

CHIEF EXECUTIVE'S REPORT TO THE BOARD

1. In my report to you in January 2020, I made some observations about the FSA's work over the following year. I said that leaving the EU required the FSA to step up. I said that the FSA's relationship with business was key to our success. I advocated for a data-driven approach to regulation. I also said that, as the central competent authority, we should hold up a mirror to the food hygiene and standards system and call it out if there were issues.
2. At the time, Wuhan had not started its own lockdown. Looking back on 2020, I am reminded of Thomas Hardy's chiding against vanity in his 1912 poem, 'The Convergence of the Twain: Lines on the loss of The Titanic':

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Alien they seemed to be;
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history.

3. I am very proud of what the FSA has done through the pandemic. We contributed to maintaining food supply. We alleviated pressures on local authorities. We set up a real-time, immediate horizon-scanning function to find out how things were unfolding for the food industry and consumers. We used this insight to inform our communications to businesses and consumers. We partnered closely with stakeholders including local authorities, the food industry and the three governments we serve. We pivoted into remote working at a few hours' notice for our office-based staff. We took swift measures to protect the health and safety of our field operations staff. And those staff joined the ranks of keyworkers and food heroes, playing their part in getting food safely on to the nation's plates. In short, we did our best to serve our mission, 'food you can trust'.
4. The food industry continues to change shape before our eyes, particularly the restaurant and hospitality sector and the food-to-go sectors. Many are struggling. Our data tells us that, for instance, between March and the end of October 2020, 24,940 new food businesses registered through our 'Register a Food Business' digital service, which serves 178 local authorities, and that 43% of those were businesses based at home. In 2019, in the same period, 27% of new businesses were based at home. Similarly, local authorities and their food teams have changed shape. In September, our survey told us that, on average, local authority food teams were at half of their March capacity, with resources diverted significantly to other COVID-19-related compliance and enforcement activity. We have indeed 'held up a mirror to the system' and spoken about the worrying implications of this – including at our Board meetings in June and September and in a [speech](#) I made to the Chartered Institute for Environmental Health in October.
5. Through the pandemic, while dealing with the anxiety and difficulties, we have also been asking ourselves, 'where can we do double duty?' Where can we usher in changes that we were working towards anyway, to help in the current day crisis? Accordingly, we have temporarily directed local authorities away from the lowest risk work, to focus on the highest risk – and this is in keeping with our aspirations for the

Achieving Business Compliance programme, though we will want to refine this over the long-term. We have been looking, both in meat hygiene controls but also in local authority controls, at where we can advise that certain low-risk activities could be undertaken by lower-skilled staff, without compromising food safety or standards. In our communications work, including with our award-winning 'Here to Help' campaign in August and September, we have helped food businesses not just on food safety but also guiding them to other Government resources on COVID-19, trying to make things easier for struggling businesses.

6. Above all, though, we are guided by consumer interests. There have been four major consumer themes this year: food availability, with the empty shelves in March and April; food affordability, with a worrying increase in food poverty and food bank usage; diet and obesity, given the worrying impact of COVID-19 on overweight people, and a welcome package of measures in England announced by the PM in July; and the standards of imported food, as the country moves to strike new trade deals and the Agriculture and Trade Bills went through the Houses of Parliament.
7. The FSA has been readying itself for its new responsibilities from 31 December 2020, particularly to provide independent advice to Ministers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland on the safety and 'other legitimate factors' relating to regulated food products or production processes, such as chemical washes and growth promoters in animals. We have also continued with our data work to improve intelligence on risks, as detailed in the surveillance paper before the Board today. I am confident that our preparation is strong.
8. On food availability and affordability, the FSA has been using its social science function to collect information and share that with relevant government departments to inform decision making. Our data on food insecurity is being used by the National Food Strategy team, the Defra Ministerial Task Force, PHE for their COVID-19 monitoring and has contributed to the call for evidence from the Trade and Agriculture Commission. We will continue to monitor and publish on this until at least the end of the financial year.
9. So, while the year brought challenges that were unprecedented and unimagined, the themes I highlighted at the start of the year did have relevance: calling out issues; making it as easy as possible for businesses to do the right thing by consumers; taking a data driven approach; and stepping up for our post-EU role.
10. In October, I set out an organisational strategic narrative to staff which looked ahead. I said that the FSA, guided by consumer interests, should use its knowledge, powers and influence to make it easy for all to make food you can trust. We should be trusted to tell the truth about food. I also set out some principles that followed from that, that should guide our work. Indeed, these built on some of the things I mentioned at the start of 2020. They include being a trusted voice; making it easy for businesses to maintain high food standards in the consumer interest; doing our work digitally through optimising data; and seeking joint endeavour where we can collaborate with the most influential actors in the food system. You will see these themes feature in our work in 2021.
11. The remainder of this report gives updates on matters that have arisen since the Board last met on 16 September 2020.

12. In this period, I have given speeches for events organised by the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Chartered Trading Standards Institute and the Women in the Meat Industry Association. I have given oral evidence to the Northern Ireland Health Committee. I attended online visits to Fera, an HMG virtual visit to Hull and a virtual Plenary Meeting for Heads of Food Safety Agencies across Europe. I also met with industry leaders, including the British Retail Consortium and Meat Trade Associations to share our plans for the end of the Transition Period. Similarly, I have met academics including: Nigel Scollan of Queens University Belfast and Jean Adams of Cambridge University. Finally, I have continued my usual engagement with Whitehall departments, including with No10, Cabinet Office, DHSC and Defra.
13. Since the last FSA Board Meeting, England, Wales and Northern Ireland have all implemented second national lockdowns. Responding to developments in the on-going pandemic and preparing for the imminent end of the Transition Period, means that **Winter Planning** has been a priority for the FSA. We are in the process of implementing our emergency response arrangements to ensure the FSA remains agile yet resilient in ensuring the safety and standards of food and feed. We have also done a great deal of contingency planning work, and detailed planning for field operations.
14. Our **EU Transition** Programme has a number of delivery projects and workstreams, most of which are well advanced. We will be giving a full update to the Board in December on overall readiness, but the following is an interim update on the current position.
15. Projects covering Incidents, Surveillance and the National Food Crime Unit are well-prepared and have been working for some time. The work to recruit further staff and ensure we have sufficient data and intelligence to replace the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed is largely complete.
16. Our new **risk analysis** processes, including our regulated product authorisation process, remain on track and will be operating from January 2021. The work in this area has been supported by all four UK countries. In November, we conducted an internal exercise to test our approach. We also ran webinars for businesses to inform them about what they need to do to seek authorisation for regulated products in the UK market post-Transition Period, with over 700 registered attendees. We also developed a suite of communication materials tailored to different audiences to support stakeholder engagement activity. Online access to the UK application service is ready to go live at the start of 2021.
17. Health Ministers have laid statutory instruments, prepared by the FSA, in Parliament and the NI and Welsh Assemblies to implement the Withdrawal Agreement and recently agreed European regulations. We have also made good progress on frameworks, and will shortly be laying the Food and Feed framework (on which the FSA leads) in front of all three Parliaments for consultation; and contributing to two more where DHSC and Defra lead (nutrition and labelling; and food composition and labelling). Legislation has been brought forward by UK Government that defines NI qualifying goods (via secondary legislation) from 1 January and enables unfettered market access for all goods including food and feed from NI (via UK Internal Market Bill). A phased approach is being taken to defining NI qualifying goods that means further amendments to the definition of the NI qualifying goods for agri-food will be brought forward in the new year.

18. On **imports** into GB, such as the implementation of the new Defra-led imports system (IPAFFs), we continue to engage with colleagues from Defra and this work remains on track to launch. As previously reported to you, Defra are phasing implementation: from 7 December third country imports of high-risk food and feed will require pre notification on IPAFFS. From 1 April 2021, all imported high risk food and feed from the EU will be notified on IPAFFS and must be accompanied by relevant certification. From 1 July 2021, all imported high-risk food and feed from the EU will be subject to increased risk-based controls and physical checks, though the frequency of such checks has still to be determined. For imported products from the rest of the world (RoW), controls remain the same before and after the Transition Period.
19. On the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol, we have been working closely with colleagues in Defra and Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). Key areas of risk include the extent to which supermarkets will need to provide export health certification on products of animal origin or other high risk food when moving product from GB to NI – and how controls will take place on these products as they enter NI (this is being discussed through the Joint Committee with Defra leading on the matter for the UK); and the likelihood that NI will not be provided access to relevant EU networks, systems and databases that we had hoped for, to manage food and feed safety incidents and food fraud engagement in NI and within the EU single market; incidents and NFCU teams are testing contingency plans for this eventuality.
20. The FSA has supported District Councils in NI to recruit and train staff ready to undertake public health checks on high-risk food and feed of non-animal origin and fish and fishery products. With COVID-19, we have been unable to offer face-to-face training for new District Council staff. We are exploring alternative novel ways to enable this training such as video 'walk throughs' and are also developing support networks between new staff and experienced port health officers in existing Border Control Posts.
21. The FSA published updated [health and identification marks guidance](#) on 12 October, which included information about proposed arrangements for a period of adjustment for GB. This will allow businesses to deplete existing stocks of labels, wrapping and packaging. We updated this [guidance](#) again on 6 November to include arrangements for the NI market. We are working with Government departments including Defra, DAERA and district councils in Northern Ireland on a proportionate and risk-based enforcement approach of new labelling requirements on the Northern Ireland market. In line with previous rule changes for labelling, this will be implemented in a way which supports businesses as they adapt to the new requirements over time.
22. The Government [announced](#) on 1 November it will be putting the **Trade and Agriculture Commission** (TAC) on a statutory footing for three years, after which it will be reviewed. The Trade Bill will be used as the vehicle to achieve this. The Agriculture Act 2020 also requires Ministers to report to Parliament on the impact of UK trade agreements on maintaining the UK's existing food, animal welfare and environmental standards. The FSA will continue to offer its advice to Ministers and Parliament as needed. In particular, as requested by the FSA Board in September, we are developing plans to publish a regular report on food safety and standards, providing an independent, evidence-based assessment and taking into account wider consumer interests, according to our statutory remit.

23. Since the last update to the Board there have been a number of high-profile **Incident-related matters** to report.
24. In early October, Nigel Wright was jailed for 14 years after attempting to blackmail a major retailer in the UK by contaminating jars of baby food with sharp pieces of metal and placing them on supermarket shelves. Thankfully no one was harmed as a result. The extensive investigations, led by Hertfordshire Constabulary, were supported by the FSA which provided expert opinion and specialist advice in the recall of several batches of baby food in December 2019 and January 2020.
25. On 16 October, following an increase in cases of Salmonella Enteritidis, the FSA issued precautionary advice to consumers on cooking raw breaded chicken products, such as nuggets, goujons, and kiev. The advice to consumers was to check the cooking instructions on food packaging. Cooking food at the right temperature and for the correct length of time ensures that any harmful bacteria are killed. Further investigations into the source of the Salmonella are ongoing.
26. In a separate incident, Salmonella may have also contaminated a small number of batches of British Lion eggs. This led to the FSA issuing precautionary advice to consumers on 30 October to thoroughly cook the affected eggs to avoid risk of illness. Consumers were also advised that, despite this isolated and small issue, there was no need to change their shopping habits for eggs or the usual cooking habits for eggs not listed in the advice.
27. We have continued to work closely with Cefas, Natural Resources Wales and Local Authorities in response to the **diesel spill into the Lougher Estuary**. On a precautionary basis, we advised local authorities to temporarily close the shellfish beds in the estuary. Sampling of cockles and mussels in the area for residual oil contamination have reported levels within statutory limits. The beds have re-opened and harvesting can be resumed. A programme of surveillance and monitoring over the winter period will continue to ensure the ongoing safety and quality of the shellfish harvested from the area. The monitoring results will be kept under regular review.
28. On 16 October 2020, the FSA held a joint meeting with representatives from Defra and the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) focussing on reducing the administrative burden on **small abattoirs**. This meeting was a positive step in joining up the work of the three agencies to support the small abattoir sector. We now have the appropriate forums established for the small abattoir sector to raise their concerns, which include the role of the vet, bureaucracy and consistency. These can then be escalated for the three Agencies to work on collaboratively to address.
29. As the FSA announced in February, applications need to be validated by 31 March 2021 for existing **CBD products** to be allowed to remain on the market after this date. We expect a high standard of applications as we have been engaging extensively with the CBD industry in recent months and hope to progress to validation and subsequent stages in early 2021 once we take on responsibility for product authorisations from the EU. We expect to work with local authorities in the implementation of a positive list system. This will give local authority enforcement officials an effective method of assessing which products are allowed to remain on the market after the deadline.
30. The **FSA social science conference** was held on 9 November. This event is part of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Festival of Social Science and this

year, the FSA co-hosted with the University of Sheffield. With more than 400 participants, the focus this year was 'Understanding Food in A Digital World'. There were 17 presentations from FSA colleagues and academic partners, covering how the increasingly digital world has changed how we buy and eat food, and how digital data collection and analysis can inform our understanding.

31. On 29 October FSA Chief Scientific Adviser Professor Robin May co-chaired a **food safety research workshop** with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI), the Biotechnology and Biological Science Research Council, the Economic and Social Research Council, and Food Standards Scotland (FSS). The event brought together more than 50 participants to build strategic thinking around the key emerging challenges for food safety over the next five years. It also looked at opportunities to further an integrated approach to developing research and innovation in food regulation.