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Your Ref:  
Our Ref:

8<sup>th</sup> April 2020

Dear Neil,

It was good to talk to you a few days ago, and thank you for finding time for that.

I thought you may welcome an update on the Food Standards Agency's Covid-19 response, and the measures we are taking to ensure the continued safety of food produced in the UK and our frontline workers. I've included the key points here, but obviously I would be very happy to provide more detail or talk any element through with you.

We take a proportionate and risk-based approach to meeting our statutory purposes – protecting public health and consumer interests by ensuring that business provides food that is safe and what it says it is – and in itself this supports the wider Government objective of reducing pressure on the NHS. In terms of the demands and challenges of the current crisis, the FSA is focused on supporting the Government's priority to secure the supply of safe food to the nation. We are taking pragmatic and proactive steps to achieve this, and the industry is being very collaborative and proactive itself in flagging issues we all need to address and resolve. Our main areas of activity are:

- Providing advice to business and consumers about Covid-19 and its relationship with food

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- Ensuring meat plants can operate with fewer staff so that meat supply continues
- Supporting local authorities and port health authorities to operate with fewer staff and to reduce footfall and avoidable burdens in businesses
- Working on urgent policy issues to support the supply of food
- Looking after the health and wellbeing of our staff, and by extension those of our main contractor Eville and Jones

One final overarching point is that we will use the circumstances facing the food and feed sector to be innovative and trial new approaches, where the law allows, so that we can learn and move forward from the experience, coming out stronger as an organisation and in our relationships with industry and across other parts of government.

### **Covid-19 and food**

It remains the case that the risk of transmission of Covid-19 by food is very low. Our scientists are keeping this under close review, as you would expect. We have seen no evidence to date to cause us to revisit our judgment on the risk.

In the last week, we have published guidance on Covid-19 for the whole food industry. This guidance was developed by the FSA, and published by Public Health England on our behalf (so that all the advice for business is accessible in one place). It is of course also available on our website.

### **Abattoirs**

As we discussed when we spoke, the meat sector is a particular concern and focus for the FSA. We have developed a hierarchy of steps we will take to ensure that we have the staff to cover the delivery of official controls in meat plants. Some of the measures we could need to take may have required legislation, but we hope that changes at the EU level deliver us the easements we need without creating additional legislative asks on official controls. And, for now, we are confident that the adjustments we have made, and are able to make, are sufficient to meet industry needs, albeit with a bit more flexibility needed on all sides. I am especially grateful to staff in the FSA who have agreed to return to the front line of official controls, where they have the appropriate expertise, and to colleagues who have delayed retirement or returned to work to support these efforts.

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Our Covid-19 Incident Director wrote to the meat industry on Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> March about measures to secure so far as practicable the 2 metre distancing rule for our staff and those of our contractors who are delivering official controls in abattoirs. As you will appreciate our staff are concerned about this, and we have a clear duty of care to them. We asked sites to put in place separation, social distancing or other appropriate measures, as appropriate. The industry responded very well to this, in tight timescales for which we are very grateful. There has been some disquiet about different interpretations of guidance in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where the FSA doesn't provide the frontline staff, but we hope that speedy information sharing and access to senior field operations leaders has helped to overcome these inevitable initial issues.

Of the 257 plants concerned, our local managers identified 35 sites who needed to make further progress over the last weekend. We wrote to them 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> March; 5 sites had not implemented any measures and we had significant concerns about our staff in relation to these five sites. I am very pleased that the majority have now taken action. There are now only one or two outliers where staff in plants continue to have concerns.

The protective equipment already available to staff in plants is in line with what has been recommended by PHE and Occupational Health. We are stressing that the health and wellbeing of our people is of the utmost importance, and it is critically important that advice on regular hand washing and not touching one's face is strictly followed. Although there is no requirement to provide face masks and visors, we are concerned that without taking additional steps, our staff those of Eville and Jones (our contractors) will be unwilling to continue with front line duties. We are therefore looking to make visors available for all Meat Hygiene Inspectors. As a result, Personal Protective Equipment kits are in the process of being delivered to plants for the use of FSA staff and Eville and Jones contractors. We are developing a package of financial support to help Eville and Jones contractors continue to staff required roles within plants, such as veterinary staff.

The industry has raised significant concerns about the steps we are taking to provide this additional PPE for our staff, because of the potential knock-on expectations of their own employees. I understand their concerns, but our priority is to keep our staff protected and delivering official controls in support of the objective of meat plants continuing to operate. In our judgment, not to provide additional equipment risks our staff being unwilling to provide services, which in turn will jeopardise the operation of the plants. The wider media coverage today about the value of face masks will only

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heighten the issue, and unsurprisingly, employees of meat plants are raising the same concerns with their managers, as our staff are raising with us.

There are several meetings each week between our incident and field operations teams and meat industry leaders, and I am supplementing this with a meeting with the heads of the main industry groups next week.

### **Local Authorities**

It is local authorities who deliver Official Controls in the vast majority of feed and food businesses. We have also issued advice to them on the approach that should be taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to these duties.

We have advised that until 17<sup>th</sup> April 2020, (in the first instance) all planned feed, food hygiene, and food standards inspections, and other interventions should be deferred. This will ensure that footfall in feed and food business establishments is kept to a minimum and will enable local authorities to focus potentially diminished resources on urgent reactive work. This includes responding to other feed or food incidents and investigating foodborne illness outbreaks. It also includes following up on intelligence of change in food business activities in response to the current situation which suggest a potential risk to public health. We are keeping this position under close and regular review.

We have published guidance and a Q&A document to support LAs with their response during this incident.

### **Emerging issues**

Through our normal major incident procedures, we are in close touch across the food retail and manufacturing sectors. The flow of information is good, and everyone is in 'problem solving' mode, working at pace, and being supportive and collaborative.

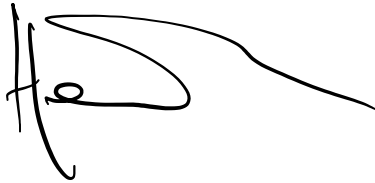
A series of further issues are emerging, as one might expect, and we are working closely with Defra, the administrations in Wales and Northern Ireland, and colleagues in Food Standards Scotland. Some of these may be particularly difficult to resolve within the current legal framework, and we are working seven days a week to try to find routes through.

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I hope this update is useful. Of course, I will keep you in touch with any significant developments over the coming days and weeks. We also intend to share a summary of our main actions with all Members of Parliament later this week, to help keep them informed of key issues and progress, and to help to manage the flow of correspondence on common questions coming into the department.

Yours ever, 

**Mrs H.J. Hancock DL LVO**

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