

Chapter 2: Public awareness of current food regulation

2.1 Understanding the food to fork journey

Participants had not thought much about where food comes from before the workshops

A number of participants shared their experience of farming and how this had given them a greater understanding of where food comes from and how it is produced. This included working on farms as children, while spending time abroad or working and living near farms in the UK. TV programmes such as Inside the Factory were also mentioned as a source of information for participants. However, most did not have a detailed understanding of the farm to fork journey, and this was not something they had learnt about at school or spent long considering previously.

“I think everyone will have a general understanding that there’s different processes involved, but I don’t know much in depth to be honest. I just know stuff happens.” – **Initial workshop participant, Wales**

There was some understanding of the origins of different food products, including domestic farms and imported supplies. Participants described how they often prefer to buy food locally, such as from the local butchers, or look at the labels to see the origin of products. They worried about how long food is stored for before it reaches the shelves, with participants expressing concern about the preservatives added to keep products fresh.

“I try not to think about it too much. Usually just when it comes to the packet, I will always with meat look where it’s meant to be from, and with fish and wine. But I wouldn’t try to think of too much beforehand where it’s coming from.” - **Initial workshop participant, Northern Ireland.**

Awareness of regulation in meat production was low

During spontaneous discussions, participants were widely unsure about how meat production is regulated. They assumed that quality control and health and safety measures existed, drawing on their perceptions that food is safe to eat in the UK. They saw this as largely the responsibility of the FSA.

“The FSA, I assume people are allowed to sell, make and produce food because they’re regulated by the FSA. That’s regulated, so it’s safe because they have to adhere to the FSA’s standards.” - **Initial workshop participant, Wales**

Participants reflected on the role of food businesses in maintaining standards and saw it as primarily their responsibility to adhere to hygiene and safety requirements as well as keeping records of their compliance. A number of participants felt that supermarkets carried out their own checks of food businesses, or mentioned Defra being involved in the regulatory process. Participants recognised that as consumers they also had a role to play in ensuring food is safely stored and prepared.

“I think everyone has a responsibility. Even the customers are responsible for checking food ratings of restaurants. The factories, the bosses to the managers and working people. They have

to follow the hygiene and safety standards.” – **Initial workshop participant, Wales.**

There was an expectation the FSA was involved at each stage of the food to fork journey

Figure 1: Food to fork journey. Stimulus shared with participants during the initial workshops

After seeing the food to fork journey, participants questioned whether the FSA is involved in each stage of the process from farming to retail. This was something they wanted to happen, with the FSA playing a role from the start of the journey to the end where food reaches the consumer. They questioned how the FSA interacts with other bodies including Local Authorities and supermarkets. There was also uncertainty about the role of the FSA in checking distribution processes, such as whether food is stored at the right temperature, and the extent to which they monitor retail environments.

“They need to be involved at every stage, in different ways, they need to be involved at every stage of that flowchart...The processing facilities, everything has to meet standards in the abattoir, equipment needs to be stored and maintained regularly, so it’s safe for the workers.” – **Initial workshop participant, England**

Participants focused on regulations to ensure safety and hygiene

An emphasis was placed on the importance of regulations that check the quality and safety of meat, as well as ensuring hygiene practices are adhered to. For example, one participant described how they think there are checks to make sure meat does not contain pathogens or E. coli ([footnote 1](#)).

There was also an assumption that checks were carried out to ensure that food is what it says it is. For example, participants described how they would expect the FSA to carry out checks to ensure food is being correctly labelled. This could be based on processes such as Halal, or ingredients such as e-numbers or ensuring food does not contain allergens if labelled as such. Participants also mentioned labels such as the Red Tractor symbol and the Lion symbol on eggs, seeing this as part of the regulatory process.

“I see the FSA as being a regulatory body establishing parameters of animal welfare, food handling, production and standards of distribution.” - **Initial workshop participant, England**

There was an expectation for regulations around animal welfare.

Participants expected animal welfare to be monitored, both while animals were living and during slaughter. For example, participants mentioned checks to ensure animals are slaughtered humanely, fed appropriately, and are treated well before they are killed. A small number of participants mentioned the role of veterinarians in this process, but this was not widely known.

“I’d like to think there is somebody that gauged all these processes in a way that it’s all done properly, cleanly and safely. But I don’t know what those people would be called. But I’d like to think those would be in place.” - **Initial workshop participant, England.**

There was some distrust in food businesses and concern about standards not being met.

Participants worried about when things go wrong in food production and voiced concerns about food businesses cutting corners. There was a general scepticism about meat production, with a number of participants describing how they had stopped eating meat due to concerns about animal welfare and the production processes involved. Personal experiences of abattoirs and news stories about horsemeat in ready meals were referenced as examples that had led to greater distrust. There were also concerns about how imported food is regulated to ensure it adheres to the same standards as domestic produce.

“The fear comes when things go wrong, with people cheating. When there was the horse meat scare. I don’t know how you get around that really because it has to be checked.” – **Initial workshop participant, England.**

2.2 Spontaneous reactions to current Official Controls

Participants were introduced to the current Official Controls process including approvals, inspections, sampling and verification, audits and enforcement. They were provided with information about each stage of the process and had the opportunity to ask questions.

Figure 2: Stages of meat production covered by the Official Controls process. Stimulus from the initial workshops.

Participants were reassured by the extent and thoroughness of the current Official Controls process.

There was an understanding that the Official Controls process provides consistency to meat production. Participants felt this ensures all meat products made in the UK achieve certain minimum standards set by the FSA, irrespective of the price of an item. This was reassuring and something participants expected, reflecting their general belief in the safety of food in the UK.

“Is it not to make sure there’s a consistency in the food that we’re eating, that there’s a standard being kept for people’s health? It’s a reassurance for the consumer that someone can stand over how what you’re buying got on the shelf.” – **Initial workshop participant, Northern Ireland**

Participants were often surprised about the continuous presence of Meat Hygiene Inspectors (MHI) at all slaughterhouses and that carcasses are checked by an FSA employee both before and after slaughter. They reflected on how they had not thought much about the process before and

felt reassured that there is a continuous FSA presence in food businesses including Official Veterinarians checking each animal. This was supported by participants who emphasised how it is essential mistakes are not made due to the potential public health risks involved.

“I’m taking it in. It’s not information you think about when you’re buying meat. It seems a lot to be checking every single one [carcase]. If they don’t, that missed one could be serious. It’s surprising, but it’s normal, I suppose.” - **Initial workshop participant, England**

However, there was also some scepticism about the ability of MHI to check all carcasses given the numbers involved. Participants questioned whether FSA employees can carry out thorough checks of all carcasses and were unsure about whether the sampling process could result in problems being missed. They also reflected on their own experiences of abattoirs or news stories about meat processing and were unsure whether regulations had recently changed to improve standards.

“A massive process, isn’t it? If you look at the numbers of cattle, pigs and especially birds... Are they all getting checked? It’s a lot of things to check, 1.2 million hours of testing. I’m sceptical about that. But it’s nice to see these things are going on.” – **Initial workshop participant, Wales**

Questions focused on the inspection, sampling and enforcement stages of the current Official Controls

Participants wanted to know more about the inspection process including how MHIs are trained and whether they move between different food businesses. There were some concerns about the potential for inspectors to become complacent or too familiar with plant employees if they are only based in one premise. There were also questions about how different animal carcasses are inspected and the ability of inspectors to fully assess a carcass in a short space of time. This reflected wider conversations about the resources involved in the Official Controls process.

“My only concern is do they have enough resources to go out and check all these abattoirs? That would be a big concern, to ensure there is enough resources to ensure everything is done right.” – **Initial workshop participant, Northern Ireland**

There were also questions about the proportion of meat that is sampled and whether this is extensive enough to ensure the safety of food. Participants worried that if only a small proportion of meat is sampled for verification activities, this could result in problems being missed and food unfit for human consumption entering the supply chain.

There was support for unannounced inspections as a way of checking standards

Participants widely supported this element of the Official Controls process and reflected on similar experiences of regulatory enforcement. They argued that unannounced inspections would provide a better understanding of how the business normally behaves, by limiting their ability to prepare for an inspection. For example, participants including teachers compared the inspections process to Ofsted inspections of schools.

“All inspections should be unannounced. If they see an issue, they can give places one month to get it right and if not, the place should be closed.” – **Initial workshop participant, Wales**

Participants wanted to see strong enforcement measures, as well as reflecting on the role of the FSA to support food businesses. Although they did not want to see the closure of multiple businesses and felt there was room for the FSA to provide advice to support improvements, participants fundamentally wanted to ensure food safety. There were also concerns about individuals selling food that are not regulated by the FSA. For example, if an individual sells food from their home, participants worried that products would not be verified by FSA employees and

could therefore pose a risk to health.

“Are there any people working outside of the auspices of the FSA that could get meat into the public domain? That the FSA are not aware of that are putting meat into the market, that aren’t governed by these regulations? If you go to a supermarket or butcher, you feel confident.” – **Initial workshop participant, England.**

1. Escherichia Coli (known as E. coli) is a type of bacteria that can be found in the intestines of animals and humans. Many strains of E. coli are harmless to humans, but some can cause serious illness. Most cases of foodborne illness are caused by a strain known as E. coli O157. More information is available on the [FSA website](#).