

2 May 2023

**Classification:** Official

Dear Chief Executive,

### **Withdrawal of COVID-19 Recovery Plan**

I wrote to you back in June 2021 to set out how the FSA intended to support local authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to continue to deliver their food safety services and recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. I am writing to update you on the progress made since then, and to set out how we plan to work with you to tackle some of the challenges still ahead.

When I last wrote to you, a year into the pandemic, over half of the staff working in local authority food teams had been diverted onto other priority work. As a result, there was a growing backlog of food businesses who had never been inspected or whose inspections were overdue. The FSA set out, in our Local Authority Recovery Plan, how we would work with local authorities to bring down this backlog, starting with those businesses which posed the highest risk.

Since then, we have worked with your staff at an operational level and with their support we have been assessing progress against agreed milestones using “temperature check” surveys, as well as the end of year surveys. I would like to extend my thanks to your team for engaging with our Recovery Plan, our monitoring surveys and verification assessments and for their ongoing vital work in striving to return to pre-pandemic levels of service.

The vast majority of local authorities met the milestones we set in the plan to bring interventions at the highest risk businesses back on track, and many have made significant progress towards returning to the normal inspection frequencies for lower risk businesses too. Due to the positive work undertaken by local authorities, I am pleased to say we were able to write to your teams in February (copy attached) to communicate our decision to bring the formal Recovery Plan to an end on 31 March 2023.

However, challenges still remain. Many local authorities still have a backlog of lower risk businesses to work through, alongside a return to normal performance expectations. The

food industry has been evolving rapidly, with new trends such as the rapid growth in online food sales posing new challenges to food teams. There are further system changes to come, like the implementation of a new operating model for UK border controls. Meanwhile, the resources available to address these challenges have been steadily decreasing. Although local authority food teams are now largely back to pre-pandemic staffing levels, those teams have around 11% fewer environmental health and 50% fewer trading standards professionals than they did a decade ago, and we have heard evidence of some significant recruitment and retention challenges in food teams.

As the national regulator, the FSA has a statutory duty to monitor the performance of local authorities and port health authorities in delivering official controls for food safety and standards. Having brought the Recovery Plan to an end, we will now work with local authorities in a more bespoke way, to ensure a return to delivery of pre-pandemic levels of service. We will take a risk-based and pragmatic approach to performance management as services work to realign with the Food Law Code of Practice and to 'catch up' on backlogs of lower risk premises created by the pandemic. We have also commissioned some research from Ipsos to help us to quantify the nature and extent of the issues impacting on recruitment and retention so that we can define our role in ensuring future sustainability of the workforce.

We will also go further, working through our Achieving Business Compliance (ABC) Programme to develop regulatory reforms which help your teams to target available regulatory resources at the areas which pose the greatest risk. This year, we expect to begin implementation of a more risk-based, intelligence-driven delivery model for food standards, which has been developed with, and piloted by, local authorities. We will also be working with your teams to develop a new approach to food hygiene in a similar way, and with them and the relevant professional bodies to explore some of the workforce challenges.

Your food teams play a vital role in protecting public health, and protecting consumers from those who might exploit them by selling fraudulent or inauthentic food. They are the second line of defence, after the businesses themselves. That role becomes even more important at times when people and businesses are feeling the impact of the rising cost of living. An outbreak of foodborne disease can have devastating consequences for people's health, as well as for local and national food businesses; 160 people die each year from eating contaminated food, and over 15,000 receive hospital treatment. And a loss of trust in the authenticity of UK food can have long-lasting economic impacts, as we saw in the horsemeat scandal ten years ago, which is estimated to have cost UK industry

over £800m. It is essential that food teams continue to have the resources they need to do the job.

We want to keep supporting you in this important work, and to work with you to ensure that food safety and standards remains a high priority for you.

This letter has been copied to lead food officers and Heads of Service via the Smarter Communications platform. If you have any questions or concerns relating to the content of this letter, please contact [LAEngagement@food.gov.uk](mailto:LAEngagement@food.gov.uk)

Thank you for your ongoing commitment and support and we would like to record our thanks to your teams for all their hard work under the unprecedented strain of the last three years.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emily Miles". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Emily Miles

Chief Executive