emergencies	Food Standards
	Nutrition

The Agency will provide authoritative and unbiased information to help people to decide for themselves what they wish to eat. It will be responsible for providing authoritative 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 claims, and dietary supplements sold as food.

The Agency will work together with Health Departments in defining the health education message on nutritional issues and in developing policy advice to Ministers.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE AGENCY

The Agency will be a single public body comprising a Commission of no more than twelve 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 that deal with food and, as a general rule, will consult widely with all interested groups before taking action.

The staff of the Agency will be civil servants.

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SCOTLAND

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

A new advisory committees will be set up in Scotland to advise the UK Commission on food standards and safety matters as they affect Scotland.

A Scottish Executive will be established, reporting to the Chief Executive of the UK Agency.

FUNDING THE AGENCY

Its annual expenditure is estimated to be in excess of £100 million, part of which will continue to be recovered through charges to industry.

The Government intends to shift the burden of the cost of food safety work from the taxpayer to the industry. It therefore intends to develop proposals for a fee-based registration or licensing scheme for food businesses which would cover the costs associated with the Agency.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The period of public consultation on the White Paper will end on 16 March. Responses to the White Paper will influence the drafting of a Bill, which will be published for a further round of consultation during 1998. The Bill will be introduced in Parliament as soon as time permits. This will not be before the 1998/99 session, and the Agency will therefore not be launched until late 1999 at the earliest.



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PRESENTATION

***Lesley Sutherland, Education Officer,
Transport & General Workers Union
(Scottish Region)***

Lesley began by highlighting her organisations interest in the subject of food safety. She pointed out that T&G members are involved at every stage of the food chain; on farms, in slaughter houses, in processing plants, transporting food, transporting the public to food, in shops, staffing community projects and voluntary organisations working on food and of course as consumers. Lesley therefore saw it as no surprise when the largest conference on food safety in recent years was hosted by her organisation last autumn.

Lesley explained the difference between a **Green Paper** designed to encourage discussion/consultation and a **White Paper** outlining what the government proposes put before Parliament in a Bill. She described the current White Paper as *having green tinges* as it contained a number of areas, including nutrition, where the government was openly inviting suggestions.

She proceeded to give a number of tips on effective *lobbying*.

- ✎ Think clearly about **who** you are trying to influence, **what** you are trying to achieve, **where** your efforts should be concentrated, and **when** your efforts will be most effective. In other words, discover **who** will be making the decisions, decide **what** decisions you would like to see them make, and target **where** and **when** these decisions will be made.

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- ✂ Ensure that the information you provide is clear and to the point.
- ✂ Make sure you lobby in favour of any aspects of the **White Paper** you support as well as **against** any aspects you disagree with and any **gaps** in the proposals you have identified.
- ✂ Not everyone will have heard of your group so **explain who you are** and what you do.
- ✂ If you are part of networks or alliances, encourage a response **at all appropriate levels**.
- ✂ **Be confident** in your own knowledge.
- ✂ **Send copies** of your response to the White Paper to relevant bodies (Scottish Community Diet Project, your local MP, the media).

Lesley concluded by encouraging everyone to have their say and to ensure that their views are put across as effectively as possible.



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REPORT-BACK

from the workshops.

Everyone split into four workshops and were asked to look at how the proposals in the White Paper responded to the issues of public confidence and community involvement. The groups were also asked to come up with an aspect of the proposals that would enhance confidence and involvement.

A common theme from all the workshops was that **this was a beginning**. No-one argued that the Food Standards Agency would, could or even should provide all the answers but it was at least a start.

It was similarly pointed out by most workshops that the proof of the pudding lay in the eating. **How the Food Standards Agency would operate in practise** was frequently raised. Ensuring consultation was an ongoing and two-way process and not as and when required by the agency was highlighted by several workshops. Related to this point was the **change of culture** that had to take place within both organisations and staff. This was recognised as a major challenge with so much of the staff and structures moving en masse from existing central government institutions. The experience of community groups currently attempting a dialogue with a variety of civil service bureaucracies further emphasised the need to develop **new appropriate channels for constructive dialogue** which took account of language, presentation and timing.

The **prioritising of public interest** in the make-up of the commission was welcomed but there was doubt over what type of figures would be considered as representing the public interest

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and how informed and accessible they would be.

Access and availability to a healthy varied diet was a major concern by many present but was felt not to have been considered in the White Paper despite the welcome inclusion of **nutrition** in the proposals. It was recognised by many that there may be pressure from the major retailers to reverse nutrition's inclusion and a general feeling that to do so would dangerously lessen public interest in and appreciation of the proposed agency.

Most workshops were confused by what was meant by the Food Standards Agency basing its activities on **the best available scientific advice** partly due to apparent recent inconsistencies and also the way the media have handled the dissemination of information. Independent research backed by understandable and well circulated disclosure of findings was felt would help tackle a growing feeling of confusion with and exclusion from current food standards debates.

The general feeling was that the proposals were not a solution to the many barriers currently being confronted by community food initiatives nor were they intended to be. However, they did represent **an opportunity** to bring those previously excluded into setting national standards for food and diet in this country at a time when a new parliament is making similar noises about new ways of broadening involvement in all aspects of Scottish life. Finding the right mechanisms/structures and the political will to apply them was felt to be fundamental as to whether this opportunity is grasped or squandered.



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TIMETABLE

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PARTICIPANTS

Jo Aitkenhead, Gorebridge Health Project
Annette Beattie, Ferguslie Community Health Project
John Brennan, Edinburgh Community Food Initiative
Lynn Brenne, Cambuslang Health and Food Project
Mary Brown, Viewpark Food Co-op
Hamilton Clelland, Craigend Resource Centre
Andrina Collin, Community Dietitian, Ayrshire and Arran
Teresa Donaldson, One Parent Families Scotland
David Dunn, Green City Wholefoods
Maureen El-Quiache, One Parent Families Scotland
David Forrester, Retired
Debbie Gardner, South West Community Health Project
Irene Gibson, Orbiston Neighbourhood Centre
John Groome, Orbiston Neighbourhood Centre
Margaret Harris, Whitfield Health Project
John Jones, Ferguslie Community Health Project
AnneMarie Kelly, South West Community Health Project
Larry Kelly, Westhorn Food Co-op
Louise Lawson, Cambuslang Health and Food Project
M Maclean, Viewpark Food Co-op
Allan Martin, Donnfield Surgery, Dundee
Gordon McAlonan, Ferguslie Community Health Project
H McGowan, Ferguslie Community Health Project
S McLachlan, Gorebridge Food Co-op
Sheila McMahon, Whitfield Health & Information Project
Janell Michie, One Parent Families Scotland
Stuart Millar, Greater Easter House CHP
Catherine Moore, Gorebridge Food Co-op
Fay Moran, Gorebridge Food Co-op

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Helen Muir, Foxbar

Annette Munro, Blackthorn Marketing

Ina Nicol, Gorebridge Food Co-op

Susanne Niven, Health Promotion Department, Greater
Glasgow Health Board

Ruth Angrove, Retired

Doreen Polson, Foxbar

Brian Power, Craigend Resource Centre

Moira Pupkiss, Viewpark Food Co-op

Elizabeth Pupkiss, Viewpark Food Co-op

Patricia Reid, Lanarkshire Health Board

Christine Reilly, Ferguslie Community Health Project

Jean Robertson, Craigend Resource Centre

Liz Simpson, Ferguslie Community Health Project

Simone Smith, Health Promotion South Team, Coughlen
Hospital

Ian Stewart, Gorebridge Food Co-op

Lesley Sutherland, T & G Scotland

Mary Swan, Craigend Resources Group

Barbara Troop, Sighthill Community Centre Food
Project

David Walker, Maryhill Community Health Project

Jackie Wilson, Whitfield Health and Information



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Bill Gray
National Project Officer



Jacquie MacIntyre
Administrative Assistant

Scottish Community Diet Project
c/o Scottish Consumer Council
Royal Exchange House
100 Queen Street
Glasgow G1 3DN

Tel: 0141 226 5261 Fax: 0141 221 0731 Minicom: 0141 226 8459
Email: scot_cc@compuserve.com



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