

Health and Social Services Committee

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Date: Thursday 11 May 2006

Venue: Committee Room 2, Senedd, National Assembly for Wales

Title: Food Standards Agency Signposting Scheme

Purpose

This paper is to inform the HSS Committee of the progress made by the Food Standards Agency in developing a voluntary front of pack signpost labelling scheme.

Summary / Recommendations

This paper has been prepared in response to a request by the Committee. It describes the background to the development of a voluntary signpost labelling scheme and summarises the current position. The purpose of this scheme is to provide consumers with easy to understand information to help them identify at a glance those foods which are healthier, and those which should be eaten in moderation or sparingly, within the context of a balanced diet.

Background

At the UK level, The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has committed in its strategic plan 2005-2010 to reduce population-wide levels of intake of salt, fats, saturated fats and sugars to recommended levels and improve the overall balance of the national diet. In Wales, this commitment is reflected in Food and Well Being, a nutrition strategy for Wales.

The strategic plan highlights the importance of making it easier for consumers to choose a healthier diet. The plan contains a specific commitment to develop and promote a simple system for highlighting the salt, sugar and fat content of foods as part of a strategy for reducing intakes of these nutrients. The signpost labelling scheme is intended to present dietary advice in a visual and easily accessible way and to reduce potential confusion in the marketplace caused by the increasing range of schemes which are being applied at the current time.

Since 2004, the FSA has built up an extensive evidence base, developing and testing ideas with consumers directly and with a range of stakeholders. The consumer research found that consumers find existing statutory nutritional labelling information complex and difficult to understand, and that they want front of pack labelling that makes it easy to see 'at a glance' information about the key nutrients.

Over 2,600 consumers were surveyed in June 2005 in one-to-one interviews to test responses to and understanding of possible formats. Two models emerged as best understood by consumers across all socio-economic groups – Multiple Traffic Lights (MTL) and Colour-Coded Guideline Daily Amount (CGDA). The use of traffic light colours was shown to be key to helping people understand whether a food contains high, medium or low levels of fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt. Research also showed that these two formats were preferred to numbers-only formats and to a single traffic light, which did not give information about individual nutrients.

Consumers also indicated that they want a consistent approach endorsed by an authoritative, independent and trusted body such as the FSA.

The FSA published this evidence and a consultation paper in November 2005. Over 100 responses were received during the consultation period from a broad range of stakeholders – including consumer and public health groups, enforcement bodies, nutrition and dietetic experts, food manufacturers and retailers - and these, along with the consumer research, were considered by the FSA's Board on 9 March.

The FSA Board agreed an approach that has those elements of the MTL and CGDA that are clearly helpful to consumers, while leaving the detailed design of the schemes to individual businesses. The FSA is recommending that industry applies four core elements to achieve a consistent scheme. These four core elements are:

- separate information on the key nutrients fat, saturated fat, sugar and salt;
- use of red, amber or green colour coding to provide at a glance information on the level (ie whether high, medium or low) of the individual nutrients in the product;
- provision of information on the levels of nutrients present in a portion of the product;
- use of nutritional criteria developed by the FSA to determine the colour banding.

Examples of how these elements can be applied in practice are shown in Annex 1.

The FSA is recommending that the signpost labelling should be used on foods that consumers eat regularly and find most difficult to assess nutritionally, such as ready meals, breakfast cereals, burgers, sausages, pies, pizzas and sandwiches.

Considerations:

Final technical guidance for industry on how to apply the Agency's recommended front of pack signpost labelling scheme is expected to be published by the end of April. The FSA wants all food retailers and manufacturers to adopt this approach to reduce consumer confusion caused by a proliferation of schemes with differing symbols and criteria. Sainsbury's and Waitrose are already using the recommended colour-coded approach on products and Asda has indicated it will follow shortly.

The FSA will work with retailers and manufacturers to promote the new labelling to shoppers and to encourage consumers to use the scheme to make healthier choices. The signpost labelling should help to encourage consumers to look for and demand healthier products and provide an incentive to business to produce foods that are lower in fat, salt or sugar

The Agency also plans to work with stakeholders on an independent assessment of the impact of all signpost labelling on consumer behaviour.

The Welsh Food Advisory Committee in its consideration of signpost labelling highlighted the importance of closely monitoring consumer acceptance of the different concepts in use, and the effects on purchasing patterns. The Committee also acknowledged the importance of providing consumers with information in a format that assists in making healthier choices, and recognised that it was a significant achievement that many retailers and food manufacturers had already adopted a form of signpost labelling. However the need for a consistent approach to minimise the scope for confusion was also highlighted.

Financial Implications

There are no financial implications to the Assembly.

Action for Subject Committee

This paper is for noting.

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Examples of variations of signposting formats which meet the core elements of the Agency's Signposting scheme



