

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT TO THE BOARD

1. Since the Board last met on 17 June, we have continued to prioritise our response to the **coronavirus (COVID-19)** pandemic, with an on-going focus on maintaining food and feed safety and support for our own staff in protecting themselves and others. During this time the Government has moved to ease the lockdown, but recent increases in COVID-19 cases in some parts of the UK and new restrictions on some foreign travel, have reminded us of the challenges this pandemic is posing for all of us.
2. We have been involved in important engagement with our **key stakeholders**. Martin Evans, Colin Sullivan and I have continued to meet with meat industry bodies on a fortnightly basis. Colleagues from Regulatory Compliance Division (RCD) and I met Uber Eats and Amazon. I met Professor Chris Elliott from Queen's University Belfast, CEOs from Fera and Eville and Jones. The Chair and I also met Rt Hon Emily Thornberry MP and Vaughan Gething, Minister for Health and Social Service in Wales. I remain in regular contact with Defra, DHSC and DIT officials.
3. **COVID-19 update**. The FSA has now entered the enhanced recovery phase of our emergency response to COVID-19. Through our Forward Plan we are reversing or embedding the measures that we introduced at the height of the pandemic. Since my last update, easements around general labelling requirements have been reversed and we have provided further guidance and advice to local authorities on the prioritisation of food and feed law official controls until 30 September, including guidance on initial remote assessments and the resumption of physical inspections. Our aim is to reach a point where we have returned to a "business as usual" position within the "new normal" resulting from the pandemic. This is in line with central Government's lockdown easements and recovery plans.
4. We continue to monitor the relatively small number of outbreaks of COVID-19 connected to food processing sites and are seeing only a handful in both meat and non-meat plants. Overall these represent a very small proportion of the total food industry. It is not the FSA's role to do health and safety monitoring of workplaces though where we have staff (i.e. in meat plants), we follow these issues particularly closely. Our assessment of the risk of transmission of COVID-19 through consumption or handling of food, or handling of packaging, remains very low.
5. We have carried out risk assessments and social distancing compliance checks to ensure Food Business Operators (FBOs) are doing their utmost to protect FSA staff and contractors. Where the three principle measures of social distancing, personal hygiene and cleansing and disinfection regimes

are adhered to, evidence supports the view that the risk of human to human transmission is low. Our staffing numbers in meat plants are being maintained sufficiently, helping to ensure food supplies are maintained.

6. As part of a cross-government task force, we have also supported Public Health England and others on a refresh of their guidance for the food production industry and have provided advice for food businesses restarting their operations as the lockdown eases. The FSA portal on food.gov provides a single reference point for food businesses to access relevant guidance. The portal received more than 65k views during the first two weeks of July and is currently receiving an average of 2.5k views per day, indicating that the FSA's messages relating to food safety and consumer protection are reaching their audience. In August, the FSA launched 'Here to help' – a campaign, which will run until September, to support businesses in adapting and re-opening their businesses safely.
7. There have been concerns about the pandemic's potential impact on **food crime**, but there continues to be relatively limited intelligence around specific threats. We are monitoring the situation carefully and are ready to respond if needed. We are making use of our horizon scanning capability to help identify emerging trends and threats, and this together with work underway to identify lessons learnt from the pandemic, is being used to inform the longer-term direction of the FSA.
8. The impact of COVID-19 on the food system was a major topic of discussion when I spoke at the **Developing a new National Food Strategy for England** conference organised by the Westminster Food and Nutrition Forum on 7 July. I took the opportunity to set out the importance of trust in the food system. I also stressed the need for greater collaboration between all of those involved in the food system to ensure consumers' interests are at the heart. A full transcript of my speech is available on the <https://www.food.gov.uk/>.
9. Following the discussion of the **National Food Strategy** at the conference, the strategy's author Henry Dimbleby released his interim report on 29 July. This first part of the strategy contained urgent recommendations in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the food system and preparations for the end of the EU exit transition period on 31 December 2020.
10. I welcome this interim report and am pleased that the National Food Strategy is drawing all of those involved in the food system into an important conversation about food. The strategy represents a precious opportunity to reshape the food system to ensure it delivers for everyone. The FSA is ready to work with others across government, the private sector, and civil society to address the challenges highlighted by Henry Dimbleby and we

look forward to the second part of his strategy.

11. Outside of our efforts on COVID-19, preparations for the end of the EU transition period have also been a priority for the FSA. We are working closely with other UK Government departments and the devolved administrations to consider the **Government's proposal on the post-transition period UK Internal Market (UKIM)** approach which was published in a White Paper on 16 July.
12. The White Paper proposes a legislative approach to achieving the goals set for enabling the effective functioning of the UKIM. The legislation will centre on the principles of mutual recognition and non-discrimination which will apply across both goods and services (including food and feed), supported by advisory and monitoring functions. Under the proposals, common frameworks are considered a key element in ensuring that the UKIM works for all, by setting out how officials and Ministers will work closely across the UK to design policy that benefits all parts of the UK, avoids disruptive divergence and maintains high regulatory standards. Common frameworks will ensure that where there is a need for administrations to set different standards, this is done in discussion to ensure that new regulations are interoperable. The proposed principle of mutual recognition is intended to act as a support for common frameworks to ensure the effective functioning of the UKIM where these standards differ.
13. We are now considering how the proposals could work practically and interact with the three common frameworks (food and feed safety framework, nutrition framework and food compositional standards and labelling framework) covering the FSA's interests. Our priority remains ensuring we have in place a robust and effective regulatory regime and that our high standards of food safety and consumer protection are maintained. Further information on this issue will be provided to the Board in the paper on the food and feed safety and hygiene framework proposals, which will be discussed in September.
14. We have established a project group to address some of the outstanding issues around **health and ID marks** and are seeking industry input as part of this process. We will be issuing a revised version of our guidance document with details addressing the Northern Ireland Protocol in the near future.
15. The FSA's preparations for the implementation of the **Northern Ireland Protocol** are continuing at pace. Providing unfettered access for NI goods entering the GB market is a central element of the UK's approach to implementing the Northern Ireland Protocol. A body of work is ongoing to clarify and define Northern Ireland Qualifying Goods (NIQG) and Northern Ireland Traders in reference to unfettered market access. A meeting has

been held with Northern Ireland Food Liaison Group (NIFLG) to discuss in detail. There are concerns regarding competition rules and NI becoming a back door for unchecked access to the GB market. The FSA is keen to ensure that food safety concerns are considered in whatever arrangement is reached.

16. The FSA is working with Defra and the Department of International Trade (DIT) on the planning and preparation for the next round of **US trade negotiations**. We are also feeding into preparations for both the Australia and New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA) negotiations, which officially launched in June, and we are providing technical advice on trade continuity agreements, including for Japan. For all sets of negotiations, FSA officials continue to contribute in line with the principles set out by the Board on trade earlier this year. We are working to ensure that public health protection and consumer interests remain a top priority.

17. On 10 July the Government announced the establishment of a **Trade and Agriculture Commission**. The Commission is to be chaired by Tim Smith, former FSA Chief Executive, and will report directly to the Secretary of State for International Trade. It will run for six months with a final advisory report presented to Parliament. The Commission will advise on:

- Trade policies the Government should adopt to secure opportunities for UK farmers, ensure the sector remains competitive, and protect animal welfare and environmental standards in food production.
- Advancing and protecting British consumer interests and those of developing countries.
- How the UK engages the WTO to build a coalition that helps advance higher animal welfare standards across the world.
- Developing trade policy that identifies and opens up new export opportunities for the UK agricultural industry, in particular for SMEs, which also benefits the UK economy as a whole.

18. Food safety standards are not in the scope of the Commission. This reflects the FSA and FSS's existing role as the departments already providing science and evidence-based advice to Ministers across the UK on those issues. The FSA has seconded Steve Wearne, formerly our Global Affairs Director and currently Vice-Chair of the international body Codex Alimentarius, to the Commission secretariat in DIT.

19. In June, the FSA worked with HM Treasury to provide reliable food business data to assist with support being developed by the Chancellor for the hospitality sector in response to COVID-19. This work contributed to the announcement of the **Eat out to help out scheme**. HMRC thanked the FSA for our support.

20. In Northern Ireland, the FSA, in partnership with Department of Health and Social Care, Food Standards Scotland and the Welsh Government has launched a [twelve-week consultation](#) on **front of pack nutritional labelling**. The aims of the consultation are to gather views and evidence to help inform any future improvements to the current UK recommended front of pack nutrition label and to ensure the UK's label remains the most effective at informing consumers on making healthier choices. A number of international schemes have been introduced in other countries including the composite label 'Nutriscore' and Chile's 'Warning label' and the consultation is seeking views and evidence on these approaches, with respondents having the opportunity to submit alternative labels for consideration. New UK nutrition advice on sugar and fibre is outlined in the consultation with views being sought on whether this advice should be incorporated into any future front of pack nutrition label. Responses are welcomed from consumers, the food industry, other government departments and academia.