

WRS Board: 10th February 2022

Information Report – Food Safety Interventions: Post Pandemic Recovery Programme

Recommendation | **That the Board notes the Report and that members use the contents of the information provided in their own reporting back to fellow members of the partner authorities.**

Report

During the peak of the Covid pandemic the Food Standards Agency (FSA) stopped the majority of food visits, although partners through WRS were required to monitor poor Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) businesses and deal with complaints. We entered a two-year recovery phase in August 2021. Every Local Authority has a long list of overdue inspections, the total across the county being nearly 3,000. We have now been set a clear programme by the FSA with priority on interventions at New Premises [NPR] and those with Level 0-Level 3 FHRS. As we have always had a high level of FHRS compliance, the numbers with previous low FHRS scores were <10% of our total. Officers have, therefore, been able to conduct a wide range of visits across all FHRS ratings.

In reading this report, members should note that:

- business compliance rates remain high with over 90% of business still scoring FHRS L3-L5 (Generally Compliant).
- food inspection reports left by officers are not subject to Freedom of Information but are freely releasable on request under the FHRS Brand Standard (www.food.gov.uk/brandstandard) The number of such requests, particularly from the media, continues to rise.
- where a business changes hands the previous rating immediately ceases.

Resources

Food inspectors must meet the FSA Food Law Code of Practice Competency requirements. We have a reduced competent officer resource due to ongoing pandemic work combined with a national shortage of suitably qualified officers to recruit or work as contractors. We have been able to employ the equivalent of two FTE contractors but the shortage is likely to continue for the foreseeable future and will impact on our ability to undertake food work. We have, however, recently appointed two Regulatory Support Officers [RSO] who are being trained to support our Environmental Health Officers to do various work that does not require full food competency, e.g. sampling, FHRS sticker checks, assessing low risk premises.

Changing Landscape

An impact of the pandemic has been the increased importance to businesses of food ordering platforms, the best known being Just Eat, Uber and Deliveroo. Whilst there is still no legal requirement in England to display an FHRS rating certificate, getting a poor score means a

business appears at a lower level on local platform listings. If a business scores a Level 0 then they will be immediately removed from the platform. This has led to an increased demand from businesses to get their long overdue rating. Our Food Lead Officer is also having to deal with more Appeals (within 21 days of rating) and Re-rating requests (£165 fee charged).

Visits Done

Even with limited resource, between June and December 2021 a pool of 8 FTE equivalent officers completed 1,049 inspections, a remarkable effort under the circumstances. 481 had no change in rating. Regrettably, we have found more premises with major non-compliances with drops in FHRS levels particularly in the independent sector. Whilst Food Business Operators are responsible in law for managing food safety, inevitably with the post pandemic pressures on hospitality some are becoming more 'aggressive' when they get a reduced score.

Table 1: Shows existing high risk premises where there has been a drop in FHRS levels

DOWN	D1 level	D2 levels	D3 levels	D4 levels
BDC	20	2		1
MHDC	5	1	1	1
RBC	11	2	1	
WCC	9	5	1	2
WDC	13	4	1	1
WFDC	12		1	1
Total	70	14	5	6

Table 2: Shows how New Premises have scored

NEW	FHRS 0	FHRS 1	FHRS2	FHRS	FHRS 4	FHRS 5
BDC				1	6	18
MHDC		5	1	2	9	28
RBC		3		6	4	16
WCC		3	3	9	7	38
WDC		4	1	8	8	47
WFDC	1	5	1	3	11	38
Total	1	20	6	29	45	185

Table 3: Shows premises that have improved their ratings

UP	FHRS 1 LEVEL	FHRS 2 LEVELS	FHRS 3 LEVELS
BDC	16	4	
MHDC	14		
RBC	10	2	2
WCC	6		1
WDC	12	4	
WFDC	13	2	
Total	71	12	3

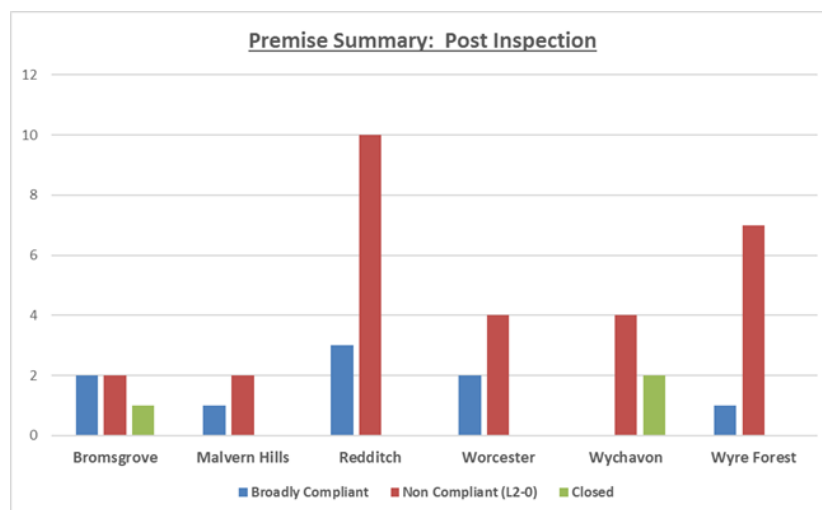
Sectoral Approach

The FSA Recovery Programme has changed to reflect our own approach to food work in that we are no longer being driven by inspection due dates but are able to be more intelligence and project led. This report now focuses on the outcome of several such projects.

New Premises: The pandemic has not stopped new businesses from registering and indeed we have received more in the last two years than in 2019, the last year before the pandemic struck. This has further added to the potential workloads of our already stretched teams.

District	2019	2020	2021
Bromsgrove	85	113	96
Malvern	69	120	125
Redditch	62	98	109
Worcester	115	154	166
Wychavon	137	189	211
Wyre Forest	106	128	140
Totals	574	802	847

We received more home-based registrations suggesting that people were trying to find alternative income streams during lockdown periods. The FSA provided funding last autumn for a risk prioritisation exercise of interventions at new premises. This work was done over a period of 6 weeks by training up some of our Covid Advisers to Level 2 Food Hygiene, providing a check list and getting them to make visits or phone calls. This resulted in some 30% of businesses being identified as no longer trading (double the pre- pandemic situation). Targeted follow up visits identified are now being completed by fully qualified Food Safety Officers, supported by our two RSO



Sampling:

Due to other operational pressures sampling over the last few years has been greatly reduced within WRS. In the autumn we were able to utilise spare capacity within the COVID Advisors (CAs) team to carry out a sampling programme. This involved training delivered by one of our experienced EHOs with Public Health England and a practical session based at Kidderminster Town Hall. The project is set to finish at the end of March this year.

The sampling programme being undertaken is part of a national survey. 211 environmental (work surfaces, sponges, cloths etc) and food samples have been taken from 57 premises at all FHRS levels across the county. Results from work done before Christmas demonstrates the value of such work with nearly 50% of all samples taken found to be unsatisfactory. Further advice/visits are now being given to premises about handwashing and general cleaning practice.

One final point to highlight is that our novel and innovative approach in organising and delivering this project attracted great interest from the EHO seconded to work on food hygiene and safety for the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham.

Table 5: Shows the interim results

Premises FHRS level	Borderline	Not Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Not Recorded	Total
1	1	5	6		12
2		2	2	1	5
3	1	28	37	3	69
4		8	18	1	27
5	3	26	56		85
NPR		4	7	2	13
Total	5	76	128	7	211

FHRS = Food Hygiene Rating Score or Star rating of the premises.

NPR represents new premises awaiting inspection

Satisfactory = No bacteriological concerns identified

Borderline = Bacteriological levels developing

Not Satisfactory = Bacteriological levels not acceptable

Not Recorded = error somewhere in process

Operation Revitalize:

In November 2021 we set up a programme of out of hours visits to existing takeaways and ethnic premises which do not open during the day. To date officers have completed 79 visits involving some 150 hours of work after 1800 hours.

The Board is asked to note that whilst Community Environmental Health (CEH) work is tasked through the CEH Management Team and Food Lead Helen Cameron, particular credit for the complex operational planning to complete the work and produce reports for Operational Corona Fries, Sampling and Operation Revitalize must go to EHO Isabel Moore and her considerable project management skills.

Low Risk Premises:

Although not a priority in the FSA Recovery Programme, throughout the pandemic the WRS Administration Team/Food Lead continued to send out self-assessment questionnaires to low risk retail, cakemakers, community centres, sports clubs, wet bars, etc which make up some 30% of our registered businesses. We continue to get a reasonable response and those that do not respond receive a follow up phone call and/or visit based on the potential food safety risk.

Allergens:

Without doubt one of the biggest challenges for businesses and food officers remains achieving allergen compliance. Businesses now have not only The Food Information Regulations 2014 requiring them to assess 14 specific allergens and ensure customers are aware of which foods contain them but also the new PPDS requiring pre-packed food for direct sale (Natasha's Law) to contain full allergen labelling which came into force on 1 October 2021. EHOs also assess businesses for the risk of cross contamination of food by allergens which can impact on their FHRs score. The major issue is not with larger businesses but with smaller independents who are still struggling to comply. Our work in this area is done in close partnership with our colleagues at County Trading Standards.

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