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Food Safety
AUTHORITY OF IRELAND

The Introduction of Service Contracts Reaction and Response

APRIL 2000

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A chronology of food scares and threats to public health has damaged consumer confidence in the safety of the food supply, in industry's commitment to producing safe food and in the regulatory agencies' ability to ensure food businesses comply with the law. Across the EU each Member State is reviewing how it implements its food safety control programmes. A series of independent food safety agencies have been created and more are on the way with a pan-European agency scheduled for 2002.

Ireland was the first Member State to create a new agency, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI). Accountable to the Minister for Health and Children, the FSAI is a science based consumer protection agency. A key objective of the FSAI is to develop a culture of food safety in Ireland so that Irish consumers and purchasers of Irish food abroad can have the utmost confidence in our standards and controls.

In Ireland, the food safety inspection system was fragmented with responsibilities dispersed over 48 agencies each working independently of other agencies on a segment of the food chain.

Under the Food Safety Authority of Ireland Act, 1998 responsibilities for enforcement of food safety standards rests with the FSAI. This responsibility is discharged via service contracts with all the official agencies involved. It is hoped that by co-ordinating all food safety control activity through service contracts that a seamless inspection service can be developed with no gaps in the continuum from farm to fork. Over 1,900 people are involved, whole time and part time, in food safety activities and the range of skills and abilities is formidable.

Effectively, harnessing the innate enthusiasm and abilities of these staff will ultimately determine whether this "seamless inspection service" becomes a reality. The achievements possible by the agencies working together as agents of the FSAI will far exceed the sum of the individual contributions. Together we can and will achieve change and raise standards in all sectors of the food industry.

I thank all the staff in the frontline agencies for their patience, perseverance and constructive suggestions. We have encountered difficulties and over the coming years we will encounter more. However, none of them are insurmountable and if we work together we have the critical mass that can make a difference.

*Dr Patrick G. Wall
Chief Executive
Food Safety Authority of Ireland*

1.1 Background

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) is responsible for the enforcement of food safety legislation in Ireland. This responsibility is discharged through a series of service contracts. The FSAI has entered into a service contract with the forty one official agencies, which prior to the establishment of the FSAI, had been separately responsible for the implementation of sectoral food safety controls. Each of these organisations now operates as an official agent of the FSAI.

The service contracts were agreed and signed following a period of extensive consultation and negotiation between all relevant parties. The contracts came into force on 5 July 1999 and will operate for an initial period of three and a half years. These contracts provide a mechanism for the discharge by the Authority of its functions without any disruption to existing agency staffing and structures. At present approximately 1,900 people are involved in the delivery of the national food safety control programme of which the service contracts form a vital part. Details of the grades and numbers of staff involved are given in Appendix 1.

1.2 Introduction of the Service Contracts to Official Agency Staff

The interval was short between the final agreement on the service contracts and their coming into operation. The Authority believed that clear and proper understanding of the contracts by all persons involved in their implementation was critical to the success of the future collaboration between it and its official agencies. Accordingly the Authority, in collaboration with the official agencies hosted nineteen one day introductory meetings throughout the country between October 1999 and March 2000. All frontline staff were invited to attend. Information on the dates, locations and attendance are given in Appendix 2.

The objectives of the meetings were:

- to share the vision of the Authority with frontline staff working in the official agencies
- to introduce and explain the service contracts
- to receive feedback, seek opinions and hear the issues of concern from frontline staff in relation to food safety in general and in particular the service contracts.

For many of the frontline staff it was the first time they had met colleagues working in different disciplines within the field of food safety.

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of this report is to highlight many of the issues raised at the introductory meetings and the Authority's response to those issues. This report will also serve as a useful resource in the operation, management and review of the service contracts.

1.4 Consultation Process

For the Authority the introductory meetings were an important and invaluable consultation exercise to augment the consultations undertaken prior to the signing of the service contracts.

The consultation process, which resulted in the elaboration and agreement on the contents of the service contracts, was the result of nine months extensive negotiation between all the relevant parties. The process began with wide-scale informal discussions that led to formal requests to the official agencies for nominees to a sixteen member Service Contract Steering Committee which was formed in September 1998. The agencies represented on the Steering Committee were as follows:

- Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development
- Department of Health and Children
- Department of Marine and Natural Resources
- Department of Finance
- Department of Environment and Local Government
- Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
- Health Boards
- Local Authorities
- Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland
- The Office of Director of Consumer Affairs
- The State Laboratory

This Committee considered the concept and content of service contracts. It also established a number of Advisory Groups to look in detail at the following areas:

- Health Boards - food hygiene inspections and surveillance
- Health Boards - outbreak control
- Health Boards - health promotion and training
- Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development - meat hygiene and animal surveillance
- Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development - milk and dairy products
- Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development - eggs and egg products
- Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development - plant products, pesticide residues and feed mills
- Department of Environment and Local Government, and Local Authorities
- Department of Marine and Natural Resources.

The membership of each of these Advisory Groups was both multidisciplinary and multi-agency. It included staff involved directly in service delivery and also a number of industry representatives. In total, seventy people participated in the work of the Advisory Groups.

The terms of reference for the Advisory Groups were as follows:

- to develop and document standards of food safety activity that official agencies will perform in order to comply with existing legislation and to ensure protection of the public's health
- to advise on the most efficient and effective way of delivering these standards
- to identify and suggest solutions for any gaps in the provision of food safety controls in the food chain, from farm to fork.

The Service Contract Steering Committee produced the draft service contract document for all agencies. The Advisory Groups' reports formed the basis of the schedules to the specific contracts for each agency. Draft service contracts were then presented to each agency for its consideration. The final contracts were signed to coincide with the coming into force of Part IV of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland Act, 1998 in July 1999.

1.5 Introductory Meetings

The nineteen introductory meetings all followed the same format. Programme details for the meetings are in Appendix 3. The morning session was a series of presentations by representatives of the official agencies and the FSAI, while the afternoon sessions consisted of agency specific workshops at which service contracts were considered in detail. The meetings concluded with a plenary session and a summation of the conclusions from the workshops. The Authority is grateful for the active participation of all official agency staff. The Authority would also like to acknowledge the active support and participation of Mr Ned O'Keeffe TD, Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development and Dr. Tom Moffatt, Minister of State at the Department of Health and Children.

The remainder of this report is based on the responses of agency staff to the service contracts, the issues raised by them and the Authority's response.

1.6 Issues Raised

Most of the workshops consisted of open discussion in which many issues surrounding the service contracts were raised. These discussions proved very valuable to the Authority in highlighting areas of concern and matters that need to be addressed. Many technical points about the interpretation and application of food legislation arose. While it would not be possible to address all of them in this report, the FSAI has nevertheless undertaken to provide general guidance notes to official agencies on the application of food legislation (see 4.1). A programme of work in this area is underway which should address and clarify the points raised.

For the purposes of this report, the issues of concern that arose are considered under the following headings:

Service contracts contents

- Contract variation
- Contract scope
- Hygiene education
- Consultation
- Time scales and targets
- Resources
- Liaison with the FSAI

Contract monitoring

- Audits
- Reports
- Compatibility of IT

Contract support

- Legislation and guidance notes
- Quality management systems

Food control activities

- Seamless inspection service
- Role of industry
- Shifting emphasis from trade considerations to public health
- Inspections
- Responsibility for activities in the marine sector
- Inspection of state and public authority premises
- HACCP
- Prosecutions
- Food alerts
- Food importation

Agency capacity and capability

- Laboratory services
- Testing facilities for *E. coli* O157
- Outbreak control
- EHOs as food specialists
- Research
- Out-of-hours cover

Communications

- Zoonosis Groups
- Training of official agency staff
- Training of food industry staff
- Communications with official agency staff

Other issues

- Wild game
- Food hygiene regulations – appeals
- Small cutting plants
- Water
- On-farm activity
- Certificates of appointment
- Food transport vehicles
- Food Safety Promotion Board

2.1 Contract Variation

The issue

Many agency staff were concerned that the service contracts had been finalised and agreed by the time they had seen them and therefore they did not have an opportunity to consider those aspects which affected them.

FSAI response

Each service contract contains a clause on contract variation as all contracting parties anticipated that over the course of the contract period, and in the light of experience, the need to make amendments or additions would arise. Contracts may be reviewed annually and appropriate variations made as required. The Authority is also considering the usefulness of developing rolling contracts with the agencies, that is, each contract would be subject to periodic review and then agreed for a further period of three years. However, any variation will be made only by agreement between the Authority and the agency.

2.2 Contract Scope

The issue

Many official agency staff pointed to the fact that much activity related to food control is not provided for in the service contracts. For example, animal surveillance and human surveillance are areas of activity for which there is no contractual arrangement.

FSAI response

The reason is that only those activities prescribed in Section 46 of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland Act, 1998 can form part of a contract. Human disease surveillance is not among the issues listed in Section 46 and therefore not included. It is a function of the National Disease Surveillance Centre and the Food Safety Promotion Board. The Authority will work closely with these two bodies and will use the information provided by both.

Animal surveillance is the responsibility of the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. The FSAI will liaise closely with the Department on the monitoring and control of the relevant zoonotic pathogens.

2.3 Hygiene Education

The issue

Currently the service contracts do not include any reference to the ongoing hygiene education and training services provided by environmental health officers and others.

FSAI response

At the time the contracts were signed, such activity could not legally be part of the contract as it was not specified in Section 46 of the FSAI Act, 1998. This section has since been amended by the British Irish Agreement Act, 1999 and consequently hygiene education is an activity which will form part of all future and amended contracts. The Authority would encourage official agencies who carry out hygiene training to maintain their current commitment.

2.4 Consultation

The issue

Some agency staff were dissatisfied with the level of consultation afforded them before the contracts were agreed.

FSAI response

As indicated earlier, the Authority believed it had made extensive efforts to engage in wide ranging consultation with all agencies. Responsibility for consultation with staff is also a matter for the official agencies. The Authority accepts that the level of consultation with all groups of staff in the official agencies may not have been sufficient for their needs. The Authority believes that the introductory meetings and the appointment of FSAI staff to act as contact points with the agencies are also a part of the overall consultation process, albeit after the service contracts were introduced. However the Authority acknowledges the need for improved on-going consultation and will endeavour to make the process as inclusive as possible. The Authority is available to meet all groups and welcomes comments and submissions on any aspects of the contracts.

2.5 Time Scales and Targets

The issue

Questions were raised about the time scales and targets contained in the contracts and whether some of them are achievable with existing resources.

FSAI response

By law all contracts must have regard to the level of resources available to agencies, therefore no contract can demand a level of service from an agency which its committed resources will not permit. The time scales and targets contained within the contracts were negotiated in good faith having regard to the resources available to agencies in July 1999. It is important to remember that the contracts are with the agencies concerned and not with individual officers of those agencies. Therefore it is a matter for official agencies to manage their resources so as to achieve their targets and the Authority will not hold individual officers responsible for any failure to meet stated targets within agreed time scales.

2.6 Resources

The issue

The level of resources was raised by almost all workshops. Agency staff were often of the opinion that there was insufficient human and financial resources to fulfil the terms of the contracts.

FSAI response

The Authority developed the contracts with a view to providing the level of service necessary to protect public health. In doing so, the Authority recognised that improvements in the service can sometimes only be achieved with additional resources. While the Authority will, and has supported, requests by agencies to their parent government department for extra resources, it will only do so in cases where need can be demonstrated and where the use of existing resources is effective.

A particular issue arose in the case of environmental health officers, in so far as many of them are in temporary positions and additional vacancies are not being filled because permanent posts are not yet on offer. The Authority supported efforts to have this issue addressed and has discussed the matter with the chief executives of the health boards.

On a wider note, it has to be acknowledged that since the establishment of the Authority, the collective response of Ministers and their departments has been to provide significant additional resources for the agencies within their respective remits. In particular, the additional resources that have been made available to date are as follows:

Health Boards	£7,200,000
Local Authorities	10 full-time veterinary posts

Section 48 (ii) of the FSAI Act, 1998 states that an official agency which enters into a service contract shall provide the necessary resources for the performance of the contract.

2.7 Liaison with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland

The issue

Clarification was sought on the level and purpose of the liaison contacts.

FSAI response

The service contracts provide for defined points of contact between the Authority and an official agency. Some agencies have nominated more people to act as liaison links than others. There is no stipulation in the contract on the number of liaison contacts and it is a matter for each agency to decide for itself. In the case of the health board contracts, there must be at least one liaison officer from both the environmental health and the laboratory service.

Another point raised was the issue of access to the Authority. The liaison officer is the contact point regarding the operation of the contract. However, the Authority operates a policy of open access both to the public and to official agency staff. In other words contact with the Authority is not limited to liaison contacts or via a liaison person.

3.1 Audits

The issue

Some concerns were expressed as to the manner in which the Authority would audit the official agencies' compliance with the terms of the service contracts.

FSAI response

The Authority is currently developing a policy on monitoring and auditing. The Authority will consult with all official agencies in relation to this policy. Already the regular quarterly meetings provided for in the service contracts between the Authority and the official agencies are taking place. In effect these form part of contract monitoring. It is clear however at this stage, that where agencies are already subject to audit e.g. as a result of EU missions or having accredited or certified systems in place, the Authority will take account of those external audits. The Authority also undertakes to ensure that in advance of any formal audit or review, official agencies are fully conversant with the policies and methods that the Authority will employ and with the criteria against which they will be audited. The Authority will endeavour to have the audit policy in place before the end of 2000.

3.2 Reports

The issue

Some official agency staff were concerned that the service contracts would involve much more paperwork and report writing than heretofore.

FSAI response

The Authority is anxious not to burden agencies unnecessarily with reporting. It will endeavour to make data collection and delivery simple and effective using the most appropriate means available. Nevertheless it is important that the activities of agencies are recorded and that the information available within agencies is collated and used. Such information, properly evaluated can act as a management information tool to assess workloads, human and other resource requirements. It will be useful in providing direction for future food safety control programmes for both the agency and the Authority.

The Authority is conscious of the need to ensure that all information gathered from agencies is returned to them in a value enhanced format so that it benefits all concerned and so that a national picture emerges.

3.3 Compatibility of Information Technology

The issue

It was pointed out that the information technology systems in official agencies and the Authority should be compatible.

FSAI response

The Authority is currently developing its IT structure to deal with the expected inflow and output of data from and to the agencies. The Authority will consult the agencies and explore the development and establishment of compatible systems. It will also support agencies in developing IT systems.

4.1 Legislation and Guidance Notes

The issue

Food legislation is the foundation of much of the work of the Authority and the official agencies. It is important for consumers, industry and enforcement officials that there is a common understanding and a consistent approach by all concerned on how the legislation is to be applied.

FSAI response

The Authority has agreed to develop guidelines on legislation and on standard operating practices. Official agencies will be involved in the development to ensure that the guidance is meaningful and practical. Inspection, auditing and risk assessment were highlighted as key areas requiring guidance.

4.2 Quality Management Systems

The issue

It is important that the public sector operates to the same standards as pertain in the best of the private sector.

FSAI response

The Authority will continue to encourage official agencies to develop in-house quality management systems for food control activities. Such systems can build public confidence in the food control system and also act as a type of due diligence defence for official agencies. Work in this regard has already begun. Many of the food laboratories have third party accreditation for their methods and operations. The environmental health department in the South Eastern Health Board has developed a Quality Management System for their food control services that has been certified to ISO9002.

The Authority will also examine which system best suits its own needs and begin to work to put a system in place by the end of 2001.

5.1 Seamless Inspection Service

The issue

While the goal of a seamless inspection service was supported, several of those attending were unclear on how it will be achieved.

FSAI response

With the establishment of the Authority, for the first time in Ireland there is a single agency with overall responsibility for the food safety inspection service. This will enable the FSAI to identify the gaps, the overlaps and the inconsistencies in the service nationwide. Overtime the FSAI will work with the agencies to resolve those matters. This may in some instances require changes in regulations or resources (whether facilities or manpower). This will be an ongoing and important aspect of the FSAI's work. The FSAI is required to report annually to the Minister for Health and Children on this subject.

5.2 Role of Industry

The issue

How will the Authority pursue its role of placing primary responsibility for the safety of food on producers?

FSAI response

The inspection and control services provided by official agencies, while necessary, cannot of themselves provide an absolute guarantee of food safety. The Authority will work to bring about a general acceptance by the food industry and all interested parties that responsibility for food safety rests primarily with the food industry. Achieving re-orientation in attitude will take time. A number of initiatives are planned including the development of guides to good practice and campaigns for the education and training of food workers. Campaigns to raise awareness among consumers also impact on all sectors of industry who have to respond to the consumer demands for higher standards of hygiene.

5.3 Shifting Emphasis from Trade Considerations to Public Health

The issue

Concerns were raised by several agencies that food safety and public health considerations were under emphasised and trade issues often took precedence.

FSAI response

Under the new contractual arrangements, consumer protection must be paramount and if a cultural change is needed in certain areas then this must take place. Food safety has now become a trade issue as purchasers of Irish food at home and abroad are seeking guarantees of high standards and traceability. Food safety is also a commercial necessity as there is no market for unsafe food. No sector of the food industry can afford a food scare associated with their product. Agencies must maintain the consumer protection focus in all their activities. Consumers must be able to have confidence that their interests come first.

5.4 Inspections

The issue

There is no agreement on, or specification of what constitutes an inspection.

FSAI response

Inspections are a key activity of official agencies. The Authority seeks to develop a common understanding of what constitutes an inspection, its aims and how it is to be conducted. As mentioned earlier, guidance on these aspects will be developed in conjunction with the official agencies.

Much of the information provided by agencies relates to the amount of inspection activity. While this is a measure of contract performance, of more value to the Authority and to food safety generally is that information from inspections is gathered in a form that can be assessed and evaluated. The Authority will work with the agencies to develop qualitative and quantitative indicators.

5.5 Responsibility for Activities in the Marine Sector

The issue

Previous attempts to clarify responsibilities between staff of the health boards and the Department of Marine and Natural Resources in relation to activity in the marine sector had not been concluded.

FSAI response

The Authority recognises the need to establish clear lines of control and responsibility for enforcement activities in the marine sector. These activities include the sampling of shellfish, the closure of production areas, the management of these closures as well as the supervision of fish premises (retail, wholesale and processing).

The FSAI has undertaken a series of regional meetings attended by health boards and the Department of the Marine and Natural Resources representatives with a view to having agreed arrangements in place by the summer 2000.

5.6 Inspection of State and Public Authority Premises

The issue

Who should inspect state and public authority premises in which food operations are conducted?

FSAI response

The health boards have a responsibility to inspect food operations in state and public authority premises. The food inspection programmes must include the inspection of food operations run by or supported by health boards. These must be treated in the same manner as any private food business. The health services cater for the most vulnerable subsets of the population in hospitals, nursing homes, homes for the elderly and other

residential and day care institutions. Therefore they must operate their catering facilities to the highest standards of hygiene.

It is a requirement of the European Communities (Hygiene of Foodstuffs) Regulations, 1998 that, if as a result of an inspection, a health board ascertains that a food business is not in compliance with the Regulations and there is risk to the safety of the food, the health board must take action, which can extend to closure of the premises.

The FSAI is concerned that health boards, acting as agents of the Authority are seen to be consistent in their treatment of public and private premises. Accordingly, the Authority will work with the health boards to develop a protocol to ensure that this is the case.

5.7 HACCP

The issue

The difficulties that small and medium sized enterprises have in complying with the legal requirement to have a HACCP system in place was raised during the course of many of the meetings. There is also a need for clarification of the role of official agency staff in verifying and validating HACCP plans.

FSAI Response

These are important issues. It was suggested that the Authority produce advice and guidance leaflets specifically for small and medium sized businesses. The Authority will consider how it can assist business and develop a strategy to address the application of HACCP. Guidance on the role of enforcement staff will also be developed. Both the strategy and the guidance will be prepared in consultation with official agencies. The Authority is currently conducting an industry survey on the awareness and use of HACCP. The survey results should assist in developing future work programmes.

5.8 Prosecutions

The issue

Since the Authority has been established, the question has arisen as to whether prosecutions will be taken in the name of the FSAI or that of the official agency.

FSAI response

The Authority considers that primary responsibility for prosecution rests with the official agency and the enforcement officers in the agency. The Authority will develop a protocol on prosecutions and enforcement. The protocol will also address the use of the additional powers available to authorised officers under the Food Safety Authority of Ireland Act, 1998. The Authority has the power to take legal action, including prosecution under food legislation. However, action taken to date has only followed a request for assistance from an official agency. In general, the Authority envisages that it will take unilateral enforcement action only in exceptional circumstances.

5.9 Food Alerts

The issue

Agency staff expressed concern that the food alert system was being overburdened and too many irrelevant alerts were being sent to agencies. Given the large number of alerts, there is the danger that agencies may fail to make appropriate response in cases requiring local action.

FSAI response

The Department of Health and Children was the contact point for Ireland for the European Commission's Rapid Alert System for Food until December 1999 when responsibility was transferred to the Authority. The Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB) will have a role in this matter as communication of food alerts will fall within its overall responsibility. Specifically in relation to the communication of food alerts, the FSPB has a legal responsibility to ensure prompt, accurate and complete dissemination of information on national and international food alerts by:

- (a) developing and monitoring protocols for responding to food alerts
- (b) liaising with enforcement agencies throughout the island of Ireland
- (c) promoting and, where appropriate, arranging training for those likely to be involved in managing and responding to food alerts; and
- (d) developing cross-border emergency response procedures.

Operational responsibility for managing and issuing alerts will remain with the food control authorities North and South. The Food Safety Authority of Ireland is co-operating with the developing FSPB to ensure an effective, co-ordinated system is in place. In particular every effort will be made to improve the current system so that all alerts transmitted are meaningful, additional technical information is provided as required and clear directions are given to agency staff. The Authority will try to ensure that so-called non-alerts are only transmitted in summary form, if at all or may be posted on its website.

5.10 Food Importation

The issue

The 1999 dioxin crisis in Belgium had demonstrated the vulnerability of the Irish food industry, should a similar incident occur. The lack of a system to facilitate traceability of imported food and food ingredients to protect the Irish food industry and Irish consumers was highlighted.

FSAI response

The Authority will consider the feasibility of developing a food import and export database. Information on food importers will be collated. In addition, it will develop a national food emergency response plan. The Authority will also work towards the better co-ordination of the food import control systems operated separately by various official agencies.

6.1 Laboratory Services

The issue

In general, most agency staff were of the opinion that the food laboratory capacity is not adequate and there is a need for more laboratory back-up for the inspection services. The amount of testing varies around the country due to local circumstances.

FSAI response

The Authority will keep this matter under review. In addition, the FSPB will be pursuing its own role in relation to creating linkages between laboratories and developing specialist laboratory services.

The Central Meat Hygiene Laboratory is not included in the current contract with the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development. It is hoped to rectify this and similar omissions at the next opportunity.

6.2 Testing Facilities for *E. coli* O157

The issue

A specific problem has arisen in the case of testing for *E. coli* O157. Laboratories handling this pathogen require special facilities to protect their staff against laboratory acquired infections. Currently no official food control laboratory has these facilities.

FSAI response

This is being reviewed on a national basis and the Authority is in discussion with a number of government departments. As well as the provision of adequate facilities, the Authority's aim is that national reference laboratories for *E. coli* O157, salmonella and campylobacter should be established. The FSPB is, as part of its functions also examining this issue.

In March 2000, the Interim National Salmonella Reference Laboratory was launched. Located in the University College Hospital, Galway the laboratory will provide routine, definitive identification of strains of salmonella from humans and food. It will work with the Central Veterinary Laboratory in Abbotstown to definitively type animal isolates to facilitate tracebacks in outbreaks.

6.3 Outbreak Control

The issue

The control of outbreaks of foodborne disease is not included in the service contracts.

FSAI response

The Authority is concerned that all outbreaks and suspected outbreaks are properly investigated. This is essential in order to control the incidence of foodborne disease, but also to learn from such incidents and prevent similar outbreaks occurring in the future. The service contracts require participation by appropriate staff in outbreak control teams and Zoonosis Groups.

The Authority is preparing a manual for the Management of Outbreaks of Foodborne Illness (MOFI). A draft document was circulated during 1999. The intention is that this manual should be helpful to all staff who may be involved in investigations. As a result of the circulation of the draft MOFI, the issue of roles and responsibilities of various health board staff was raised. The Authority does not wish to be prescriptive and believes that these issues are properly the concern of official agencies. The Authority strongly recommends that investigations should be team based and multidisciplinary. The health boards should take the lead on most outbreaks because of the human disease aspect, but involving other agencies such as the local authority, the Department of Marine and Natural Resources or the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development earlier rather than later, is desirable. Early intervention by a multidisciplinary team could prevent outbreaks in other areas by tracing and identifying contaminated product. The Authority is assisting health boards to provide training for staff in outbreak investigation and control.

A related question arose as to whether the outbreak control team should decide on the enforcement action to be taken. The Authority does not consider that this should be the case, the enforcement officer on the team should retain responsibility. The MOFI manual will be revised in the light of experience and comments received and the final version will be issued in 2000.

6.4 EHOs as Food Specialists

The issue

Should EHOs and other agency staff specialise in food control?

FSAI response

Currently many agency staff, including EHOs, perform official functions other than food control. Given the growing complexity of food safety, the Authority would prefer that those engaged in food control be solely engaged in this work. This would allow them to develop and enhance their expertise. The service contracts with the health boards include the concept of specialisation as an aspiration. However, the Authority acknowledges that in light of the current resources available to official agencies and the seasonality and geographical spread of food work, specialisation in food control is not always a feasible option.

6.5 Research

The issue

What is the Authority's role in the area of research?

FSAI response

The FSAI does not have a major role in research. There will be some research activity connected to the work of its Scientific Committee. In addition, some research such as surveys, food surveillance and compliance monitoring will be conducted. This work will be related mainly to the control functions of the Authority. Research is a specific function of the FSPB.

6.6 Out-of-Hours Cover

The issue

Out of hours cover was raised by various staff in several agencies.

FSAI response

The service contracts with the health boards require the provision of out of hours and emergency cover, but no operational details are specified. The Authority acknowledges that a lot of non-routine work is carried out on a goodwill and ad-hoc basis. However, consumers expect and deserve more than that and the Authority will advocate for a national structure that ensures adequate and proper cover is available. The Authority has an emergency telephone line (open 24 hours a day, seven days a week) which is available to official agency staff.

7.1 Zoonosis Groups

The issue

While agency staff felt that the Zoonosis Groups were a good idea, the disadvantage of the scheme is that a limited number of individuals were invited to participate in them and information on their activities was not disseminated locally.

FSAI response

A Zoonosis Group was first established in Cork. The Authority considered that the concept was a good one in that it enabled and encouraged different professional groups to meet and work together. These groups also foster inter-agency collaboration which is vital to any successful food control programme. The concept has since been adopted throughout the country and the service contracts stipulate that agency staff should be facilitated to participate in the work of the groups. The Authority will work to support the Zoonosis Groups and will take such measures as it can to ensure that the work of these groups is adequately reported.

7.2 Training of Official Agency Staff

The issue

In all of the introductory meetings the issue of training for frontline staff was raised. Some attendees highlighted the fact that food safety related training had never been provided by their agencies. Others expressed concern that a lack of training had compromised their ability to deal with industry and to address certain technical issues.

FSAI response

The Authority is firmly of the belief that continual in-service training is essential to the success of food safety control programmes. Investment in staff training is important if an effective seamless inspection service is to become a reality. The Authority has a training team whose role is to assist in identifying the training needs required to improve control systems, drawing up training plans for official agencies and monitoring the programmes to ensure that these training needs are met. There is a need for a standard approach across the country to inspection. This may entail bringing inspectors together from different regions, forming working groups, developing guidelines and running workshops to disseminate and communicate agreed standards.

7.3 Training of Food Industry Staff

The issue

There is a clear legal onus on industry to train their staff. During the introductory meetings, a suggestion to have compulsory procedures for the training of food handlers and workers in the industries was made.

FSAI response

The primary responsibility for food safety rests with the food industry. It is necessary that this responsibility must extend to providing proper training for staff. In response the Authority has established the Food Safety Training and Education Council (FSTEC) composed of representatives from training and education, the food industry and official agency staff. The Council aims to:

- co-ordinate food hygiene training in Ireland, and
- agree guidelines for the inspection of effective hygiene training in the workplace.

Official agencies will be kept informed via the Authority's newsletter and website of the work and progress of the FSTEC.

7.4 Communications with Official Agency Staff

The issue

How will the Authority communicate with official agency frontline staff?

FSAI response

The Authority will commit resources to ensure that there is regular and relevant communication between itself and the staff in the official agencies. Several channels of communication will be employed including the website, email and the newsletter. A freephone helpline 1800 336677 is also available.

8.1 Wild Game

There are legal controls on wild game, but these do not extend to much of the game that reaches the market and consumers. The Authority has set up a working group to examine how controls can be improved and adequate protection afforded to consumers. The report will be available in mid 2000.

8.2 Food Hygiene Regulations – Appeals

Many EHOs expressed concern about the appeal system provided for under these regulations which has the effect of permitting premises with unsatisfactory structural facilities to continue to operate. The Authority has urged the Department of Health and Children to re-examine the legislation and to amend it as soon as possible. A review of this legislation is now underway and revised regulations are expected this year.

8.3 Small Cutting Plants

There is a number of small stand-alone meat cutting and processing plants throughout the country. The Fresh Meat, Mince and Meat Products Regulations must apply to these plants and the Authority has had discussions with the Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development to put in place an appropriate enforcement regime.

In March 2000 the FSAI began the process of transferring responsibility for these premises to the local authorities. This entails liaison between the health boards and the local authorities, with support from the FSAI. FSAI envisages having this exercise completed before the summer of 2000.

8.4 Water

The issue of the relationship between the FSAI and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was raised, particularly in relation to the safety of water supplies. The responsibility to monitor and report on the quality and safety of water supplies is a matter for the EPA. The Authority's and its agents' responsibility is for bottled/packaged water and to ensure that food businesses use potable water for food processing purposes.

8.5 On-farm Activity

The Authority's responsibility is often described as extending from "farm to fork". In fact the Authority's role only begins at the farm gate and on farm activities normally are excluded. Thus, control of milk production on farm does not fall within the terms of the service contracts.

Nevertheless, the Authority does have the power to carry out "additional inspections" which could include farm inspections, but this will not be on a routine basis.

8.6 Certificates of Appointment

Every officer, whether permanent, temporary, wholetime or part-time carrying out duties under his/her agency's service contract must be authorised for that service contract under Section 49 of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland Act, 1998. Such authorisation is in addition to any other authorisation required to enforce the individual pieces of legislation covered by the service contract. It is a matter for each official agency to decide which of their officers are to be appointed and the Authority must be provided with the details of those appointed. Each authorised officer under the FSAI Act, 1998 must be given a warrant of appointment.

8.7 Food Transport Vehicles

While most food transport vehicles may be inspected under the European Communities (Hygiene of Foodstuffs) Regulations, 1998, more specific regulations apply to certain categories of vehicles e.g. Fresh Meat Regulations. The question of authorising staff to carry out inspections in particular circumstances e.g. at small abattoirs is being addressed by the FSAI in the context of the re-assignment of responsibility for the supervision of meat retail and small meat plants between health boards and other agencies.

8.8 Food Safety Promotion Board

The Food Safety Promotion Board established by the British Irish Agreement Act, 1999 came into force in December 1999. It has specific functions namely:

- Promotion of food safety
- Research into food safety
- Communication of food alerts
- Surveillance on foodborne disease
- Developing linkages between laboratories
- Developing specialist laboratory services.

Responsibility for promotion of food safety direct to consumers will therefore transfer from the Authority to the FSPB once it becomes fully operational. However, the Authority will have a communications role in relation to its own functions.

The Authority welcomes the new body and looks forward to working closely with it.

The introductory meetings were a first step in developing regular communication between the Authority and the frontline staff in official agencies. The Authority wishes to ensure that this process is maintained, developed and becomes an integral part of the service contracts system. The whole exercise of holding the introductory meetings also underlined for the Authority the mutual benefits for it and the agency staff of open and structured communication.

The commitment of the various official agencies and their staff was evident at all the meetings. This commitment extends both to their individual roles and to working towards the achievement of the highest standards of food safety, food hygiene and the enforcement of food safety legislation relevant to their area of activity.

As a result of the meetings, the Authority has a greater appreciation and understanding of the concerns and priorities of agency staff. This will enable the Authority to formulate policies aimed at addressing these concerns.

Most staff are aware that many of the issues raised at the introductory meetings pre-date the establishment of the Authority. The creation of the FSAI as the single body with responsibility for enforcement of food safety legislation provides, for the first time, the opportunity to address these issues in a structured way and to find solutions that will enhance the overall quality and effectiveness of the services being provided. The Authority is well aware that some issues may be more difficult to resolve than others and will take more time and effort, however, over time and with the good will of all concerned, no issue should be insurmountable.

The resolution of certain issues will, in all probability, require some movement on certain professional boundaries and demarcations. This should be seen in the context of the overall gain and increased esteem for the service, and as a step towards developing a more integrated and effective service.

Following the conclusion of this series of introductory meetings the Service Contracts Unit of the Authority began its programme of bilateral quarterly liaison meetings with the agencies. This programme of meetings is ongoing and will be a feature of contract management for the foreseeable future. To date, the meetings have been very useful and constructive. Already, it is clear that they enable the Authority and the particular agencies to deal in a more in depth manner with issues relevant to the contract in question.

The ideas and issues coming up at the bilateral and other agency group meetings, together with the issues arising from the introductory meetings will be of considerable help when the contracts are being formally reviewed and revised.

Meanwhile, the Authority is embarking on a programme of work designed to provide codes of practice, guidance notes, etc. where the need for these has been identified. Realistically, some of these may require more time than others to prepare. Bearing this in mind, the Authority hopes to tailor its work programme so that documents will become available progressively over a period of time, based on priority and the resources available for their preparation. As indicated previously in this report, the Authority hopes to call on the expertise and experiences of agency staff in preparing these documents.

In conclusion, the FSAI is confident that staff will see the introductory meetings as the beginning of an ongoing dialogue between the Authority, the official agencies and their staff, which has as its aim the protection of the consumer, and will result in a higher profile and recognition for the work and expertise of the regulatory authorities.

Service Contract Staffing

FSAI and Official Agency Service Contract Staff	No.
Administration/Clerical Officers	166
Dairy Produce Inspectors	21
Public Health Doctors	140
Environmental Health Officers	232
Food Safety Authority of Ireland Staff	61
Laboratory Staff	166
Local Authority Veterinary Inspectors	38
Office of Director of Consumer Affairs Staff	13
Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland Staff	10
Sea Fisheries Officers	28
Technical Agricultural Officers/Inspectors	232
Temporary Local Authority Veterinary Inspectors	150
Temporary Veterinary Inspectors (DAFRD)	550
Veterinary Inspectors (DAFRD)	92
Total	1,899

Details of Introductory Meetings

Dates for Introductory Meeting - Service Contracts

Date	Venue	Agencies Attending
5 October 1999	Cork	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Milk)
		Southern Health Board
		Cork Corporation
		Cork Co. Council
		Kerry Co. Council
		Department of Marine and Natural Resources
11 October 1999	Kilkenny	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		South Eastern Health Board
		Tipperary South Co. Council
		Kilkenny Co. Council
		Carlow Co. Council
		Wexford Co. Council
		Waterford Co. Council
12 October 1999	Tullamore	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Longford Co. Council
		Westmeath Co. Council
		Offaly Co. Council
		Laois Co. Council
		Midland Health Board
26 October 1999	Galway	Mayo Co. Council
		Roscommon Co. Council
		Galway Co. Council
		Galway Corporation
		Western Health Board
27 October 1999	Dublin City & Fingal	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Milk)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Pesticides)
		South Dublin Co. Council
		Dublin Corporation
		Eastern Health Board
		Department of Marine and Natural Resources
28 October 1999	Dublin	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Wicklow Co. Council
		Kildare Co. Council
		South Dublin Co. Council
		Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown Co. Council
Eastern Health Board		

1 November 1999	Limerick	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Eggs)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Milk)
		Limerick Corporation
		Limerick Co. Council
		Tipperary (NR) Co. Council
		Clare Co. Council
		Mid Western Health Board
8 November 1999	Carrickmacross	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Eggs)
		Louth Co. Council
		Meath Co. Council
		Monaghan Co. Council
		Cavan Co. Council
		North Eastern Health Board
9 November 1999	Tullamore	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Longford Co. Council
		Westmeath Co. Council
		Offaly Co. Council
		Laois Co. Council
		Midland Health Board
11 November 1999	Cork	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Milk)
		Southern Health Board
		Cork Corporation
		Cork Co. Council
		Kerry Co. Council
		Department of Marine and Natural Resources
16 November 1999	Kilkenny	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		South Eastern Health Board
		Tipperary (SR) Co. Council
		Kilkenny Co. Council
		Carlow Co. Council
		Wexford Co. Council
		Waterford Co. Council
		Waterford Corporation
18 November 1999	Galway	Mayo Co. Council
		Roscommon Co. Council
		Galway Co. Council
		Galway Corporation
		Western Health Board

22 November 1999	Sligo	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Donegal Co. Council
		Leitrim Co. Council
		Sligo Co. Council
		North Western Health Board
30 November 1999	Carrickmacross	Department of Marine and Natural Resources
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Eggs)
		Louth Co. Council
		Meath Co. Council
		Monaghan Co. Council
		Cavan Co. Council
North Eastern Health Board		
2 December 1999	Dublin	Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Wicklow Co. Council
		Kildare Co. Council
		South Dublin Co. Council
		Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown Co. Council
6 December 1999	Limerick	Eastern Health Board
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Eggs)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Milk)
		Limerick Corporation
		Limerick Co. Council
		Tipperary (NR) Co. Council
Clare Co. Council		
8 December 1999	Dublin City & Fingal	Mid Western Health Board
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Milk)
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Pesticides)
		South Dublin Co. Council
		Dublin Corporation
		Eastern Health Board
14 December 1999	Sligo	Department of Marine and Natural Resources
		Department of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (Meat)
		Donegal Co. Council
		Leitrim Co. Council
		Sligo Co. Council
20 March 2000	Dublin	North Western Health Board
		Department of Marine and Natural Resources
		Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland
		Office of the Director of Consumer Affairs

Introductory Meeting Format**Morning Session**

FSAI - overview	Dr Patrick Wall
FSAI Act, 1998	Mr Martin Higgins/Mr Hugh Boyle
Role of the agencies	Various
Service contracts – how they were developed	Mr Pat O'Mahony
Discussion	

Afternoon Session

Agency workshops on the service contract	FSAI/Official Agency facilitators
Plenary session - summary of issues	Dr Patrick Wall