

Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee

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Paper for the Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee on the Implementation of Recommendations in the E.coli O157 Public Inquiry Report

1. My foreword to the Consumer Focus Wales 'Protecting consumers from "E.coli "O157: progress on the Implementation of the Pennington Report in Wales' remains particularly pertinent. I endorse the conclusions of the whole document too.

2. E.coli O157 has not gone away. The number of human cases in GB has not changed significantly in the last 10 years. The open farm outbreak at Godstone in Surrey in August and September last year showed that its power to cause very serious disease has not diminished (www.griffininvestigation.org.uk). 96 were infected, 27 were admitted to hospital. 17 developed HUS, 8 requiring dialysis. Some children have been left with permanent kidney damage. In my view it is very unlikely that methods to reduce the carriage levels of the organism in cattle and sheep or to prevent the development of HUS in those who have been infected will come on stream any time soon. Prevention of infection is absolutely paramount.

3. The only big change since the publication of the Consumer Focus Wales document is that the probability of the rapid implementation of big budget cuts has markedly increased. It seems unlikely that any significant sums of new money to pay for work to implement my recommendations ('Pennington money') - hypothecated/ring fenced or not - will be allocated to local authorities. My immediate concern is that in the implementation of financial reductions by the shedding of staff, policy will be driven by HR departments rather than the need to retain experience and institutional memory (see paras 17.36, 17.49 and 17.51 of my report). Part One of the 'Report of the Walkerton Inquiry: The Events of May 2000 and Related Issues' (www.publications.gov.on.ca) - more than 2,300 fell ill at Walkerton, 27 developed HUS, and 7 died - provides evidence that rather than maintaining the systems that protected the population from E.coli O157, the Canadian approach to managing budget cuts contributed to the regulatory failures that led to this massive outbreak. I look to the Welsh Assembly Government to do all that it can to ensure that LA public protection budgets are given the priority they need to respond to my recommendations - which in are solely concerned with work that they should in principle have been doing before 2005.

4. Most of my recommendations were about the effective implementation of HACCP.

I am disappointed by the negative responses to Recommendation 8, that the inspection of HACCP plans should be audit based, and Recommendation 10, that a copy of a business's HACCP plan should be kept on its inspection file. I fear that these responses might indicate the continuation of a fundamental problem - that the absolutely central role played by HACCP in delivering food safety is not yet accepted by all. I hope not. I look to the Welsh Assembly Government in conjunction with the Food Standards Agency, LAs, and other bodies to do all that it can to influence the training and professional development of regulatory officers at all levels regarding HACCP.

5. My report made it clear that outbreak control in 2005 was handled well. The contrast with the findings of the Independent Inquiry into the Godstone farm outbreak that 'there was a lack of public health leadership and a missed opportunity to exercise decisive public health actions and thereby restrict the size of the outbreak' is very great. I know that LAs in Wales, and in particular those involved in the outbreak, have taken many actions since to reduce the risk of a repetition. I consider that the Welsh Assembly Government has a duty to use all the powers and influence at its disposal to build on these strengths, which, in conjunction with the implementation of my recommendations, could make food in Wales very significantly safer. While "E.coli" O157 is particularly nasty, with prevention being paramount, better HACCP implementation will bring many other benefits as well. Food poisoning is still outrageously common, with big negative health and economic impacts.

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