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**FOOD SCARES AND FOOD  
SAFETY REGULATION**

**Qualitative research on current  
public perceptions**

DEBRIEF

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## A. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

- recent quantitative research has indicated that public attitudes towards food scares may be changing, particularly with regard to whom consumers would trust to provide reliable information and advice in the event of a food scare
- media attention is now focused more heavily on other food-related issues such as obesity
- the FSA requires further insight into consumers' concerns about food, their attitudes to food scares and how these have changed, to help it determine how best to inform the public and address fears
- research was commissioned to:
  - establish whether consumers' attitudes towards food, and their concerns about food, have shifted in recent years
  - understand current perceptions of food risks and what informs and influences them
  - understand whether and how concerns over food differ across demographic groups
  - explore how people react to messages about their food concerns
  - explore whom people trust to inform them about their food concerns
  - assess where worries about food fit into the overall landscape of concerns
  - explore awareness and perceptions of regulation of the food industry and expectations of how far they expect the state to go in regulating it
  - examine awareness of and response to examples of sanctions against food businesses which break rules/the law

## B. METHODOLOGY

- 8 group discussions and twenty short qualitative interviews were conducted among members of the public who had sole or joint responsibility for buying food
- the 8 groups were structured as follows:
  - G1: 21-30, C1C2, mixed sex, African-Caribbean, London
  - G2: 31-45, C2DE, female, Birmingham
  - G3: 46-60, ABC1, male, London
  - G4: 61-75, C2DE, male, Birmingham
  - G5: 21-30, C2DE, female, London
  - G6: 31-45, ABC1, male, Leeds
  - G7: 46-60, C1C2, female, Pakistani Muslim, Leeds
  - G8: 61-75, ABC1, female, Leeds
- the short qualitative interviews were conducted in Luton and were configured as follows:
  - 7 male, 13 female
  - 10 ABC1, 10 C2DE
  - 5 aged 21-30; 9 aged 31-45; 4 aged 46-60; 2 aged 61-75
  - 1 Asian; 2 African-Caribbean
- fieldwork was conducted from 17<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> January 2005 by Tim Porter and Catherine Taylor

## C. CONCLUSIONS

### **Food safety**

- food safety does not appear to be as high on most consumers' list of concerns as other topics, but is acknowledged as an important current issue
- it has most resonance for parents, but is also felt strongly by younger ages without children and by the middle classes generally
- perceptions and interpretations of worries about food are undoubtedly changing, and there is an appetite for reliable and trustworthy information about food
- in particular the range of concerns is broadening and now includes subjects that were far from top of mind a few years ago
- the dynamic in this process is largely in the direction of information being communicated by 'experts' (scientists) and concerned bodies (statutory and otherwise) to consumers, filtered by the media

### **Food scares**

- it does not appear that new issues have become food scares: there is a spectrum of worries about food, on which established scares are still regarded as the most serious *in isolation*, and on which other concerns are thought less severe
- a central issue here is timing and media coverage: it is the issues that are most current and receiving the heaviest media coverage *at the time* that tend to be seen as the most serious
- this seems at least a partial explanation of the perceived severity of salt as a food safety concern during late 2004: at that time there were no major stories about food contamination, and salt attracted much coverage (as well as an advertising campaign)

- issues that are considered less extreme are often still regarded as serious, and can bring about changes in behaviour, or at least intended changes

### **The food industry**

- feelings about all components of the food industry are ambivalent: people want to believe in and trust it but wonder whether they can
- supermarkets are the most visible and tangible elements of the industry and attract much criticism as well as praise, particularly among the better educated
- examples of sanctions against supermarkets reinforce negative impressions and surprise those who feel supermarkets can be trusted

### **Trust in information**

- in relation to information and trust there is still uncertainty about reliable sources
- people want honesty but do not want to have to worry about food; these demands are difficult to reconcile
- the news media are regarded with suspicion: they break stories about problems with food but are believed to scaremonger and to undermine public confidence
- experts are more likely to be believed, particularly if their views are thought to be based on hard scientific fact, but there is frustration at inconsistency of scientists' findings

### **Regulation**

- though regulation of the food industry is assumed to go on, there is very little knowledge about who does it or how
- when asked, consumers tend to believe it is the responsibility of central government in some form, with local representation, possibly by environmental health inspectors

- there is interest in more and more rigorous regulation, but a belief that greater resources are needed

### **Sanctions**

- sanctions attract much interest and at first glance tend to prompt demands for more and tougher measures against transgressors
- information about sanctions also raises concerns about disparities in penalties and inequalities in relation to different sizes of business, different types of wrongdoing and different regions
- views on sanctions probably need to be treated with caution: though people want to see wrongdoers punished, there is a balance to be struck between creating alarm about food safety and letting people know they are being protected

## D. THE CONTEXT

### 1. **Subjects of interest and concern**

- issues that aroused anxiety and concern were little different from those that featured in earlier research, except in relation to the global context
- some respondents focused on the external: national issues such as crime, immigration, the NHS, education and religion
- global topics also came up frequently: the environment, global warming, the tsunami, the Iraq war and war in general
- C2DEs and parents were more likely to mention personal issues: their children's health, welfare and education, other family matters, friendships
- among personal topics, health was a concern for some, especially older ages and women; they worried about loss of faculties with age, illnesses, their children's and grandchildren's health
- food was rarely mentioned directly at this stage, though for some respondents, more often women, it was part of their concerns about bigger topics, typically the environment or health

### 2. **Feelings about food and changes in recent years**

#### 2.1 Overall impressions

- these largely reflected demographics and background attitudes; people had different areas of interest and preoccupations
- there were signs that attitudes and behaviour were changing: many people reported changes to their eating behaviour in the last two or three years
- typically these changes had been prompted by concerns about health (though they were sometimes linked to weight issues among young women)

- these concerns had arisen as a result of increased information about food, via a number of channels – primarily news coverage of the issues in national media, but also publicity campaigns

## 2.2 Younger women

- younger women without children had concerns about food and health, with a particular focus on weight: they worried about adulteration of food but were especially concerned about calorie and fat content
- their feelings about food and weight seemed unchanged in recent years: they had the same concerns about avoiding weight gain and dieting if necessary that they had had in the past
- where their behaviour had changed this seemed more to do with perceptions of other issues: salt, sugar, impurity of contents, GM food
- if behaviour had changed it was marked by a greater propensity to interrogate food contents, particularly via labelling, and attempts to weed out what was believed to be unhealthy

## 2.3 Parents

- most parents regarded food as a subject of concern because they felt it had significant implications for their children's health; key aspects of this were:
  - perceived need to encourage children to eat fresh fruit and vegetables, and difficulty achieving this, especially as they got older
  - concerns about children eating fast food and the risk of them growing up obese, because it was assumed high in fat and probably other potentially harmful ingredients
  - some also worried about ingredients which might affect behaviour, especially colouring and other additives
- if anything, parents' attention to their children's diet was greater as a result of the proliferation of information about food safety

- food remained a contentious issue, especially as children grew older
- as they learned more about what was apparently good and not so good, they became more focused on and keener to ensure the safety of their children's diets
- some parents, especially men, worried less about their own food consumption than their children's, but were beginning to consider this more as they got older

#### 2.4 Older ages

- those in older age groups (55+) seemed fairly well informed about what is and is not healthy, but diverged in their views about whether to change their behaviour:
  - some were cautious: felt they were becoming more frail with age, so needed to be increasingly careful to eat a healthy diet
  - others seemed resigned: felt it was too late to change, assumed any changes would make no difference anyway, so carry on regardless
  - older women were often more confident than men: they had grown up with cooking and trusted their own common sense and avoidance of more modern options, eg ready meals

#### 2.5 Ethnic minorities

- **Asian women** had different views from most of the rest of the sample:
  - they had a strong tradition of cooking and tended to eat mainly Asian food, which they saw as outside mainstream of processed and retailed food
  - consequently they were less concerned about food safety or health in general, nor had changed their behaviour much

- there were exceptions to this:
  - halal meat was regarded this as 'cleaner' and safer than non-halal meat, but they were not always confident that meat they bought was genuinely halal
  - some of the older Asian women had concerns about their daughters' lower knowledge of Asian food
  - a few of the better educated had begun to cut down their consumption of red meat, fat, salt and sugar
  - they also expressed feelings of fatalism about their health: this was in God's hands as much as theirs
- most of the **African-Caribbean** sample were younger (21-30) and C2; this had an effect on their stance regarding food
- they seemed less enquiring about food contents and food safety than some, and showed less evidence of changes in attitudes and behaviour around food than other respondents

## E. FOOD SAFETY AND FOOD SCARES

### 1. Food safety

- though most consumers appeared confident that most of the food they ate was safe, and none expressed serious worries about it, they were willing to believe in food scares and concerns
- this was almost certainly conditioning: virtually all were aware of a range of problems with certain foods, mainly in the recent past, but in some cases going back fifteen years or more
- impressionistically those who were most susceptible to worries about food safety were women, parents of young children and young adults
- older ages tended to be no less aware but less worried about safety, primarily because they felt that experience and common sense would steer them through the uncertainties
- more generally there was some feeling that references to food scares were exaggerated and unreasonable: that food in the UK was reliably safe and that media reporting of problems with food was inaccurate, unhelpful scare-mongering
- there appeared to be little sense of a clear delineation between food that is safe and food that is unsafe
- it was more the case that much food was regarded as potentially risky, for a wide variety of reasons, some more convincing and more serious than others
- those issues that were considered less extreme were often still regarded as serious, and could bring about changes in behaviour, or at least intended changes
- a central issue here was timing and media coverage: issues were regarded as more serious *if they were receiving heavy coverage at the time*
- this seemed at least a partial explanation of the perceived severity of salt as a food safety concern during late 2004

## 2. Food scares

- anything that was described as a *food scare* was clearly positioned at the extreme end of the spectrum of worries about food
- for most people *food scare* meant contaminated food causing serious diseases, as a consequence of malpractice in agriculture or in processing and preparation
- those that were mentioned unprompted most were:
  - BSE in beef causing CJD
  - salmonella caused by eggs or chicken
- other similar scares had largely been forgotten but were recalled with prompting:
  - farmed salmon and cancer
  - chicken unfit for human consumption
  - tuna contaminated by mercury
- these sorts of issues were characterised by:
  - poisoning of food by disease
  - limited knowledge and lack of control for the consumer
  - potentially fatal consequences
  - high profile media coverage at the time
  - long-lasting recall but not a current worry
- above all consumers worried that in relation to these sorts of food scare there was little they could do by way of prevention until after the event
- if the problem arose from malpractice they had no control over it; there was no room for common sense to address it

### 3. Other concerns relating to food safety

- further along the spectrum, towards the less serious end, were issues that caused less acute concern but were still regarded by many as worthy of bringing about changes in behaviour
- in relation to bought food, these were:
  - obesity, particularly among children
  - the salt content of processed foods
  - sugar and other additives in processed food and drinks, particularly those aimed at children
  - fat content, particularly saturated fat
  - cholesterol content
- of these, salt and obesity were most salient and judged the most serious, but probably only because they had received the most recent media coverage
- there were also references to other aspects of food in the catering industry context:
  - food poisoning resulting from under-cooking or re-heating
  - poisoning arising from poor hygiene in preparation and storage
- these were not current in a general sense, though they could and did arouse concern at the local level: stories about hygiene problems in local restaurants could bring them to the fore
- further away from the food scare end of the spectrum were other food issues that attached to bigger topics:
  - GM crops and GM food
  - contamination by pesticides
- these received scattered mentions but were not generally regarded as contemporary concerns

- at the least extreme end of the spectrum there were concerns about:
  - a claimed general deterioration in food quality resulting from mass production
  - supermarkets selling cheap imported food
  - availability of fresh fruit and veg out of season
- apart from food provided by the catering industry, these less extreme issues were regarded as within the control of the consumer
- with good labelling, people could gauge what was and was not what they were happy to buy and eat

## F. THE FOOD INDUSTRY

- views about the food industry were ambivalent: all stages of the food chain were believed to be at risk of abuse by unscrupulous operators

### 1. **Farmers**

- farmers and the farming industry as a whole attracted very mixed views
- at a basic level farmers were believed to have some integrity because they were at the beginning of the food chain and dealing with food at its purest stage
- for some consumers this was reinforced by romantic notions of honest toil in difficult conditions
- and farmers attracted some sympathy for their problems in dealing with supermarkets – prices driven down but quality sustained
- but trust in farming had clearly been undermined by press coverage of major food scares, particularly BSE, and their role in the outbreak of foot and mouth
- and their case and image was not helped by negative press about subsidies

### 2. **Food processors and manufacturers**

- less was known about processors and manufacturers: people knew of those which were associated with brands (eg Kelloggs, Nestle) but not much about their operations, nor about other large processors
- the assumption was that the processors and manufacturers had a major impact on food quality and on aspects of food safety and health (eg salt, fat and sugar content)

- but their role seemed to be seen as a little mysterious and uncertain; the impression was that consumers had little understanding of processing and manufacturing
- in addition their presence and identities were less visible than those of the farming industry or, particularly, retailing:
  - people had a clear idea in their minds what farmers and supermarkets did
  - but unless they lived near a food factory this part of the industry was much less tangible to them
- it seemed likely that the more people learned about processors and manufacturers, the less they would trust them

### 3. **Supermarkets**

- supermarkets also prompted widely varying views, particularly among middle class respondents
- in their favour they were appreciated for: choice, variety, competitive prices, access and opening hours, and at least minimum quality standards
- for some consumers (more often C2DE) supermarkets were inherently trustworthy because they were large businesses which could not afford to make mistakes
- and some had an irrational faith in big names: big meant reliable, trustworthy
- against this there were complaints that supermarkets...
  - were entirely profit-driven
  - squeezed suppliers almost to the point of driving them out of business
  - were anti-competitive because their growing presence threatened smaller retailers
  - could not necessarily be trusted to provide safe food

- were not above malpractice or neglect in relation to food labelling and hygiene
- followed, did not lead, and only offered food that might be seen as safer or healthier (eg organic, GM free) if it was profitable

#### 4. **Independent retailers**

- views of independent retailers were more fragmented:
  - specialist suppliers were generally trusted in relation to quality, hygiene and food safety, if not for competitive prices
  - those catering for ethnic minority demands (eg Asian or African-Caribbean) foods were regarded with confidence by their customers
  - independent general suppliers (ie corner shops) were more open to suspicion on grounds of concerns about hygiene, sell-by dates and low quality brands

#### 5. **The catering industry**

- restaurants, cafes, pubs and take-aways seemed to be an easy target for those with concerns about food safety
- as in previous research consumers often believed that food outlets were the most common source and cause of food safety problems – food poisoning
- this perception was more a function of perception than experience and was typically based on media coverage and hearsay
- trust in the catering industry was patchy: people wanted to feel the outlets they used were clean and safe, but were prepared to believe that some were not
- a key to the lack of trust they felt was the dual nature of outlets in this respect: pristine eating area but filthy kitchen

## G. SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND TRUST

- main sources of information about food and food safety were: the news media, government publicity, consumer media (food articles in newspapers and women's magazines, and TV programmes), food suppliers
- among Asian women information from their own communities seemed to play a part: news, experiences and views were passed on by word of mouth about issue such as the need to reduce salt and fat consumption
- beliefs about who to trust for information about food depended on the nature of the topic and severity of concern
- the more serious the concern, the fewer sources were trusted and the greater the tendency to look to 'official' and scientific sources: scientists, the medical profession, the medical parts of government
- the less worrying the concern, the more that people were happier to rely on less formal sources – word of mouth, the media (discussion rather than news)
- the news media muddied the waters of trust in more ways than one:
  - for consumers they created confusion and panic, and undermined confidence both in food and other information sources
  - they straddled the range of sources in terms of trustworthiness: some news media were considered responsible and balanced, others less so
- for food scares, which were the more serious concerns, the need was for solid reassurance that:
  - the food involved was unquestionably safe
  - the cause of the problem had been identified and eradicated

- measures had been put in place to prevent it happening again
- appropriate action had been taken against any guilty parties
- while information on this largely came via the news media, the assumption was that the key bodies involved should be the scientific experts and if appropriate, regulatory authorities and possibly the justice system
- where the issue was considered less acute but still serious (eg salt, fat, sugar), the expectation was for:
  - informed advice and guidance from experts such as food writers and presenters in consumer media
  - information and reassurance from food suppliers (processors, retailers and catering industry)
  - where relevant, changes in practices by those involved
- if the issue involved larger considerations such as the environment, there was less certainty about where information should come from, but the assumption was that it should be science-based

## H. REGULATION

### 1. **Awareness and beliefs about regulation**

- though food was not on most people's hypothetical 'list' of worries and concerns, with prompting many believed there is a need for regulation and for more publicising of regulations and sanctions
- the overwhelming view about regulation was that in practice there was not much of it, and there probably should be more
- this point prompted debate: some felt that regulation was lacking and needed to be increased
- others believed it existed but that the function was under-resourced at street level: rules exist but are broken because not enforced
- little was known about regulation: few were aware of any regulatory procedures, bodies or powers, or could recall any examples of regulation of or sanctions against food industry being put into practice
- many assumed regulation goes on but feel they know little about it and are told nothing about it; this is true across the spectrum of the population
- typically the assumption was that any regulation is probably done by national government (whichever department deals with farming and food) or at local level by environmental health officers
- but it was clear that no one was certain where responsibility for food regulation lies, nor how it is organised across the different parts of the food industry
- there was some familiarity with (concept of) 'environmental health' inspectors; one respondent had made a complaint in the past but otherwise understanding of their role was limited

- the tendency was to assume (when asked) that regulation probably focuses on two broad areas:
  - safety of content of food, in relation to either contamination (eg salmonella) or items introduced in processing (eg salt, sugar)
  - safety of food preparation and sales, ie hygiene in restaurant kitchens, supermarket storage
- labelling of food, particularly on packaging, was less top of mind in relation to need for regulation and thought less important than content and preparation
- on consideration some consumers felt it was an important area and should be regulated as much as other aspects of food, in several ways:
  - for information about potentially health-affecting content such as salt
  - for people with allergies
  - in relation to food preparation, eg halal meat, kosher food
- the idea of closer monitoring of supermarkets' information and labelling was well received in principle: consumers felt that this could and should make things more transparent
- in practice there were questions about how it would work, and the resources that would be needed to make it effective

## 2. Regulators

- views on providers or executors of regulation were consistent though not always informed by logic
- at some level government was expected to have a role, at least in drawing up regulations, on the basis of scientific input
- several consumers suggested the FSA, if not by exact name; they were not certain of its function but believed it would and should be involved in regulation of some kind

- some assumed that whichever part of government is responsible for agriculture would need to have a role, at least for regulation of farming
- the Department of Health was rarely mentioned unprompted; when it was suggested consumers could see sense in it having a role, though some wondered whether it would have specialist functions that could address food issues
- local authorities were largely rejected as regulators or enforcers, primarily because people had little faith in their councils for any function
- with prompting, environmental health officers were believed to be the most likely monitors and enforcers of regulation
- the Meat Hygiene Service was not known, but came across as a likely-sounding regulator of meat safety

## I. SANCTIONS

- response to examples of sanctions imposed on businesses and people in the food industry was striking: almost all these examples were considered serious transgressions
- at the extreme the offences prompted outrage and disgust, and made some people worry more about food safety and feel more negatively towards the food industry
- on consideration, exposure of these examples could offer reassurance that regulation is going on and penalties are being imposed, and that someone somewhere is monitoring food safety in the UK
- the exception was the Sainsbury's claim of an old recipe; this tended to be seen as relatively minor
- typical reactions to information about the sanctions for the offences were powerful: most of these consumers expressed...
  - shock at the nature of the offences committed, particularly re contamination of food and hygiene failings
  - surprise at the perceived lenience shown to some transgressors
  - disapproval of what they perceived as low fines on large supermarket chains, even for offences less serious than some
- some suspected (or claimed to suspect) that part of the reason for low fines for supermarkets was that they have secret arrangements with government to avoid higher penalties
- some counter-balanced what seemed relatively low fines/penalties with assumption that negative publicity could be very (terminally) damaging, for a local shop and for a supermarket chain

- against this, there was a belief that the media might have a positive role in publicising information about food businesses committing malpractice; this contrasts with sometimes negative role of media as scaremongers during food scares
- but there was a widespread demand for more to be done:
  - more checking of food and food suppliers and producers re food content and hygiene practices
  - stiffer penalties for those who do wrong
  - penalties proportionate to size of business
  - more power to close businesses that commit malpractice(temporarily if appropriate)
  - more rigorous and systematic checking of claims about food contents
- given the nature of these responses it is worth noting that these requests were much more often prompted than unprompted
- also there were questions about resources available to regulators, and a suspicion that they have too few resources to do their job properly