

Evaluating the use of remote assessments by local authorities for regulating food businesses

Area of research interest: Innovative regulator

Project status: Completed

Conducted by: ICF

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Background

As part of its response to the coronavirus pandemic the Food Standards Agency (FSA) advised local authorities that they may use remote assessments in some circumstances to determine areas to target during a subsequent onsite visit and in other circumstances to inform the need for an onsite visit to assess and address potential public health risks.

These remote assessments can take a variety of forms, for example, a phone call, a video call, or exchange of information online.

The FSA asked ICF to undertake a short evaluation of local authorities and food business operators experience of using remote assessments. This was to help inform the FSA's thinking about future regulatory practice and to ensure the most efficient and effective use of local authority resources.

Aims and objectives

This report presents the findings of a short evaluation carried out by ICF on the use of remote techniques by local authorities to carry out food hygiene and food standards assessments across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The study was tasked with answering seven research questions about local authorities' use of remote assessments:

- When, where, and why have remote assessments been used by local authorities?
- What have been the benefits (including the impact on resources) to local authorities from using remote assessments? What have been the limitations?
- What are the barriers and enablers to the implementation of remote assessments from a local authority perspective?
- What technological capabilities are necessary to facilitate remote assessments?
- What are the good / best practices in the conduct of remote assessments? What are the limitations, barriers and perception of regulatory burden?
- Is there a need for guidance on conduct of remote assessments to ensure a consistent approach to delivery?

Research approach

The study commenced with an initial scoping and desk research phase, followed by 20 interviews with local authorities. Interviews lasted for 30-45 minutes.

The intention was to interview food businesses, though it was recognised from the outset that this would be challenging due to the Covid-19 pandemic and because sample construction depended on food businesses opting-in to the study via local authority-issued invites. Only three food businesses opted-in, and from these two interviews were completed.

The food business interview sample is small and should not be considered representative of the wider food business population. The results are included to illustrate points, but do not reflect the expected range of views that food businesses might have. Interviews with local authorities and food businesses were completed between October and December 2020. Qualitative interview data were analysed using a coding frame structured around the research questions listed above.

Key findings

The evaluation found that:

- remote assessments enabled more structured conversation with food businesses (e.g. using prompts / questionnaires over the phone without onsite distractions)
- for local authorities, there were benefits in being able to prioritise the most urgent work and postponing less urgent visits, thus reducing time spent in low-risk establishments
- remote assessments were more appropriate for Food Standards Controls e.g. assessing menus, labelling
- local authority officers felt remote assessments were more appropriate in lower risk food businesses as there was a lower public health risk associated with failing to identify food hazards
- that there was a perceived potential for food businesses to conceal information and falsify/mask problems with their businesses

The FSA is currently considering the findings from the evaluation. These will help inform decisions on any further testing we might want to do or trials we may want to undertake to assess where remote approaches might be used more routinely in the future.

Research report

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

PDF

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