

Councillors' Briefing Note No. 143

Service : Public Health and Public Protection, Safer Communities

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Update on FSA and Wiltshire Councils' action on horsemeat in food investigations

From: Maggie Rae, Corporate Director and Councillor Keith Humphries, Cabinet Member

We thought it may be helpful to update the current position here in Wiltshire regarding the recent national beef adulteration with horsemeat investigations.

Following all the initial media announcements and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) directives for local authority action which have followed, the Public Protection Service here in Wiltshire have taken all the steps we were required or otherwise might reasonably have been expected to take. This included:

- Prompt contact with approved meat premises and cold stores in Wiltshire under our jurisdiction who might handle/distribute potentially affected beef products – all had already taken steps to arrange specification testing on product and were asked to demonstrate supply chains/origin. All have returned this information directly to the FSA via the required mailing route and we supported this where there were initial difficulties.

We have had sight of the majority of the results. As far as we are aware, all results were negative for presence of horsemeat. The FSA have notified those local authorities where failures have been found.

This work also enabled us to refresh the current list of approved meat premises in Wiltshire that sit under FSA or our jurisdiction. We have sent this updated list back to the FSA.

Unfortunately there was one report to us from Newtownabbey Council N. Ireland regarding 1 - 5% pork found in a Wiltshire produced beef lasagne. This has been investigated by Trading Standards with the company and found to be a cross contamination during process issue, rather than deliberate adulteration. Remedial action has been taken to prevent a recurrence.

- We received FSA instruction to prioritise inspections to our approved meat premises and cold stores, particularly where these had not been visited for 12 months. Fortunately we had already visited most of them much more recently as part of the planned programme and followed up a cold store which turned out not to supply beef product. We were asked to make returns on their status and compliance and any speciation testing conducted by the companies by 30 April, which we have done.
- We followed up one FSA query specific to Wiltshire regarding the supply of horsemeat for the lions at Longleat, to ensure that this had not inadvertently been fed to the visitors – a Senior Trading Standards Officer has followed this up and has been able to reassure.
- We sent out letters to all Wiltshire schools, independent schools, hospitals, care homes and nurseries advising them about the issue and their responsibility for their own food contracts and the importance of having rigorous procurement procedures in place with reputable suppliers.
- We looked at the procurement of foodstuffs for supply by Wiltshire Council – this is extremely limited and our contractors, Elixir, were found to have taken appropriate investigations themselves to satisfy procurement of meat products - all being UK Red Tractor assured meat from fully accredited British abattoirs, not sourced from any of the plants involved in the current police investigation. Their suppliers were also carrying out product testing on processed beef products.
- Members briefings were issued following the extensive media coverage at the beginning of the investigations and concerns raised about BUTE.
- We have had very few complaints or queries from concerned consumers - these have been requests to ask if their food was safe to eat, requests for analysis, or asking if they should return products to the retailers.

As far as the national position is concerned:

- The FSA were holding regular ‘bird table’ meetings about the investigation. The last of these was held on 18 April 2013. Two reviews have been called. Professor Pat (currently vice-chair of Cambridge University Hospitals) is to lead an independent review of the FSA's response to the incident - to report to the next FSA Board meeting on 4th June.
- On 9 April, the Food Standards Agency published further test results from the first two phases of the UK-wide authenticity survey of beef products on sale at a range of retail and catering outlets. From the first two phases of the survey, out of a total of 362 samples taken, 354 were clear of both horse and pig DNA at the 1% reporting limit. Four samples have been confirmed as testing positive for horse DNA over 1% and three samples contained pig DNA over the 1% reporting limit. All these products were withdrawn from sale following receipt of the first test results and named on the Food Standards Agency website.
- These results are in addition to the results of 5,430 industry tests reported on 4 March 2013 which indicated that over 99% of processed beef products found no horse DNA at or above 1%. The findings of phases 1 and 2 of the local authority survey are consistent with those from the tests carried out by the food industry. The results confirm that adulteration of beef products with horse or pork meat has been limited to a relatively small number of products.

This sums up where we are in Wiltshire to date. We anticipate that we will be directed to participate in a further meat speciation study in the current year but we have not had any steer on this as yet. We will keep members updated.

Maggie Rae, Corporate Director and Cllr Keith Humphries, lead member Public Health and Protection Services