

FSA Chief Executive's speech to the Chartered Institute of Health (CIEH) Conference: Embracing change, empowering environmental health

FSA Chief Executive Katie Pettifer addressed the CIEH conference in Wales on Wednesday 22 October 2025. Speaking to an audience of environmental health professionals, Katie spoke about the challenges facing the profession and how the FSA is helping to address them.

Prynhawn da' and thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. It's always a privilege to speak at the CIEH conferences, with the professionals who are the backbone of food safety in our communities.

I love the title of this conference, I think it really sums up what we want to do! I will talk about how in a minute, but first I want to say something obvious, because I don't think we say it enough.

The essential role of environmental health

What you do matters. At the FSA we often say there are three lines of defence in the food system – food businesses themselves who have to make sure the food they sell is safe, local authorities who carry out official controls to check this, and FSA as the national regulator monitoring the whole system. Every day, environmental health professionals across Wales, work hard to protect public health in every part of that system – businesses, local authorities and indeed the FSA. Thanks to you, when people sit down to eat with their families, they can trust that their food is safe.

I think that's the goal we all share.

I'm going to go on to talk about how we improve the regimes for inspection and enforcement, but we mustn't lose sight of the wider role of environmental health in shaping the strong food safety culture we have in Wales. You help businesses understand their responsibilities, support them to improve, and help to create an environment where good food safety practice becomes second nature. And the results of this dedication are clear – 97% of Welsh food businesses achieve food hygiene ratings of three or better, with more than 75% achieving the top rating of five. That's something to be really proud of.

At the Food Standards Agency, we recognise that we can't achieve our mission without you. We are here to support environmental health professionals in the shared endeavour of protecting public health. Today, I want to explore the areas where we can collaborate to ensure we keep protecting public health in the future.

Acknowledging current challenges

Before looking ahead, we must be honest about where we are. The pressures facing environmental health services are significant. While there has been progress since the pandemic, there are still backlogs and local authorities are still experiencing significant resource challenges. In Wales, we're seeing 12% of food hygiene posts unfilled and 11% of food standards posts vacant. Across the UK, there are more than 42,000 unrated businesses – each one representing a gap in consumer protection.

These aren't just statistics – they represent the daily reality local authority food teams face. Resource constraints mean difficult decisions about priorities, longer intervals between inspections, and professionals stretched across multiple responsibilities. We hear this in the feedback we get from local authorities across Wales, and across England and Northern Ireland too, and we see it in the data. The job is getting harder, the number of food businesses across the UK is growing, and the workforce is not.

How the FSA is responding – in the UK and Wales

We're trying to respond to these challenges in a comprehensive and systematic way.

First of all, we're raising awareness, with policy-makers, elected politicians, whoever we think can help. A few months ago, I was in the Senedd launching our annual report on food standards in the UK, in which we yet again said that local authorities do not have sufficient resources to deal with a growing number of food businesses.

In the FSA we have a statutory duty to monitor performance of enforcement authorities across the food system. So, we collect data and report on it publicly, and when we see local authorities that are really struggling to deliver, we engage with them on an individual basis. Usually what we see is food teams trying hard to do the job without the people they need, and sometimes an intervention from the FSA can help them make the case to senior managers for more money.

We're also changing what we ask of local authorities, to help them make the best use of the resources they do have. The new Food Standards Model takes a more risk-based approach, focusing more time on non-compliant and high-risk businesses. In Wales, we've worked with local authorities to pilot the model, which we evaluated earlier in the year. The evaluation confirmed the model's effectiveness, and it's been included in the recent consultation on the Food Law Code of Practice.

In that same consultation we proposed changes to the food hygiene model. We're supporting the recognition of new qualifications and expanding the roles of Regulatory Support Officers. We're promoting remote assessments and business triaging where appropriate, giving local authority teams more tools to manage their workload effectively – empowering environmental health.

We're seeking approval from ministers to make changes to the code later this autumn and, subject to approval, we're going to be working with local authorities to initiate a transition period and begin implementing the changes by the end of the year.

Finally, we're supporting the workforce and trying to help build it. Here in Wales, we're working in partnership to promote regulatory careers, addressing the workforce challenges through collaborative efforts with DPPW, we're keen to support DPPWs work identified in their Building the Future report recommendations. We're engaging with partners like Mentera and Food and Drink Skills Wales to attract new talent into the profession.

I'm proud of what we've done so far. It represents a collective effort to respond to serious challenges, but we need to do more. The food sector keeps growing and evolving, and the pressure on public funds isn't going away. And unfortunately, risk in the food system is

growing too. It's a volatile time for global food supply chains, and we may well see more shocks in the system from climate change and geopolitical events. In the FSA, the food incidents we deal with are getting more complex, and local authority food teams are vital partners in responding to these – as our businesses themselves. So, the job is going to keep getting harder.

That means all of us working in food safety need to be more creative in finding ways to keep food safe in the future. We need to think about what the future system will look like. We need to explore how we can continue to protect the public, while delivering a system that's sustainable in the long term.

Building blocks

At the FSA, we've been thinking about this for a few years, and have set out what we think could be the building blocks for a future system. Skilled environmental health professionals are, of course, central to the regulatory system, but you need improved tools and support to meet evolving challenges, and we need to be ready to embrace some different ways of doing things.

Enhanced registration is one such building block. A major challenge we face is the increase in the number of new food businesses, some of which may lack food safety competence and knowledge. Enhancing the registration system can help address this by providing better data to local authorities. We could also potentially introduce a registration fee to fund regulatory activities without overburdening small enterprises.

In Wales, enhanced registration represents one of our most significant opportunities to strengthen the foundation of food safety regulation. Following a ministerial request, we've launched a comprehensive workstream exploring how to improve business registration.

This isn't about creating bureaucracy for its own sake. The current system has gaps – businesses that register but never trade, others that re-register under new names to avoid low FHRs scores, and multiple registrations for different purposes. An enhanced system could address these issues whilst generating sustainable funding for regulatory services.

We're working collaboratively with the Welsh Government, WLGA, and local authorities through pilot programmes to gather evidence about what works. The approach is deliberately consultative – we're learning from your experiences on the ground before making recommendations to ministers in spring.

We've done some exploration with local authorities about potential charging options for regulation more generally. In Wales, there's strong preference for a fee linked to registration, similar to the former Butcher's Shop License model. This could provide a sustainable funding mechanism whilst ensuring businesses take their responsibilities seriously from the outset.

Improving enforcement is another priority. Local authorities need a more robust toolkit, including options like fixed penalty notices, which are already used in other sectors like alcohol licensing. We could further support regulation by sharing intelligence and leveraging data to identify risks, like we're doing in the food standards model.

Consumer information is also critical. Mandatory display of food hygiene ratings—already required in Wales and Northern Ireland—has strong support and could be extended to England. Here in Wales, we would like to see ratings displayed online as well as in store, to further empower consumer choice.

There are ways that we can build on that brilliant basis to improve information for consumers even more too.

The work we've done with online food delivery platforms is a good example. Since the pandemic, almost half of us order takeaway food through an app or online, with hundreds of thousands of food businesses accessible through our phones. Online aggregators like Just Eat, Uber Eats and Deliveroo have significant reach across the takeaway, restaurant and food-to-go sectors, as well as millions of consumers. We developed a food safety charter with these three online platforms, committing them to ensuring that businesses selling food through their platforms are registered with their local authority and meet a minimum standard of hygiene rating. The charter also commits them to use their communication channels to businesses and customers to share FSA hygiene and safety information and support those with food hypersensitivities.

We should, of course, talk about National Level Regulation for large food businesses too. This is the one of our building blocks that has been the most controversial so far, and that's not surprising as it's probably the most significant shift we're considering in how we approach food safety oversight. I know from talking to a lot of environmental health professionals about it that it's something people have strong views on.

Let me explain where we're coming from on this one. There are ten big retailers who sell us 95% of our food across the UK, so they have tremendous reach. Between them they have many thousands of stores, which are all regulated as individual premises. We as regulators are treating them like they are thousands of separate small businesses, but that's not how they're run. They have big, comprehensive internal compliance systems. Some of what happens at store level depends on local managers and staff, but a lot of it is driven centrally and monitored centrally.

We ran a trial in England with five of these big retailers which was essentially trying to answer the question "if we look at all their business-level compliance data, and combine it with some checks on the ground, can we get as good or indeed a better picture of what's going on than through all individual inspections." If we can, that's really significant because it gives us a new way of protecting public health, with even more visibility of what's going on in these massive businesses. And it's a way that takes up less valuable time in local environmental health teams.

Our trial was very positive. But when we started talking about where it might lead in the long term, I know it led to a lot of concern that we were rushing ahead with this. We're listening to those concerns, and we've spent the last year in really extensive engagement with hundreds of people working across the system, including environmental health officers here in Wales.

The Senior Steering Forum, which includes CIEH and DPPW representation, helped to oversee the immediate next steps following our trial. Despite the concerns raised about this potential new approach, there was a consensus that we should be making more use of this data. So, we're moving forward to try and use national scrutiny of data to enhance the current system rather than replace it. For Wales, this could mean more efficient oversight of large retailers operating across the country, giving valuable insight and assurance to local authorities and empowering them to focus more of their resources to focus on the smaller, independent businesses that need more hands-on support.

The key insight from our engagement process has been clear: consumer protection must remain at the heart of any regulatory system. National Level Regulation isn't about lighter regulation – it's about more intelligent regulation that uses data and systems thinking to achieve better outcomes.

Looking Ahead – shared challenges and opportunities

As we look to the future, we face shared challenges that require collective action. Resourcing constraints aren't going away in the short term, so we must use our resources in the right

places, maximising the use of data to tell us where the risks are.

We also need to look at more sustainable funding sources in the future. We're also exploring charging models that could provide sustainable funding for regulatory services. The cost recovery work we're undertaking with local authorities could provide the financial stability needed for long-term workforce planning and development.

And the food system won't stand still. As it evolves, we'll need to look for opportunities and challenges. One very near-term change will be the authorisation of foods produced through precision breeding in England, which will require nation-specific enforcement guidance for Welsh local authorities. We will continue to need to manage risk through import controls and systems for protecting our borders during another period of change, as the UK and the EU negotiate an agreement on a new SPS zone. And we'll keep developing the case for new models like enhanced business registration systems which could transform how we manage the business population.

Innovation doesn't stop with technology. We're seeing new approaches to professional development, different pathways into environmental health careers, and creative partnerships that extend our reach into communities.

The future of food safety regulation will require us to be bold, collaborative, and adaptable. We're going to have to reform our systems to meet new challenges – from emerging food technologies to changing consumer behaviours, from climate impacts to evolving business models.

But reform done well strengthens protection. It makes better use of professional expertise, provides clearer guidance to businesses, and delivers better outcomes for consumers. Most importantly, it recognises that environmental health professionals remain absolutely central to public protection.

Conclusion

I'm grateful for your continued efforts to protect the public, despite the challenges of the last few years. The high food standards we see in Wales, and across the UK, depend on your professionalism, dedication, and expertise.

Our commitment to you is continued collaborative working. We will keep listening, keep adapting our support, and keep working together to ensure our regulatory system keeps our communities protected. We need to work together to make sure the system continues to protect public health whilst adapting to new realities.

Every day, you make decisions that protect people across the UK from foodborne illness. You help businesses understand their responsibilities and raise their game. You respond to incidents and maintain the systems that allow consumers to have confidence in their food.

Your role has never been more important. In an increasingly complex food system, with new technologies, new business models, and new challenges, we need your professional judgement, your local knowledge, and your commitment to public protection more than ever.

The FSA is committed to supporting you in this vital work. Together, we can shape a regulatory system that's fit for the future – one that protects consumers, supports responsible businesses, and recognises the professional expertise that makes it all possible. Reform is essential and we will need to work together to make sure we do it well and keep food safe for the future.

Thank you.