

To Chief Executives of local authorities in England

21 June 2021

Dear Chief Executive,

COVID-19 - recovery plan for local authority delivery of food law controls

At its meeting on 26 May the Food Standards Agency (FSA) Board paid tribute to the hard work and sustained commitment of local authority officers to protecting public health at the local level during the coronavirus pandemic. I wanted to let you know that, and to add my own thanks for the efforts of your teams since March last year in safeguarding your communities and controlling the spread of the disease. This letter draws your attention to the FSA's most recent guidance and advice to local authorities on food controls which is in the form of a recovery plan.

During the time of immense pressure on your resources the FSA has been agile in revising our guidance and advice to local authorities on delivery of food controls so that you could address the wider and unprecedented challenges being faced. Now that we are well along the roadmap back to a more normal life, it is important that the focus is progressively shifted back to delivery of food law regulatory controls. These controls ensure business compliance with food law requirements and are key to safeguarding public health and consumer protection in relation to food.

I would, therefore, like to draw your attention to the recovery plan that the FSA has developed for achieving this. The plan sets out guidance and advice to local authorities for recovery over the period from 1 July 2021 to 2023/24. The FSA wrote to food teams in all local authorities in England about this on 16 June and copies of that letter and the recovery plan are appended.

The plan provides a framework for re-starting the delivery system taking a measured and risk-based approach that ensures resources are targeted where they add greatest value. It also ensures more routine operation of the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme which is important for your local businesses and consumers. The planned interventions and other activities specified are the minimum that local authorities need to undertake to fulfil their statutory duties in relation to food, so I wanted to ask for your support in following the guidance and advice.

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FOOD HYGIENE RATING

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In order for your authority to deliver this, I would urge you to take steps to ensure that the resources required are in place and are protected for the future. Please note that where local authorities have the resources to do so, we advise that they move at a faster pace than that set out in the plan.

The plan takes account of feedback received during development from local authority colleagues through the national focus groups and regional food liaison groups. They considered that the plan provides the most pragmatic and practical way to re-start the system and I hope that you will agree with that. At the more strategic level, we shared the plan with the MHCLG led cross-Government Regulatory Services Review Task & Finish Group and the COVID-19 Compliance Working Group, and the local authority colleagues on these Groups were positive about the approach. I should also add that through the Task and Finish Group, the FSA is fully engaged in discussions regarding the pressures facing local authority regulatory services and committed to finding ways to try to alleviate this challenge.

We will be monitoring delivery against the expectations and timelines set out within the plan through our established engagement mechanisms and by regular assessment of Food Hygiene Rating Scheme data where appropriate and also data from end year returns for 2021/22 and 2022/23. We are very aware that for some local authorities, particularly those areas of sustained transmission where staff will still be heavily involved in public health work, delivery may be challenging, and we stand ready to provide what support we can to help. The approach we will take will reflect the challenges that individual authorities are facing and the differing circumstances that COVID-19 may create at a local level during the recovery period. Where necessary, I will be in touch at chief executive level to explore with you whether the FSA can offer any specific support or assistance to your authority.

In the meantime, I would stress that it is really important that we are alerted as early as possible if you are unable to deliver against the plan. If this is the case at any point during the recovery period, I would ask that your food team contact us at LAengagement@food.gov.uk. This will enable us to consider together the risks this is posing and agree any follow-up action and support we can provide at the first opportunity.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Emily Miles'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the bottom.

Emily Miles