

Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council
Public Health and Protection

Annual Review of the Food Safety Service Delivery Plan 2018/19

Background

In accordance with the service plan a review has been carried out to identify any variances from the preceding year.

The 2018/19 service plan set out our plans for delivering our statutory food services to ensure that all levels of the food chain within our control in the borough prepare, sell or offer food that is wholesome and fit for consumption. We seek to ensure that all food consumed from commercial food businesses is essentially safe to eat.

Whilst both businesses and consumers are aware that our service delivers routine food hygiene inspections we also deliver a range of interventions to help ensure food is safe.

In addition to our statutory services the following improvement plan was agreed:

1. Undertake continual review and revision of all existing food policies and amend as necessary to reflect current good practice and working methods, especially with reference to the Regulating Our Future programme being delivered by the Food Standards Agency and the implication to food safety legislation by Brexit.
2. Continue to develop the use of social media in delivering food safety messages.
3. Start to deliver Eat Out Eat Well, healthy food award.
4. Maintain and update the food safety content of the Council's website
5. Deliver two food business seminars targeted at poorly performing food businesses, rated '2' or below.
6. Deliver an additional food qualification, RSPH level 2 Nutrition for Health.
7. Undertake a customer satisfaction survey with food businesses.

Summary

There were no significant variances from the plan, we have always prioritised food interventions by the potential risk to public health, and we will continue to use this approach.

At the time of writing (April 19) we have 4 outstanding programmed inspections from the year 2018/19, these are 1 category C and 3 Category D inspections. All high risk inspections (Categories A & B) have been completed.

It has been a steady year with regard to food interventions the team has continued to take formal enforcement action as necessary and whilst there has been an increase in the service of formal food hygiene improvement notices, the numbers served remain relatively low.

With regards to staffing there have again been changes and we again carried vacant posts for several months. We failed to recruit a food competent contractor until April 2019 but we have recruited a further Environmental Health Officer on a casual contract in March 2019 and vacant posts were also filled by the end of the year.

Officer Training

During 2018/2019 all food authorised officers involved in food safety enforcement undertook the mandatory 10 hours of food related Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and 10 hours of other professional CPD as required by the Food Law Code of Practice (England).

We have continued to delivery regular cascade training sessions and maintained regular meetings of the food officers to share learning and good practice. We also participated in the Food Standard Agency’s annual Food Hygiene Rating Scheme national consistency exercise.

Training courses attended by officers over the last year include:

- Public Health England Sampling Update
- Public Health England Listeria Focus Training
- Public Health England Interpretation of Microbiological Results Training
- Herts & Beds Food Group Training Day (range of topics)
- Level 2 Nutrition for Health

Food Business Training

The service has continued to provide low cost Royal Society of Public Health accredited food training to local residents and businesses. This year this was delivered by food officers and one of our casual contract officers.

Type of Food Training	Numbers of Food Handlers Trained 2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Level 2 Food Safety	84	141	53	54	57
Level 3 Food Safety	21	29	17	23	18

Primary Authority Partnership

The Primary Authority agreement with Ocado continues to be successful. One day per month is fully funded by Ocado which enables a food officer to provide advice on changes in legislation, guidance and food alerts. Welwyn Hatfield also provides the first point of contact for other local authorities across the country if they have concerns with food supplied to Ocado customers.

Ocado has continued to grow and expand its food operation within England. We now have a new contact at Ocado following changes in staffing and a restructure amongst their team and a new Environmental Health Officer within our team managing the relationship from April 19. Fundamentally there were no significant changes to the services provided over the last year.

Our second primary authority relationship with Retail Concessions has seen little progress over the last year further to us undertaking a full review of their food safety management systems and working with them to introduce new systems. With a full complement of staff we aim to develop this relationship more in the forthcoming year.

Food Sampling

Food sampling is undertaken formally in response to food poisoning outbreaks but also as a routine intervention within the delivery of our food safety service.

During the last year we participated in both national and local sampling programmes. Our local sampling plan includes targeted sampling at manufacturers, and high risk businesses based upon officer intelligence. Further to figures circulated from Public Health England laboratory services we took more samples than any other local authority in Herts and Beds last year.

During 2018/19 the authority took 116 microbiological samples. This figure is an increase on the previous year as we continue to use sampling as an alternative intervention to inform our intelligence about food businesses. 9 of these samples were unsatisfactory and 7 were borderline, in response to both these results follow up action is taken. All microbiological samples are tested using our annual allocation of credits at the public health laboratory.

Inspections completed 2018 -2019

In 2018-2019, 360 food businesses have been risk rated this includes outstanding low risk inspections carried over from previous years which we have now caught up with. Given the pressures on staff resources over the last year we feel this a good achievement, with very few inspections (4) left outstanding at the end of the year.

Outstanding inspections are a public house that has temporarily ceased food service, two home caterers with whom we are currently trying to book appointments (all of which have extenuating circumstances associated) and a broadly compliant restaurant. We plan to have these visits completed by the end of June 2019.

This year we have served 14 hygiene improvement notices. This is more than last year (7) but that was a particularly low year for enforcement notices. A hygiene improvement notice is generally only served after a business has received at least one written warning of non-compliance. A notice provides a formal time frame for completion of works and failure to comply may result in prosecution. Notices are typically served for not having a food safety management system, lack of food hygiene training and structural repairs.

In addition to these notices we served 182 written warnings; 1 emergency prohibition notice, closing part of a food business that was experiencing pest activity and 1 voluntary closure further to evidence of pests. One business was subject to interview under caution, this case remains ongoing. Written warnings have increased from the previous year.

Taking enforcement action is resource intensive but proportionate to the risk presented to public health.

Other Food Interventions

In 2018-2019 the authority received 88 requests for new business registration. The majority of new registrations are low risk in terms of food safety. Those businesses that are identified as high risk due to the food handled or cooking methods are prioritised for inspection. We do have a backlog of very low risk new business registrations, and we have drawn up an action plan to inspect these by the end of June 2019 using our existing food officers whilst utilising our contractor to conduct our routine due inspections in quarter 1.

In addition to the new businesses officers responded to 89 complaints/enquires about food businesses. Primary authority enquiries makes up a third of these jobs and this has increased.

We delivered two business support seminars this year. These seminars are targeted at businesses scoring 0-2 within the food hygiene rating scheme. These are generally hard to reach businesses and there is a consistent number of businesses with these scores. This year going forward in addition to delivering these support seminars we will be critically reviewing each of these businesses to determine whether formal enforcement action is necessary and proportionate.

Six requests were received via the Freedom of Information Act. These are typically requesting a range of food related information and can be quite time consuming to comprehensively respond to within the given timescales. In addition we are routinely asked for copies of food hygiene inspection reports.

EU Exit

Over quarter 4 we spent time looking at the impending effect on our food businesses following the planned departure from the EU on 31 March. A significant proportion of food legislation derives from the EU and though we are reassured that these standards will be carried into UK legislation some changes will occur immediately around the import and export of food.

As an inland authority the impact upon our team will be very dependent on whether a deal is agreed and the direction we receive from central government to respond.

Hertfordshire authorities are working together to both identify both potential risks associated with our exit and opportunities for working together. This information is being fed into wider cross agency contingency planning.

All food officers have completed update e-learning training provided by the Food Standards Agency in imported food controls and through the Herts Resilience team we have organised a further day of training for officers to be delivered in early May.

There is further work to be undertaken with informing businesses, particularly SMEs, of the changes that will occur.

Control and Investigation of Outbreaks and Food Related Infectious Disease

During 2018 -19 we were notified of 33 residents suffering from food related infectious disease. This number is typical of what we receive annually. Where confirmed food poisoning can be related to a specific food business investigations are undertaken to identify improvements required in the structure and/or practices employed to prevent a re-occurrence.

Conclusion

It has been a year of further changes to our food team. Whilst we adapt and manage with the resources available it does create additional pressure and we are pleased with the quantity and range of interventions achieved. In recent correspondence from the Food Standard Agency this was recognised and praised. Our inspection rate has increased as we have delivered the majority of our due inspections and a backlog of low risk visits from previous years. Our enforcement activity has increased slightly from last year but is proportionate and justified to the compliance issues identified.

We are aware that whilst we have made significant progress in ensuring our due inspections are on target we still have a number of new business registrations to inspect*. We have agreed an action plan with the Food Standards Agency to complete these by the end of June.

Progress with the Food Standard Agency's Regulating Our Future programme has been slower than we expected, with no notable changes to our service other than the withdrawal of training to officers with the exception of the recent e learning imported health. We are aware that centralised registration of food businesses has started and is currently being rolled out based on the software management company being used. This may be rolled out to us in the forthcoming year.

Our greatest challenge in the forthcoming year will be our exit from the EU, and it is our priority to continue to deliver our services and protect consumers throughout this period of change.

*Food businesses are required to register 28 days prior to trading, they may legally trade once they have registered and do not have to receive an inspection from the Council prior to selling food to the consumer.