

Driving change

It's been a hugely busy but productive 12 months since Martin Last became Director General of the Health Food Manufacturers' Association (HFMA). Here, he sits down with *Health Food Business* Editor, Rachel Symonds, to detail the progress of his five-year plan, how the organisation is strengthening its presence in Westminster and the future evolution of the HFMA.

A lot can happen in a year, and that is certainly the case when we look at the 12 months since Martin Last took on the role of Director General at the HFMA. Not only have we seen the internal team strengthened, new IT systems put in place and a restructure of the organisation, but, a year into the HFMA's five-year plan and externally, much progress has been made to ensure the HFMA is serving its members' needs and positioning the food supplement industry as the key contributor to the nation's health.

Take for example the appointment back in February of political advisors, Cavendish, which is working hard to raise the profile of the HFMA, the wider industry and the current issues among politicians. Not only has this work been an important step, irrespective of an election, but by the time the General Election was called for July 4, it meant Cavendish was already in place and able to hit the ground running as a new government came into power.



For Martin, it has been a busy year but one of great reward as he tells *Health Food Business*: "I'm thoroughly enjoying it. I have never felt so fulfilled. It is challenging and the days fly by but there is so much I want to do and so much we can do and I am being given the opportunity to do it, which is wonderful. With anything I have done in my career, I have always given 100 per cent and more and I love being able to do that in this role – it is such a great position to be in and to have a team that's going in the same direction with me is wonderful. The team really feel they have a voice and that is so important.

"I thought I would just come in and manage things, but it is more than that – I am driving the HFMA and that is very rewarding. I didn't think we would have as much change as we have had in the first year. We are further ahead of the plan than I thought we would be a year on but there are still many things we want to do that will take time. I wanted to get the structure right first, ensure that

the foundations were in place, get the systems working properly, and then build from there."

Speaking just after the recent General Election result and with a new Labour Government now in power, Martin explained that work began on July 5 to begin engaging with MPs.

"We work cross party, making sure that it's not just Labour MPs that we engage with but other parties too. With any new Government, it is about new engagement but the process is really the same as if they were existing MPs. It does present new opportunities for us too."

On growing the HFMA's voice in Westminster

The HFMA announced the appointment of political advisors, Cavendish, in February, timed well now that we have a new government in place, along with a plethora of new MPs.

"Appointing Cavendish was the right thing to do as we needed a voice in Westminster. We needed engagement with MPs where we could raise some of the key issues," Martin explained.

After a two-month recruitment process, and a shortlist of five, Cavendish was appointed.

"Cavendish stood out as the most dynamic and more hands-on and that has been the case since they started with us," Martin added. "Since February, we have had a strategic plan in place with priorities for three key issues, focused on engagement with MPs and Ministers."

In terms of the overall aim of Cavendish, Martin went on: "This fundamentally is about what our industry needs. Too much we are seen as an easy target to knock, that people don't need food supplements. We should be part of the healthcare agenda – we should be raising our profile to show that there are real benefits to food supplements, and that we can take the burden off the NHS.



There are something like 25 different issues that we manage and we didn't want to give Cavendish 25 issues. There are some we can manage where we have access to the Civil Service, for example, and so that's why we came up with three key issues for Cavendish to work on."

In terms of the work of lobbying both here and in Europe, Martin noted that there is a shifting landscape in the latter, which is making things harder for the food supplements industry.

He explained: "Europe is very anti food supplements at the moment. It has been a shift in the last 12 months and that has come from MEPs, who are being lobbied by a lot of other companies. A lot of this stems from issues around social media influencers. Consumers listen to social media influencers and too many claims are being made – they are being paid because they have a big following but they don't always have the knowledge. How that's affected the Commission is they put these regulations in place but nobody is listening to them so they are concerned. The education is lacking in terms of guidance to influencers."

One strategy that is being looked at here in the UK is adopting a similar system as The Netherlands, which has created a register of accredited influencers, those who are known to offer



during pregnancy. The matter has come to the fore once again following proposals to fortify white bread with folic acid.

But the HFMA rightly has concerns, not just because it encourages women to eat white bread but in the lack of plans for an educational campaign around supplementing with folic acid.

Martin advised: "This is something we have been working on since 1995 and it is well recognised in science and recommended by the Department of Health that women should take 400mcg of folic acid while trying to conceive and in the first trimester to reduce the risk of neural tube defects, such as spina bifida. Now, there is going to be fortification of non-wholemeal flour but you would have to eat 10 slices of white bread a day to reach the 400mcg that is needed. And there is a risk that it discourages women from supplementing with folic acid."

The law is due to come into force in late 2026, but there are ongoing consultations about its implementation and what concerns the HFMA is the lack of planning for any education campaign.

"There are 800,000 births a year in the UK and this is an ongoing issue. Women should be made aware through proper education," Martin added. "It goes back to the important role of supplementation and the role of food supplements in healthcare and this is a good example of that. We should be part of the solution."

"We want Government to commit to an ongoing campaign to support supplementation during pregnancy as there is currently no plan for any kind of campaign alongside this new law. And we need the Department of Health and the FSA to talk to each other because at the moment, we have health advice going against food law. We need some joined up thinking across departments."

On the five-year plan

When Martin took over the role last August, there were some key changes he wanted to make to the organisation to bring it more up to date and be more in tune with what members wanted. This has seen a restructure internally, new appointments made, including a new Technical Manager, while they are also recruiting for a further member of the CLEAR CHECK team. These changes have made a huge difference to the workings of the organisation and are

ON PROBIOTICS

Turning in more detail to one of the critical issues Cavendish is working on, Martin explained that the goal was to make progress on the issue around probiotics.

As a reminder, probiotics was ruled to be a health claim as part of the Nutrition and Health Claims Regulation and, despite Brexit, this has been allowed to continue in the UK, meaning brands are not allowed to use the word 'probiotics' to describe their products.

Martin advised: "The only organisation that uses probiotics is the Department of Health, when referring to them, but they are the ones telling us we cannot use the word! This did not have to be picked up from Europe and it is not even about changing legislation – it is about the interpretation of the word. On this matter, we feel we need to get a proper voice on it in Westminster and get it on the political agenda so that someone can push for the interpretation of the word to change."

Another issue that has become a problem since Brexit and another issue Cavendish has been tasked with working on is Not for EU, which is to do with labelling between the UK and the EU.

Martin explained: "If you label a food product for the UK, it must say on the label it is not for the EU. It creates the assumption that a UK product is not as good as an EU product. This is not something that legislation has done, this is something that was created as part of the Windsor Framework to get the deal done, and that was done at the top by Rishi Sunak – to change that, we need to address that at top level. It falls under food law. We know that medicines has a much friendlier statement and that is something we would like to see applied to food law as it is causing a barrier to trade."

responsible and correct advice.

"It would mean for brands looking to work with influencers, they could access a list of people who they could trust with providing the right information," he advised. "We are talking to the trade association there to find out what they do and the criteria to set it up to see if it's something we could do here."

In addition, Martin has also been working on strengthening partnerships with other key organisations, such as PAGN and the CRN in the UK.

"If we are saying similar things, and working to similar goals, it makes sense for us to link together," he commented, adding that the HFMA will also look to work with organisations across the likes of fresh and chilled produce sectors to learn lessons.

"It is a matter of getting our reach out further and further," he explained.

On folic acid fortification

This is a matter that the HFMA has been campaigning on for decades in terms of folic acid being added to bread to try and ensure women get adequate folic acid to reduce the risk of neural tube defects