Dear Mr Lamb,

Thank you for your letter of 5 December 2018 enclosing one from regarding food safety advice for vulnerable persons. letter draws attention to the increased risk of foodborne illness with, and the need for advice for, vulnerable groups (usually considered to be persons over 65 years of age, children under five, persons who are immuno-compromised, such as those with cancer or on certain medications, and pregnant women and their unborn babies). You highlight concerns and ask more particularly about advice for persons from such groups in care services and receiving medical attention.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA), as the competent authority for food safety, works to ensure food is safe and is what it says it is. The FSA is of course very aware of the higher risks posed by foodborne illness to vulnerable consumers and has provided a range of helpful advice to food businesses, local authorities and consumers. Health bodies throughout the UK continue to monitor wider trends in foodborne illness and these are taken into account by the FSA when developing policy; the FSA always considers the particular risks to vulnerable groups when making its risk management decisions.

The FSA has provided advice for healthcare settings and I include these for your information, but the Department of Health and Social Care should comment in regard to any medical advice provided directly by medical staff, by GPs for example or by dieticians or clinicians in hospitals where other health issues may also be of concern.
I can reassure you that robust food safety legislation is in place to protect public health. EU food safety and food hygiene legislation places requirements on food businesses to provide safe food and to have safe food hygiene procedures in place. There is also a requirement that food businesses take into account ‘the particular health sensitivities of a specific category of consumers where the food is intended for that category of consumers’. Food businesses which handle foods of animal origin such as meat, poultry meat, fish and shellfish and supply other food businesses must be approved to do so also have to follow hygiene rules specific to those commodities. Throughout the food chain, food businesses are required to keep food at temperatures which keep food safe. Local Authorities, which carry out enforcement work in most UK food businesses will help those FBOs comply with the relevant legislation but will also take action where necessary if requirements are not met by food businesses. Food businesses must be able to demonstrate on inspection that the food safety procedures they use when handling food do not compromise consumer health.

I should mention at this point that FSA colleagues are working to ensure that EU food safety legislation is retained in UK law when we leave the European Union ensuring continued public health protection and reassurance for UK consumers.

The FSA has developed and published guidance for healthcare and social care organisations to reduce the risk of vulnerable groups contracting listeriosis: https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/listeria-guidance-june2016-rev.pdf

In 2015 the FSA ran a project to deliver ‘Listeria workshops for healthcare establishments to highlight key Listeria controls for those preparing and serving foods to vulnerable groups’.

In regard to listeria, the FSA provides a range of guidance to help FBOs; there is also a lot of information on listeria provided for consumers and the advice notes those vulnerable groups: https://www.food.gov.uk/safety-hygiene/listeria

We also provide, on the NHS Choices web site, advice specifically aimed at vulnerable consumers, including pregnant women and those over 65 years of age:

https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/foods-to-avoid-pregnant/

https://www.nhs.uk/common-health-questions/pregnancy/how-can-i-avoid-food-poisoning-during-pregnancy/

https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well/foods-to-avoid-over-65/

There is also a wide range of food safety advice for the general population which can be accessed on the FSA web site and on NHS Choices, including avoiding food poisoning through good kitchen practices based around ‘the 4 Cs’ - cooking, cleaning, keeping food chilled and avoiding cross-contamination.
I hope this letter shows that the FSA, and colleagues in our equivalent organisation in Scotland, Food Standards Scotland, takes very seriously the higher food safety risks faced by vulnerable consumers as well as those faced by the general population and has in place the suitable legislation and advice as necessary.

Yours sincerely,

Jason Feeney CBE