

Consultation on proposed changes to the Food Law Code of Practice (Northern Ireland) in relation to the new Food Standards Delivery Model

Launch date: 17th October 2022

Respond by: 9th January 2023

This consultation will be of most interest to:

- Competent Authorities – District Councils (DCs)
- Food Businesses
- Professional awarding bodies for environmental health professionals
- Trade Unions and expert groups may also have an interest

Consultation subject/purpose

To seek stakeholder views on the proposed changes to the Food Law Code of Practice (Northern Ireland) ('the Code') to support the introduction of the new Food Standards Delivery Model.

Key proposals include:

- modernisation of the approach to food standards delivery specified within the Code, in particular the incorporation of a new Food Standards Intervention Rating Scheme, and a Decision Matrix to determine the appropriate frequency of Official Controls based on the risk posed by a food business; and
- changes to sections of the Code relating to the delivery of interventions and enforcement to support the principles of the new food standards delivery model.

How to respond

Please use the consultation response form to provide your comments.

[Consultation response form \(accessible Word version\)](#)

[Consultation response form \(accessible PDF form\)](#)

The consultation response form should then be emailed to:
CodeReviewResponses@food.gov.uk

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Details of consultation

Introduction

In Northern Ireland, district councils (DCs) are Competent Authorities responsible for verifying compliance with food law in the majority of food businesses. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is responsible for providing advice and guidance on the approach that DCs should take, and this is set out in the Food Law Code of Practice (the Code).

DCs have a duty to have regard to the provisions in the Code in relation to the delivery of Official Controls.

The Code requires regular review and revision to ensure that it reflects current priorities, policy, and legislative requirements so that DCs delivery of food control activities remain effective, consistent, and proportionate. The FSA is required to consult on amendments to the Code before implementation.

The purpose of this consultation is to provide stakeholders with an opportunity to comment on our current proposals for amending the Code for Northern Ireland – the proposals for change are outlined below. Similar changes are being proposed for the Code for Local Authorities (LAs) in England. The FSA in Wales will review the Food Law Code of Practice (Wales) at a later date and undertake a consultation prior to issuing advice to the Minister.

Background

The FSA has developed a new model for delivery of food standards Official Controls for DCs. The new model addresses the shortcomings in the current approach identified through a LA survey undertaken in 2018 which recognised that the existing framework is not fit for purpose. The survey found that the approach to interventions in the Code was no longer fit for purpose and that it fails to support LAs in targeting resources at the areas of greatest risk within the food chain.

The need for a fundamental review of the current model was accepted by the FSA Board in late 2018. Working in collaboration with LAs and other key stakeholders, we developed a new delivery model to provide an approach that allows DCs flexibility to better target resources at food businesses presenting the greatest risk. This consultation on the changes to the Code follows on from a 15-month pilot of the proposed new model in Northern Ireland and England. The Pilot ran from 1 January 2021 to 31 March 2022. It involved seven LAs (six from England, one from Northern Ireland) operating to the new model and four control LAs in England working to the current Code. LAs volunteered to be involved, and the participants were selected based on specific criteria to provide a representative cohort on which to base our evaluation.

Prior to the pilot commencing, we trained the pilot LAs on implementation of the new model (for example the new risk scheme). We provided support and engaged with LAs throughout the pilot to identify issues and understand how the new model operates in practice.

The formal evaluation process for the pilot concluded that the new approach is effective. Critically, the evaluation data indicates that the new model is more effective at directing officers to food businesses that are non-compliant with food law. Findings from officer interviews as part of the process evaluation were consistent in identifying the following aspects as working well:

- ability to re-score a business after an activity such as revisit,
- the new decision matrix and risk assessment scheme are easy to understand and implement,
- the new decision matrix allows risk to be assessed and balanced across different types of premises - allows a more accurate assessment of risk,
- a key benefit is that manufacturers were no longer considered high risk by default
- use of remote interventions at appropriate businesses,
- integration of the new model into their existing working practices,
- officers were recognising when problems may not be local and sharing more information with the FSA.

With the completion of the pilots in Northern Ireland and England, the FSA in Wales will review the food standards delivery model for Wales and hope to undertake a pilot of the proposed model prior to consulting separately.

Policy objectives

The proposed new food standards delivery model described above is intended to enable DCs to:

- reduce the number of non-compliant products on the market.
- more effectively target available resources to the areas of greatest risk within the supply chain.
- have greater flexibility to determine the appropriate official control method(s) and technique(s) to use depending on the risk posed by a food business.

Main proposals

The main proposals involve fundamental changes to the current Food Standards Delivery Model within the Code, and associated content, namely the introduction of:

- a new Food Standards Intervention Rating Scheme (Proposal 1 below) that officers will use to evaluate the risk posed by a food business; and
- a new Decision Matrix (Proposal 2 below) to determine the frequency at which food standards official controls should be delivered in line with the outcome of the risk assessment.

Detailed proposals

New Food Standards Delivery Model

Proposal 1: New Food Standards Intervention Rating Scheme

The scheme seeks to provide a more accurate assessment of the potential risk posed by a food business, taking into account both the inherent risk associated with the business and the level of current and, where appropriate, sustained compliance the business has demonstrated. As such, the new scheme is intended to ensure that food regulatory resources are targeted, as effectively as possible, towards the areas of greatest risk in the market.

The proposed food standards intervention rating scheme involves the calculation of a risk profile for food establishments that is based on its 'inherent risk profile' and a 'compliance assessment.'

The inherent risk profile gives an indication of the risks associated with a food establishment and the compliance assessment assesses the FBO's performance. Both the inherent risk profile and compliance assessment are made up subcategories which are individually scored to allow the accurate assessment of different risk elements which will be assigned according to the information available. These subcategories are:

- Inherent Risk Profile
 - Scale of supply and distribution
 - Ease of compliance
 - Complexity of supply chain
 - Responsibility for information
 - Potential for product harm
- Compliance Assessment
 - Confidence in management (CIM)
 - Current compliance level
 - Management systems and procedures
 - Allergen information

When applying the food standards intervention rating scheme, DCs will assign the risk factor score that is most relevant to the food business. Where a food business falls into more than one scoring category for a scoring factor, they must be allocated the lowest score (higher risk), in line with the precautionary principle. It is recognised that officers will use their professional judgement to assign a score based on using the descriptions under each of the risk scores.

Whilst individual scores are attributed to each subcategory, these are then averaged and rounded (to the nearest whole number) to give the overall 'inherent risk' and 'compliance assessment' scores. Rules are applied to take account of situations where significant non-compliance has been identified within the compliance assessment.

This rule and principle provide additional assurance within the model where significant non-compliance has been identified, namely an establishment with one serious non-compliance (score of 1 under the compliance assessment), will be given an overall compliance assessment score of 1 for the compliance assessment regardless of the other individual compliance risk factor scores.

To complete a risk assessment, the DC will need to ensure that they have sufficient information about the food business (for example business type and supporting information) so they can consider the potential hazards associated with the establishment.

For the new model to operate successfully, a common risk assessment framework has been established to ensure a consistent approach between DCs. Further information on these risk factors is detailed in this consultation.

Proposal 2: Decision Matrix

To determine the frequency at which official controls should be carried out at a food business establishment, the average scores for the inherent risk profile and compliance risk assessment are plotted onto the decision matrix.

The decision matrix follows a graduated approach based on risk. The frequency of official control activities starts at one month and progresses to lower frequencies, enabling DCs to target their resource on those establishments deemed to be highest risk. This supports the objective of the model and recognises that DCs will be focusing their resource on those establishments where they need to take prompt action to safeguard public health or protect consumers.

The decision matrix does not specify the particular Official Control activity that should take place. Instead, this approach gives DCs the flexibility to use any of the methods and techniques of official controls specified in Article 14 of Regulation (EU) 2017/625, either individually or in combination, providing they are effective and appropriate in the circumstances.

The overarching principle when considering which method(s) or technique(s) to use is to ensure that the most effective Official Control activity is chosen and that the officer is satisfied that the selected method(s) and/or technique(s) allows them to verify compliance with food law.

The decision matrix identifies where DCs should take prompt action to safeguard public health and protect consumers. It recognises that they will be directing their resources to work with that food business to ensure appropriate corrective action is taken until compliance is achieved. The matrix introduced the concept of priority interventions to enable a more intensive approach to be taken, enabling DCs to promptly ensure improvements at these establishments. This will enable the business to move into compliance, thereby protecting consumers.

When undertaking a priority intervention, the officer should focus on those areas of concern and rescore the establishment on that basis (therefore a partial inspection/intervention may be sufficient), with the intention of working towards a compliant establishment and a less intensive regulatory output. The reassessment of the establishment should only occur when the DC is satisfied that the non-compliance has been addressed. Once satisfied, the officer should revise the intervention rating to reflect any improvements made. Ideally, the resulting regulatory output will have improved (for example moved out of the priority intervention category). However, in certain circumstances, if sufficient improvements have not been made, the establishment may remain as a priority intervention.

It should be noted that the frequencies provided in respect of priority interventions are minimum frequencies. When determining the appropriate frequency, consideration should be given to the non-compliances found, available enforcement options (for example improvement notices), how quickly the non-compliances can be corrected and any relevant local procedures or protocols.

It is recognised that there will be circumstances where a FBO is unwilling or unable to take the necessary action required to achieve compliance. In such cases, DCs should consider taking formal enforcement action in line with their enforcement policy and the hierarchy of enforcement. Further priority interventions at the prescribed frequency are at the discretion of the DC until the formal enforcement action has been concluded.

Impacts

Costs

Costs to district councils

Familiarisation costs (changes to the Food Law Code of Practice)

DC officers who deliver food standards Official Controls will have to familiarise themselves with the changes to the Code.

In line with BEIS guidance on the appraisal of new guidance, we have estimated the one-off familiarisation time by multiplying the average number of words a person can read per minute with the document's word count.

In Northern Ireland, there are 11 DCs and 31 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff engaged in delivering food standards. We assume that all officers responsible with food standards official controls will need to familiarise themselves with the revision to the Code.

We do not have any data on how many officers make up the 31 FTE figure (e.g., part time officers); therefore, we will assume that one FTE represents one officer. We anticipate that 31 officers will be required to spend 1.7 hours each to read and familiarise themselves with the new changes.

Familiarisation costs are quantified by multiplying the wage cost of the relevant officers, with the time spent on familiarisation. The median hourly wage cost of an officer is £22.30 (including a 22% uplift for overheads). Multiplying this with the time spent on familiarisation and the number of food standards officers in Northern Ireland generates a total cost of familiarisation of £1352.

The familiarisation costs are opportunity costs. DC officers will need to give up some of their time to familiarise themselves with the Code. Therefore, these costs do not constitute additional financial costs.

Familiarisation costs (changes to the Management Information System (MIS))

In order to operate the new food standards delivery model, changed will be required to the MIS used by DCs.

DC officers which deliver food standards official controls will have to familiarise themselves with the changes to their MIS.

It is assumed that all officers in Northern Ireland will be affected by these amendments. We do not have evidence on how long the familiarisation with the updated MIS will take and if it will vary depending on the MIS provider.

DC officers training costs

We anticipate that all officers will need to undertake one day of training to understand the new food standards delivery model. Therefore, we assume that all 31 officers will be required to spend approximately 8 hours attending the training. The FSA will provide this training remotely after the publication of the Code.

Training costs are quantified by multiplying the wage cost of the relevant officers with the time spent on training. Given that there are 31 officers in Northern Ireland that will be required to undergo 8 hours of training, and the median hourly wage cost of an officer is £22.30, this will result in a total training cost of £5550.

The training costs are opportunity costs. DC officers will need to give up some of their time to undergo the required training. Therefore, these costs do not constitute additional financial costs.

DC MIS/ IT cost to upgrade to current MIS product

DC MIS will need to be updated to build in the new model.

In some cases, the DC MIS will need to be upgraded to the latest MIS product so the necessary changes can be made. We anticipate that DCs in this position will need to make arrangements for their MIS to be upgraded.

DCs are likely to require support from their IT colleagues or IT service provider to make any changes – this is an unknown cost.

MIS/IT cost of moving to the new model

Once DCs have a version of their MIS that has been updated to enable operation of the new Food Standards Delivery Model, they will need to convert their existing risk data to the new model risk scheme and migrate to the updated MIS product. We anticipate this will require activities such as data cleansing, mapping between the two systems, project management etc.

DCs are likely to require support from their IT colleagues or DC IT service provider and MIS provider to make the move – this is an unknown cost.

New DC systems/ procedures costs

As the new food standards delivery model introduces changes to how DCs manage and deliver their food standards interventions, we would expect that DCs will need to update their administration systems, procedures, and paperwork.

Feedback from pilot DCs suggested that this will not be a significant burden.

Costs to industry

Costs of regulatory burden for non-compliant businesses

The new food standards delivery model aims to change the frequency of food standards official controls based on a better understanding of the level of risk a food business poses. The level of risk posed considers the inherent risks associated with a food business and their level of compliance with food law. We assume that high-risk businesses will be inspected more frequently compared to low-risk businesses.

An increased number of inspections will result in a time cost for non-compliant businesses to deal with the additional inspections. Compliant businesses will benefit from being inspected less often. Therefore, at industry level, we estimate that there will be a transfer of regulatory burdens from compliant to non-compliant businesses.

Benefits

Benefits to consumers

Improved consumer protection and public safety

The new model aims to reduce the number of non-compliant products that enter the market by addressing the issue at source or at the most appropriate point in the food supply chain. As businesses become more compliant, we expect the number of non-compliant products that reach consumers to decrease over time, therefore improving consumer safety.

We anticipate consumers to be more confident that the food they buy is safe and what it says it is, and that the information on food labels is accurate

Benefits to district councils

Increased effectiveness of DC resources

As mentioned, the new food standards delivery model will better target DC resources at the highest risk premises. The frequency of food standards official controls will be based on a better understanding of the level of risk a food business poses.

It is assumed that this will create a benefit to DCs, as they will use the same level of resources in a more efficient way – by carrying out official controls at the highest risk businesses where they will identify more non-compliances.

The effectiveness of DC resources will also result from the ability to risk rate food businesses following a re-visit and recalculate the next inspection date. We expect that this will reduce the inspection frequency and DCs will be able to better use those resources elsewhere.

Time savings due to new methods of undertaking food standards official controls

The new food standards delivery model introduces greater flexibility in the methods and techniques of official controls that DCs can use. For example, Targeted Remote Interventions (TRIs) are designed to monitor the activity of low-risk businesses remotely, without the need for a physical inspection to be carried out.

We anticipate that this new approach will improve efficiency by saving time, as officers will not need to travel to the business premise to undertake the official control.

Improved compliance levels

The new food standards delivery model is more effective in targeting interventions towards non-compliant food businesses. Therefore, we expect to see poorly performing individual businesses improving their levels of compliance over time because they will be subject to more frequent interventions and follow up action by DCs. Their incentive to improve and the speed at which they will receive a revisit will increase, as DC resources will be freed up from visiting compliant businesses. We estimate this will drive up levels of compliance across all food businesses.

Engagement and Consultation Process

Widespread engagement activities have taken place throughout the development of the new food standards delivery model, prior to the pilot commencing. At the start of the project, a Food Standards Working Group (FSWG) was formed, including representation from LAs, industry and the public analyst service. The FSWG was instrumental in designing the new delivery model and working through potential challenges and barriers. The work of the FSWG was supplemented by two rounds of regional face to face engagement events, seeking input and feedback from the wider enforcement community on our proposals, which led to further refinement of the model prior to piloting. We have

also provided periodic updates on our progress to other stakeholders such as Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and professional bodies such as Association of Chief Trading Standards Officers (ACTSO), CTSI and Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) throughout the process. We have also provided updates through appropriate fora such as the Food Standards & Information Focus Group and Food Standards Business Expert Group as appropriate.

The model was subject to a 15-month pilot, involving seven LAs working to the new delivery model and an additional four LAs operating as 'control' authorities working to the current framework. Both pilot and control authorities submitted relevant evaluation data monthly and participated in a number of interviews as part of our qualitative process evaluation. The pilot was essential in identifying whether the new delivery model would achieve its aims when applied in a real life setting and enabled us to compare the current and proposed delivery models to ensure that the new model provides a more effective approach than the delivery model currently within the Code, providing benefits to DCs, compliant businesses and consumers as a result.

To support the consultation, there will be a number of face-to-face engagement events throughout the consultation period, including a specific a DC face to face engagement event in November. The engagement events will include a virtual session for those unable to attend in person. We will also be engaging with other key stakeholders to discuss the proposed changes and answer any questions.

Information gathered from this consultation will be considered when preparing a finalised version of the revised Code for submission to the Minister of Health for approval. Information supplied by consultees will also inform any assessment of the impact these revisions will have.

At the end of the consultation period, the FSA will analyse the responses, make any relevant amendments to the Code, and within three months of the consultation ending we aim to publish a summary of responses received and provide a link to it on our website.

Questions asked in this consultation

So that we fully understand your responses, and adequately take account of them, please explain and, where possible, evidence any answers that contradict the assumptions we have made in this consultation. Please complete the consultation response form.

Questions asked in this consultation:

1. Does the layout/presentation of the proposed revisions to the Code facilitate consistent interpretation? If not, how could they be improved?
2. Do you agree that the proposed changes to the food standards intervention rating scheme provide DCs with the ability to deploy current resources more effectively by improving the way in which the levels of risk and compliance associated with businesses are assessed? If not, why not? (Please specify any aspects of the new model which require further consideration, and why).
3. Do you agree that the proposed frequencies for official controls, specified in the decision matrix, within the new food standards intervention rating scheme are appropriate based on the levels of risk and compliance associated with the business? If not, please identify any concerns you have with the proposed frequencies.
4. Do you foresee any problems with the proposals under consultation? If yes, please outline what these problems are and what, if any, solutions we should consider?
5. Do you agree with our assessment of the impacts on DCs and our assumptions on familiarisation resulting from the proposed changes to the Code? If not, why not?
6. Do you foresee any other impacts from the implementation of the main proposals detailed beyond those we have identified? Where possible, please explain your views and provide quantifiable evidence (for example, costs associated with updating your administration systems, existing procedures, the benefits of greater flexibility to allocate staff to activities).

Other relevant documents

N/A

Responses

Responses are required by midnight on 9th January 2023. Please state, in your response, whether you are responding as a private individual or on behalf of an organisation/company (including details of any stakeholders your organisation represents).

Please use the consultation response form to provide your comments.

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The consultation response form should then be emailed to:

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For information on how the FSA handles your personal data, please refer to the Consultation privacy notice at <https://www.food.gov.uk/about-us/privacy-notice-consultations>.

Further information

If you require a more accessible format of this document, please send details to the named contact for responses to this consultation and your request will be considered.

This consultation has been prepared in accordance with HM Government consultation principles.

Annex A: Summary of changes to the Food Law Code of Practice

Reference	Record of changes to the Code	Revised Code	Current Code
COP 1	Addition of Food Hygiene heading under Initial Inspections to differentiate from new Food Standards section to reflect new Food Standards Delivery model.	Chapter 4.2.4.1	Chapter 4.2.4
COP 2	Addition of Food Standards heading with section on new Food Standards Delivery model and flexibility to postpone initial inspections.	Chapter 4.2.4.2	Chapter 4.2.4
COP 3	Deletion of footnote reference no. 90 as does not reflect new Food Standards Delivery model.	Chapter 4.3.1	Chapter 4.3.1
COP 4	Addition of Food hygiene in bullet point 4 in Frequency of interventions and requirement for risk-based approach to differentiate from Food standards	Chapter 4.3.1	Chapter 4.3.1
COP 5	Addition of new bullet point 5 to include Food Standards in Frequency of interventions and requirement for risk-based approach	Chapter 4.3.1	Chapter 4.3.1
COP 6	Food Hygiene heading added to section under Revision of intervention ratings to differentiate from Food Standards.	Chapter 4.3.2.1	Chapter 4.3.2
COP 7	Food Standards heading and section added under Revision of Intervention ratings to differentiate from Food Hygiene.	Chapter 4.3.2.2	Chapter 4.3.2
COP 8	Detail added under Alternative Enforcement Strategies heading covering Food Hygiene and Food Standards to reflect new food standards delivery model.	Chapter 4.3.3	Chapter 4.3.3

Reference	Record of changes to the Code	Revised Code	Current Code
COP 9	Sections deleted under Food Standards Intervention frequency covering category A through C. Replaced with 2 new paragraphs on 'Priority interventions' and 'all other establishments' to reflect new food standards delivery model.	Chapter 4.4.2.1 and 4.4.2.2	Chapter 4.4.2
COP 10	Two sections added under Requirements to Revisit (Food Standards) – Priority interventions and other interventions.	Chapter 6.5.2	Chapter 6.5.2
COP 11	Alternative Enforcement Strategy (AES). Detail amended to reflect new Food Standards Delivery model.	Glossary	Glossary
COP 12	Broadly Compliant (Food Standards) – amended to reflect new food standards delivery model.	Glossary	Glossary
COP 13	Confidence in Management – amended with deletion of Food Standard Rating intervention scheme and inclusion of Compliance Assessment to reflect new food standards delivery model.	Glossary	Glossary
COP 14	Deletion of Food Standards Scoring system and addition of new food standards delivery model scoring system and Food Standards Risk Assessment.	Annex 1.2	Annex 1.2
COP 15	Table 1 Inherent Risk Profile added.	Annex 1.2	Not included
COP 16	Table 2 Compliance Assessment - Guidance on the Scoring system added.	Annex 1.2	Not included
COP 17	Decision Matrix added which determines the frequency of official controls according to the new Food Standards Delivery model.	Annex 1.2	Not included

Annex B: List of interested parties

Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (NI)
Consumer Council
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Food and Feed)
Dairy UK
Department of Health
Federation of Small Businesses
Food NI
GMB (TUF)
Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland
Hospitality Ulster
IFST (NI) Branch
Institute of Hospitality (NI) Branch
Livestock & Meat Commission for Northern Ireland
National Association of Agricultural Contractors (NI)
NI District Council Heads of Service
NI District Council Lead Food Officers
NI Schools Catering Association
NIPSA (TUF)
Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC)
Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association
Northern Ireland Food Chain Certification (NIFCC)
Northern Ireland Food Chain Certification (Red Tractor)
Northern Ireland Food Managers Group (NIFMG)
Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association (NIGTA)
Northern Ireland Hotels Federation
Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA)
Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA)
Northern Ireland Retail Consortium
Northern Ireland Trading Standards
Northern Ireland Pork and Bacon Forum
Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce
Poultry Association for Northern Ireland
Retail NI
Siptu
Ulster Farmers Union

Unison

Unite the Union

University of Ulster