

WRITTEN QUESTIONS FROM COUNCILLORS*Genetically modified (GM) products in shops, restaurants, cafes and pubs*

I would be grateful if you could place this letter on the agenda of the Cabinet Meeting for 10 July.

I write to you on two matters of concerns, brought to my attention by Friends of the Earth, both relating to the possibility that Brighton and Hove residents may be unwittingly buying and consuming genetically modified foods that they neither need nor want.

Firstly, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) has recently issued a food alert regarding the contamination of some rice products by illegal genetically modified (GM) rice.

Two contaminated foods, both rice noodle products, were found on sale in Asian specialty stores in London in 2006, but the FSA has only just issued the alert. I am therefore concerned that contaminated food may be on sale in shops in Brighton and Hove. This is particularly worrying because scientific studies have raised concerns about the risk to human health, particularly the potential to cause food allergies. Worryingly, the FSA says that so little data on Bt63 rice exists that it is not even possible to carry out safety tests.

For full information about the food alert, including details of products that might be affected and the obligations of local authorities please see the FSA website at: <http://www.food.gov.uk/enforcement/alerts/2008/apr/bt63>

Secondly, GM ingredients, mainly cooking oil, may be finding their way into restaurants, cafes and pubs without customers being informed of this fact. Although I understand that it is lawful for catering establishments to use certain types of GM oil in their food, they are legally required to reveal it on the menu or on a prominent notice.

However, in some areas, such as Norfolk and York, Trading Standards officers have found that GM ingredients are being routinely used without any form of labelling by numerous caterers. This is despite the fact that failure to comply with these labelling requirements is a criminal offence with a penalty of up to £20,000.

A Business Guidance leaflet on Genetically Modified Foods, produced for caterers by Trading Standards at national level has been produced and is available at: <http://www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/cgi-bin/bgitem.cgi?file=badv070-1011.txt>

The people of Brighton and Hove have comprehensively rejected genetically modified products. In 2003, the Council passed a motion making us the first local authority in the South East to become a GM-free zone. However, despite massive public opposition, the Government is once again expressing its support for GM technologies following extensive lobbying from the biotech industry. The Council must act to defend our record on GM and to uphold the law.

Therefore, I would request that our Trading Standards team:

investigate the possibility that products contaminated with the illegal Bt63 GM rice are being sold in Brighton and Hove, including any necessary testing;

investigate whether unlabelled GM products, especially cooking oil, are being used in catering establishments across the city;

take action to remind local businesses of their legal obligations in respect of the labelling of GM products;

take the strongest possible action against offending businesses, where repeated and wilful breaches of the law are occurring.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Paul Steedman
Queen's Park ward (Green)

Response from Member

Thank you for your letter.

The Trading Standards Food Team have a risk assessed programme of inspections and carry out target sampling in line with national guidance.

They are aware of all the issues relating to GM foods, including the recent alert and the concerns of the public and will, of course, always have this in mind when they are carrying out their work.

Their current sampling programme does not include GM foods but, obviously, if information is received that suggests a problem within the city; they have the flexibility to amend the programme to take account of this.

I know that the Trading Standards Team are reviewing the local position regarding this issue to ensure that appropriate action is being taken.