

COMMUNICATION ENGAGEMENT AND COOPERATION

EFSA Brussels Liaison Office

2-year evaluation report

Background:

- EFSA's Brussels Liaison Office (BLO) has been operating as an arm of the Engagement and Cooperation Unit on a permanent basis since August 2016. This followed a pilot phase of a year.
- The motivation to set up the office was, in part, a response to one of the priorities adopted by EFSA's Management Board in 2012 following the Authority's second external evaluation.
- The Board recommended that EFSA strengthen the clarity and accessibility of EFSA communications and seek to better understand public perception of the independence of EFSA's scientific advice and strengthen dialogue with interested parties on measures EFSA had taken to guarantee the independence of its scientific work.
- A key aim was to help manage key relationships which can impact on EFSA's work and reputation. Externally, this can relate to EU institutions, stakeholders, NGOs, international organisations, the media. Many of these important decision-makers and their influencers are based in Brussels.
- The pilot phase showed that growing a reputation for greater visibility and accessibility was taking root, as evidenced by the increasing number of calls and invitations from institutional partners and stakeholders.
- The Management Board subsequently endorsed the approach of establishing an EFSA liaison office in Brussels as a permanent fixture and requested an evaluation report after a two-year period.
- This report aims to give a brief overview of the achievements of the Brussels Liaison Office over the two-year period and determine whether it has met its objectives and KPIs.

Strategic Alignment:

Since its establishment, the Brussels Liaison Office has supported EFSA's overarching strategic objectives by:

- Developing opportunities to outline EFSA's vision to become an open science organisation, benefits to stakeholders, Member States, other partners – promoting elements integral to the Open EFSA initiative on transparency (OPENNESS);
- Seeking opportunities to explain to MEPs, their assistants and advisors (ENVI, AGRI, CONT, BUDG, PETI committees) and Member State representatives the benefits EFSA brings to the EU food safety system (VALUE-ADDED SCIENCE);
- Seeking opportunities to leverage new and existing contacts with institutional partners and stakeholders in support of scientific co-operation (CO-OPERATION);
- Identifying reputational risks to EFSA from critical Members of the European Parliament/stakeholders/Non-Governmental Organisations and taking early pre-

emptive action to mitigate any damage – e.g. face-to-face, informal information briefings, background briefings with visiting EFSA scientists, dealing with criticisms with swift follow-up actions, such as providing relevant information (REPUTATION MANAGEMENT).

General overview:

- The overall impression, from reaction to tangible achievements, anecdotal feedback and comments expressed among partners, stakeholders and staff, is that the establishment of EFSA's Brussels Liaison Office is welcome and considered a positive move.
- The work of the Brussels Liaison Office, staffed by one full-time EFSA employee, builds on the many relationships already established by colleagues in the Engagement and Cooperation Unit of the Communications Department in Parma. By an *in-situ* presence to help articulate EFSA's vision and strategy, the Brussels Liaison Office has been able to deepen those relationships and broaden the list of contacts to further build trust.
- Early networking successes scored in the pilot phase have been nurtured and established, in particular with contacts made in the European Parliament, among stakeholders and Member State Permanent Representations, and the Commission Directorate General SANTE.
- In Parliament, for example, the visibility of a familiar EFSA face, together with that of visiting institutional staff, builds recognition and allows Members of the European Parliament and their staff to feel comfortable to approach, and be approached, in Parliament and at events, to discuss questions about EFSA in general or food safety in particular.
- Dealings with Brussels-based media are steered by the Media Relations unit in Parma, though the Brussels Liaison Office provides back-up and support when required, and meets long-established contacts from time to time.

Targets:

Targets set in a number of Key Performance Indicators were exceeded in both 2016 and 2017.

European Parliament:

For example in 2017, meetings arranged with Members of the European Parliament's assistants/advisors, rapporteurs and shadow rapporteurs (x 14), European Parliament committee meetings (ENVI, AGRI in particular) (x 8), and attendance at political events/debates/workshops (x 4) were more than double.

European Council/Permanent Representations/Commission:

Targets measuring the number of meetings with the agricultural attachés of the permanent representations of Member States assuming the EU Presidency were met (x2) as were those to discuss EFSA presentations at meetings of Chief Veterinary Officers and Chief Officers on Plant Health Services (x 4). Informal meetings were also held with colleagues at Directorate General SANTE.

Stakeholders:

Discussions with EFSA stakeholders are a regular part of the Brussels workday with numerous encounters on the sidelines at most conferences, workshops relevant to EFSA, e.g. Anti-Microbial Resistance One Health network meetings, and the Commission's Advisory Group on the Food Chain, invitations to annual meetings and

other events. These are in addition to EFSA-organised events, e.g. the Stakeholder Bureau. The target of x 20 exceeded.

The target picture was similarly exceeded in 2016.

Achievements:

Bee Health - first major event with the European Parliament, mandate from the European Parliament:

A breakfast presentation by EFSA scientists to Members of the European Parliament on the Working Group on Bee Health and Apiculture led to EFSA co-organising Parliament's 2017 Bee Week scientific symposium with interested stakeholders. This was the first major event EFSA has organised in conjunction with, and at the request of, the European Parliament.

That symposium with stakeholders concluded with a general agreement to work towards an EU Bee Partnership of stakeholders on sharing and collecting data on bee health, which was presented at the European Parliament 2018 Bee Week High Level Conference.

EFSA's work and the EU Bee Partnership was included in a major AGRI Committee Report on 'prospects and challenges for the EU apiculture sector' voted through by the European Parliament in April 2018. In addition, the ENVI Committee drafted a parliamentary mandate for EFSA on bee health, which was signed and sent to EFSA by European Parliament President Antonio Tajani in July.

A background briefing on **Food Contact Materials** organised by the Brussels Liaison Office was welcomed by Danish Member of the European Parliament Christel Schaldemose, whose Motion for Resolution on Food Contact Materials aimed at broadening the current EU Regulation to include paper, board and other materials, was informed by details from the briefing and EFSA support documents.

European Parliament lunchtime debates:

The same approach to ensure EFSA's presence goes for science-related lunchtime debates hosted by the Parliament. These are well attended by Members of the European Parliament or their staff, and many stakeholders, some sometimes travelling from outside Brussels.

The Brussels Liaison Office prepares briefings for these debates, and ensures the appropriate EFSA scientist is available to give a presentation. Over the past two years we have participated in two debates on 'uncertainty in risk assessment', one on 'risks vs. hazards' and a topical discussion on 'fact checking science – shaping the governance of scientific advice in the EU'.

EFSA's participation and willingness to engage in sometimes quite lively Questions & Answers exchanges are always well appreciated.

Chief Veterinary Officers' meetings:

Regular preparatory meetings with the Permanent Representations of incoming EU presidencies, in coordination with EFSA's Animal and Plant Health (ALPHA) Unit, has given EFSA the opportunity to book slots in agendas of the Council-run Chief Veterinary Officer meetings or Working Groups to present members with important updates on, for example, African swine fever, avian influenza or lumpy skin disease.

Following activities and contacts with the presidencies of Malta, Estonia, Bulgaria and most recently Austria, EFSA's participation is now considered part of the regular agenda at least once under each Presidency. Similar action is now being focused on the meetings of the COPS.

Intelligence gathering:

EFSA is always present at high-level events, represented by the Executive Director, other managers, or senior EFSA scientists. Engagement and Cooperation staff also travel to Brussels to follow major debates in Parliament, important stakeholder events or to be present at key media interviews. These are mostly supported by the Brussels Liaison Office.

The additional added-value the Brussels Liaison Office provides is to attend and observe those events which may not at first sight warrant the expense of a mission from Parma, but nevertheless contain important information which we are now able to report back to Parma in real-time which can inform strategies and decision-making.

EFSA's Chief Scientist:

The Brussels office also provides a base for EFSA's Chief Scientist, currently Dr Marta Hugas, who spends part of her working month in Brussels. The presence of the Chief Scientist is key to the meeting of her objectives, in particular regarding the deepening of contacts with DG R&I (SAM Unit, H2020 and the Horizon Europe next framework programme), at Joint Research Centre headquarters, with the European Parliament – notably, the Science and Technology Options Assessment panel – as well as the EU-ANSA network. The Brussels Liaison Office supports the Chief Scientist whenever needed in relation to relevant stakeholders and some European Parliament activities.

Support to EFSA staff:

One of the added advantages of the Brussels Liaison Office is that it is able to provide EFSA scientific staff and, on occasion, EFSA experts, with preparatory support ahead of participation in conferences, workshops, hearings or meetings at the European Parliament, the European Commission, at stakeholder events or ahead of media interviews.

The office also acts as a hub for the Engagement and Cooperation Unit and other Communications staff and as a base when needed in Brussels to work, prepare for events, print off documents, etc.

Expenditure and relocation:

At present, EFSA's Brussels Liaison Office is sited in office space in Square de Meeus in Brussels, which provides quick and easy access to the European Parliament, the European Commission, media centres and nearly all EFSA's stakeholder premises.

Costs regarding the running of the Brussels Liaison Office have largely been maintained at projections seen in the Charter, with the annual figure for 2017 at €41,328.

The Brussels Liaison Office is scheduled in early 2019 to move just two blocks away to a building occupied by the Network of Agencies Support Services Office, which has improved facilities and will see savings in rental of around €20,000 over a 4-year contract.

The move is in line with recent initial thinking by EU Heads of Agencies with regard to a so-called 'House of Agencies', recognising the benefits which can be accrued from sharing common services, as well as from proximity, cooperation and exchange of information.

Conclusions and future perspective:

EFSA's Brussels Liaison Office has increased visibility and accessibility at EU institutions and among stakeholders, has grown its contacts portfolio through networking and has proved to be of tangible support to EFSA scientific and communications staff and scientific experts.

The work of the Brussels Liaison Office is one of continuous improvement and continual efforts to cement relationships with the changing faces of movers and shakers in Brussels, which will see a new Parliament and Commission within the next 12 months.

And as EFSA's recent Customer Satisfaction Survey has shown, there is always more work to be done. The lowest satisfaction rate among EFSA customers remains with EU institutions and bodies, albeit at 51.8% of respondents -(though when removing "I don't know" responses, EU institutions/bodies registered a satisfaction rate of 77.9%, nearer to the average of 82.2%). The result among members of EFSA's Stakeholder Forum was higher at 61.4%.

Annex:

Below is feedback from some of the EFSA's scientific staff:

Jose Tarazona, Head of EFSA's Pesticides Unit:

"The support I have received from the Brussels Liaison Office has always been excellent, covering both preparatory work and support at meetings and other events.

Tobin Robinson, Head of the EFSA's Scientific Committee and Emerging Risks Unit:

"Consistently excellent support provided by the Brussels office. A clear added value is provided by someone who has knowledge of the daily working of the EU Parliament, and has established personal contacts with key Parliament staff. This proved to be indispensable in pushing forward the work on bees, in support of Parliament's interests, and in ensuring that key stakeholders were kept engaged and on board. Furthermore, the contact with Parliament has provided us with the opportunity to present complex issues, such as uncertainty, to audiences close to the Parliament."

Nik Kriz, Head of EFSA's Animal and Plant Health Unit:

"Having come from 16 years of work at the European Medicines Agency which does not have a dedicated liaison office in Brussels I was curious as to the benefits such an arrangement could offer me as a Head of Unit with frequent interactions with the European Commission and the Council and being affected by work sent to EFSA from the European Parliament. During the last 18 months I have come to fully appreciate the increase in efficiency and co-ordination of interaction with the EU institutions the EFSA Brussels Liaison Office has been instrumental in setting up. There is not only a great feedback mechanism in place which enables me to be much better informed

about discussions going on at Council and European Parliament level on topics affecting my Unit but also pro-active engagement with myself on the need for attendance of my Unit staff in order to effectively communicate on the risk assessment work the Animal and Plant Health Unit is doing. I believe the Brussels Liaison Office is an effective advocate for the scientific units of EFSA risk assessment work. I also feel that their feedback loop on important subjects such as African Swine Fever, Xylella or Lumpy Skin Disease ensures a better communication and collaboration with the EU institutions."

Valeriu Curtui, Head of EFSA's Nutrition Unit:

"It is a pleasant experience stopping at the EFSA office in Brussels before meetings in the Commission or in the Parliament and using the facilities there to continue preparing for the meetings. It felt like being in EFSA. Very useful the support provided by the Brussels Liaison Office regarding sensitivities around the meetings and in handling media and other stakeholders."