

**Joint Committee
26th September 2013**

Title: Report on activity in relation to Food Contamination following the Horse Meat Fraud

Recommendation

That the Joint Committee notes the report, recognises the importance of the role of Worcestershire Regulatory Services plays in preventing and/or detecting food fraud and that the Committee expresses continued support for minimum levels of market testing through sampling by the service.

Introduction

The discovery of undeclared horse meat in a wide range of meat products earlier this year has undermined consumer confidence in the meat industry. It has also raised concerns about the traceability of food, long supply chains and the ability of businesses and responsible agencies to effectively maintain the integrity of the food supply.

The sampling of products, including food, is an essential tool used by Worcestershire Regulatory Services as a means of testing the market for a number of purposes:

- Checking food labels, to determine whether the product contains unsafe or undeclared ingredients, e.g. allergens or pork in Halal meat products
- Checking whether products meet compositional standards e.g. excessive levels of fat or insufficient meat
- Checking for deliberate fraud, such as the substitution of expensive products for cheaper ones e.g. Panga fish from Asia for cod, or horse meat for beef
- Checking other consumer products for safety (e.g. toys/electrical products) or claims/ descriptions.

Sampling is generally the only means of determining what is in a product and/ or whether it is safe. It is not just the consumer who is at risk if a product is mis-described, it is an unfair commercial practice which undermines responsible and honest businesses. Sampling activity supports a number of Worcestershire Regulatory Service's strategic aims which include:

1. Support economic growth, especially in small businesses, by ensuring a fair, responsible and competitive trading environment

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2. Help people to live healthier lives by preventing ill health and harm and promoting public health
3. Ensure a safe, healthy and sustainable food chain for the benefits of consumers and the rural economy

Hence it remains a key element of our control strategies.

The Food Standards Agency Ireland, which uncovered the horse meat fraud, stated that;

“the survey of beef products [which uncovered the horse meat] was a routine, albeit infrequent survey. It was not based on a tip off or so called “intelligence”. It was based on common sense and a detailed understanding of the food chain which we are required to police”.

Extensive testing of processed and frozen beef products sold in the UK since January has revealed that the horse meat contamination was limited to a relatively small number of products with more than 99% of those tested found free of horse DNA. Tests across EU Member States found 4.66% of products tested contained over 1% horse DNA.

Consumer confidence in the frozen and processed meat sector has fallen as a result of this scandal.

The evidence suggests that the presence of horse meat resulted from fraudulent practice by elements of the food industry, seeking to make a additional profit and able to do so despite food traceability requirements.

In separate EU-mandated tests for the presence of phenylbutazone (bute) in horses slaughtered for human consumption, the UK had the largest number of positive results.

It is considered that retailers should have been more vigilant against the risks of adulteration, especially where meat products are manufactured from ingredients traded many times, often across the continent. Consumer confidence would be boosted by shorter, more local supply chains.

It has been recognised that deficiencies in intelligence make it difficult to prevent food fraud. Recommendations from the inquiry into the horse meat fraud include:

- Large retailers, who sell much of the food we eat, should carry out regular DNA tests on meat and meat-based ingredients which form part of processed or frozen meat products.
- The results should be reported to the Food Standards Agency and a summary should be published on the retailer’s website. The additional cost of this testing should be borne by retailers and not passed on to consumers.

Following the discovery of horse meat in beef products the Food Standards Agency requested sampling to be carried out by a number of Local Authorities at specific premises. Although Worcestershire was not one of those authorities asked specifically, a number of Worcestershire businesses involved in meat cutting, preparation and distribution were identified and visited. The purpose was to ensure that no Worcestershire businesses had received the adulterated meat. Samples were taken and submitted to Worcestershire Scientific Services for analysis.

In accordance with activity going on nationally, cold stores in the county were visited to check paperwork and take samples. WRS selected further premises to visit, including schools and the Worcester Royal hospital. Suppliers were identified and a number of samples taken. Results received from Worcestershire Scientific Services, the County Council's public analyst laboratory, did not identify any horse meat in the products.

Letters were also sent to all independent butchers in the county advising them of the need to ensure traceability of beef products and tests of some butchers' raw beef were carried out in response to reported consumer concerns.

Only one sample was found to contain horse meat and this was in a follow-up sample taken in response to a positive result being found at an out of county supplier. A test was carried out in Worcestershire on product from the same batch to help confirm the initial finding.

The report from the inquiry into the horse meat fraud also specifically mentioned the role of Local Authorities in detecting food fraud and maintaining consumer confidence in the food chain. It states that:

“Local authorities are responsible for food sampling and should adopt a more targeted approach, testing food products which are likely to be contaminated, even if there is no intelligence to suggest it. There is significant variation in food sampling levels across local authorities. It is not acceptable for any local authority to have carried out no food sampling for more than a year. The Government should be mindful of the impact of local authority budget cuts and seek to ensure that they do not have a negative impact on food sampling.”

The inquiry also went on to express concern about the decline in the number of public analysts who carry out tests and of the public laboratories in which they work. This report stated that this should be kept under review to ensure there are sufficient numbers of properly trained public analysts in the UK.



Worcestershire Regulatory Services has responsibility for the Local Authority role in Worcestershire. The relevant legal provisions fall within horse passports legislation (County Council function,) and detecting and preventing food fraud (County Council Food Standards function,) and food hygiene (District Council Food Safety function,) although the safety implications in relation to horse meat were limited.

Approximately 280 food samples were submitted to Worcestershire Scientific Services during 2012/13, primarily to check for the composition and the accuracy of labelling.

The report makes it clear that Local Authorities are in the front line in dealing with food fraud and have a critical role in its prevention and detection. It also mentions that there was no specific intelligence received (“no tip off”) to direct sampling towards the beef products, but was the result of common sense and a detailed understanding of the food chain.

Detection of food fraud is heavily dependent on sampling by local authority officers. Intelligence plays a role, but intelligence is generally only generated by field officers taking samples and picking up the issues themselves.

Being relatively rural, Worcestershire is a county with an economy that is heavily dependent on the food supply chain and it is important that Worcestershire Regulatory Services maintains the capability and capacity to protect the food chain locally. This necessitates maintaining sufficient numbers of competent officers both to carry out sampling and understand the food chain through appropriate inspection activity and an adequate sampling budget to pay for analysis.

Continued reductions in budgets will seriously impair the ability of Worcestershire Regulatory Services to continue with current levels of sampling. Sampling rates for compositional issues should be in the region of 1.5 samples per 1000 head of population to provide adequate protection for consumers. In the past, the Trading Standards service aimed at 1 sample per 1000 head population, as much of the sampling was part of regionally co-ordinated activity, which improved the benefit derived. The Joint Committee is asked to recognise both the importance of the role of Worcestershire Regulatory Services in preventing and detecting food fraud, and to continue to support minimum levels of market testing through sampling by the service.

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Background Papers

None