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21st November 2023

Mr Damien McCann,
Chief Executive,
Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council,
The General Offices,
Steelworks Road,
Ebbw Vale,
Gwent,
NP23 6DN.

SENT BY EMAIL

Food Standards Agency audit of local authority service delivery planning processes and arrangements and relevant open audit actions – 27th - 28th September 2023

Dear Mr McCann,

I refer to the recent audit visit undertaken by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to assess your authority's food service delivery planning processes and arrangements and review relevant open audit actions from previous audits.

I would like to thank you and your officers for your time and assistance in enabling us to complete the audit visit. Detailed feedback of our findings was provided to the service manager, team managers and lead officers and a summary of the overall findings was delivered during and at the conclusion of the visit.

Service planning and delivery

The local authority has provided a service plan that broadly meets the requirements of the service planning guidance issued by the FSA. A small number of improvements are required to bring the process fully up to the required standard and verbal feedback has been provided to officers.

The food hygiene service has recovered significantly from the pandemic demonstrating progress towards re-alignment with the intervention frequencies contained within the Food Law Code of Practice (the Code). The service plan highlighted that officer resources were slightly lower than required (0.32 Full Time Equivalent (FTE)), however, there is a plan in place to address the backlog of outstanding premises interventions. These findings indicate that the authority is making good progress on recovery and is taking a risk-based approach.

The food standards service has also recovered significantly from the pandemic to make progress in re-aligning with the Code. The service plan highlighted the lack of officer resources with a deficit of 2.75 FTE. There is also a plan in place to address resources from within and tackle the backlog of overdue and unrated establishments. The food standards service is making good progress despite resource difficulties and is also taking a risk-based approach.

Overall assessments of the assurance of the authority's food hygiene and food standards service planning and delivery have been attached at Annex 1.

The level of assurance is dependent upon the continued and successful delivery of both services' plans to address the existing intervention backlogs. If those plans are not delivered, the level of actual assurance would be reduced. It is imperative that the authority continues to manage, monitor and support the recovery of both services in accordance with the risk-based plans provided to ensure recovery to the standard prescribed in law and under the Code.

Relevant open audit actions

The actions taken to address the 24 food hygiene and food standards recommendations, detailed in the authority's full audit action plan from 2014 were assessed along with the findings from the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) audit of 2017/18. Auditors were able to verify conformance with 23 recommendations from the full audit and all of the actions from the FHRS audit, in which there were two. Auditors

were also able to confirm that the authority had made progress towards addressing the remaining recommendation but the action that had been taken was not sufficient to verify full conformance. Please note that it is necessary for the authority to ensure action is taken to address the outstanding recommendation. Please find attached at Annex 2, an updated action plan which confirms the findings relating to open audit actions.

The authority is reminded that not all recommendations are of equal significance, for example, recommendations relating to resourcing, management of intervention programmes and internal monitoring carry a higher level of significance. Also, not all recommendations are equal in relation to the quantity of the requirements that are required in order to complete them. For example, one recommendation may comprise of a dozen or more individual parts. It is noted that the number of recommendations raised is not always representative of overall achievement. It is important that the root cause of any issue is identified and that corrective and preventative action is carried out. The importance of internal monitoring is key to maintaining improved standards.

Next steps

This letter and the document attached at annex 1 will not be published but the updated action plan attached at annex 2 will be published on the FSA's Website. It is, however, expected that the report letter be brought to the attention of relevant Members.

Further follow-up to check progress in addressing the previous outstanding recommendation will take place in due course.

In order for us to continually improve, we would be grateful if you could complete the attached audit feedback questionnaire. We would welcome any comments you and your officers may have on the conduct of this audit.

In the meantime, if you wish to discuss the contents of this letter, please feel free to contact me on Tel: 07870 362491 E-mail: wales.audit@food.gov.uk

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "C Sewell".

Craig Sewell
Senior Audit Manager
Regulatory Audit & Assurance Team

Enc: Annex 1: Assessment of assurance
Annex 2: Updated Action Plan

Cc: Ellie Fry, Corporate Director Regeneration & Community Services
David Thompson, Public Protection Service Manager,
Lisa Griffin, Team Manager Commercial Services (Food Hygiene)
Steve Osborne, Team Manager Trading Standards (Food Standards)