

**QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TO  
EXPLORE PUBLIC ATTITUDES  
TO FOOD SAFETY**

REPORT

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## A. BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

### 1. **Research Background**

Until now, the Ministry for Agriculture Fisheries and Food has been responsible for the publication of information and good practice in relation to food safety, while health issues relating to food safety have been the remit of the Department of Health.

The Food Standards Agency was launched in April of this year. Its role is to protect the public's health in all matters relating to food, effectively consolidating the previous responsibilities of the aforementioned departments in one body.

While reporting to health ministers and devolved authorities, the agency will work independently. It will, therefore, be free to publish its recommendations to ministers, and its advice to inform consumers.

Prior to the launch of the Food Standards Agency, research was required to explore public attitudes to food safety, and to inform development of a communications strategy to help position the new agency in relation to the current concerns and expectations of the public.

Interim findings from this study were presented to the Central Office of Information and the Food Standards Agency on Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2000. This report expands on the findings discussed in a spoken debrief given at the Central Office of Information on Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> April 2000.

### 2. **Research Objectives**

The overall objective of this study was to explore the public's current attitude to food safety, and to elicit expectations of Government in this respect. More specifically, the study was required to investigate existing awareness and understanding of food safety amongst consumers, including coverage of the following:

- understanding of the issues which might be involved in 'food safety', and attitudes to it in general
- factors taken into account / priorities when purchasing food (convenience, nutrition, cost, product info, who purchased for etc)
- existing sources of information on food safety
- levels of concern, priorities
- perceived threats to food safety
- current confidence levels in various foods (meat, vegetables etc)
- confidence in levels of food safety across different sources (restaurants, fast food outlets etc)

The research also sought to understand perceptions of the current management of standards of food safety, including:

- perceived responsibility for ensuring standards
- confidence levels in government's ability to maintain standards
- awareness of, and attitudes to recent food scares
- information sources and requirements during scares
- attitudes to the media during food scares, and its perceived role
- awareness of the Food Standards Agency

Finally, the research was required to elicit responses to the proposed Agency, including:

- expectations of the Agency
- reaction to its proposed role
- understanding of, and attitudes to impartiality
- perceived implications
- saliency / relevance in current climate

A copy of the topic guide, outlining the subjects covered in the discussions, together with the materials used for stimulus are amongst the appendices following page 98.

## B. METHODOLOGY

### 1. **Research method**

A series of 26 qualitative group discussions was used to provide a forum for debate across a varied sample of the public. This approach was chosen for its suitability to the exploratory nature of the study, and as a time and cost effective method of gathering public opinion.

Each group discussion lasted approximately 1½ hours and comprised eight individuals.

Fieldwork was conducted between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2000 by Arnold Cragg, Kirsty Hughes, Rhodri Gilbert and Catherine Woolcott, all of Cragg Ross Dawson. The research covered the UK: there were 20 groups in England, 2 in Scotland, 2 in Wales and 2 in Northern Ireland.

### 2. **Sample details**

Full details of the sample composition will be found in the Appendix.

In brief, the sample was segmented by the following criteria:

- gender (weighted towards women to reflect household shopping habits)
- lifestage covering ages from 18 to 65+ (weighted to those with children at home)
- socio-economic grouping (covering B,C1,C2,D and E social grades)
- ethnicity (representation of African-Caribbeans and Hindu and Muslim Asians)
- urban and rural areas (weighted to urban to reflect population levels)

- meat and non-meat eaters (weighted towards meat eaters)

### 3. **The nature of the study**

It is important to note that this research was qualitative in nature. The intention was to canvas the opinion of a variety of different groups in society. Discussions were unstructured, and therefore did not follow a common pattern. Not all issues were discussed in all groups. It is not safe to regard the sample presented here as representative of the general public. Nor should the views expressed by the sample be generalised to a wider audience. The intention of the study was to examine the range of views that exist, but not to indicate what proportions of the public hold those views.

## C. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. When they are asked about the responsibilities involved in shopping for food, most people (on this qualitative evidence) talk first about convenience, prices and value. They then go on to stress the importance of 'quality' – by which they mean primarily food which is fresh and which appears to be hygienically prepared and presented.
2. Different people have different perceptions, but most of those consulted in this sample associated 'quality' with the large supermarkets. Independent shopkeepers, smaller discount supermarkets, butchers and market stalls are often regarded as less reliable, particularly in the areas of hygiene and freshness. However minorities have opposing views and often value what they perceive as the greater expertise of smaller traders.
3. Many people appear to place their trust in the well-known national names – the large supermarket chains and the producers of advertised branded foods. They see these large organisations as having the turnover and resources to ensure freshness and good management practice. If they have cause for complaint, they expect these organisations to react quickly to put things right.
4. The sort of difficulties people mention in relation to buying food concern keeping within their budgets, and, in the case of parents, buying food that is both adequately nutritious and appealing to their children. Convenience or 'junk' foods compete strongly with what are recognised as more nutritious choices, particularly fresh vegetables. As prepared foods become more varied and more widely available, it seems possible that parents nowadays experience increasing difficulty getting their families to eat what they feel is an adequately balanced and varied diet.
5. It appears on this evidence that few people have food *safety* issues on their minds when they go food shopping. It was rare, in this study, for respondents to talk about food safety as long as the discussions seemed to be principally about why they shopped where they did, or bought the foodstuffs they did. Many people, especially those in

middle age or older, clearly believe that the food available to them has got better; it is more abundant, better presented and there is more choice than there used to be.

6. Even after food safety has been prompted as an issue, many people express confidence that the food they eat is good. This confidence reflects a number of perceptions and attitudes: trust in the big retailers and food brands; belief that this country has always managed its food well – better, certainly in terms of hygiene, than many other countries. In addition to trust in retailers and manufacturers, there is a strong underlying confidence that the food industry is comprehensively regulated. Moreover, and perhaps most important of all, there is strength in numbers and no evidence that people in this country are getting ill, or are not well nourished.
7. However, once they are asked to think about food safety specifically, the mental set of many people changes, often quite radically. They are comfortable talking about such things as where they find value, or what sorts of food and food outlets they prefer. But they interpret food safety as bound up with larger, intractable issues and do not wish to appear naïvely optimistic about these. The questions underlying these issues are of the following sort. How much do we really know about how our food is produced and what it may contain? How confident are we, really, that regulations governing the food industry are enforced? Do we think modern methods of mass food production are as safe as traditional methods? Do we trust food producers and retailers not to cut corners in the interests of profit? Do we think the science going into food production in the way of insecticides, pesticides, additives and so on has been tested thoroughly enough for us to be sure there will not be long term ill effects? Do we trust our politicians to tell us the truth about food? Do we think there will be no more ‘food scares’? Many people instinctively feel it is (at the least) prudent to respond to these questions with a healthy scepticism.
8. Discussion of food scares provokes or sustains this broadly based scepticism. The main scares that come to people’s minds are BSE, salmonella and genetically modified foods. BSE is widely regarded as a catalogue of errors; the stupidity of feeding cows with meat products,

followed by a failure to be adequately open with the public, and (for some) on-going uncertainties about whether or not beef is really safe. Salmonella is remembered either as Edwina Currie's plucky attempt to tell the truth in the face of a governmental instinct to cover up, or as a minister irresponsibly fomenting public anxiety. Many people acknowledge that they are very unclear about the issue with GM foods, but feel that something is amiss and is not being well handled. All of these scares have brought to the surface underlying concerns: that the public do not know what is going on, have to take things on trust, and do not *have* much trust in authority, particularly not in politicians.

9. Feelings of uncertainty and powerlessness are increased by distrust of much media coverage of food issues. Newspaper stories on anything resembling a scare are perceived as typically sensationalist and brief. The public are alarmed without being informed. TV documentaries are better respected. Much media coverage exacerbates public cynicism about governmental handling of food issues, not only because this coverage is often critical of government, but also because the media give publicity to advice and analysis from other sources and this encourages the perception that the experts are squabbling.
10. In the wake of discussion of food scares, and in considering some of the questions listed in paragraph 7 above, people tend to move from a basic confidence in the goodness of food and begin to find much to worry about. Prominent amongst these worries are: the conditions in which poultry are raised; the feed given to livestock – pigs and lambs as well as cows; the effects of pesticides, and other chemicals on fruit and vegetables; the effects of preservatives, colourants and other additives in prepared foods; the conditions in which all foods are distributed and in which prepared foods are processed; what may be happening behind the scenes in all areas where food is packaged and sold; the extent to which imported food conforms to standards set for the UK.
11. Reflection on these topics often produces gloomy speculation about how what we eat may be contributing to trends in such diseases as cancer and asthma. There is an underlying sense of not knowing, and therefore of powerlessness and dependence on authority. Some

people regard growth in the availability of organically produced foods as vindication that there is good reason to be wary of modern food production methods. There is among some, especially non-meat eaters, a belief that the public has to be more careful, and take less on trust. An irony of the situation is that the big retailers and established brands are widely trusted, yet people feel that many of their anxieties are a consequence of the industrialisation of farming and commercialisation of food distribution.

12. People are, perhaps understandably, clearer and more imaginative about their anxieties than about what should be done. The general sense is that adequate regulations may well be in place, but that there are problems with enforcement. Many find it difficult to see how the labyrinthine complexity of food production, processing and distribution can ever be effectively investigated and regulations enforced. There is particular concern about imported foodstuffs. At a local level, some people feel that there are not enough environmental health officers, and that the whole structure of regulation is probably underfunded.
13. Another common perception is that there is room for improvement in food labelling, with demand for clearer lists of ingredients, more readily understood by ordinary people. There is concern about freshness and some people think 'picked on', 'milked on', or 'delivered on' information might be reassuring. Similarly, some people feel that the terms 'organic', 'free-range' and 'farm fresh' are open to abuse and need tighter definition.
14. The idea of contacting local environmental health officers seems to occur to few people and more often in connection with food in restaurants and from take-aways than in food stores. One reason for this is that supermarkets are experienced as quick and generous in their compensation of customers with cause for complaint. Many people feel that market forces can be relied on to discipline both shops and restaurants effectively. There appears to be little if any sense amongst the public that liaising with local environmental and trades description personnel would make the regulatory system more effective.

15. There does not seem to be spontaneous demand for advice about nutrition, nor about how to look after and prepare food in the home. People seem to feel that schools lay a basic grounding in these skills, and that the media also offer plentiful advice. It may be that the research methodology – using discussion groups rather than individual interviews – discouraged respondents from saying they wanted guidance on preparing and keeping food.
16. When people talk about what is wrong in the area of food safety, it is the subject of politicians, and the perceived lack of governmental openness, that generates the strongest consensus and the most heat. As noted above, most people feel that the various food scares have been poorly handled. More specifically they suspect that politicians seek to act in ways that will minimise their vulnerability to blame, and that in practice this leads to delay in communicating with the public. The perceived failure to provide clear and authoritative advice is also much criticised, with many people apparently not appreciating that ‘experts’ may, with integrity, disagree about complex issues.
17. This study confirms that the public is eager to find someone to blame for food scares, and that people are quick to think that blame should attach to politicians. This creates a problem for the Food Standards Agency; it is liable to be perceived as the creation of politicians and may thereby attract some of the cynicism it is intended to dispel.
18. Few people seem to have thought enough, or clearly enough, about the issue of food safety to have come to the conclusion, independently, that what is needed is a new independent agency. Few of these respondents had learned that such an agency was in the process of coming into being. However, when the idea is outlined, many people feel it is a good idea *in principle*. They like the idea of a body which is – independent of political interference; dedicated to food safety specifically rather than having broader responsibilities for farming and health; authoritative, not subject to contradiction by other government departments; powerful in the sense that it can enforce its judgements even if they interfere with the profits of the food industry and/or with political expediency.

19. People hope that the Agency will be – strongly science based, so that its judgements arise from scientific evidence (again, to the exclusion of considerations related to profit and politics); quick to make decisions and quick to disseminate them effectively to the public; alert to the interests of consumers (perhaps by including consumer representatives within it); accessible, so that members of the public can visit a website, or phone for advice and clarification. Many people's initial reaction is that the Food Standards Agency should be entirely independent of farmers and the food industry generally on the basis that it exists in some sense to police these interests. On reflection some come to the view that input from those who produce and distribute the food will be essential if the agency is to make informed judgements, but there is considerable uneasiness about how this relationship should be managed.
20. Over and above these expectations, many people want to feel that the Agency will be proactive to a degree that it will prevent food scares from arising at all. Although they are very critical of how scares have been handled in terms of openness and speed, many people also feel that scares simply should not have happened. The success of the Food Standards Agency will certainly be judged by many on the impossibly challenging criterion of how many food scares have been averted. From the point of view of public relations, this is an assignment clearly impossible to achieve.
21. Although it is welcomed, sometimes rather grudgingly, in principle, there is widespread and often deep cynicism about how the Agency will function in practice. Some people fear that it may be too busy and too quick on the draw – out-of-touch boffins looking for announcements to make – thereby increasing rather than reducing public anxieties about food. A very common perception is that, because it is funded by government, it will be susceptible to government interference. On this evidence, a substantial proportion of the public will treat it with some suspicion, fearing that it will be costly and no more effective than previous arrangements. Early perceptions of how beneficial the agency will be will depend more than anything else on how successfully and completely it establishes its independence of political and food industry interests.

## D. DETAILED FINDINGS

### 1. **Choosing where to shop for food**

It is dangerous to generalise too confidently about food shopping habits because different people in different situations obviously have different priorities. Indeed individual priorities are liable to change over time and in response to circumstances.

However, there were strong patterns across large segments of this sample. Affordability and value were of course key factors influencing where respondents chose to shop; many accounted for their choice of outlets on the basis of value. Typically...

*"It depends on who's got the best offers on."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"I go to Asda because they're one of the best and the cheapest, very good for families."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

The type of outlet was also often justified by reference to cheaper prices or better value.

*"I go to the butcher's... The butcher's is cheaper than the supermarket."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

Convenience was another important consideration. Respondents shopped where it was most convenient for them – at shops that were easily accessible on foot, or by car (parking was often mentioned as critical). A small minority wanted their big weekly or monthly shopping delivered and chose outlets (Iceland was mentioned) which offered free delivery. Many also said they preferred to shop where they were familiar with the shop layout and could find what they wanted quickly. Opening hours were important for some.

*"I go to Asda because it is big, it is open 24 hours a day and it is reasonably priced without being too cheap."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

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\* A note on the socio-economic classification used in this report will be found amongst the Appendices, page viii

The more affluent often cited the extent of choice and the variety of foods on offer as critical. A wide and distinctive choice was often associated with 'quality'. For example...

*"I prefer M&S and Waitrose because the quality is better."*

QUALITY?

*"I think it's nicer. The meat's nicer. It might be more expensive but it's presented nice, it's a nice variation, slightly different from the normal stuff."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

Most people unsurprisingly preferred to shop at outlets where they were confident about 'quality' – where the premises looked clean and the food was, and looked, fresh. Many respondents had rationales to support the assumptions they made about why certain outlets gave them confidence about quality and value. Some of these issues recur in subsequent sections of the report (see especially section 9), but we should note here that different people are impressed by different things. Many of these respondents felt safe with supermarkets because they thought they were big, well managed organisations which had a huge financial interest in building and preserving their reputations.

*"If (supermarkets) have bad stuff everyone knows about it quickly. The publicity is too important to them."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

*"(Big supermarkets) can't afford to have bad publicity ... but the corner shops probably don't bother."*

female, young family, C2D, Scotland, urban

In this respect, street markets were at the opposite extreme.

*"They all seem very fly by night with beautiful apples on the front and horrible stuff at the back."*

*"They are not there when you go back."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

Some respondents also thought that the large supermarkets had the buying power to secure the best; smaller and cheaper outlets had to make do with what was left.

*"The big supermarkets pick the better fruit out of the top, so the stores that can't buy as much are getting the not so good quality stuff."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

It was evident early on in discussions that most respondents thought there was an elementary correlation between quality and price. Supermarkets with a reputation for cheapness were often associated with poor quality, as were, especially among the young, street markets. Smaller outlets, discount and ethnic stores were often described as dirty or were otherwise suspect. Racism sometimes seemed a factor in respondents' judgements.

*"Discount stores are horrible, they're very cheap."*

*"They're very tacky."*

*"They're foreign."*

*"They're dirty looking in there."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

*"Some of these Asian supermarkets are disgusting."*

*They seem to get away with it."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

The larger supermarkets were usually perceived as reassuring in their appearance. They were big and bright, and they looked clean.

*"At the supermarket they are all nice and neatly packaged."*

*"You would assume the supermarket was cleaner (than a corner shop)."*

*WHY?*

*"The bright lights and the white tiles."*

*"You expect them to be inspected more."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

They also seemed well managed. Many respondents assumed that the supermarket chains had the working practices, and the resources, to ensure that all the food they sold was adequately fresh. They could afford to discard food that was outside its sell-by date; smaller outlets were often assumed to be less reliable in this respect.

*"A supermarket, when things are going out of date, will generally put them on offer and give you a different price, but corner shops won't do that, they just keep it at the same price, generally after the date, hoping you'll buy it."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

*"I don't like the local shop. They have a lot of out of date stock. A lot of the corner shops do."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

Many respondents were more confident that the large supermarkets would adhere rigorously to good practice, in relation to freshness and

sell-by dates, or re-freezing, than would smaller corner shops or butchers and fishmongers.

*"They (butchers and fishmongers) put them in the freezer every night... Re-freeze them all the time. That's not good for your health."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

Moreover people who worked in supermarkets were supervised. There was training and, many respondents felt, quality control. There were enough staff to ensure that the store itself was kept clean and stock was checked. A small shopkeeper had limited resources and was a law unto him or herself.

*"There's nobody there to watch over the butcher in the one man butcher shop. Is he washing his hands?"*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

On the other hand, some respondents, chiefly amongst the older men and women, placed their confidence in experienced tradesmen. They felt that butchers, greengrocers, fishmongers and those who kept market stalls were experts in their field – they knew what they were selling – whereas employees in supermarkets were not specialists in the same way. It was no good asking for advice in a supermarket.

*"I always go to the same butcher because I know the quality of the meat and I trust him."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

*"If I went to a supermarket and asked them for what I ask my local butcher for I wouldn't get it or they would have to order it. They wouldn't have a clue what it is. Vegetables in the market in town are fresher and a lot cheaper."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

In this sample it was noticeable that older people were much more likely to have confidence in smaller outlets and in markets. They liked dealing with people they knew, and they often thought shopkeepers were knowledgeable about the food they were selling – for example, where it had come from. Many younger respondents by contrast associated hygiene, and to some extent quality, with packaging; they liked foods to be well wrapped up. In the case of meat, some liked the way packaging distanced the meat from the slaughtered animal and presented it in a sanitised way as just 'food'.

*"I don't like the fact that in the butcher's you've got flies flying about and all that. I like the meat packed up."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"I wouldn't buy cold meat or chicken in a butcher's. I feel when you get a packet in Sainsbury's or something, it's fresh. I don't know where it's been before. If I see it in the butcher's I know where it's been before that, beside something else. In Sainsbury's it's in a packet, it looks nice."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

Some of these perceptions and preoccupations are discussed further in Section 9 below.

Although many respondents often talked about 'quality' as an important criterion governing their choice of food store, this rarely implied that they thought inferior quality entailed any sort of risk to their health. They were talking about their *preferences* – the sort of food they liked, and the sort of food shopping that they preferred. As we describe in Section 3 below, most respondents had a strong underlying confidence that the food available to them was safe to eat. Concerns about food safety very rarely emerged in the early stages of discussions, and most respondents clearly felt that they could exercise their preferences, and go looking for value, without fear of making themselves ill.

## 2. **Concerns about buying food relate to...**

When they were asked if they found shopping for food difficult, or a worrying responsibility – something that required care and involved difficult decisions – many respondents, especially those with families, said that it was. One of the main difficulties most of them had in mind, perhaps predictably, related to keeping within the personal or household budget. Not having enough money to buy what you wanted (or the children demanded) was a common problem.

Supermarkets offered abundant choice and, in many people's view, relatively cheap prices but many respondents also found that the abundant displays often tempted them to spend more than they could afford. This difficulty was said by some to be getting steadily worse as more and more ready prepared convenience foods became available. Individual meals had become much more variable in price; the raw

material might be inexpensive, but the same meal bought in a prepared form was much more expensive.

Another very common preoccupation concerned nutritional value. Many respondents said that their children were happy to eat convenience or 'junk' foods, and often refused healthier alternatives. Buying food that amounted to an adequately nutritious and balanced diet for the family was not easy.

*"You need vitamins and stuff from vegetables... you can't just buy junk all the time. Even though you see something and it's nice you have to think 'Will they eat it or should they be eating it'."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

*"I just make things that are quick and easy. In my house you're making maybe three separate dinners because they don't like this, they don't like that. Nobody in my house eats vegetables except me, the odd time."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

It did not seem that the problem here was ignorance – not knowing what constitutes a balanced diet. All respondents seemed to think that convenience foods were usually relatively low in nutrition. The difficulty many of them, especially mums, said they had was achieving an adequate fit between what they knew to be nutritious and what their children were willing to eat, and also with what they had time to prepare.

*"Eating junk food lowers your immune system."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"The wee boy... he prefers processed food and he would rather have chocolate to anything else at all. Getting him to even eat a banana is a real rigmarole."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

*"If I buy fresh food it'll go to waste, roots growing out of your potatoes. It just goes to waste.... You don't get time to get home and prepare it now."*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

Menu planning, and the decisions that needed to be made when shopping, were complicated by the restricted range of foods that many families wanted to eat.

*"It's knowing what to cook every day. You want variety... You want to get different vitamins from different meals.... The first thing I think of when I wake up in the morning is, 'What am I going to give them for dinner?'.... It's a bit of a nightmare really."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

Typically, convenience and 'junk' foods were well represented in the foods family members most enjoyed, and fresh fruit and vegetables were underrepresented. The problem here was often blamed on the children, but some parents acknowledged that they themselves were attracted to quick, convenience or fried foods.

*"I hate vegetables... if I was hungry I'd peel a potato and put it in the deep fat fryer. My husband eats pies and things with chips."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

Some older respondents expressed concern that the nutritional value of the foods most families ate was deteriorating. They regarded the rise of convenience and 'junk' foods as a new problem, one that they had not had to cope with, at least not to the same extent, when their own children had been younger. Snacks and take-away meals were, according to this perspective, a more and more prominent part of the typical family's diet.

*"How many kids where I live know what food is? They have pasties or packets of crisps. It would be nice to see them eating a good fresh meal."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

*"They want to put crap in their mouths now."  
"My son is 15 and he eats rubbish."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

*DO YOU FEEL, WITH MUCH MORE ABUNDANT FOOD, THAT WE ARE BECOMING HEALTHIER?*

*"I don't think they eat a healthy diet now."*

*"They eat the wrong food."*

*"Because they eat fast food. I don't feel it has the goodness in it."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

A partially related perception concerned the quality of cheap foods, especially tinned and frozen foods. Many respondents placed their confidence in well known brands, and said that cheaper alternatives were less healthy.

*"I go to Marks to get something nice that's not full of chemicals and preservatives and all that rubbish that you get in the cheaper brands."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"There's certain names that I just wouldn't even think of buying... If it's Birdseye we'll get it."*

female, African-Caribbean, older family, C2D, Midlands, urban

*"I never buy 'economy' anything because it's full of rubbish, it's the very worst of anything. Like when supermarkets do their own economy range of beans and it is always stacked with sugar and the sauce is thin and runny. And the thought of buying economy meat! It's just bits they pick up off the floor."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

As would be expected, almost all respondents also associated quality with freshness. As noted elsewhere, they said they shopped in outlets where they felt confident the food was fresh, but many said this was sometimes a difficult judgement to make. There were many references also to organically grown produce as representing better quality and better levels of nutrition (see also Section 8 below).

Notwithstanding these preoccupations and perceptions, within the context of a discussion about 'shopping for food', it was *not* common for people to raise issues of *food safety* spontaneously. The responsibilities food shoppers found most onerous on a daily or weekly basis related primarily to finances, what their children were willing to eat, and what they had time to prepare. Exceptions to this general pattern were most conspicuous amongst the non-meat eaters. These respondents were much more preoccupied than others with the possibility that some foods might be injurious to health.

### 3. **Strong underlying confidence in food in Britain**

This confidence rested in part on the security of numbers, and what most respondents regarded as the common-sense assumption that what the population as a whole was buying and eating was most unlikely to pose a real threat to health.

*"You would soon hear about it if the whole of Birmingham came down with food poisoning after shopping at one of the big supermarkets."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Midlands, urban

Leaving 'food scares' to one side (and see Section 5), people were not, in general perceived to be getting ill or becoming less healthy. Buying food was *not* a mine field (except for people with severe allergies); everybody did it and almost everyone seemed pretty much fine. It was argued that market forces played an important role in ensuring that food retailers and restaurants sold food that was (at least) safe to eat.

*"If they're going to keep poisoning everyone they're not going to be in business long."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

*"People wouldn't buy if it wasn't good. They would go somewhere else."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

Moreover, it was very widely assumed that food in the UK is at least as good, in every way, as that available to shoppers in other countries. 'We' regulated things like food production and distribution 'properly' (see also Section 12).

*"I think we've got a lot more standards in place than anyone else. I think our levels are quite a lot higher."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

Most of these respondents believed that standards of hygiene in the UK were superior to those in southern Europe. Few other countries inspired the same level of confidence.

*"You can't believe that other countries have got better health hygiene than ours. I just can't believe it."*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

*"We are much better because other countries don't keep things so clean."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Midlands, urban

*"Their pasta might be all right but I wouldn't trust nothing else."*

*"I'm never keen to eat meat when I'm abroad."*

*"I would never go to Spain and have seafood."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"Germany is probably the only country that I would think is on a par."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

This confidence came from a variety of sources. As already noted, most of these respondents trusted the big food retailers. They were well run and they obeyed the rules. There were differences in prices,

and in the variety of choice, but it was taken for granted that the food on offer in all the big supermarket chains was basically 'good' in the sense that it had been carefully selected and well looked after.

*"You just take it for granted that stuff you buy in a reputable supermarket is gonna be reasonably good and fresh.... I don't think you're going to find stuff that's out of date, not in the big ones anyway."*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

Market forces kept them on their toes.

*"If I went into Asda and there was lots of things past their sell by date I wouldn't go back."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

Other countries, especially those in southern Europe, were associated with different customs and ways of dealing with food. They were perceived as having more markets and small food shops. Produce was perceived as more likely to be exposed to contamination from the street. Most respondents felt less confident that food sold in foreign countries was as safe to eat because the food shops did not seem as reassuring (in part, of course, because they were different).

It seemed to be assumed that being careful and hygienic about food was part of the British national character. Moreover, British food production and distribution was usually assumed to be more tightly and responsibly regulated. Perceptions were reinforced, here and there, with a little patriotism and/or xenophobia. The UK was thought to compare well with 'abroad' when it came to standards of cleanliness and probity.

*"In this country there are tight rules and we have the nicest food. If you go abroad they have streets where there are loads of people selling the food in the open and they are terrible, flies everywhere."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

In line with this mental set, and on the matter of BSE (see also Section 5) most of these respondents believed that British beef is as safe as any beef because we had 'sorted' the problem more honestly and thoroughly than other countries had done.

*"It's stricter here because of the BSE thing. In foreign countries their meat, in certain circumstances might be just as bad as ours but they're not as strict in looking at it."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

Confidence in the food available to British shoppers nowadays also reflected a belief that things had got better - the task of shopping for a family's food today was believed by many to be much easier than it had been 25 – 50 years ago. The sheer abundance and variety of the food available was one factor making it easier. If you were the slightest bit uneasy about any item of food, you could always choose something else instead.

*"There's such a wide variety of choice that you don't have to take things that you're not happy with. There are so many supermarkets and so many products that you can choose."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

Developments in food production, distribution and processing had enormously increased the range of options for the food shopper. Fruit and vegetables were now available almost irrespective of season. The technologies for preserving foods – freezing, shrink wrapping, and vacuum packing – had significantly expanded choice, not least in the area of convenience foods, where manufacturers had been particularly inventive.

Fresh food was also a more practicable choice for the shopper nowadays; there was more of it, perhaps because it got to the shops more quickly because of improvements in distribution. Perishable food seemed to last longer, so food shoppers could buy fruit and vegetables without fear that they would have to be used that day or very soon after. This development was also the source of some anxiety (and see Section 9), but it clearly increased the options for food shoppers.

The competition between major food retailers was perceived to be another factor making life easier for food shoppers. These respondents knew that the big supermarket chains were jealous of their reputations, and were always looking for a competitive edge. Supermarkets were continually improving the choice and service they offered in the interests of gaining and retaining customers.

*"People are more aware of what they want to eat now and big supermarkets are aware of that and they do check the food to make sure they have what the customer wants."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

The developments described above led many of the older people in the sample to make favourable comparisons between the food available to them nowadays and the food they ate when they were much younger (but see also subsequent sections, especially Section 6).

Perhaps the most important reason for having confidence in the quality of food was that noted at the beginning of this section – people on the whole seemed healthy and were not getting ill. There had been food scares, but the perception was that very few people had been affected. Of course every now and again people believed that they had been poisoned by something they had eaten. On this qualitative evidence, food poisoning was regarded as rare – remembered because it was so exceptional. A high proportion of the instances of food poisoning mentioned in the course of this research was attributed to food eaten outside the home, and several had occurred on holiday abroad.

*"One hotel I went to, they had a barbecue and I spent three days in bed after eating that chicken."  
"I had something from an Indian restaurant and I was ill and I had to give a stool sample and it went to tribunal and it was an uncooked food product from there but they couldn't find out what it was exactly."  
"I had a chicken leg at a friend's house once and I was really ill."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*"I had a ham sandwich and it was a lovely clean restaurant and I was bad for about three days. That was in the 80's. I just told the rep but she didn't bother. They don't usually bother, so it's a waste of time. I never went in there again."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

The very common consensus in the early part of these discussions was that food shopping was primarily a matter of exercising your preferences, staying within your budget and trying to devise meals which would be adequately nutritious for your children. There was very little unprompted preoccupation with issues to do with food safety. Many people might not eat healthily, but this was because they chose not to. They knew how they could improve their diet, and this better diet was both available to them and within their means.

4. **People differ on food safety issues, and the context in which the subject is raised also has a profound influence**

Up to this point in our report we have described a general confidence that the overwhelming majority of respondents in our sample had on a day to day basis. This sense of confidence arose out of discussions about *food shopping rather than discussions about food safety*. If *food safety* is prompted two things become immediately apparent. First, there is no consensus. People differ in their attitudes – some are very concerned about food safety, others are not concerned at all. Moreover, different aspects of food safety concern different people. People are also inconsistent; they are at times robustly confident, at other times anxious or cynical. Our suspicion is that many people's stance towards food safety issues changes depending on their mood, or on the last thing they have read or seen on television.

Second, once the subject for discussion is explicitly food safety, the mental set changes. The genial confidence most people exhibit when they are talking about food shopping is often replaced by a grim determination not to appear naïve about what food producers, processors and distributors – and politicians – are capable of.

Looking first at the extent of difference in attitudes, in this sample non-meat eaters were prominent amongst those who were concerned that what they were eating might not be safe. They appeared to have thought more about food in general. They were usually better informed about food issues, and they were more interested in organic foods of all sorts. As one would expect, those with special dietary needs, for example nut allergies (or who buy for other family members with such allergies) were also reliably better informed about food issues.

Respondents who were parents were generally more concerned about what food to buy than people without children. They were, of course, concerned about longer term risks – that is to the food chain, or the environment – than respondents without children. The latter had generally given less thought to what might be going systemically wrong with food production. On a more immediate level, they were typically happier to have a high proportion of fast and convenience foods in their

diets. Males were usually more happy-go-lucky and unconcerned about food than females.

*"I can understand worrying about children."*

*"No, I can't. There's nothing to worry about. Food is good."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

Some older respondents expressed concerns about the diet of younger people. In part this was because they thought young people ate too much fast food, too much 'junk'. This in turn reflected the perception of some older people that young women nowadays did not know enough about cooking, and about storing food.

Partly because they began food shopping before supermarkets were common, and partly because they had more confidence in their ability to prepare food, older women were often less worried about hygiene than younger. They were more willing to use markets and butchers, rather than only buying food at the supermarket. They were also less concerned that food should always be wrapped up to protect it from germs (see also Section 9).

Respondents from Hindu and Muslim backgrounds in the sample seemed more concerned about food hygiene, and especially meat hygiene, than was typical of the sample as a whole.

Although there were these broad patterns, the differences in attitudes towards food safety often seemed idiosyncratic. To some extent they reflected different personal priorities, needs and experience. But they also reflected differences in personality – different propensities to worry about things in general (or to complain), and different feelings about the relationship between an individual and 'them' – farmers, manufacturers, distributors, and politicians.

Moving on to the second point made above, differences in what people have to say about food safety, and the confidence they say they have in the safety of food, also reflects *the context in which the issue of food safety is raised*. The strong underlying confidence described in the previous section quickly evaporates if food safety is raised in the context of 'scares' like BSE, salmonella, and GM foods. Expressions

of confidence are reliably weakened if people are invited to consider the implications for food safety of modern methods of food production. There is widespread suspicion that science is the servant of people – farmers, processors, distributors and marketeers – who are dedicated to improving profit margins and who may not be sufficiently careful about public health. Confidence also very reliably declines if the subject of food safety is considered alongside the difficulty and cost of enforcing regulations, the competence of local authorities and the trustworthiness of national politicians. These and other influences on how people think about food safety are discussed in the following sections.

## 5. Food scares

### BSE

BSE was the food scare mentioned most often by these respondents. Reactions to it varied enormously. Some respondents said they had never stopped eating beef, and a few reported taking advantage of cheap beef prices to eat more. On this qualitative evidence, it seemed that older people were prominent amongst those who had decided they were not going to worry.

*"There was that scare with the mad beef. Didn't affect me."*

*"Me neither, I thought if I was going to have it I already did have it. The price just shot down didn't it?"*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

*"I still enjoy a good steak. Don't care where the meat comes from."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

**WHAT DID YOU ALL DO DURING BSE?**

*"Carried on eating beef. It was beautiful and cheap."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

By contrast, some respondents said they, or members of their families, were still not eating any beef. One or two mothers said they had written to school canteens in attempts to ensure their children ate no beef.

*"How can it be safe when people are still dying?"  
"That's it, I wouldn't buy beef again."*

female, African-Caribbean, older family, C2D, Midlands, urban

*"That's when I started to become a vegetarian, with the beef scare. My kids don't eat beef at all."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

As might be expected, most respondents fell in between these extremes. Typically they had stopped eating beef for a period, but were eating more of it as time went by. Many were wary of cheap beef cuts or products and did not buy these for the home. Some sought reassurance by only buying beef from outlets they especially trusted.

*"I've only just recently gone back to having an occasional joint of beef. I still don't buy beef sausages or beef mince."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"I avoided products with beef in for a while now... I avoid cheap lasagne and so on because I imagine they use the worst parts there."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Midlands, urban

*"For a while I didn't eat mince or sausages. Then I did start buying mince from local butcher's rather than from the supermarket."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

Several African Caribbeans said that they only bought beef if they were going to cook it themselves; it seemed they believed that the danger of BSE could be removed or reduced by thorough cooking.

*"I wouldn't eat beef out. I only eat beef 'cos I cook it myself."*

female, African-Caribbean, older family, C2D, Midlands, urban

Many respondents said that they had eaten so much beef in their lives, they had felt there was no point in their stopping when the BSE threat came to light. The damage, if any, was done. Several respondents argued that beef must have improved immediately after the scare; there was no point in not eating the 'good' beef if you had already eaten a lot of the 'bad'.

*"When the beef scare was at its height, I remember reading that it could actually be connected to beef that you'd eaten 10 years ago. I just thought, 'What is the point of this?'...And we just carried on regardless. We gave the children the option but we carried on."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"Beef..I never stopped eating it."  
"I thought, 'Well, I have eaten it for so many years'."*  
female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

*"With BSE, although they have uncovered the scare now, how long had people been eating it?... It'll be too late because we'll have too much of it in our bodies anyway."*  
female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"I think all of this has been going on for a long time anyway so I think if we've got anything from it, we've got it. Now it has come to light it's probably the best time to eat this kind of food, the beef and everything, because everyone has got an eye on it so much."*  
female, young family, E, S England, urban

Many respondents also took comfort in the reflection that no one's life was without some risk. They might be run over by a bus. It did not seem to them that BSE was an especially grave risk in terms of probability. Smokers chose to run what had been reliably established as much greater risks: it was illogical to worry about the lesser risk of BSE if you were a smoker.

*"You could get run over by a bus just as easy as get BSE."*  
female, pre-family, BC1, Midlands, urban

*"Friends of mine smoke 40 fags a day but gave up beef because they didn't want to kill themselves!"*  
male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*"I mean that was so minute, the risk. More people die of smoking. You can't spend your life like that."*  
female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

Not being personally worried about the threat of BSE did not of course mean that respondents were uncritical of the underlying reasons for the crisis, or of how it had been handled. On the former, many respondents expressed incredulity that food producers had apparently thought it would be all right to feed cows on meat derivatives.

*"Normally you don't eat an animal that eats another animal... Feeding meat to animals that wouldn't normally eat meat is not natural."*  
female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

Most respondents seemed to think that the BSE crisis ought to have been avoided; farmers ought to have realised the folly of feeding meat to grass eaters. Some thought it was an instance of the pursuit of profits overwhelming common sense.

*"BSE comes down to greed."*  
male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

Most respondents thought the government of the day had not been sufficiently open. They had tried to manage information, so that the public only learned what was going on little by little. Many respondents appeared to feel that, to some extent, political expediency had taken precedence over public health.

*"That was the problem with the BSE thing. When it first came out nobody was actually saying anything. If people had known earlier less people would probably die because people would have stopped eating the beef."*  
*"Cover up."*  
male, African-Caribbean, pre-family, BC1, S England, urban

Several thought the ban on beef on the bone was confusing or did not make sense. Some thought the government was being too protective, and had taken a decision that ought to have been left up to individuals.

*"I thought the BSE crisis was a little bit absurd, that the damage was probably done anyway. I was particularly annoyed when beef on the bone was banned because I wanted that choice, to make the decision for myself. I didn't want to be told."*  
female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

Many were also critical of what they perceived as a failure on the part of government to be decisive or authoritative. Different branches of government had contradicted themselves. Many respondents seemed to have had a concept of 'the scientific facts' that they believed would have been clear, and which had been withheld. Instead, politicians had indulged in posturing; there were many contemptuous references to the televised example of Gummer's daughter eating (being fed) a beefburger. (For further discussion of these attitudes, see Section 13.)

*"We don't have any faith in our government."*  
*"Politicians tell lies all the time."*  
*"The instant someone comes into power I stop believing them."*  
*"I listen to my mum more than politicians. If she says eat it I will."*  
female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

Some respondents thought the situation had still not been satisfactorily resolved. The public had not been kept fully informed; unanswered questions remained.

*"There is nothing to say that there isn't a chicken or pig form of BSE. There was a report in the paper the other day that BSE was just the tip of the iceberg."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"We know people have died of BSE and are dying of it. What makes it OK now?"*

*"They killed the whole lot of them with it."*

*"It is still in the soil though. There must be still some genes."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

## Salmonella

Salmonella was mentioned by these respondents almost as often as BSE, and was perceived as a potential hazard with both chicken and eggs. As a 'food scare' it was associated with Edwina Currie's assertion that a high proportion of eggs were infected, and her subsequent resignation. It was a little unclear how frightened of salmonella respondents had been at that time. Nobody seemed to know anyone who had had salmonella (although people being ill after eating chicken were mentioned by a few respondents).

In terms of current eating habits, the salmonella scare appeared to have had the result of making people more careful that they cooked chicken thoroughly, and had also dissuaded some people from eating raw eggs in any form, or eggs which had been lightly cooked so that the yolks remained runny. Again, African Caribbeans in particular had confidence in thorough cooking.

*"Since they have all these crises about eggs I don't stop eating eggs. I cook my eggs rock hard. I don't eat soft boiled eggs."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

The point many respondents wanted to make about salmonella concerned government competence and trustworthiness. Many respondents seemed to feel that Edwina Currie had paid the price for making public what the government of the day would rather had remained secret.

*"Edwina Currie and the eggs, they tried to squash her down."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"I don't think we are well enough informed. I think the government tries to cover everything up until it's a major problem. Like the egg thing with Edwina Currie and salmonella."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

But there were others who thought that Currie, supported by an irresponsible media, had whipped up a quite unnecessary sense of panic.

*"After the Salmonella eggs scare came about, a lot of credibility was lost."*

*WHOSE CREDIBILITY?*

*"Edwina Currie... The media loses grip on reality when they are building up about food scares and you have to wait for the hype to die down."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

Although the salmonella scare seemed to be remembered as something of a joke, the widespread feeling that government was not to be relied upon about food issues appeared to date from Currie's departure.

### GM foods

Genetically modified foods were also frequently mentioned as a food-related problem involving government, although not many of these respondents really seemed to regard them as a food 'scare'. Many were not clear about it as an issue. In particular there was often confusion between the possible dangers of *eating* genetically modified food and the threat to the environment of producing genetically modified species. The supposed potential of genetic modification sometimes attracted vivid references, but it was not really clear how worried respondents were about it in relation to their own health. It often seemed that genetic engineering was more notorious than threatening.

*"Hitler was into GM, into genetics, wasn't he?"*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*"You cross a strawberry with a raspberry and come up with a sort of mutant plum... I'm suspicious of anything genetic. It's messing around with nature... You'll end up with potatoes the size of footballs that don't taste of anything."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*"But you never actually see much of it. You hear about it in the news but I've never seen GM food."*  
male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

*"Not one of my friends has discussed with me GM food like we did over mad cow... It doesn't bother me."*  
female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

Many respondents acknowledged that they did not understand the GM issue.

*"I'm not very well up on GM foods. What really are GM foods? It is like the sheep that was cloned, they want to produce everything the same. Is that what it is?"*  
female, 65+, E, N Ireland, rural

*"It's not fresh is it?... It's not natural food."*  
**WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND BY GENETICALLY MODIFIED?**  
*"I don't understand it. ."*  
female, Asian (Hindu), young family, BC1, S England, urban

A minority felt they had grasped the essentials.

*"They take something out of one and put it in another so they are messing with the environment. Bees and birds are going to feed off those plants, what is it going to do to them? It's not natural."*  
*"We might get big wasps or something like that in the summer... They might have 2 heads."*  
female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

There was criticism of both the government's and the media's failure to explain the issue in terms that ordinary people could understand.

*"It's so confusing for us. GM was in every paper and on TV but it's very hard for us to understand. It doesn't explain it to us in language that we understand, so after a while, once it goes off the front of the paper one tends to forget about it. Although in a lot of supermarkets they have notes stating, 'We are not selling any product with GM'."*  
female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

Many respondents said that although they did not really understand the issue, they would avoid 'GM foods'. They appeared to feel they had learned that 'there is something wrong with it'.

*"If it said across the box, 'This contains GM foods', I wouldn't buy it. But to be honest with you, I don't know that much about GM foods so I don't know why I wouldn't. It's just because it is controversial at the moment."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

A few others said they did not see what could be wrong with genetically modified fruit and vegetables. The problem with beef was clearer.

*"A cow can turn into a mad cow but a tomato that's had its genes modified to stay fresher, that's fine with me."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

As with beef, some respondents wondered if it was already too late to be careful.

*"Someone told me they've been using GM tomatoes for a while in tomato ketchup. I tend to reach the point where I think, 'Well, I've been buying for this length, why stop now?'"*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

And if the research that was being done was taking a sufficiently long view.

*"They have only been on about it for two years. How can they test it properly in two years? It takes a lifetime of eating to know if it has effects or not."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

There was quite a widespread feeling that genetic modification was a problem for the longer term rather than an imminent threat to health. Some respondents who had children were worried for the next generation.

*"GM foods...how it'll affect us in the future...I'm not worried for myself, I'm worried for the next generation."*

female, Asian (Hindu), young family, BC1, S England, urban

As with BSE, many respondents felt that the question of genetically modified food had not been well handled by the responsible authorities. The public had not been adequately informed about the nature of the risks, and there seemed to have been too much contradictory advice from official sources.

E-coli

E-coli seemed to have faded from the consciousness of almost all in this sample. It was mentioned spontaneously only in the research locations close to where there had been outbreaks – in North London, and in Scotland.

Scares in relation to pregnancy

A number of food issues relating to pregnancy was mentioned. Listeria in soft cheeses was prominent, but a wide variety of other foods which pregnant women were advised to avoid were mentioned.

*"I did stop eating beef with the beef scare because I'd just fallen pregnant."*

*"If I was pregnant it would worry me more."*

*"I wouldn't eat liver when I was pregnant, or kidney because they don't recommend it."*

*"And soft cheese."*

*"Mayonnaise."*

*"Eggs."*

*"I wouldn't eat a boiled egg, or soft cheese, or liver paté if I was pregnant. That's because I was told about it when I was pregnant before but things like that stick in your mind."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

There was a noticeably less cynical stance towards advice given to pregnant women. In part this seemed to be because the advice was perceived as emanating from doctors rather than authority generally.

*"Because my baby is two and when I was pregnant you get the booklets and leaflets and it tells you."*

*"These people are doctors and they know what they are saying."*

*"Yeah they know what they're saying."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

In part it doubtless also reflected pregnant women's eagerness to do whatever they could to ensure they had a healthy baby, and the limited time commitment. Pregnant women actively sought advice, whereas the general public saw themselves as long-suffering – bombarded with what they perceived as confusing and often contradictory messages.

*"When you're pregnant you want to read all the books. You've got a vested interest."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

### Food scares in general

The extent to which our research respondents felt personally threatened by the food scares mentioned above was difficult to gauge but clearly variable; some respondents were very worried, others not at all. Different respondents reacted differently to what was often perceived as a lengthening sequence of problems with food. Some appeared to feel that this sequence represented a growing crisis. They felt that the public had been put on the alert, and were now much more conscious of food safety as an issue. According to this view, as a consequence of the scares people were learning to take a more cautious, informed and responsible stance towards what they ate.

*“The BSE crisis proved that we can’t trust anything that we’re buying.”*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*“Nowadays people tend to be a bit more conscious about what it is they are eating, especially with this beef thing. People tend to be checking more and asking more questions.... We are more educated and more willing to ask and find out for ourselves. We don’t take anything at face value. Because of all the problems that have been happening, all the news, the bad press. People are now more concerned and waking up to what we’re putting inside our bodies.”*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

On the other hand, many respondents seemed to feel that the more food scares were in the news, the less inclined they were to pay any attention.

*“I don’t pay much attention to all the scares... You hear about something different every week. Everything to do with food, the beef things, eggs, soft cheese. One minute it’s OK to do this, the next minute it’s OK to do that. I am not going to start changing my shopping habits overnight because of something that I read in the paper that could all be different next week.”*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*“A couple of years ago it was Listeria.”*  
*“Salmonella.”*

*“Genetically modified food now.”*

*“There are too many things. You just shut off.”*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

Many retreated to what they regarded as a robustly common sense view that life was not worth living, indeed next to impossible, if you paid attention to all the warnings and advice that were issued on the subject of food. Government rulings on food scares became confused with all sorts of other advice in the media.

*"If you did what they tell you to do you wouldn't eat a thing so I just have what I fancy."*

*"If you look at what might not be good for you the list is endless."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Midlands, urban

*"If you listened to all the food scares you'd never eat."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*"If you worried about everything that they said you'd never eat..."*

*"... You wouldn't breathe."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

Food scares, even when they were real enough, had to be put in the context of the evident fact that the overwhelming majority of the population remained healthy. Indeed, people were arguably becoming more healthy, and increased longevity was evidence of this.

*"When you see on the news 20 people die of E Coli, then you look at the 20 million people or whatever in the country who eat 3 meals a day."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*"Why are we living longer and longer? It's the food we're eating. The food is good now. Whatever it is, it's good."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

Some respondents seemed to feel that all food scares had been badly handled. They looked for someone to blame, and often complained that the government had been slow to react, and slow to communicate with the public, only issuing statements when bad news leaked out.

*"The government have failed us in a lot of things. This BSE and all of the rest of it... That went on for years and years and the government knew that was happening and we were the last ones to know about it."*

female, 65+, E, N Ireland, rural

*"With GM foods it was leaked and that's how we all got to know about it. It wasn't like a full government statement in the first instance. We only got the statements after everyone kicked up a fuss about it."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

There were also many complaints about the failure of the authorities to give clear and consistent advice.

*"It's like GM food, one minute they say it's all right and the next minute they say other things."*

*"Well I wouldn't touch that with a barge pole."*

*"If I could grow my own I would."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"Salmonella only came out a couple of years ago, then beef on the bone was bad for you. Next year it'll be something else, then something else after that. It's just U-turns all the time."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

There was a common perception (and see also Section 13) of squabbling amongst the 'experts', one saying one thing, another something else. In this context, it is worth noting that many respondents were liable to interpret any difference of opinion as squabbling because they had little insight into the nature of the science that underpins expertise. Emotionally at any rate, they seemed to feel that disagreements were a sign of incompetence or a lack of openness. They did not appreciate why responsible experts with integrity might not always agree.

The effect of introducing food scares into a discussion of food shopping was to remind respondents that food is a complex subject; things can go wrong, and have gone wrong. This in turn made them feel vulnerable, especially in their dependence on 'experts' and politicians. In almost all the groups, respondents demonstrated a marked reluctance to express confidence in politicians. Discussion of food *safety* therefore released currents of cynicism and pessimism that were rarely evident when the subject under discussion was food *shopping* more generally. This cynicism and pessimism often produced jaundiced assessments of the future in general and of our ability to ensure safe food specifically.

## 6. Generalised cynicism and pessimism

In this section we try to describe in a little more detail the kind of negativity that began to surround the subject of food once scares, and the role of government, had become front of mind. Contributing to many respondents' feelings on these issues seemed to be a sort of nostalgia, comparable perhaps to that sometimes surrounding perceptions of crime. 'When we were young we never locked the front door', becomes, in the context of food, 'when we were young we never had food scares, we got our eggs straight from the farm'.

Some respondents were certainly tempted to feel nostalgic for an imagined simpler age when people grew some of their own food, and knew who had produced much of what they bought. In certain frames of mind, respondents regretted the industrialisation of food production, and the growing obscurity of the connection between what they ate and how or where it had been produced.

*"Many years gone by people used to grow their own, used to have their own chickens, cows. They say it's progress but it's not progress at all."*

female, African-Caribbean, older family, C2D, Midlands, urban

*"We have lost the contact. We are lucky because we can go to the small shops and feel the carrots and you think the greengrocer has gone and got these carrots himself, just for you, and there is this sort of thing in the supermarkets where it arrives in crates."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"The food supply chain is so big now. It's not like when you got your meat from the butcher up the road who got it from the farmer round the corner. The food chain has got bits coming probably from all over the world, so how can people regulate it?"*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

This obscurity encouraged concern about the basic quality of food – as it left the farm as well as in the course of its progress to the shops (see next section). There was a widespread feeling that the general public did not know how food production and processing methods were changing, and what the implications of such changes might be. Not knowing produced a sense of powerlessness; the public had to accept what was available to buy without knowing much about it, and perhaps

especially not knowing how pursuit of profit might be affecting the food industry.

*"It's all down to the supermarkets They dictate what we eat."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"You don't know what you're eating, you just trust that they know what they are doing. But you don't know."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

BSE was widely regarded as a discouraging example of the lengths to which food producers might be going to maximise their returns. As noted in the previous section, feeding vegetarian cattle on meat derivatives struck most people as obviously unnatural and foolish, and many thought greed was the obvious explanation. Thinking about issues like this, many respondents became cynical about the whole infrastructure of the food industry. They began to think of the public as being at the mercy of the food producers and retailers.

*"They put too many chemicals in things."*

*"Yeah too much, they only want to make big money."*

*"Yeah money grabbers, that is all it is."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"All along the line you have everyone cutting corners.... If they can shave off a few corners and make a few bob they will."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

When they were in this frame of mind, many respondents were pessimistic about the ability of the regulatory structure (see Section 12) to be effective in the face of the various powerful vested interests.

Yet more basically, many respondents felt that there was an elementary dissonance between industrial methods of production and old-fashioned notions of naturalness and wholesomeness.

*"Factory farming, I just don't like it."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

Whilst they appreciated many of the benefits of industrialisation in terms of variety of choice, the appearance of food, the standardisation of quality, the greater longlastingness of perishable foods, many respondents also wondered how these had been achieved. And what penalties there might be for the future.

*"Choice wise we are better but quality wise we are worse off."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

*"They won't know what effects the things they put in food will have on us in 20 or 30 years, do they?"*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

## 7. The quality of food produced

Anxieties about the long term usually focused first on the basic quality of food coming from the producers. Concerns about processing and/or distribution tended to come out later (see Section 9), and moreover were sometimes tempered by awareness that standards of hygiene had been improved by technological developments and by regulation.

*"I don't think the standard is falling.... There's more technology everywhere, a high standard of checking everything. The only thing that is making the food worse in the world, never mind in this country, is chemicals. If you've already got something in there, it is no use taking care of all the other steps, you've already got the thing in. Once you've eaten it it's the chemicals that are going to get you."*

female, Asian (Hindu), young family, BC1, S England, urban

Poultry, meat and (to a much lesser extent) farmed fish were particular subjects of concern.

### Poultry

Many respondents worried about the conditions in which poultry was raised and felt that battery farms were clearly unnatural and cruel.

*"The chicken has been just pumped full of hormones and are grown too quickly and that is a really unkind way of producing meat."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"They were on GMTV and they were all on perches on roosts and they are allowed out for an hour a day and they are classed as free range."*

**DOES THAT MATTER?**

*"It is cruel having them cooped up in cages."*

*"It is hygiene again. They are stacked up on top of each other."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

*"With battery hens I think they are allowed a certain amount of space but I still don't think it's enough. I have seen the space they have and it's still horrific. I tend to buy organic chicken."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

There was also concern about what chickens were fed. Some respondents were resigned to this but nevertheless were uncomfortable thinking about it.

*"You can go on forever They feed them colouring in the food to make the yolk yellow. And they can choose what food they give them to get the yellow of the yolk. And that's why you get yellow chickens in the supermarket. You can go into it forever and drive yourself potty with it."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"We had friends who had battery hens and they used to scrape all the poo off the perches and they sent it to the company who processed it into food and it were fed back to the chickens seven times before it was destroyed."*

*"That is what they do with other animal foods."*

*"That goes into our eggs."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

*"They're pumping poor little animals. The chicken goes from 0 to 3 weeks and it's a great big fat bird on your table. That is just not natural and it's not fair to the bird and it cannot be good for you."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

Although many respondents seemed more concerned about the possible implications of modern poultry-raising methods for health, the effects on *taste* were also mentioned repeatedly. Many thought that chickens nowadays were beautifully plump and temptingly inexpensive, but they did not have as much taste as chickens which were not mass-produced.

*"The food grown in India is much more tasty... If you buy a chicken in this country it's a beautiful fat chicken but if you eat that same chicken in India it's small and tasty. It's not stuffed with artificial stuff."*

female, Asian (Hindu), young family, BC1, S England, urban

*"Mass produced food, it's got less taste."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

The labelling of chickens seemed to many respondents to be becoming more complicated and less trustworthy. There was quite widespread scepticism about what 'free-range', and 'barn' meant precisely with

many respondents strongly suspecting that the reality did not accord with what these labels suggested.

*"Your understanding of what free range was, you thought the chickens were running about free, and then you discover they're not actually... I've seen them and there must have been about 5000 running around in one wee square and it put me off chickens. I won't eat them... They're all cooped up in the one spot and they're all going to the toilet in the one spot and the place is stinking and you don't know what they are eating."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

There was in general a lack of confidence that there were enough resources to monitor all poultry producers and ensure compliance with whatever regulations existed (see also Section 12).

### Meat

Similar anxieties were expressed about meat as about poultry production. Respondents wondered if cattle, sheep and pigs were raised in sufficiently 'natural' conditions to ensure wholesomeness. All the attention given to beef made some speculate about what might be happening with other types of meat. Were there grounds for confidence that a BSE-type problem would not emerge with sheep and pigs?

*"I always worry about all kinds of meat, what they feed animals. What are you actually eating? There was that big thing with beef but what about pork and chicken? Who's to say in a year's time you're not going to find out there's something wrong with all the pigs? I buy meat but I try to buy the best that I can."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

Worries centred on what livestock was given to eat. The quality of the grass, hormone supplements and special treatment to encourage weight gain were all mentioned.

*"We don't know what they feed the animals do we? We know they feed them things to fatten them up and make them weigh more. What are those things doing to people?"*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"Hormones... They want to fatten them up too quickly. It is artificial, they are not happy."  
"The pigs they have to weigh them every so many weeks."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

*"The grass they feed the cows, it's got minced sheep in it or something."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*"Joints of meat have been injected with such and such. Are cows given antibiotics every week?"*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"When the cows eat grass that's had acid rain on it how does that affect us? Does it affect us slowly or does it not affect us at all?"*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

### Fruit and vegetables

Concerns about fruit and vegetables had several related strands. There was some anxiety about the effects on humans of artificial fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides and insecticides.

*"If it is going to kill these weeds what's it going to do to us?"*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

It became clear that once this subject of chemicals had been raised, respondents could think of a large number of things to worry about. Preservatives were often mentioned, with several respondents wondering how fruit and vegetables had been treated to produce what many perceived as a significantly longer shelf life than they remembered being the case some years ago. Irradiation was mentioned by a small minority.

#### *WHAT WORRIES YOU?*

*"Pesticides."*

*"Chemicals."*

*"Irradiating vegetables... Giving them a longer shelf life. It stops tomatoes going soggy."*

*"If you chop an apple up now it doesn't go brown like it used to, does it?"*

*"We used to be told not to have frozen vegetables but now they say they are better for you."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

Almost all respondents said that they routinely washed fruit and vegetables before they ate them, but there was speculation about why this was so generally recommended as essential, and whether washing

was in any case effective. People did not understand what they were trying to wash off.

*“They tell you to wash all fruit because it’s not safe, but that doesn’t sound very good to me at all. Why is it necessary to do that at all? Why can’t it be slightly more natural?”*

female, older family, BC1 S England, rural

*“If I skin an apple I’m OK but if I eat the skin I become ill. I find that with peaches and all sorts of different fruits and I now wonder if it’s something that is sprayed on to the fruit. I do wash the fruit before I eat it. I could wash it more than I do.”*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

As with poultry, taste as well as the implications for health was an issue here. Many respondents complained that whilst fruit and vegetables in supermarkets defied the seasons, and usually looked lovely, their taste was disappointing. There was quite a widespread feeling that nature was being perverted in some way, with undesirable results.

*“You used to get some good strawberries. Now the strawberries are nearly as big as apples. It’s disgusting to see the size of strawberries now, they are massive. They’re not sweet, not nice.”*

*“They don’t have any taste at all.”*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

*“When you cut an iceberg lettuce... water comes out. When you eat them, no taste. They don’t taste like lettuce.”*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

*“The seasonal stuff you can get all year round, it doesn’t taste the same... Tomatoes used to be, you could buy them from the greengrocers, eat it like an apple. Nowadays, got no flavour to them.”*

*“It’s all the chemicals, all the GM stuff.”*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

Several respondents wondered who was making the decisions and, more specifically, why abundance was such a priority when food mountains seemed to be a fact of modern European life.

*“We don’t want such a high yield because so much is discarded. We can do without such a high yield and have the quality and safeness of the product instead.”*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

## Imported food

Some of the concerns mentioned above were particularly acute in relation to food produced abroad. How was it possible, some respondents wondered, to ensure that imported meat and vegetables were produced in accordance with the standards laid down for the UK?

*"They are here but they don't check the other countries."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

*"And there's ingredients coming from every corner of the world and you just don't know what's going into it and where it's coming from. We may have standards and rules about what we do with our food, how we produce our food but that doesn't necessarily mean that another country has got the same rules that we have."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

*"Corned beef comes from Zimbabwe or somewhere and you think 'they are starving there'. Half of them have got Aids who are packing the stuff out there."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

## Overview

Not all respondents shared these concerns. Several repudiated the nostalgia that seemed to underlie some people's approach to modern methods of food production.

*"We'd all prefer things to be grown naturally without pesticides and chemicals sprayed all over them but if we were being realistic it just ain't gonna happen, is it?"*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

*"You take it for granted that they've been sprayed with something. It's just one of those things. Unless you can afford organic you haven't got much choice."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

Others believed that the benefits of modern technology clearly outweighed the penalties, which were in any case much diminished by effective regulation in this country. These respondents thought there was absolutely no need to worry about fruit or vegetables.

*"The only thing that would worry me is if they start using too much chemicals on the fields. Which they used to a few years ago, which they're stopping now through the government. The government are stopping them doing it."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

*"These fruit and veg that have got pesticides are all still healthy and fine so it's not really doing us any harm."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

But once chemicals, hormones, preservatives and additives had been mentioned, the majority of respondents seemed to feel they had no choice but to express concern. The underlying feeling was that the long term effects of modern methods could not be known with certainty; there was bound to be some measure of risk. It clearly struck some respondents as foolhardy, perhaps particularly in the research situation, to appear complacent.

This mental set encouraged speculation about the possible role of modern industrial methods of food production on such dire problems as the rising incidence of cancers, asthma, allergies, reduced sperm counts, hyperactivity in children and so on. Pollution was blamed for some of these phenomena, but might diet not be a major contributory factor?

*"There's so much disease and cancers. I just feel it's all associated with what one eats."*

female, Asian (Hindu), young family, BC1, S England, urban

*"Cancer is definitely on the increase over the last 100 years and it has to be something they are putting in the food or spraying the crops with or the hormones."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"When you look at kids, the fantastically high levels of asthma, is it from food pollution or what?"*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

*"There are so many children with these life threatening food allergies. They are feeding the animals...or the crops are being covered in pesticides and everything and we are only just starting to find out now what is actually happening because it's coming out in our children. They are becoming asthmatic, they've got skin conditions, eczema, anaphylaxis, everything."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"Cancer and heart disease in this country are rife, we're one of the highest. There must be some reason why people get all these diseases compared with countries like China."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

Common feelings were that...

*"They're messing around too much with food."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

... and that there could well be a price to pay for this. There seemed to be an element of superstition in some respondents' assessments.

*"In another 20 years we'll go back to people living less long because of all the additives we eat, all the convenience foods people eat. I think that is going to take its toll eventually."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

*"All the illnesses children are being born with, that's nature getting its own back for something."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

In thinking about these issues, many respondents clearly felt that the consumer was 'the little man' up against the large corporations – essentially powerless, in the dark and having to take it on trust that dangerous shortcuts were not being taken.

An irony of this perception was that whilst most respondents seemed to see large vested interests (and the profit motive) as part of the problem with food production, from another perspective they saw large organisations, especially the big supermarket chains and the big brands, as an assurance of 'quality'. As noted elsewhere, a lot of confidence in food was born of belief that big companies had too much to lose to take risks with the health of their customers.

## 8. Organic foods

Most understood 'organic' to mean that foodstuffs like fruit and vegetables had been produced as naturally as possible, without the use of pesticides and without incorporating preservatives. Organic meat was assumed to be derived from livestock fed on organic matter and reared in appropriate conditions. A small minority, typically non-meat eaters, appeared more knowledgeable about organic food and

farming methods generally, mentioning organisations like The Soil Association.

Feelings about organic foods tended to vary, but everyone appeared to agree that: they were becoming steadily more widely available, and that they were significantly more expensive than 'normal' food. The cost of organic food was a key issue and it seemed reasonable to assume that many respondents would have been buying more organic produce had it been cheaper. There was a level of consternation amongst some at the higher prices charged and a feeling that the emergence of organic food forced consumers to make a trade off between being extravagant in their spending on food and being healthy, or being thrifty with their purchases and taking risks with the food they ate. The feeling seemed to be that the less you had to spend on food, the more risks you had to run with pesticides and modern food production technologies generally.

*"In this day and age you can't be completely free of all the pesticides and that, unless you're rich and live in the country."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"I'd like to buy it (organic) because I think it's probably better because there's no chemicals used. But I've got a very low budget so it's out of my price range."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"If you want organic food or anything that's meant to be good... you have got to pay through the nose for it."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"Take ice cream. You can buy organic which is more expensive and you're probably not getting as much sugar and stuff in it, or you can buy Tesco's own which is fairly cheap but has mega everything in it... Some people can't afford to buy the organic type things and be healthy."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

Many people, certainly a majority, seemed ready to believe that organic foods were in some way 'better for you'. This appeared to stem from the perception that 'natural' was better than 'chemical', but most could not articulate how or why this might be. There was, however, a widespread feeling that organic food was 'purer' and less tampered with and that, in the long term, this must be better for one's health.

A minority, who were generally from lower social grade backgrounds, were less positive about the growing interest in and availability of organic foods. They were more likely to think of organic produce as a food fad or a gimmick from which supermarkets were likely to make a substantial amount of money. There was also a feeling amongst some that there was little proof that food produced organically was actually better for you.

*"They've got more money than sense."*

*"It's a fashion trend."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"They have research that says organic food is not so good for you."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

It was also not the case that the anticipated benefits of organic foods, especially fruit and vegetables, were borne out by experience. Some did not agree that they tasted better, or that they tasted sufficiently better to justify their extra cost. Most people also acknowledged that they often *looked* less appetising, and that they 'go off' more quickly.

*"I'd rather not eat organic. It's just the thought of it, it could be dirty or anything. I hate the thought of dirt being on your food."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

*"If you get a bit of broccoli for 39p a pound and the organically grown one is 89p, what do you buy? You always go for the 39p. It looks the same so...In fact sometimes the organic stuff looks bloody awful."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"I always think it looks so ugly. It doesn't look very appetising."*

Female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"Organic fruit and veg never last as long as normal fruit and veg. I tend to buy quite a lot of frozen organic stuff."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

In terms of purchasing behaviour, in this sample it appeared that those buying organic produce were more likely to be buying organic vegetables than organic meat. A small minority, in which non-meat eaters were prominent, said they always bought organic vegetables. A much larger minority said that they sometimes bought organic vegetables, 'when they could afford it', or on a speculative basis. However, the majority in this sample never bought organic food

because, at this stage, they regarded it as too expensive and remained unconvinced about the benefits.

It seemed that the authenticity of organic food was not often challenged: only a tiny minority of respondents in the sample was suspicious of organic foods in the sense that they thought they were produced in the normal way and passed off as organic. Having said this, there was a feeling that 'real' organic food was associated with certain types of outlet. Specifically, supermarkets were regarded as somewhat incongruous with the notion of organic food; there was perhaps a feeling that to obtain genuine organic food, it needed to be bought from farmers markets and smaller, specialised outlets like bakers and butchers.

*"I get my eggs from the bakery because they are free range."*

**WHY NOT GET FREE RANGE EGGS FROM A SUPERMARKET?**

*"I don't trust they are free range eggs."*

*"They are not always free range. In a supermarket you think of battery hens."*

*"You can visualise it better in a little shop."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

Almost everyone believed that free-range chickens and eggs were healthier to eat and tasted better. There was also general acknowledgement that the conditions in which such chickens were kept were far more humane.

**HOW DO WE KNOW WE ALL MEAN THE SAME THING BY FREE RANGE EGGS?**

*"It means hens run free."*

*"Come and go as they please."*

*"Not force fed."*

*"Happy hens."*

*"That's it!"*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

There appears, however, to be growing scepticism about what 'free range' really means and a suspicion that the term is not clearly defined and is being misused. There was particular confusion about the difference between 'free range' and 'barn' chickens and eggs and a suspicion that perhaps such terms did not guarantee that chickens were kept in any better conditions than battery hens.

*"There was a programme on about going behind the scenes and they were investigating free range hens and pigs and things, and it wasn't as we were buying. They didn't stick to the methods... You have got to watch these things sometimes because you don't know what you are eating these days and there is all this GM foods now."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

Overall, it seemed that organically produced foods were regarded as a response to the anxieties summarised in section 7 above. In some way they were also perceived as a vindication of these anxieties: the fact that there is apparently so much interest in organic foods on the part of both consumers and supermarkets suggests to many that there is reason to be concerned about foodstuffs produced using modern methods.

## 9. **Concerns about food processing and distribution**

### Additives, etc

These concerns were generally regarded as rather less fundamental and less threatening than those to do with food production, in large part because the major processors and supermarket distributors were trusted as brands.

Additives were a common concern for food processing as they were for food production. The objection here was often that additives enabled processed foods to boost their appeal, especially to children, whilst contributing nothing to, and possibly diminishing, their nutritional value. Occasional fears were also expressed that 'chemicals' added to food to make it look better or last longer might entail long term health risks and be responsible for, or aggravate, conditions like hyperactivity in children, or asthma.

A fruit flavoured drink which had been in the news at the time of the fieldwork, was singled out in several of the groups as an example of a product that was somehow counterfeit. Additives, it was thought, had enabled it to pretend to a character it did not really have.

*"That's a classic example of marketing telling you how wonderful it is. In actual fact it is just pure sugar and additives...If you see the TV adverts it's full of vitamins and all this stuff. You might as well put vitamins in Coca-Cola. I think it's terrible, really misleading."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

A few respondents thought that colourants were widely used to enhance the apparent naturalness and wholesomeness of products, perhaps especially drinks but other foods, even meat, as well.

*"If you were to squeeze your own fresh orange it's not so bright so there is obviously loads of colourant in it."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"The factory that is going to process the meat, they inject it to make it look better."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

A few also wondered why bread and milk lasted so much longer than they felt these staples had done years ago. Were things being added?

*"Bread and milk worry me a lot. There's all these different types of milk. You buy these little square cartons and you can leave them out of the fridge for a week."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

Yet others complained about the water content of bacon, but here they were more concerned about taste and value than about any impact on health.

*"When my mother cooked bacon the smell was beautiful but now when you cook bacon there is water in the bottom of the tray."*

female, 65+, E, N Ireland, rural

Many respondents were critical about levels of salt and sugar included in prepared foods, especially snack products and soft drinks, but also processed foods like cereals and baked beans.

*"They say there is too much sugar in all the drinks. They have been saying that for years."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"In everything you get, even cereals, there is just such a huge salt content. They are destroying us really and we are just eating it because it's convenient. I watched a programme where they measured everyone's salt intake and it was appalling! They were eating 4 or 5 times the salt daily that they should have been."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

### Conditions in 'factories' and processing plants

With very few exceptions, respondents had not thought at all about the conditions in which processed foods were produced. They simply did not know what these might be like; food 'factories' were a part of the broader mystery surrounding how food nowadays progressed from farm to shop. When the subject of conditions was prompted, most respondents thought the only sensible thing to do was to assume that these were tightly regulated, and to trust the well known brands. As with supermarkets, the strong consensus was that big brands could be relied on to take care because they had too much to lose.

Those few respondents who felt they had inside knowledge about what went on in processing plants all had subversive things to say. Their account was that consumers would be horrified if they knew what went on.

*"I've got friends who worked in factories and I've worked in factories and it's disgusting the way they make the food. The frozen food factories are the worst. I worked in one it was disgusting, dirty floors, people picking stuff off the floor and putting it back into the food."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

Respondents were not in general concerned about foreign bodies in foodstuffs. Stories of this happening were told with indignation but often with a certain amount of relish also. Compensation for a product that contained something which ought not to have been there was expected, and usually proved, to be swift and generous, especially from the big national supermarkets.

*"My mum had a bag of new potatoes and there was a stone in it and she took it back and they replaced the potatoes and gave her a £50 voucher."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

Moreover, the incidence of foreign bodies in processed or prepared foods was thought to be very low.

*"The percentage of problems you have is very small. You have wire in a piece of food once, which OK is once too many, but if you look at how many bits of food you process and get through in a day or a year, that's a minuscule amount."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

### Labelling

A nest of issues emerged about food labelling.

A few respondents thought regulations were not tight enough and some products got away with being labelled in a way that was perhaps factually correct but which nevertheless created (usually in conjunction with advertising) a misleading impression. Fruit flavoured drinks were a favourite example of this, but 'pure' fruit juices were also mentioned as suspect. Some respondents were sceptical about the credentials of some bottled waters.

*"Labelling does need looking at because it can be very misleading and confusing."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

*"Bottled water for God's sake. You don't know if they are filling it in the kitchen, you don't know do you?"*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

The word 'aqua' on lists of ingredients came in for particular criticism as an obvious attempt to confuse or mislead. There was broader concern about the intelligibility of ingredient lists, with several respondents saying these were not clear enough and were perhaps not intended to be.

*"The reason I don't read labels is I don't know what it means. If they put it in English rather than, you know, these scientific terms then I would read labels."*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

*"The label... you've got to be a chemist to understand it."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

*"There are a lot of products out there that aren't labelled well enough to let you know what is in them... not in layman's terms where people can understand them... It'll tell you about the sodium and stuff but maybe some people won't realise that sodium is salt."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

Another concern expressed by several respondents related to the meaning of 'fresh'. It was alleged that foods with a distant sell-by date were sometimes labelled as fresh.

*"Does fresh food exist today?... There was this thing in the papers about things on the shelf advertised as fresh that were months old."  
"They put such a lot of additives in things they last longer."*

*"What is fresh?"*

*"I looked at a carton of juice I got the other day and it said it was fresh but the use by date was November 2000. That is not fresh."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

This concern translated into demand for more comprehensive labelling that gave not just sell or use by dates, but which let the consumer know when fresh food had been produced and delivered to the store – 'picked on', 'milked on' and 'delivered on' dates were suggested.

*"It would be nice, especially with bread and stuff, if you had a date when it came into the store or a date when it was picked... You've got a sell-by date and a use-by date and that's fine but you don't know how long it's been sat open in the middle of the supermarket."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

*"I want to know when the carrots are picked and how long they have been sitting there on the shelf, then you can make an informed choice... A picked on date."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

More comprehensive labelling was suggested on snack and soft drink products, especially covering amounts of salt or sugar. One respondent maintained that labelling regulations meant that, in the case of compound ingredients, anything constituting less than 25% of the compound did not need to be listed.

*"I am always concerned about food labelling. There isn't enough done on that and they should get involved with the salt levels and things like that. They should set standards and enforce them rather than leaving it down to the consumer."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"There's a 25% rule isn't there? If a product contains less than 25% of a compound ingredient it doesn't have to list it on the packet, and I think that is disgusting."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

One or two respondents said they would like there to be more information about where food came from, including where the ingredients of processed foods had originated.

*"There's not enough information being given about where the food is coming from."*

male, African-Caribbean, pre-family, BC1, S England, urban

A respondent with a daughter who was allergic to nuts complained bitterly about labelling in relation to this problem. As she saw it, manufacturers routinely included a warning about possible nut content to protect themselves. She understandably wanted more 'guaranteed nut free' labelling to make her life easier.

*"One of my kids is really allergic to nuts... she could melt away to nothing if I literally took what it said. I think they are trying to protect themselves to the point where they are so paranoid that if you've got someone in the family with a nut allergy like I have it makes life hell... Presumably they prepare nut products in the same factory and there is a very slight chance... it would be nice to see food that was prepared in a nut free environment so you wouldn't have to worry it had been in contact with everything else."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

## Packaging

As noted elsewhere, attitudes towards packaging varied, but many respondents, and a large majority of the young, liked their foodstuffs to be well packaged because this reassured them about hygiene.

However, a minority of respondents maintained that the packaging itself could have undesirable effects, either because the chemicals in the packaging transferred to the food, or because packaging locked in germs.

*"I read somewhere that all this plastic packaging, when you buy meat you should take it off straight away because the chemicals from that goes into the meat, and they reckon this causes cancer. Years ago when you went to a butcher your meat wasn't in like cling film and it was safer and better to get your meat like that."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"If you buy loose vegetables it's more healthy than the ones in the plastic wrapping because of the bacteria kept in the wrapping."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

A few respondents associated packaging, especially of meats and vegetables, with food that had been treated with additives.

*"If I'm going to buy meat I prefer to get it off a butcher's counter. If it's in a package you know it's got preservatives in it."*

Male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

### Distribution

Regarding distribution, there was a generalised concern that the average consumer knew next to nothing about how foods get from producer to retailer. As with food production, many respondents felt they just did not know what happened on route from farm to shop. Speculation about this was often negative.

*"From the farm to you there must be at least half a dozen to a dozen places that it'll go for packing, processing, distribution, into the shop. The farm might be good and you might get the end product in the supermarket where you think it might be good but the middleman transporting it and that might not have such good cleanliness and that, which you haven't got a clue about."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"Some of your vegetables that are from just down the road can be taken on a 50 mile round trip by the time they get to the warehouse and are packed and sent back to your local supermarket, whereas before our mums would maybe have been shopping at the local grocers who was getting his produce from the local market."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

Respondents wondered aloud about what conditions were like in processed food manufacturers, if food sat around in unhygienic

conditions in transit, and what happened if it deteriorated in lorries that had been held up, for example, by blockades of channel ports.

*"In the manufacturers you don't know if it's been dropped on the floor and just slapped back on the conveyor belt or what."*

female, African-Caribbean, older family, C2D, Midlands, urban

*"When they have lorry strikes at ports like Calais and mega amounts of lorries are standing around, you often wonder how long can they have that freezer capacity. They never say on the news how many days the capacity is."*

female, Asian (Hindu), young family, BC1, S England, urban

Freshness was a particular concern.

*"How long they are keeping it for?  
How fresh is it when it gets to you?  
What has been added to it?"*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

*"How long has it been in the shop? How long has it been sitting around since it has been picked?"*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

When they were thinking about food distribution, and what problems might arise during it, many respondents, especially among the young, felt safer with the big supermarkets. As with questions of hygiene (see further below), they expected the large concerns to have better equipped and managed distribution systems than smaller shops.

*"That's why people put Sainsbury's over a corner shop, because Sainsbury's have big refrigerated trucks. You know it's going to be fresh. Corner shops could just be a wee Transit van. You see the vans every day travelling about. All the reputable supermarkets have got all the big trucks with refrigeration."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

Doubts about freshness, especially in smaller shops, led several respondents to argue that frozen foods were healthier than fresh.

*"The fresh vegetables, they're sitting on the shelf too long apparently. So the vitamins are all degrading and it's the frozen ones that are better."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

### Conditions where food is sold

Frozen or chilled goods occasionally gave cause for complaint or concern. It was said to be common to find such goods out of place (because customers had changed their minds and did not return them where they had found them). Respondents wondered what happened to goods that had deteriorated because of this treatment. Supposedly frozen foods in the tops of supermarket cabinets were occasionally said not to be adequately frozen.

*"In the supermarket if you are buying frozen veg, if you touch the ones on the top they are often defrosted. And the meat, if you press them they are going soft."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

There were big variations in respondents' assessments of the importance of strict hygiene (especially as manifested by packaging) alongside other criteria like freshness, value, freedom from additives and underlying quality. Most respondents of course wanted to be reassured that the food they bought had been hygienically treated throughout the distribution process. As reported in Section 1, supermarkets were very widely regarded as the most reliable in terms of in-store hygiene. The stores themselves looked clean, they were well lit, people were employed to check sell-by dates, servers at delicatessen and meat counters wore gloves, and so on. Some of the big stores were also believed to take hygiene concerns yet further. For example...

*"Places like Asda have already got bacteriologists in who go about checking... And Sainsbury's do it. They come round with little sticks and swabs and test them."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

By contrast, some smaller, cheaper supermarkets and corner shops inspired much less confidence about hygiene.

*"They (small local supermarkets) leave their meat out, their salads and all that. We walked by and all you saw was all the flies on it. We thought, 'We're not going there'."*

**DO YOU EVER THINK SUPERMARKETS MIGHT BE DOING THOSE THINGS AS WELL?**

*"No."*

*"I think it's because the shop is so clean."*

*"It's pre-packed... You imagine they have quite high standards to stick to."*

female, young family, C2D, Scotland, urban

It seemed that expectations of smaller and discount food stores were lower, and there was sometimes perhaps an element of snobbery in attitudes towards their standards. One or two respondents had quite vivid stories.

*"(The local supermarket) is bogging. The one down the road is disgusting. It's the colour of the floor, the staff..."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

*"When you go to one of the discount chains it can be filthy. The rats were in the sugar once... All these holes were filled in on the walls and I asked what had happened and they said the Environmental Health had ordered it because of the rats."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

Similarly there was less confidence that smaller stores were as scrupulous behind the scenes. Respondents were more inclined to give the big national chains the benefit of the doubt.

*"You go round the back of a discount store one day and see what goes on round the back, it'll open your eyes, the bit that you don't see... The big supermarkets I trust. The smaller ones you don't know what they are up to."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

However, although most respondents were happy that the major supermarkets maintained good standards of hygiene, those respondents who had worked in supermarkets, or had friends who had, often said (as with processing plants) that standards were a lot lower than most customers assumed.

One of the factors encouraging trust in the standards of the big supermarkets was the confident expectation that they did not like dissatisfied customers and were prepared to go to considerable lengths to appease anyone with reason to complain. There were accounts of

customers being given bottles of wine and bunches of flowers, as well as having their money back (sometimes double their money) or goods replaced.

*"If you took it back to the store they want to protect their name so they give you loads of stuff to keep their face."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"Iceland are absolutely brilliant for taking things back... They compensate you by giving you other things as well."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"I got paid 25 quid of free shopping in Sainsbury's because it was fresh mince and I went to use it the next day and it was off, it stunk. I took it back the next day and it had the date on it, and I got 25 quid of free shopping."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

It is worth noting at this point that the generosity of supermarkets in the event of complaint seemed effectively to deter many consumers from getting in touch with environmental health officers or other official regulatory bodies. Complaining to the retailer generally paid off. Environmental Health Officers, corner shops, specialist shopkeepers and market stall holders were none of them generous in the same way.

Attitudes to independent food shops like greengrocers, fishmongers and butchers, and to market stalls were variable. As already noted, younger respondents were more likely than middle aged and older people to feel safer in supermarkets for reasons that were basically all about hygiene. They liked foodstuffs to be individually wrapped. They felt the butchery and delicatessen counters in supermarkets had higher standards of hygiene than they would find in the High Street; the servers had hats, wore gloves, did not use the same knives to cut cooked and raw meats, etc. They felt supermarket foods were all safely 'indoors', better protected from pollution and ambient germs than small, on-street shops.

Attitudes towards butchers and market stalls were especially clearly polarised. Whereas some of the older respondents valued a butcher's expertise, many others (including some of the old) were distressed by what seemed to them to be a disregard for hygiene. There were some worries about freshness also.

*"I was in a butcher's a few months ago buying a chicken for my kids. He picked the chicken up with his bare hands and then took my money in his hands. Germs! He should have gloves on touching food."*

*"Yet when I was a child going to the butchers for my mum they never wore gloves."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"If I want meat I prefer the butcher because you'll get the joint of meat that you want, at a good price."*

*"But you don't know what kind of turnover he's got and how long he's had that meat for."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"One thing I don't like about butchers is the way they sell cooked and uncooked meat together. I would never buy cooked meat from a butcher. You have to really trust the butcher that he is washing his hands in between moving from one thing to another... I feel happier with pre-packed from Sainsbury's."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

Market stalls were treated with yet greater suspicion by a substantial minority of the sample. The fact that the food was outside, and therefore potentially exposed to pollution and flies, was enough to put many off. The assumed absence or primitiveness of storage facilities was also a worry. There were other concerns about freshness, and the provenance of the food, especially meat. A few respondents clearly thought they were more likely to be defrauded in a market than in any kind of shop.

*"They are money oriented. They are going to cut every corner they possibly can to make as much money as possible."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"I don't buy from market stalls because I don't like the thought of buying it from some dirty lockup. You don't know how long it's been there, and they're just there to make money. I'd rather go to a company that will try to give me quality food."*

*"I agree, no way would I buy from a market stall."*

male, African-Caribbean, pre-family, BC1, S England, urban

*"Leeds market. I once got a bag of meat from there and it was... like a really good deal, really heavy and nice, a bargain but you get it home and open it and it smelt foul and was all really rotting meat."*

*"My son-in-law used to work there and they told us that the men were stealing sheep from a field and killing them. They weren't coming from a proper abattoir or anything."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

Against these perceptions, some respondents, concentrated among older people, regarded markets as providing fresher as well as cheaper produce. These respondents were usually less preoccupied with hygiene, often because they were confident that the care they put into preparing and cooking the food would ensure that there were no harmful bacteria in it.

There was, amongst a small minority of respondents, evidence of a reaction against what they perceived as an obsession with hygiene and freshness.

*“Your body is designed to cope with so many bacteria and things and if you live this wonderful pure sterile life then your body just can’t deal with it. You start to get ill a lot.”*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

*“We’ve gone over the top, we’ve gone too far... I used to love those old places where they cut everything up in front of you but apparently it’s a breeding ground for germs.”*

*“But food with a bit of germs on is good for you. Not a lot of germs, obviously.”*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*“Those sell-by dates, you’re lucky if you get something that lasts for a week. But it says, ‘eat this by the 4<sup>th</sup> December’. What happens if you eat it on the 6<sup>th</sup>? Nothing.”*

*“We just go over the top. There are laws for everything. You could save a lot of money by just letting things run their course.”*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

## 10. Prepared food – restaurants, take-aways etc

There was general acknowledgement that eating food prepared by someone else involved an element of risk. Take-away establishments were often singled out for particular comment.

*“I think if you go out to eat you’re vulnerable anyway. If you upset the waiter you don’t know what he’s doing to the food.”*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*“Just looking at some takeaways from the outside you know not to go into them. They are just filthy.”*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

However, the perceived risks associated with eating in restaurants or take-aways usually had to be prompted. Most respondents seemed to feel reasonably confident that the food they ate outside their homes would be safe to eat.

With very few exceptions, respondents did not believe that they had been made ill as a result of eating food prepared by someone else. Despite references to reports in local papers of breaches of hygiene and food safety regulations, often by take-away outlets, most were sceptical that the majority of episodes of sickness etc could be tied to a particular source. Some pointed out that too much alcohol, food they prepared themselves or a stomach bug might be just as likely to have induced a bout of illness.

There was also an assumption that a level of official inspection existed and a belief that establishments which were not up to scratch would (ultimately) be closed down (see also section 12).

*"There are standards they have to meet otherwise they'll be closed down."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"Health and Safety come round... I know a place that got shut down by the health place."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

Some argued that food outlets had too much to lose by producing meals which were likely to make people ill. Large chains were thought to be particularly keen to keep their reputations in tact. Smaller caterers were assumed to rely on word-of-mouth to grow their business: making people suspicious of the food they produced was clearly likely to be damaging.

*"Once you have been ill somewhere you never go there again."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"Harvester is a big company and the last thing they want is a massive scandal."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

However, as with other facets of food safety, when prompted about the safety of restaurant and take-away food, most people were unwilling to appear naïve. They therefore suspected that kitchens and food

handling procedures were often less hygienic than they ought to be. Particularly negative assumptions were made about the quality of raw materials which went into making the meals, especially those used in fast food and take-away outlets.

*"You just do take it for granted that stuff you buy in supermarkets in tins and things have got certain rules and regulations they abide by and they're gonna stick by them but a dodgy takeaway, you know when they are charging a couple of quid for a curry they're not going to be bothered about hygiene regulations so much."*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

The exceptions here were perhaps branded chains like McDonald's and Burger King which were generally thought to have reasonably high quality standards, again because they had reputations to protect. However, even these chains apparently did not enjoy the same level of confidence that consumers invested in supermarkets.

Ethnic take-aways, especially those run by Indian and Pakistani individuals, were widely regarded as suspect from the point of view of food safety. Racism sometimes seemed an element in comments on such outlets.

*"There was one place, a Chinese place, they found an Alsatian's head in the fridge."*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

*"There was a story I think in the paper, where some health and safety person went in to a kebab shop fairly recently and this thing on the spit roast, when they cut into it was full of maggots. It had been on there for so long. There is no way I would ever eat a kebab after hearing that story."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

School canteens appeared to enjoy the confidence of parents regarding standards of hygiene, however many appeared to doubt the quality of school meals in terms of both taste and nutrition.

## 11. Looking after food at home

It is likely that group discussions do not encourage individuals to produce the most accurate picture of their standards of food hygiene in the home. On the basis of this evidence, it seemed reasonable to

assume that most respondents were reporting their best behaviour in order to present themselves favourably to others in the group. For example, the majority indicated that they always washed their fruit and vegetables (and in many cases, their meat) before eating or cooking, and said that they would never eat anything they had accidentally dropped on the floor.

Fridge management was also an area that many described taking care over. These respondents said they were careful to keep cooked and raw meats apart and always placed chicken at the bottom of the fridge.

*"You put your uncooked food at the bottom of the fridge."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

Generally, chicken was singled out for particular care and attention. Many described having separate chopping boards for chicken and reported washing knives used to cut chicken particularly thoroughly before using them for another purpose. This concern about chicken appeared to have been a result of past food scares around salmonella.

Other measures taken to ensure food hygiene and safety were: not re-freezing food, respecting use-by dates and wiping surfaces down with anti-bacterial products.

*"The way you store the food, whether your fridge is at the right temperature, whether you let things defrost and re-freeze them, that all comes into it. So it is your responsibility as well."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Midlands, urban

*"I have got a cat but I always make sure I wipe surfaces down with an anti bacterial spray when the kids are around but not so much for myself."*

Male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

African-Caribbean women also mentioned that using salt and thorough cooking of meat were important to ensure food was safe to eat. There appeared to be a belief that both of these would 'kill off' any bacteria or germs lurking in the food.

*"We prepare our food, we wash meat, we'll season the meat, salt alone can kill whatever is in there, bacteria, and then we're going to cook it as well."*

female, African-Caribbean, older family, C2D, Midlands, urban

Having said this, there was some evidence of cavalier attitudes towards looking after food at home, most often indicated by younger males.

*"This rubbish with keeping meat at the top and chicken at the bottom, all twaddle."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

Again the group context may have influenced responses, but no-one in this sample appeared to feel that they had more to learn about how to store food at home safely. However, some older respondents felt that young mothers knew little about the basics of storing and preparing raw food: they assumed they relied on convenience foods.

There was also some feeling that much of the advice communicated these days was either wrong or silly, an opinion expressed particularly by older individuals in the sample.

*"Like they say put jams in the 'fridge, a lot of nonsense."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

These respondents felt that the current fastidiousness around food was not possible in earlier days when food was less plentiful and appropriate storage was less reliable or unavailable.

*ARE PEOPLE TOO SQUEAMISH NOWADAYS?*

*"Oh yes."*

*"If you can live through the war..."*

*"I remember my mum trimming all the bits off the cheese."*

*"I didn't have a fridge when I got married."*

*"In the war when you couldn't have what you wanted because everything was rationed, I think that was good because what went in your body then is better than the rubbish that the kids have in their bodies today."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

There was a general feeling amongst mainly older respondents that people were unduly concerned about hygiene and that a less fearful, more robust attitude towards germs should be encouraged. As noted in section 9, there was some concern that making everything 'too clean' lowered resistance to illness and disease.

*"I believe things shouldn't be too clean, because our body needs germs. I don't wear rubber gloves to cook a steak or whatever."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*"I think we are making it too sterile... It was the dirty people in the old days who stayed healthy."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

*"I think we are too fussy when it comes to all this anti bacteria... We're more prone to all these infections... We're so worried about germs and things. I am more worried about what starts it off, the spraying and all that, I think that's the problem because butchers 50 years ago always worked the same. There's going to be germs everywhere, you'll never stop germs. It's what is in the meat and vegetables."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

## 12. Responsibility for food safety

As noted on several occasions in this report, all respondents in our sample assumed that the food industry was subject to regulation by government. This included all aspects of the industry - food production, processing, packaging, distribution and retail.

*"There's got to be procedures involved in the whole process of making food and there's quality standards. A national standard, they must follow the same kinds of rules and guidelines."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

*"There are certain food standards regulations in place and you assume they are going to follow those standards to the letter, don't you?"*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

While none had any detailed knowledge of what these regulations might be, when asked to think about it there was a widespread assumption that insecticides, weedkillers and so on had to be approved for use on vegetables, and that colourants, and other additives also had to be approved.

*"So long as it tastes nice it's all right... They must do tests on it to see if it affects you... Even if they put slight chemicals in it I can't see it being too bad that it'll destroy people's lives, they just wouldn't make it, you know. It would be pointless."*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

*"You take it for granted that pesticides have all been tested. Well I do anyway."*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

They also assumed that animal food was regulated and routine inspections carried out (particularly in the light of BSE). Additionally, the conditions in which animals (particularly poultry) were kept were thought to be subject to regulation (for instance, how many animals could be kept in a given space).

It was also thought that food had to be packaged, transported and stored in ways which conformed to regulations, and that retail outlets, take-aways and restaurants were subject to scrutiny, and had to conform to detailed standards.

*"I think they definitely are inspected because in our local papers, one take-away place has been had up loads of times. Someone is obviously inspecting those places."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

*"If they are selling food there are laws aren't there? There are laws and regulations surely."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"You hear the odd rumour about the dog in the freezer... the inspection boys are round once a year to check them out."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

*"They do these snap raids on restaurant kitchens... they're always nicking people."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*"I can't think people would be able to put things on the shelf that would cause anyone harm."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"When we had mice in the branch we notified them and there was something done about it immediately."*

female, Asian (Hindu), young family, BC1, S England, urban

It was also felt that food-labelling was monitored and regulated.

Confidence that such regulations existed contributed significantly to underlying peace of mind about the food available, and there was little doubt that the regulations in place were rigorous and of a high standard (particularly when compared to many other, particularly southern European countries).

*"The standards of food in Britain are all right so just keep it as it is now."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

It was a very small minority, often with specific examples in mind, that argued that the UK was actually less rigorous than others.

*"Milk, the lindane. Britain hasn't banned lindane, as far as I know. But most other European countries have banned it. England is one of the slowest countries at banning pretty harmful chemicals."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

However, as with other areas of discussion in this study, the context in which a subject was raised could influence reaction significantly. When invited to interrogate or think more deeply about the regulatory system, many became worried. Their concerns reflected the assumption that while the regulations were in place, the real difficulty lay in enforcement and implementation.

*"There are a lot of regulations there but I wouldn't say they were enforced all of the time."*

female, 65+, E, N Ireland, rural

*"The government are ultimately responsible. They are very good at making regulations, I don't know how good they are at enforcing them. Sometimes good sometimes bad, I guess."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

More specifically, they were worried that the food industry was so large and the number of farms, factories, distribution centres, shops, take-aways and restaurants so numerous, that it would be almost impossible to invigilate them all effectively. The process appeared to be so long, and included so many different elements, each with different regulations and concerns, that many felt it inevitable that problems would occur.

*"All these takeaways, what food inspectors are going round there, who goes round this time of night to check them?"*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*"You've got to assume that the manufacturers aren't allowed to put whatever they want in, but we just don't know what level of control the government has."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"I worked in the bakery when I were a kid... And things the staff were doing in there, who knows what happens in other places?"*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

There was also widespread suspicion that the number of inspectors, and the frequency of inspections was insufficient. This perception that the system was often ineffective was supported by anecdotal evidence from those who had worked or who had friends who had worked in various areas of the food industry.

*"Well they are supposed to be bound by law but have they got enough people? Officers that go round and check them?"*

*female, older family, C2D, N England, urban*

*"There's about ten covering the whole of Bradford, about 30, 40 miles... You look at the number of takeaways in Bradford, it's an impossible task."*

*"I know someone who's got a sandwich shop, he hasn't had a visit yet. There's no rule saying you've got to tell them you're there."*

*"You might see a factory inspector once every five years, if you're lucky, 'cos they ain't got the resources to do it, that's where it falls down, at the sharp end."*

*male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban*

*"The council won't take any action because there's no money to police the system."*

*male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban*

*"I was watching a programme the other night and they said there used to be 25 environmental health officers in Wales but now there are only 12. How can 12 people cover the whole of Wales?"*

*male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban*

*"I worked in a restaurant years ago and you were supposed to have inspectors come out and I was there for four years and we had one girl come round in four years. They used to plop things on the floor that was supposed to be in batter and they would wash it under the thing, if it was sausage or pineapple, and put it back in the thing."*

*female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban*

*"My brother worked in a food place and made pre-packed sandwiches for supermarkets. He knocked over a great big tub of mayonnaise, scooped it back up, put it back in and made the sandwiches... The boss told him to get that back off the floor and make the sandwiches with it."*

*female, young family, E, S England, urban*

Anecdotal evidence and hearsay had fostered suspicions that the system, and notably in the area of inspections, might be corrupt. There was a widespread belief that premises knew when they were to be inspected as a result of tip-offs, and were consequently able to 'put a gloss on things'.

*"It is impossible... to go to every farm in the country. But the government inspectors are not doing their job well at all, they are paid extra from these places to let it through. End of story."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

When one added foreign food producers to the already complicated equation, it was thought impossible to enforce regulations effectively. It was also suspected that some foreign markets would not be subject to such high standards.

*"There is one rule for this country to meet our standards and another for other countries and yet their food comes here."*

*"In Greece it is hanging on the street with flies on it and so on."*

*"Everything is done to the law here."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*"It is much harder now because it is the EU and they have too much influence, they are too far away, it is too hard to regulate."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

When asked to pin down who exactly was responsible for administering regulations, most answered vaguely that government or local government had responsibility. Few were confident they knew which departments or individuals oversaw this area. Nevertheless, when pressed, many mentioned the departments of Health and/or Agriculture, and a minority mentioned MAFF.

Most awareness of regulation and enforcement was at a local level – they knew that there were local inspectors of retail and other food outlets. The term Environmental Health Officers was known only to a minority, and some referred to Public Health Inspectors or Health Inspectors.

On this evidence, only a small minority had had any dealings with EHOs in the past. This was to a significant extent due to a relationship having been formed with retailers, particularly the big supermarkets, and a belief that in the case of unsatisfactory foods, the contract was with the retailer.

*"I would trust a well know supermarket more. If I was buying something in a corner shop and there was a problem with it I'd maybe, not half expect it, but I wouldn't be surprised. But if I bought it in a large supermarket I would expect them to have done a load of checks and everything they possibly could, before I bought it, to make sure that what I am eating is safe."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"As far as we are concerned as customers the buck stops at the shop. If that shop accepts there is something wrong with it then it's up to them to go back to their supplier. But he's not going to say 'I bought it off this person so you better get in touch with them'."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

It also owed much to an assumption that concern for their reputation would lead the big supermarkets to be generous in their compensation; a belief (as noted in section 9) which seemed to be borne out by experience. On this evidence, this compensation usually appeased the aggrieved consumer. Most assumed that any dealings with official bodies such as local government would be tedious and drawn out, and probably less fruitful (borne out by a tiny minority who had acted in the past).

*"I bought a pie with a plaster in it. I tried to take it back but they were useless so I took it to Environmental Health and they took it back to the factory and it was said to be a one off incident and forgotten. It makes you wonder if it's worth it."*

*"A piece of wire. I got the Health and Safety in for that because I thought that was dangerous because if it had gone down children's throats it could have been dangerous. At the end of the day they just apologised and said it was just a mistake and I didn't get no compensation or anything."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

In the case of unsatisfactory meals out, most were content to resolve never to visit that establishment again. Many contended that an establishment that disappointed on a regular basis would soon find itself in trouble, and thus were happy to let the market discipline offenders.

Indeed, very few in this sample appeared to appreciate that the regulatory system would function much more effectively if the public reported problems. For most, there appeared to be only a hazy sense of whom to contact in the event of dissatisfaction.

*"I eat a lot of seafood, mussels and the like. I've never been ill, but if I was, I'd go back to the restaurant and tell them. But when they say, 'It might not have been us' I wouldn't know where to go next. Who can you report them to?"*

*"All the councils have got environmental health departments."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*"I've been to the Environmental Health. We found an earwig in chips from a chip shop. The idea wasn't to go back to the chip shop and him palm us off with a lot more chips. We wanted to make sure the premises were cleaned and checked. The environmental health did a spot check on the chippie and said it was absolutely fine and they reckoned it was just the one off. So I then felt confident that I could go back to the chip shop again, otherwise I wouldn't have gone back."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

There was some comment from older respondents that some years ago the situation had been clearer and that there had been a Public Health Officer at the local council (known to the community) who responded to any complaints of this nature.

At a national level, most assumed that regulations about additives and so forth were the result of scientific testing, and inferred that there were teams of scientists working on an ongoing basis for the government. While this facet of government responsibility rarely received any spontaneous emphasis, when prompted, all thought that this was self-evidently a very important function of the regulatory system.

### **13. Sources of information**

A large number of people in this sample (especially women) cited schools as an important source of information on food safety, hygiene, the right and wrong ways to prepare, store and cook food. This was either received directly during their own school days, or second-hand from their children. Indeed, several contended that the most effective way of communicating this kind of information was via schools. These

respondents pointed out that children could typically be relied upon to chastise their parents where they did wrong and keep them informed of best practice.

Women also cited magazines as influential sources of information about food. Recipes often included hints or tips on good practice and there were occasionally more in depth articles in this area. This seemed to be particularly true of advice for pregnant women, who, it appeared, had no shortage of information. Parents were also credited with passing on information about best practice.

More generally, the broadcast media (TV and radio) was credited with educating the public about food safety. There had been a proliferation of food/cookery programmes, and factual documentaries and women's programmes on radio appeared to be well trusted.

*"Documentaries are your best bet... They are more independent than what the government are trying to tell you."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

Newspapers were much less trusted and associated strongly with food scares. Respondents complained that newspapers sensationalised stories, and often exacerbated the situation, contributing to rather than allaying public uncertainty. Coverage of food issues was frequently criticised as irresponsible; newspaper treatment of BSE and salmonella were mentioned repeatedly.

*"You can watch a documentary on television and think, 'Yeah that's awful' and then you can read something in the paper the next day that says it's a load of rubbish so when push comes to shove you've got to make up your own mind."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"I think there's a lot of scare-mongering in the press."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

*"The slightest wee remark and 'We've got a story here'... A lot of times it's actually played out bigger than it is."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

*"Yeah they're scare-mongers, to scare us into thinking you should eat this and that."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"We've got a massive media that relies on big stories like this to keep them going."*

male, pre-family, C2D, N England, urban

There was a widespread and strong distrust of the press in the area of food safety.

*"TV is more truthful, because they really get into it, but papers I don't believe."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*"If Rupert Murdoch bought shares in GM crops you'd get a fantastic press in the Sun and all his newspapers."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"They never tell you if they're wrong. They might put a little bit in a paper, but no headlines. They never admit their mistakes."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

More broadly, there was a general feeling amongst the public that it was not kept sufficiently informed of developments which might affect the safety of food.

*"We are informed but we don't know the truth."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"We are not that well informed are we? We get bits off the press and so on but we don't really know."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

This clearly reflected the sense of powerlessness and alienation described earlier in this report.

Moreover, many respondents in this sample exhibited a strong distrust of government, and discussion of its role in informing the public was often cynical and suspicious. Generally, the government was perceived as withholding information for reasons of political expediency. Some respondents seemed to think that government officials were capricious in their approach to communicating with the public about food issues.

*"They only tell you what they want you to know, they are never going to tell you the truth."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"I think a little man sits at the top and gets paid an enormous amount of money and says to himself, 'Now what can we have this week that's wrong?'"*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

*WHAT ABOUT THE GOVERNMENT?**"You can't trust them."**"They promise and don't do it."**"They don't tell the whole truth."*

female, empty nesters, BC1, N England, urban

*"There is a department there called 'Things the Public Shouldn't Know'."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

*"Tony Blair says to the head of the MAFF, 'Do that' he does it because he's been told to do it."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

Some respondents attributed this perceived lack of candour and openness to the government's having vested interests which it needed to appease, or, more commendably, to its need to manage developing situations, and avert panic. Many respondents specifically said that they did not think that politicians' pronouncements were reliable. They wanted to hear from scientists directly.

*"I would like to hear from the scientists, not from a politician at all. Politicians don't have a very good reputation and there's so much spin around. Even when politicians use statistics."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

*"If you are given all the information then it's down to you to make up your own mind and however you act upon it is down to you. I think they only give us the information when they're about to be found out, and then only give us the basics."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"I'd be more inclined to accept scientific research than government reports... if I could access the scientist who was actually dealing with CJD, I would believe him more than a government spin doctor... they only tell us what they want us to know."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

These vested interests were thought partially responsible for the perceived high level of contradictory guidance and information which the public received from government. There was a universal criticism that politicians and governments in general (and perhaps more recent governments in particular) changed their minds, postured and withheld information on a regular basis. It often seemed that respondents were confusing governmental advice with advice from other sources.

*"Yeah they say butter is absolutely bad for you then the following year they change and it's tomatoes or something."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

*"They'll bring out something to scare you... One minute they tell you milk is good for you then they say 'Don't drink too much milk.'"*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

*"They change their mind because at one time butter was bad for you but now they say it doesn't matter, you can eat butter."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"The thing is, the government tell you one thing and then the next week it is something different, it is never the same thing."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"Milk is good for you, no it's bad for you, no it's good for you."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

Many respondents complained that messages from experts regularly conflicted, and advice changed week by week. With the plethora of conflicting advice from a variety of sources it was difficult for people to form opinions of their own.

*"If the so called experts can't agree how are we supposed to know?"*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

*"It is confusing isn't it? There is someone saying if you eat these in two years time you'll be dead and in another breath they are saying 'No, everything is OK'. You don't know who to believe."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"There are loads of things around that are half truths. I remember them saying that Cornflakes give you cancer at some point!"*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"I think with say this GM thing, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing. You need a body to go ... and take the decision on behalf of the country."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"I think the scientists don't actually know sometimes, they just test. They tell you it's this that's giving you it or it's that... This will give you cancer, that'll give you cancer. But they're changing it all the time. Everything is a risk."*

male, pre-family, BC1, Scotland, urban

Some pointed spontaneously to the lack of a single authoritative body to whom they could turn for guidance – a form of accessible consumer watchdog (see also section 14).

As has been noted elsewhere in this report, overall trust in the big supermarkets was high. Nevertheless, at a rational level at least, respondents were aware that the interests of consumers and supermarkets would not always coincide, and might diverge on issues of food safety.

## 14. The Food Standards Agency

### 14.1 *Prior Awareness of the Food Standards Agency*

Following discussion of responsibility for food safety and current sources of information, respondents were asked whether they were aware of any imminent changes or of any proposals which might impact on responsibility for food safety in the future.

The vast majority was unaware of the creation of the Food Standards Agency, and had no recollection of hearing of any potential changes in this area.

However, a small minority was confident that they had heard news of some initiative. Of these respondents, some had more detailed ideas than others. The general consensus amongst this minority was that a body was to be established to oversee food safety, although its role and characteristics were unclear. Those who appeared to be most informed spoke of: the introduction of an agency funded by retailers' contributions; or the amalgamation of several government departments to form one body; or the creation of a specialist and independent body. Newspapers were typically cited as sources of this rather hazily recalled information.

*"I heard they'll be checking all the stores and they're going to levy a tax for stores to pay, like £1000 or something a year, to fund it."*

male, African-Caribbean, pre-family, BC1, S England, urban

None recalled the name of the new organisation, although when shown later in discussions, there appeared to be some sporadic recognition of the Food Standards Agency. One respondent facetiously suggested that the new body should be called "Off-food".

Recollections of the initiative were often met with surprise by other respondents in the groups. The suggestion that there was to be a single body in charge of food safety evidently raised the possibility, perhaps for the first time, that this was not currently the case, as had been widely assumed.

Overall, however, little thought had been given to the initiative by those who had heard about it.

#### 14.2 *Overall reactions to the introduction of the Food Standards Agency*

When the broad concept of the new Agency was introduced (see stimulus material appended), it generated little excitement. This was unsurprising given the assumption of many that this was how things were currently handled.

*"Don't they do that anyway?"*

female, pre-family, BC1, Midlands, urban

However, when the current situation (combining the efforts of MAFF and the DoH – see stimulus material appended) was explained and the proposed unified system of management contrasted, the Food Standards Agency was generally welcomed, and certainly, conceptually at least, was held to be an improvement.

*"It sounds like a good idea in principle."*

male, African-Caribbean, pre-family, BC1, S England, urban

*"It sounds very good in theory."*

*"It has got to be better than what we've got now."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

Despite this in principle welcome, however, news of its introduction raised a number of questions, and, to an extent had the effect of further undermining confidence in regulation in general. What was wrong with the current system? Why was the Agency being introduced *now*? The conceptual simplicity of one body taking responsibility for all aspects relating to food safety appeared to be such a logical and rational approach that many wondered why it had taken so long to implement.

*"It seems ridiculous that we haven't already got it."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"I think what they are saying they are going to do is what we always hoped that they were doing."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

*"I feel this should have happened years ago! I can't understand it."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

*"Obviously something has been slipping through the net between the other two agencies."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

*"Why do we need it now when we've been going so long without them?"*

*"People have been telling us all along that this is okay, this is fine, so why are these other people coming now to override that and tell us something else?"*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

*"To be doing that there must be concerns about what we eat, big concerns if they're setting up an agency like that, there must be a real reason for it."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"It's a bit worrying if you think it hasn't been done. We thought it was being done."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

*"The thing that makes me angry is that it's only now that the agency has been created. We felt that we should be having this service long before now."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

The net result, then, of informing respondents of the introduction of a new agency to oversee food safety was to imply that all was not as it should be.

Nevertheless, these concerns were somewhat rationalised and there was often an underlying optimism. With certain factors in place, the Food Standards Agency could be a force for good in the area of food safety, and there was widespread support for its implementation.

### 14.3 *Expectations of the Food Standards Agency*

Prior to exposure to more detailed information outlining how the new Agency would operate (see stimulus material appended), or the areas with which it might concern itself, it was clear that there was a number of prerequisites for the new agency – factors seen as essential if the agency was to be welcomed not just in broad concept, but also in form and content. These spontaneous expectations are outlined briefly

below, and precede discussion of the details of the Food Standards Agency.

It was clearly thought necessary that the Agency should be capable of effecting change, of improving the current situation, particularly in relation to food scares. While change was primarily called for in the area of information dissemination - efficient and speedy communication - there were sometimes far higher expectations of the Food Standards Agency. In order to justify fully its existence, some felt that the Agency would need to improve the handling of food scares decisively, and be proactive and pre-emptive to the extent that scares became a thing of the past. It was suggested that appropriate action should be taken more quickly, and that government indecision had exacerbated situations in the past. Government handling of BSE was frequently cited as an example of poor practice in this respect.

*"They should be proactive and go out there and find the problems before they happen."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"Why wait for a scare? Why don't they do a survey, find out what worries us and then go along those lines looking into things before they become a problem."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

*"Yes they don't seem to take things seriously until it becomes an issue. When the BSE first came to light it was kind of, 'Oh that's not much', but as more cases came up, people becoming ill, they then realised that here was definitely something wrong and they had to look into it."*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

Nevertheless, despite some high expectations, some respondents pragmatically accepted that things would not always run smoothly and that there would be, from time to time, problems in the food industry.

*"Obviously you don't expect things to be totally perfect. Some things come up unexpectedly, like when you have scares of some kind. I mean you might have a nutter putting something in a packet. I try not to get too hysterical about it all. I'm too busy, I really am. I think you can be bombarded with too much and you just wouldn't know what was best for your kids."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

With this rational acceptance, the majority called for changes in the way scares were handled in terms of communication, and cited the prompt release of information, which, they complained, was currently withheld by government.

This focus on food scares and the demand that the Food Standards Agency should have a significant impact on such events in future evidently places the agency in a challenging position.

*"If we had another BSE scare, it's how fast would things happen this time? Are we going to mess around the way we did last time?"*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"They always seem to react, like mad cow or salmonella, it's always after the horse has bolted."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"Do you think if the FSA had been set up that we would still have had all these outbreaks of BSE, E-Coli? How are they going to find out any quicker than what was done before?"*

female, 65+, E, N Ireland, rural

There was also a clear feeling that central to its likelihood to succeed (in effecting change) was a need for impartiality. This was typically related to the provenance of funds. Initial insistence that the new Agency should receive no funding from government or the food industry made for interesting discussion. The vast majority was equally unequivocal that the Food Standards Agency should not be beholden to the food industry, whose interests, they contended, would often be opposed to those of consumers. More generally, respondents were cynical about the ability of the Agency to achieve true impartiality.

*"Who would it be funded by? Are they totally independent?"*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"Who pays for it then? Nothing is independent of the government, they need money from them... We don't trust the government with anything, do we?"*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

Also central to the Food Standards Agency's perceived ability to improve current management, although less vocally supported, was the call for it to have 'teeth'. This call may be seen as indicative of a general satisfaction in relation to food safety *policy* and the formulation

of guidelines. Changes were thought more necessary in the effective *implementation* of those policies.

*"You need a body with teeth that actually will fine people."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"Can they actually do anything? Are they going to have powers to do anything or are they just purely information?"*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

The issues raised by each of these expectations are discussed further below in the context of reactions to the stimulus material.

#### 14.4 *Reaction to the FSA (stimulus material)*

When more detailed information concerning the nature of the Agency was introduced (see stimulus materials appended), the reception was largely positive.

While there was certainly scepticism over the likelihood of real change, this was raised not as a rejection of the initiative per se, but should be taken as evidence rather of the difficulties of implementation and enforcement which respondents anticipated. As has already been noted, it was a feature of this piece of research that respondents did not wish to appear naïve, especially about the role of politicians or the potential for pursuit of profit to undermine regulatory systems. Many were sceptical about how the initiative would work in practice.

*"If you've got a problem with food, the main point of contact is the shop, and the Environmental Health."*

*"Yeah then you go to your local authority. How will that change... are we going to notice any difference?"*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

Nevertheless, in principle, the initiative was seen as a step forward – a marked improvement on the current situation.

It was expected that the creation of one body would lead to more coherent communication on food safety issues. This would, hopefully, put an end to the perceived bombardment of contradictory advice and conflicting 'expert' opinion, which many felt characterised this area at

present. With one organisation, there would, many respondents conceded, be a more co-ordinated approach that would, theoretically at least, result in clearer and more definite communication, and in more confidence in this advice amongst consumers.

On learning that the present management comprised several bodies, some contended that it was little wonder that 'mistakes' (such as the perceived incompetence of communication surrounding food scares) had arisen. Several optimistically suggested that having one authoritative body would mean less room for error, and that communication problems might, in future, be minimal.

*"Because there's only one of them, so no crossed wires where maybe A didn't talk to B."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"It's one body whereas the others were several bodies and might counteract each other, whereas that is one body working in unison...I know the others were under the government but one might have found one bit of information out and somebody might have found something contradictory."*

female, older family, BC1, S England, rural

Some respondents also pointed to the fact that MAFF and the DoH had had wider remits. They imagined, therefore, that the Food Standards Agency, free from other responsibilities, would be able to concentrate on food safety issues, providing a more dedicated and specialist approach.

*"Everyone in that office then is going to be interested in one thing: food and how safe it is. They are going to concentrate on that."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

Some also imagined that responsibility would be more clearly defined, and that there would be fewer opportunities to try to evade it.

*"At the end of the day you should have one person sat up there, it is his responsibility and at the end of the day the buck stops at him. He needs to get the information and sort it out and if there is a problem he is responsible."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

*"There's nowhere else to pass the buck."*

male, 65+, C2D, Midlands, urban

Conversely, there was some sporadic and tentative suggestion that one body rather than several would lead to less accountability. This minority held that the involvement of more than one organisation afforded an opportunity for cross-checking. This view was not held by the majority of respondents, however.

There was a widespread and optimistic interpretation that an agency that made it its business to provide the public with impartial advice would act as a consumer watchdog, representing the public, and protecting it from any unscrupulous behaviour from the food industry and disingenuous politicians.

*"It's got to be better than the way it is."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"I would have an independent body for quality."*

*"Someone who wasn't out for the money."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"At the end of the day the information we get from supermarkets or from anybody else isn't going to be 100% accurate because they are going to publish what we want to see. Whereas these are impartial, they are going to print what is 100% true."*

female, Asian (Hindu), young family, BC1, S England, urban

*"The ministry of agriculture was set up for the farmer, not the consumer. It is more for the ministry for farmers and fishermen."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"I think what I'd like to do is, rather than give us something else to worry about every six months before they started seeing results, is to investigate everything thoroughly and properly. Then say, 'OK we've been looking at this for x amount of years and this is what we found' and make a decision to sell this or not, or that it is good for you or it's not good for you. Because there seems to be so much messing around all the time and different stories and this one saying it's OK and that one saying it's not. So I think we need one body to investigate it properly and then to report to the public."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

In this context, they envisaged that information would be far more accessible and user friendly than they perceived it to be at present.

*"More information pushed through the door. You're gonna take more notice then."*

*"That's right."*

female, African-Caribbean, older family, C2D, Midlands, urban

However, there were more negative reactions to the Food Standards Agency.

When respondents learnt that the new Agency was independent of farmers and the food industry, and had no vested interests, reactions were very positive. This was perceived to be an improvement to existing relations between MAFF and the farming community.

However, it was argued that if funding came from government, the credibility of the agency would still be jeopardised.

*“The general public don’t trust our politicians so what would make us trust another agency that’s been set up?”*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

While it was recognised that impartiality was extremely difficult to achieve, respondents held that, in practice, impartiality would ensure that information was not withheld from the public. They also indicated that impartiality would guarantee that a whole story emerged, rather than highlights edited to show ministers in the most favourable possible light, as was widely assumed to be the case presently. It was presented as a truism that the government’s desire to win votes often conflicted with its responsibility to the public with regard to the safety of its food.

*“If we are panicking about food, the government are going to play it down anyway, aren’t they?”*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*“Whatever happens they will still cover up.”*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

*“You need somebody that’s not connected with the government to be able to tell the public the truth.”*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

If the Food Standards Agency was funded by government it was widely assumed that ministers would have the power to edit unfavourable information, censor the findings of the agency’s reports and routinely ignore its advice.

*“It would only publish what the government lets it publish.”*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"I don't think the agency will tell us anything the government doesn't want us to know. Tony Blair says one thing one day and another thing another day."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"But the government pay their wages so they're dictated to, I wouldn't trust it. They'll give us what they've always given us, what they want us to know."*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

*"If they're paid by the government, they're going to be just a few men sitting round the table doing what the government tells them to do."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*"There would be the government there telling them don't tell them that, tell them that, but don't tell them that."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

In this context, the worth of the agency was called in to question, and the point was raised in most groups that there was little value in simply moving bodies around and changing names, if the remit of the agency remained the same. Respondents argued that the Food Standards Agency would, in these circumstances, just be a substantial waste of taxpayers' money.

*"It's just another agency with a title...really we're making jobs for these people basically."*

female, African-Caribbean, older family, C2D, Midlands, urban

*"Who is going to fund it? Probably us."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"They're giving an old job a new name."*

*"Weren't the food inspectors already doing this?"*

female, 65+, BC1, S England, urban

*"I feel as if it is useless, just changing one name to another.... It is the government."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"More money going into something else to give more people jobs."*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

*"It doesn't say who these people are."*

*"It's just red tape."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*“There should be more inter-departmental negotiation and communication, rather than setting up something else.... Creating another organisation to do it doesn’t solve the problem because you’re still going to get scientists who disagree. What we want is proper communication and that should have been available.”*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

*“It is just being put under another roof... They are just reorganising the way things are done.”*

female, African-Caribbean, 65+, BC1, N England, urban

Respondents were also disappointed to learn that the Agency would be limited to an advisory role. While they appreciated the Food Standards Agency’s commitment to making public its findings and advice to government, they lamented a perceived ‘lack of teeth’. When the idea of the new Agency had been introduced, there had been a strong spontaneous call for the agency to have enforcing powers. Its more limited capacity came as a disappointment to many.

*“If they haven’t got any teeth there is no point being there. If all they can do is advise then profits are going to override whatever they come up with.”*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

Some were more optimistic and were confident that by making public its reports and advice, consumer pressure would serve to keep the food industry and government in check, and that this was, effectively, the power of the new agency. They interpreted this as an intention to ‘name and shame’, and argued that this was a powerful tool. However, the majority was less easily satisfied, and less convinced that increased consumer knowledge would lead to improvements.

*“They are bouncing it back to the individuals saying, ‘We are going to do all this but at the end of the day it’s down to you anyway’.”*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

*“It’s got to come straight from them, from the horse’s mouth.... You don’t want it to go through the government.”*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

There was also some underlying discomfort that once a more open approach to food standards had been introduced, there would be no possibility of returning to less enlightened times. This was a function of the realisation that the information likely to be unearthed by Food Standards Agency investigations was unlikely to be welcome. In this

context, some argued that it might be better to remain in the dark, and there was debate about the implications of increased consumer awareness. It was certainly held to be true that no news in the context of the Agency was likely to be good news, and some claimed that findings might even cause panic. This reflection sparked discussion about whether the government, if committed to heeding the advice of the Food Standards Agency, would release information which might panic the general public, or whether this would lead to more information being withheld than at present.

*"They are not going to present the real facts when there is a real problem for fear of scaring the public."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*"My fear is that they would try to justify their existence by dragging up this that and the other, and we would end up with all the hype again."*

female, young family, C2D, N Ireland, rural

*"Publishing certain information might actually just scare the public rather than actually put confidence in them... They have to publish the truth but some people might not understand the truth and get carried away, get scared by it."*

male, African-Caribbean, pre-family, BC1, S England, urban

*"They are in a no-win situation here - they don't say anything and they are accused of letting it go and not warning people, but if they do say there might be a problem here they are accused of scaremongering and people over react."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*"They've got to be careful because when the press get their hands on it, it really scares the public. Just the way they approach it, each paper making it sound worse than the other... They need to make the public aware in the right way rather than letting things slip out."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

#### 14.5 *Structure of the Food Standards Agency*

Initial thoughts on the make-up of the Food Standards Agency tended to be fairly knee-jerk, clinging to the panacea of absolute impartiality. With this in mind, some respondents called for the new Agency to be made up exclusively of scientists and the medical community. Strong and widespread calls for a scientific base reflected a perceived lack of credible advice to consumers, and was, in part perhaps, a reaction to

discomfort at what some saw as the conflicting agenda politicians were thought liable to impose on communications.

*"It should be like a jury system, a cross section of people."*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

*"Scientists, they do research so they should know what they're talking about, a politician is gonna come and like give you a soap opera version, just say 'Well we won't tell them that 'cos it'll cause public outcry'."*

female, African-Caribbean, older family, C2D, Midlands, urban

*"What bothers me is you have Tony Blair saying British beef is fine, what does he know? He's a barrister. Someone else will say no it's not all right. What does he know? He's an accountant. They shouldn't make the judgements."*

male, older family, C2D, Wales, urban

*"The health minister is a politician. Last week he was the transport minister."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

Ideally, this 'jury' or panel would also include consumer representation, and, as noted above, would act as a consumer watchdog for the food industry. It was clear that there needed to be someone in whom the public could trust, and who would ensure that play was fair.

*"The people I would want to see regulating food standards is normal everyday people. Mothers, a big group of mothers. But if they work for the government they still have to report to someone who says, 'OK the public can hear this, the public can't hear that'."*

male, African-Caribbean, pre-family, BC1, S England, urban

*"Everyone believes old Delia so perhaps get Delia."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

It soon became evident to most, however, that without dialogue with other interested parties, there would be little chance of effective management. Most acknowledged, albeit reluctantly, that there was little point in excluding those whose actions one was trying to manage, and from whom co-operation would be required on an ongoing basis. It was therefore accepted that some representation of the food industry would be necessary. This might include retailers, food producers and representatives of farmers on agency committees, and links with related organisations to discuss strategy.

*"They're independent of food producers? What the hell do they know about food production then?"*

male, empty nesters, BC1, S England, urban

## 14.6 *Areas of public concern*

Respondents were asked to think about the areas in which they would like the new agency to concentrate its efforts. The following issues emerged in the majority of discussions, although some are obviously more relevant to certain groups than others.

### 14.6.1 Food labelling

Although food labelling was perhaps not the topical issue it might have been some years ago (when there appeared to have been a greater interest in e-numbers etc), there was a good deal of attention paid to this area in discussions. It seems likely that the GM debate has rekindled consumer interest.

However, alerting the public to the inclusion of GM ingredients was clearly not the most important issue here, and respondents called rather for greater clarity of food labelling.

Current labels were thought to be designed with scientists or food experts in mind rather than consumers, and a majority claimed that the Food Standards Agency should support their calls for food labelling to be simplified, and work towards language and terminology which the lay consumer would find more helpful at the point of purchase.

In a similar vein, clarification and standardisation were thought to be needed in the terminology surrounding many products. The most notable example was eggs. Respondents spoke of the vagaries of the terms applied to different kinds of eggs, such as 'Free range', 'Barn' and 'Farm fresh'. While some felt that these terms were standardised and had confidence in them, very few were confident that they knew the differences between them. As the issue of conditions in poultry farming was quite emotive (particularly, but not exclusively amongst non meat-eaters), consumers used these terms to inform their choice. As discussion progressed and it appeared to emerge that these terms

were not as tightly defined as at first thought, some in the groups were concerned. This led again to demand for greater clarity in labelling.

In addition, respondents wanted more information on the provenance of the food they ate. This was felt particularly necessary for so called 'fresh foods'. Respondents challenged the contention that foods were fresh if they had a 'use by date' some weeks or even months away. In this context, they called for a review of the kinds of information provided by retailers and food producers, and for more transparency in the process. Of more use, they felt, would be a 'picked on' or 'packed on' date. This was a response to the feeling of increasing alienation from the manufacturing process.

#### 14.6.2 Educating the public

In addition to food labelling, respondents called for information to be provided in the following areas.

##### *E-numbers and children*

Many parents in this sample contended that the effects of e-numbers (particularly in some brands of soft drinks) on children were immediate and visible, and that hyperactivity was a common phenomenon. Some claimed to have read reports in newspapers or seen documentaries on television confirming this and referring to specific products. However, some respondents thought that this information had been corrupted by sensationalised reports and more reliable information was needed.

##### *Organic versus non-organic*

Organic and non-organic produce was often poorly differentiated in the minds of consumers, and attitudes varied as to the benefits and drawbacks of each (see Section 8 above).

A minority of respondents was interested in the differences between organic products and non. They were unclear about relative nutrient levels as well as toxins, and again, wanted information which would allow them to make more informed choices.

### *Genetic modification*

Unsurprisingly, respondents felt poorly informed about GM foods/ingredients. They felt that the arguments had been poorly presented by the media, that the debate had alienated the general public and that information was impenetrable.

There was a widespread, if vague, call for the Food Standards Agency to clarify the present situation with regard to GM foods, and to de-sensationalise the issue. However, there was also an acknowledgement that the issue was scientific and that the public's appetite for information of this kind was limited.

### *Allergies, health & additives*

There was perceived to have been a proliferation in the incidence of food allergies, especially amongst children. Respondents wondered, again in the light of reporting they considered sensationalised, whether this was a result of intensive farming techniques and directly connected to the increasing numbers of pesticides and additives in our food.

They also hypothesised about the potential for harm in the future caused by additives in today's food, and spoke about increasing incidences of asthma, eczema and other ailments.

The Agency was called upon to report what was known about the links between additives and health problems.

### *E-scaries*

Although no respondents suggested investigation of scares spread on the internet or by word of mouth, there was plenty of evidence during the discussions to suggest that consumers responded to this kind of misinformation.

For example, the issue of Kentucky Fried Chicken's acronym was reported in several groups in different areas. The details given by respondents were vague, and their understanding of the story varied.

However, the essence of the rumour reported by this minority was that KFC was no longer allowed to use its name in full. These respondents claimed that it had been shown (although they did not know by whom) that there was not a sufficient amount of chicken meat in the company's products, and that the company had been instructed to withdraw the word 'chicken' from its brand name. This was, according to newspaper reports, at least, a hoax disseminated on the internet. However, some respondents had clearly taken it seriously. The Food Standards Agency might be well-placed to respond to 'scares' of this nature.

#### 14.7 Sources of information

As mentioned above, some respondents saw the new Agency as a sort of watchdog for the food industry. With this role in mind, they suggested that information should become both more accessible and more consumer-friendly. The Food Standards Agency, they hoped, would be a place for the public to go directly for information and advice on all aspects of food and food safety.

*"It would be nice to be able to get in touch with someone about things."*

male, young family, BC1, Midlands, rural

*"Make it easier for people to complain, make it like in the store. They should have a poster saying, 'If you have a complaint contact so and so'."*

female, older family, BC1C2, N England, urban, non-meat eaters

*"It's got to be a two way thing. It's all very well having somebody, big boss God, stood up there saying, 'Though shall not touch this, shall not touch that', but you've got to be able to say, 'Hang on a minute, why can't I do that?' You've got to have some way of being able to interact with them."*

female, pre-family, BC1, Wales, rural

They suggested that television would be the most accessible vehicle for disseminating information. This would have a wide reach and was likely to present information in a digestible format. Many cited the influence of television generally, and more specifically news reports and documentaries, in forming opinion on topical issues.

*"Documentaries once a month like 'We looked into salt' and just keep everyone informed in a way everyone can understand."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

Women, particularly, suggested that information should be published in magazines. Again, these were mentioned loosely in the context of forming opinion on food safety issues and nutritional information.

For more specific issues of topical concern, respondents thought that a simple, user-friendly leaflet would be of most use. These would either be available in retail outlets (although some argued that this was unlikely if the information contained clashed with the interests of the outlet), public amenities such as libraries, or possibly even mailed direct to the public.

*"There should be a monthly letter in all the supermarkets."*

female, older family, C2D, N England, urban

*"With GM they should send leaflets out to every home so the public would know what is actually going on. Then it would be up to the individual to decide what they really want."*

female, Asian (Hindu), young family, BC1, S England, urban

*"An information sheet you could go somewhere to collect. You could go to your local library and pick up a document issued by the government."*

female, young family, BC1C2, S England, urban, non-meat eaters

Several pointed to the internet as the most viable way of making regular reports available to the public. Respondents imagined that the Food Standards Agency would have a website, and it seemed logical that this would be used as a reference, with access to all the latest reports and areas of investigation.

*"Probably your best source of information is on the Internet... You can look at the professors who are actually doing it, see what they're coming up with, have a look at the current papers."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

*"Where they can show you an agenda of what they are looking into, what they're doing in the future, a website is probably going to be the best. Things they're going to be looking out for, concerns, and findings."*

male, older family, E, N England, urban

As decisions about food often had to be made in the home, respondents also wanted the new Agency to have a telephone hotline. This would be useful, they argued, if one had concerns about certain foods, labelling or ingredients. It reflected the high expectations people had of the agency, that some talked of a hotline which could answer questions relating to diet in the context of health and medical conditions.

*“If they were accessible to the public and they had a hotline that would be good. Like the NHS where you can call up.”*

female, young family, E, S England, urban

# APPENDICES

1. Sample in full
2. Recruitment questionnaire
3. A note on socio-economic status classification
4. Discussion guide
5. Stimulus materials

## **APPENDIX 1 – DETAILS OF SAMPLE**

In all groups respondents were responsible or, at least, jointly responsible for their own food shopping. Across the sample, respondents shopped at a range of outlet types, including a mix of supermarkets, smaller grocery stores and small independent (high street) retailers. The sample also included: a mix of those who mainly purchased convenience foods and those who tended to buy fresh ingredients; and a spread of those using prepared food outlets, such as restaurants, take-aways, fish and chip shops, sandwich bars and the like.

Those who were currently working in the retail, distribution, packaging, inspection or manufacture of foodstuffs were excluded.

The sample was segmented by a number of different criteria. All groups were single sex but the sample was weighted towards women to reflect household shopping habits. The sample also took account of respondents' lifestage. Respondents fell into one of the following categories:

- |                      |                                                                                                                             |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Pre-family:</i>   | young singles or cohabiting couples with no children, loose age range 20 to 30                                              |
| <i>Young family:</i> | all children in household under age 11, included pregnant women and some with very young children, loose age range 25 to 35 |
| <i>Older family:</i> | all children in household over age 11, loose age range 35-45                                                                |
| <i>Empty nesters</i> | family left home, loose age range 45 to 65                                                                                  |
| <i>65+:</i>          | a mix of those with partners and those living alone                                                                         |

Individuals from a range of different backgrounds were included: B,C1,C2,D and E social grades were all covered. Different ethnic

communities, namely the African-Caribbean and Hindu and Muslim Asian communities, were also represented.

Fieldwork took place in urban and rural areas to explore any differences in response. However, the sample was weighted to urban areas to reflect population levels.

Meat and non-meat eaters were included in the sample although there was a bias towards meat eaters to reflect their greater numbers in the population.

A copy of the recruitment questionnaire used in the research is appended.

## Sample summary

In summary, the main consumer sample was as follows:

Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Sex	M	M	M	M	M	M	F	F	F	F	F
Life – stage	PF	PF	YF	OF	EN	65+	PF	YF	YF	OF	OF
SEG	C2D	BC1	BC1	E	BC1	C2D	BC1	C2D	E	C2D	BC1
Location	N Eng	S Eng	M Eng	N Eng	S Eng	M Eng	M Eng	N Ireland	S Eng	M Eng	S Eng
Area	U	U	R	U	U	U	U	R	U	R	R

Group	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21
Sex	F	F	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F
Life – stage	OF	EN	65+	65+	PF	YF	PF	OF	OF	YF
SEG	C2D	BC1	E	BC1	BC1	C2D	BC1	C2D	BC1 C2	BC1 C2
Location	N Eng	N Eng	N Ireland	S Eng	Scot	Scot	Wales	Wales	N Eng	S Eng
Area	U	U	R	U	U	U	R	U	U	U

### Key

Sex: M = male; F = female

Lifestage: PF = Pre-family; YF = Young Family; OF = Older Family; EN= Empty Nesters; 65+= those aged over 65

Area: U = urban; R = rural

Location: N = north; S = south; M = Midlands

### Ethnic Minority Sample Summary

The ethnic minority sample was as follows:

<b>Group</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Sex</b>	Male	Female	Female	Female	Female
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Afro-Car	Afro-Car	Afro-Car	Asian (Hindu)	Asian (Muslim)
<b>Lifestage</b>	Pre-family	Older Family	65+	Young-Family	Empty-Nester
<b>SEG</b>	BC1	C2D	BC1	BC1	C2D
<b>Location</b>	South	Midlands	North	South	North
<b>Area</b>	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban	Urban

<b>RECRUITMENT QUESTIONNAIRE</b>
----------------------------------

Name: .....

Address: .....

..... Tel: .....

Sex:        Male ( )        Female ( )

Age:        20-30 ( )    25-35 ( )    35-45 ( )    45-65 ( )    65+ ( )

Occupation: .....

Occupation (HoH):.....

SeS:        B ( ) C1 ( ) C2 ( ) D ( ) E ( )

Marital status:        Married/cohabiting ( )        Single ( )

**ASK 65+ ONLY**    Living with someone ( )    Living alone ( )

No of children:        .....        No of children living at home        .....

Ages of children:        .....

.....  
HELLO, I AM CARRYING OUT A MARKET RESEARCH SURVEY. MAY I  
ASK YOU A FEW QUESTIONS.

QA    Could I just check, do you, or any of your close friends or relatives  
work, or have worked in the past, in any of the following fields?

Marketing	( )
Market Research	( )
Advertising	( )
Journalism	( )
Public Relations	( )

CLOSE IF YES TO ANY OF THE ABOVE.

FOR THOSE WHO WORK IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING

Retail, distribution, packaging, inspection,  
preparation, production or manufacture of food ( )

SEE RECRUITMENT BRIEF FOR SPECIFIC EXCLUSIONS

QB Have you ever been to a market research group discussion?

- Yes ( ) TO QC
- No ( ) TO Q1

QC How long ago was the last time?

WRITE IN \_\_\_\_\_

CLOSE IF ATTENDED WITHIN THE LAST SIX MONTHS.

QD What subject(s) was/were the group(s) on?

WRITE IN \_\_\_\_\_

CLOSE IF RELATED TO THIS RESEARCH TOPIC. OTHERWISE GO TO Q1.

Q1. Which of the following statements best describes your eating habits?

- A. I eat meat ( )
- B. I do eat meat occasionally, but not often ( )
- C. I do not eat any meat but I do eat fish ( )
- D. I do not eat any meat or fish ( )
- E. I am a vegan ( ) CLOSE
- F. None of the above (PLEASE WRITE IN)

.....

FOR GROUPS 20 & 21, ALL RESPONDENTS SHOULD BE NON-MEAT EATERS, AT LEAST HALF SHOULD BE VEGETARIANS (NON-MEAT OR FISH EATERS), BUT NONE SHOULD BE VEGANS.

FOR ALL OTHER GROUPS, ALL SHOULD BE MEAT EATERS. GO TO Q2.

Q2. Who is responsible for doing the household/your food shopping?

- I am solely responsible ( )
- I am jointly responsible ( )
- Someone else is responsible ( )

ALL RESPONDENTS SHOULD BE SOLELY OR JOINTLY RESPONSIBLE FOR DOING EITHER THEIR OWN OR THE HOUSEHOLD SHOPPING. OTHERWISE CLOSE. GO TO Q3.

Q3. Where do you buy your groceries from most often?

- Market
- Small grocery store
- Small independent high street retailers
- Supermarket (PLEASE WRITE IN).....
- Somewhere else (PLEASE WRITE IN).....

PLEASE TRY TO ENSURE A SPREAD OF TYPES OF SHOP, AND A SPREAD OF DIFFERENT SUPERMARKETS. GO TO Q4

Q4. What type of food would you say you buy most often?

- Pre-prepared or convenience foods
- Frozen foods
- Fresh ingredients / produce

PLEASE TRY TO ENSURE A SPREAD OF TYPES OF FOOD. GO TO Q5

Q5. Which of the following food outlets or services do you ever use?

- Fast food outlets (e.g. McDonalds, KFC etc)
- Restaurants
- Pub/wine bars
- Sandwich bars
- Canteen
- Take-aways  
(e.g. Fish & Chip shops, Chinese meals etc)

PLEASE ENSURE A SPREAD OF OUTLETS/SERVICES USED. GO TO Q6

Q.6 And roughly how often would you say you use any of these outlets or services?

- Every day
- Once a week
- Once a month or more
- Every two months
- Every six months
- Hardly ever
- Never

PLEASE ENSURE A SPREAD OF FREQUENCIES. GO TO Q7

Q7. Which issues currently in the media would you say you have very strong views about? PLEASE WRITE IN

.....  
PLEASE EXCLUDE ANYONE WHO MENTIONS THE GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOOD DEBATE. OTHER WISE RECRUIT AS APPROPRIATE

## A NOTE ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS CLASSIFICATION

The classification system commonly used by UK market research companies comprises A, B, C1, C2, D and E. These denote the following...

A's are professional and managerial people at a senior level, typically earning high salaries. There were no A's in this sample.

B's include top management in small organisations, middle managers in large organisations, civil servants with substantial responsibilities and professionals (excluding those at the highest level, who are A's). Most branch managers of banks are B's. B's constitute about 15% of the population.

C1's are white collar workers and all non-manual workers who do not fall into one of the above categories. They typically work in junior management or in junior positions in the civil service. Bank clerks, shop assistants and most nurses are C1's. Together C1's make up about 25% of the population.

C2's are skilled manual workers. Bus drivers, bricklayers, and plumbers are C2's. Together C2's make up another 25% of the population.

D's are semi-skilled or unskilled manual workers. Bus conductors, chambermaids and labourers on building sites are D's. People training to be plumbers and bricklayers would be classified D also. D's make up about 20% of the population.

E's are people who are dependent on benefits of one kind or another, including those living on the state pension. Students are also E's, as are people without any fixed employment or unemployed. About 12% of the population are E's.

## **Discussion Guide**

### **1. Introduction**

Name, age, occupation, household, interests etc

### **2. Food purchase**

*Explore current food shopping behaviour, and attitudes towards food purchasing, including factors influencing purchase.*

- Where do they buy their food (probe for supermarkets, corner shops, specialist shops etc). How often do they eat out, where? Do they buy sandwiches or take-aways?
- What reasons do they give for shopping where they do? (note any reference to 'standards' such as hygiene concerns etc)
- Do they use different outlets for different kinds of food; rationale?
- What are consumer priorities when purchasing food. How do they choose? What do they think about?
- Can they rank importance of factors they mention (e.g. convenience, cost, quality, nutrition, calories, organically produced, and so on).
- What do they insist on? What has to be true before they will buy any foodstuff?

*If necessary, explore complex drivers such as quality (what does it mean?) What are they looking for? Note any reference to standards/safety etc.*

*Take care to listen to vocabulary and do not suggest words for food safety concerns.*

*Explain that the area of interest of this research is the public's perception of these issues.*

### **3. Perceived responsibility**

*Having explained this, explore perceptions of responsibility for maintaining 'food standards', as well as attitudes to the government's role and their own role as consumers.*

- Whom do consumers hold responsible for ensuring that their concerns in this area are met? (Prompt on farmers and manufacturers/food processors, retailers, eating establishments, central and local government, they themselves).
- Would they take any action if they contracted food poisoning? Whom would they blame? Are there clear divisions in terms of responsibility, and does a hierarchy exist? How does the suspected source of poisoning affect likely action?
- What does the government currently do to ensure food standards? Which department or person is responsible for this?
- How high-profile is the issue? How high-profile should it be?
- Do consumers have confidence in the government's ability to maintain food standards?
- How wide is the government's remit? What does the government do during a health scare? How much confidence do consumers have in information and advice given? What food scares have there been recently? Who has been at risk? Where have respondents received information about food scares? What source did they trust?

- Are consumers aware of local government responsibilities? Do they know, for example, that establishments that serve and sell food have to register and are regularly inspected by EHOs and or Trading Standards Officers? Do they see themselves in any way as watchdogs, looking out for poor standards? Would they think of complaining to their local council?

#### 4. **Current attitudes towards food standards**

*Explore understanding of the terminology and specific concerns around the subject of food standards. Particularly, in relation to type of food, type of outlet and manufacturing process.*

##### Terminology

- What does 'food standards' mean? What areas/issues are covered (probe for areas of concern, factors which influence behaviour; how is behaviour influenced?) and note language used. If not mentioned, prompt on diet and nutrition, health scares, safe storage and preparation etc.

##### Specific issues

- How concerned are they about food standards generally? Do they have any examples of concerns? What action was taken, if any? Results and satisfaction.

*Let them discuss any specific issues concerning food standards at present? What do they know?*

- More generally, are standards the same everywhere? Are there any particular flashpoints?
- Are standards particularly important for certain groups of people e.g. children and the elderly? Are different issues taken in to consideration when purchasing for others? If so, in what way?

- How do concerns differ between various types of food (prompt on raw and cooked meat, fish, dairy products, eggs, vegetables, ready prepared meals). Do they categorise types of food according to how safe they are? If so, how?

*If necessary, a mapping exercise may be conducted at this point: respondents would be asked to organise various foods to indicate what issues were associated with each one, and which they were most concerned about.*

### From farm to plate

*Prompt on food chain 'from farm to plate':*

- Where do the perceived threats to food safety occur in this process?
- Probe specifically on manufacture and production of food, transport, storage and handling by retailers, storage and preparation of food in the home.
- What are the specific threats at each stage of the food chain? Do they have confidence in this process? Which parts of the process are they most concerned about?
- Do they have concerns about chemical additives? About bacterial contamination? How do these two concerns sit together?
- Do they trust some types of outlets more than others, for example supermarket versus corner shop? Why?

## **5. Sources and levels of information**

*Explore perceptions of consumer knowledge and awareness of food standards issues. Elicit sources of information and attitudes to those sources, especially government and the media.*

- How well informed do they feel about food standards?
- Where do they get their information? How much notice do they take of information?
- Which particular issues do they feel most knowledgeable about? Why do they think that is? How much do they know about issues such as labelling, food additives, provenance and so on? Are these food standards issues?
- Do they feel it is possible for them to evaluate levels of nutrition in food? Where do they imagine responsibility for nutritional values lies?
- Is there anything in particular that they find confusing? or particularly important / helpful?
- Do they trust current sources of information? Rationale?
- What is the role of the media in relation to food safety? What part does it play in shaping opinion? Do they trust the information they receive from the media? If not, why not?
- Do they think it is the job of the media to inform the public about food standards? What is the role of the media during a food scare for example?

## **6. Food safety in restaurants, canteens and schools**

*Explore perceptions of the issues when eating out, and the differences between various outlet types. Also to explore differences and similarities with eating in.*

- What about eating out? How often? Where do they go? (Include sandwich bars, fast food outlets etc)
- Discuss food safety in restaurants, fast food outlets, take-aways, canteens and schools.

- Do consumers think about food standards/safety on these premises? Do they take any measures to ascertain food standards in places that serve prepared food? Are they more concerned about some sorts of places than others?
- Would they reject particular menu items on the grounds of food standards? How much confidence do they have in different types of food served in the various kinds of establishments?

## 7. The Food Standards Agency

*Investigate awareness and expectations of the FSA. Reactions to the proposed responsibilities of the FSA, and its positioning.*

- Are consumers currently aware of proposals for the Food Standards Agency? Have they heard anything in the media? What do they know? What is their opinion?

*Stimulus material: statements of intention of the FSA, and its benefits.*

- What is their opinion of Food Standards Agency as detailed in the draft statements? Is it a good idea to have a dedicated food safety panel? What would be the arguments for and against? Why do they think the Food Standards Agency is being set up?
- What would they expect from the Food Standards Agency? What areas should it cover? What would an optimist expect, a pessimist?

*Prompt if necessary on safety and health scares, new food fads, advice on nutrition and diet, introducing legislation.*

- What kind of information do consumers want on food standards? Do they want factual information only, or advice? What do they need to inform their decisions? What format would they like this information to take? What kind of role should the Food Standards Agency have on a day to day basis? What sort of information should it provide during a food scare? How should it make its rulings known?

*Stimulus material: statement of FSA's impartiality.*

- How important is it for Food Standards Agency to be impartial? Do they believe that it would be impartial? Where would they expect the Food Standards Agency to get its information? Would they trust it to be accurate? Would they trust information from the Food Standards Agency more than that from independent research companies? How would they react to advice from the Food Standards Agency? Would they follow it or question it?

## **Stimulus Materials**

The seven numbered paragraphs below were all mounted on boards. These boards were shown to respondents towards the end of discussions to inform them about various aspects of the Food Standards Agency. The boards were treated as a means to elicit thoughts and feelings about the Food Standards Agency rather than as subjects of interest in themselves. Not all the boards were shown in all of the groups.

### 1. Main Purpose

The main purpose of the Food Standards Agency is to protect public health in all matters relating to food

### 2. Purpose

The Food Standards Agency has four purposes. To:

- Protect public health in all matters relating to food
- Be an independent and impartial voice, free from all vested interests
- Provide the public with advice and information on food safety
- Give the public confidence in government food safety arrangements

### 3. How it will protect the public?

It will protect public health in all matters relating to food by:

- Setting standards of food safety and hygiene
- Enforcing food safety regulations through local authorities

- Monitoring and surveillance of food producers, manufacturers, and retailers
- Checking foods for e.g. excessive levels of chemicals, radiology etc.
- Initiating new food regulations if research suggests they are needed
- Interpreting European legislation

#### 4. Communications

The Agency has the responsibility to improve the quality of the information that is available to the public so people can make more informed choices.

- It will publish all its research and make public the advice it gives to government and other bodies
- It will publish information and advice on a range of food issues including:
  - food safety and hygiene in the home
  - food labelling
  - nutrition
  - food allergies
  - all topical food issues
  - procedures for ensuring food safety from 'farm to fork'
- If there is public concern about a particular food, the Agency will provide clear and impartial advice, based on the most up-to-date scientific evidence

5. Further Information

- The Food Standards Agency is responsible for setting standards that food producers, manufacturers, retailers and caterers should follow to ensure food is safe
- The ultimate responsibility for food safety lies with the food industry itself
- The job of enforcing standards is that of the local authority
- The general public has a responsibility to ensure the food it eats is safe
- In some cases there will be insufficient scientific evidence to say whether or not certain food should be avoided. The Food Standards Agency will present the facts for individuals to make their own decisions

6. Changes to responsibility

Up until now no one body has had responsibility for ensuring that the food available to the public is safe to eat.

Responsibility has been divided between different branches of government, and especially between The Department of Health (which is concerned with all aspects of public health) and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, which has responsibility for food producers.

No single body has focussed on all the stages between farm and fork that can affect food safety.

Information and advice on food safety issues has tended to come from several different sources rather than one authoritative body.

7. The Food Standards Agency

The Food Standards Agency has been set up so that responsibility for all aspects of food safety rests with just one body.

The Food Standards Agency is *only* concerned with food & food safety.

It does not look after the interests of farmers or other food producers, and is entirely independent of the food industry.

It will provide an impartial, objective source of information and advice on all matters affecting food safety.

To ensure that the public is fully informed about any food safety issue, and nothing is hidden, the Food Standards Agency is committed to making public all its research reports and advice to government.