

Food (Scotland) Bill – Stage 1 Debate

This briefing is for the Food (Scotland) Bill Stage 1 debate on Thurs 2 October 2014.

UNISON is Scotland's largest trade union and represents the operational workforce of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and council Environmental Health Officers, who inspect food premises and undertake food sampling and educational advice services.

UNISON broadly supports the general principles of the Bill and in particular the creation of Food Standards Scotland (FSS) to replace the UK wide Food Standards Agency (FSA). However, if the new organisation is going to achieve the objectives set out in the Bill, it will need to act in a very different way to the current organisation. In particular, the **interests of the consumer must be paramount**.

For example, the FSA has been deregulating the independent inspection of poultry allowing poultry plants to employ their own meat inspectors. According to FSA figures, more than 60% of chickens in the UK are now infected with the campylobacter food poisoning bug, which on average kills 110 people each year and results in 22,000 people being treated in hospital. The FSA was recently heavily [criticised](#) for backtracking on a decision to 'name and shame' retailers and abattoirs during a year-long testing programme on retail chicken for campylobacter. **The only real protection for the consumer is independent inspection - free from meat industry influence.**

Food safety experts have highlighted the close links between the industry and regulators. Erik Millstone, professor of science policy at the University of Sussex said; "*The FSA has failed to keep its promise to the British public. This means that consumers can no longer trust the FSA to put the interest of consumers ahead of those of the food industry.*"

Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University, said the FSA had been 'captured' by industry interests; "*This is a sad day for British food policy. A quarter of a century after the British learned of the extent of contamination of poultry, we are back again with unacceptable levels of food-borne pathogens. Then, it was salmonella. Now, it's campylobacter.*"

And we shouldn't dismiss this as something that wouldn't happen in Scotland. At the behest of the industry and the FSA, the Scottish Government recently promulgated regulations that allow the visual only inspection of pigs, bringing Scotland in line with the rest of the UK. **This means tumours and abscesses will be minced into the sausages and pies we eat.**



Do you want **this**...



...in **this**?



UNISON Scotland

Every day, meat inspectors prevent instances of diseased animal carcasses like this from entering the food chain.

Deregulation of meat hygiene means these checks would no longer happen. Do you care what's in your food?

UNISON: fighting for thorough independent meat inspections, free from food industry influence

www.unison-scotland.org.uk

This is in addition to [food fraud](#), another issue the FSA has ducked. Food mislabeling is not uncommon, as is the practice of substituting premium commodity products in whole or in part with cheaper ingredients. **Publication of a report into the horsemeat scandal was blocked**, amid UK government concerns that the public would be frightened by the idea that criminals were still able to interfere with their food.

The primary job of meat inspectors is to ensure the meat we eat is slaughtered safely and that contaminated meat doesn't enter the food chain. Since April 2012 **meat inspectors and vets have prevented over a million instances of diseased animal carcasses from entering the food chain** in Scotland. This included:

- 659,000 instances of the Liver Fluke parasite
- 427,000 instances of pneumonia in red meat carcasses
- 100,000 instances of adult tape worm
- 100,000 tumours in chickens
- 1100 instances of parasitic lung worm in cattle,

The provisions in s13(2) of the Bill should therefore not allow for the delegation of inspection and enforcement functions to contractors. Particularly those connected to the food industry.

As was highlighted in evidence to the Health Committee, the best in the industry understand that high **regulatory standards are essential to protect Scottish food brands as well as the consumer.**

In our shops and restaurants, regulatory responsibility shifts to Environmental Health Officers. As a UNISON Scotland [survey](#) of these staff and FoI requests show, there have been deep cuts in the workforce and a consequential reduction in inspections and food sampling. Education and advice work are also suffering. All the direction and advice referred to in this **Bill will be meaningless if the skilled staff are not there to enforce it.**

The governance arrangements are not set out in any detail in the Bill. We would wish to see a specific duty of staff governance in similar terms to those applying to NHS Scotland. The [Mather Commission](#) recently recommended (Rec. 24) that all public bodies should have a union representative on the board. This report was welcomed by the Scottish Government and this is the first opportunity to put this proposal into practice.

There are no provisions in the Bill for staff transfer. These are only referred to in the financial memorandum, which is inadequate and contrary to the Cabinet Office guidelines referred to in the memorandum.

MSP's are urged to recognise that simply creating a Scottish body to regulate food safety is not enough. They must legislate for higher standards to ensure the objectives set out in the Bill are achieved.



Useful links

- [UNISON's evidence to the health Cttee](#)
- [Briefing: Cuts in food safety](#)
- [UNISON Food for Good Charter](#)

For further information contact [Dave Watson](#) Bargaining and Campaigns Team on 0141 342 2840.

This UNISON e-brief is intended for Members of the Scottish Parliament. If you have received this email in error, or if your email address is changing, please [contact us](#).



Follow us on

