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MID-WESTERN
HEALTH BOARD

2nd April 2002

To: Chairman & Each Member
Mid-Western Health Board

Report No:
Item No on Agenda

Food Safety Authority of Ireland – Annual Report 2000

Dear Member,

For your information the following is a synopsis of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's Annual Report for 2000 which was received recently by the Mid-Western Health Board.

Introduction

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland recently published its Annual Report for the twelve month period ended 31st December, 2000. This report is in accordance with Section 25 of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland Act, 1998.

The ultimate aim of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland is to protect consumer health from risks associated with food consumption. The FSAI is an independent, science based organisation, that protects consumer health through enforcement of legislation, monitoring hygiene practices and enhancing food safety standards.

Statements from the Chairman and Chief Executive

Within this report the Chairman and Chief Executive highlighted a number of key issues from 2000 and priorities for the years ahead. These issues include:-

- The FSAI have worked to generate a clear understanding within the food industry of their primary responsibility for producing and preparing safe food.
- The important aspect of communicating information to all audiences on the need for legal compliance.
- The year 2000 was the first complete year of operation of the service contracts. It has enabled the FSAI to gain clear information on the extent of the food industry in Ireland, the number and diversity of food businesses, the level and frequency of inspections and the extent of legal compliance.
- While it is essential to monitor food production, it is equally important to put the risk of food poisoning in perspective – attention to detail across the food chain will reduce the incidence of food poisoning.

- In late 2000 the FSAI set up the Food Safety Consultative Council which reflects a cross section of Irish industry and consumers, whose knowledge and views will feed into the policies of the authority.

The priorities established by the authority for 2000 were namely:-

- To co-ordinate and work with the 46 official agencies responsible for enforcing food safety legislation, with the ultimate aim of developing a multi-disciplinary, seamless inspectorate operating in a consistent fashion across the food chain.
- To re-enforce to the food industry its legal responsibility for producing safe food by promoting food safety management systems and high standards.
- To facilitate training for industry and the official agencies to improve and harmonise standards.
- To implement an effective communication programme to raise awareness of the risks of food-borne illness and how those risks should be managed to optimise consumer protection.
- To utilise the Authority's scientific advisory structure to ensure best scientific advice influences the organisation's policy decisions.

The Irish Food Inspection System

The Authority manages its responsibility for the enforcement of food safety legislation through a series of service contracts with 46 official agencies. These contracts, established in July 1999, specify an agreed level and standard of food safety activity that the agencies will undertake under contract to the Authority.

A broad range of professional groups and administrators are involved in food safety activities and they have unique and complimentary skills and expertise. The Authority has provided the forum for them to meet and work together as an effective team to protect Irish consumers.

Number of Food Premises Inspected under Service Contract during 2000	
Health Boards	36,000 (95.9%)
Department of Marine and Natural Resources	350 (0.9%)
Department of Agriculture, Food & Rural Development	600 (1.6%)
Local Authority Veterinary Service	600 (1.6%)
Total number of food premises	37,550

No. of establishments inspected in 2000	
Limerick	190
Clare	253
North Tipperary	233
Total	676

No. of inspections carried out in 2000	
Limerick	1,365
Clare	1,195
North Tipperary	873
Total	3,433

No. of establishments inspected in 2001*	
Limerick	160
Clare	388
North Tipperary	239
Total	787

No. of inspections carried out in 2001*	
Limerick	710
Clare	1,698
Tipperary	796
Total	3,204

* Decrease due to staff shortages and increased workload in processing QMS (new computerised system in recording inspections).

Strategic Partnership Health Boards

In partnership with the Health Boards, through the service delivery outlined in its service contracts, over 36,000 food businesses in the country are overseen by the FSAI's inspection remit. Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's work is largely focused at the start of the food chain through its work with primary producers and the inspection of food plants manufacturing products of animal origin.

Sampling

Sampling Programmes agreed between Environmental Health Service and Laboratory ensure compliance with Food Safety Legislation.

While the vast majority of premises inspected are retail and catering businesses, it also includes many plants manufacturing foods of non-animal origin. In 2000, almost 37,000 inspections were carried out by the Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) of the Health Boards. This involved a team of 274 EHOs, supported by the expertise of three public analyst's laboratories and seven microbiology food laboratories operated by the Health Boards. 58% of food premises inspected were found to be compliant, while the remainder were found to have varying levels of infringements. In the main, these were related to poor hygiene standards and failure to formally adopt food safety management systems based on the principles of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) system. Appropriate action was taken on foot of each inspection.

In addition to routine inspections and sampling, the Health Boards also respond to consumer complaints by follow-up visits and additional sampling.

HACCP Manual

With the establishment of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point System the Environmental Health Service within the Mid-Western Health Board set up a Sub-Committee to investigate and produce a HACCP Manual in order to provide guidance to Food Businesses in the region. This manual was produced and circulated to businesses in 2001 and a series of Seminars were held throughout the region.

The following agencies also work in partnership with the FSAI on food safety policies and initiatives.

Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

This Organisation's input is largely focused at the start of the food chain. In addition to the food safety activity performed under service contract to the Authority, DAFRD are involved in a range of additional activities on farms and feed mills to enhance consumer protection.

Local Authority Veterinary Service

Local Authority veterinary inspectors, under service contract to the Authority, have responsibility for inspecting small abattoirs and small meat manufacturing plants supplying the domestic market.

In addition to work under service contract in the meat hygiene area, local authority inspectors also ensure liquid milk suppliers operate in compliance with the law.

Department of the Marine and Natural Resources (DMNR)

During the year, 28 sea fisheries officers supervised almost 350 premises, engaged in the processing, handling and storage of fish under service contract to the Authority. Department officials also inspect the coastal production areas for shellfish, with assistance from the EHOs in the Health Boards.

Office of the Director of Consumer Affairs

ODCA is responsible for the enforcement of the Labelling Regulations under service contract to the Authority.

ENFORCEMENT

Ensuring that industry complies with food safety legislation is an ongoing focus of the Authority's work. Enforcement is performed under service contract by the official agencies, which have an enhanced range of powers under the Food Safety Authority of Ireland Act, 1998.

Enforcement Notices – FSAI Act, 1998

- **Improvement Notice** – Issued, where in the opinion of the authorised officer;
 - a) any activity involving the handling, preparation, processing, manufacturing, distribution, storage or selling of food or
 - b) the condition of a premises (or part thereof) where this activity takes place is such that if it persists, it will or is likely to pose a risk to public health.
- **Improvement Order** – Issued by the District Court if an Improvement Notice is not complied with.
- **Closure Order** – Issued where in the opinion of the authorised officer, there is, or there is likely to be, a grave and immediate danger to public health at, or on the food premises (or part thereof).
- **Prohibition Order** – Issued where in the opinion of the authorised officer the activities (handling, processing, disposal, manufacturing, storage, distribution or selling food) involve, or are likely to involve, a serious risk to public health from a particular product, class, batch or item of food. The effect is to prohibit the sale of the product, either temporarily or permanently.

Surveillance – National Co-Ordinated Programme

The Authority continually monitors the safety of food in the Irish food chain, in conjunction with 46 official agencies and associated laboratories. Monitoring and surveillance of food for chemical and microbiological contaminants is essential for the protection of public health. The objectives of the Authority in relation to surveillance of foodstuffs include; identifying contaminated product and removing it from the market; assisting outbreak investigators in targeting food for sampling, as well as comparing microbiological quality of imported and domestic foods; definitively identifying pathogens and comparing pathogens in food with those in humans and animals.

Outbreak Surveillance:

The investigation of food-borne illness is an important component of the Authority's role in protecting public health. Since 1998, the Authority has maintained a national database of all outbreaks of infectious intestinal disease investigated by Health Boards, including food-borne outbreaks and is currently working with the National Disease Surveillance Centre (NDSC) and staff in the Health Boards to enhance the surveillance system.

During 2000, 36 outbreaks of infectious intestinal disease were notified and investigated, involving approximately 1,380 people, of whom 76 were hospitalised and 1 died. Food was suspected as the mode of transmission in 21 (58%) outbreaks. A food vehicle was identified in 13 of these outbreaks.

Industry Initiatives

The ultimate responsibility for the production of safe food rests primarily with the food industry. During 2000, the Authority carried out a number of initiatives to raise awareness in the food industry of its legal obligations to produce safe food of high standards. The aim is to re-enforce to industry that it must have appropriate systems in place to ensure food produced, processed, distributed and marketed is safe. This increased emphasis on industry's responsibilities has, and will continue to influence the role of the regulators.

During the year, the Authority produced the first three in a series of codes of practice documents to reflect the best current practice, and to ensure a more uniform interpretation and application of the law across all sectors and all regions.

During the year, the Authority completed its survey to investigate the level of application of Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems in all sectors of the Irish food industry. HACCP identifies potential hazards to food safety at each stage of production and specifies measures for control. The EU Hygiene of Foodstuffs Regulations, 2000 requires that a food business must ensure that every step in the activities of the business, critical to food safety, is identified, and adequate safety procedures are put in place.

Training Compliance

Food Safety training is an essential component of every food business in ensuring a food safety culture is developed – it is also a legal obligation for employers. In 2000, the Authority devised a food safety training policy to clarify the principles and strategies which were adopted in relation to training objectives for industry. In line with this policy, the Foods Safety Training Council (FSTC) was established bringing together industry, food safety training providers and the Authority to set new agreed level of skills required by employees working in the food industry. 60 representatives from a diverse range of organisations and food sectors are

involved in the Council, which set standards for training in retail, food service and manufacturing businesses.

Communications and Information

During 2000, a large constituent of the Authority's work focused on the provision of appropriate information and advice on food safety practices to consumers and to distinct food industry audiences. However, towards the end of the year, the newly established Food Safety Promotion Board took over the remit of communicating and promoting information to the consumer. The Authority now primarily focuses its activities in this area on key sectors of the food chain to highlight the risks of food-borne disease, provide information on outbreaks and advise on how these risks should be prevented and controlled.

New Functions

The Authority is now the contact point in Ireland for the *European Rapid Alert System for Foodstuffs (RASFF)*. This system operated by the EU, facilitates the speedy exchange of urgent information to Member States on food products that could present a serious and grave risk to consumers.

Quality in Environmental Health Services

The Environmental Health Service within the Mid-Western Health Board was awarded the ISO 9002 accreditation. The service complies with the conditions of standard operating and other procedures laid down in the Quality Management System for the service along with the adaptation of codes of practice in regard to inspections, outbreak management and water contamination incident protocols. The latter were developed in co-operation with the Local Authorities.

Local Environmental Health Officers are involved in the development of standard operating procedures and guidance notes for:-

- Outbreak control/sporadic food poisoning investigations (QSM/FSAI)
- Control of Food Imports (QMS/FSAI)
- The classification of infringement during food inspections (FSAI)
- Standards for catering facilities in Bed and Breakfast establishments
- Inter-agency protocol for dealing with Drinking Water Quality and Contamination Incidents Control (local Environmental Health Officers/County Council personnel)

FSAI Service Contract

The Environmental Health Officers, Public Health Laboratory Services and the Public Health Department of the Mid-Western Health Board have and continue to protect consumer health of people in the region. This is achieved through the achieving of food safety standards and legislation enforcement and monitoring.

The Service Contract between the Mid-Western Health Board and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland has enhanced awareness of Food Safety. It has led to quarterly liaison meetings with the FSAI and the Mid-Western Health Board. There is now a greater standardisation of inspections, and the guidance notes issued by the FSAI have been instrumental in this. The service contract has encouraged increased linkages between the Environmental Health Service and the Laboratory Service. The contract has heightened the understanding of the need for additional staffing in this area, and the Board have been approved for additional staff in this regard.

Inspection targets set out in the previous and existing contract, has proven difficult to achieve and this situation has been exacerbated by the difficulties in recruiting Environmental Health Officers. It is hoped that the development of the service contracts will take into account the need for out-of-hours work, outdoor events, registrations, food alerts, product recalls and advisory work.

The new contract will hopefully allow for a mechanism to take account of the resource implications of new legislation.

The Board is represented in the process of developing a new contract and issues such as resource implications of the new legislation will be addressed. Other issues such as registrations, food alerts, product recalls and advisory work will be highlighted during this process.

I would like to acknowledge the significant contribution and input by the Board's Environmental Health Service which includes management, officers and staff in implementing the service contract in conjunction with the FSAI. I would also like to thank the Public Health Laboratory management and staff for their analysis and surveillance work in this area.

Signed:

**James Conway,
Asst. Chief Executive Officer.**