

The FSA Brochure

Who we are

Who we are, what we do, and how we do it at the Food Standards Agency

The FSA is an independent, non-ministerial department, established in 2000 following several high-profile outbreaks of foodborne illness such as BSE (mad cow disease).

Our objectives, powers and duties are mainly set out in the Food Standards Act 1999. We work across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our main objectives in law are to protect public health from risks arising from the consumption of food and generally to protect the interests of consumers in relation to food.

We are determined to drive change in the food system so it delivers better outcomes for consumers. We protect the public by ensuring that food is safe and is what it says it is, and by playing our part in helping to make food healthier and more sustainable for everyone. We work across the food system to encourage transparency and openness, make it easier for businesses to do the right thing, and increase compliance to high food standards to protect public health.

Our role includes providing policy advice to ministers; inspecting, auditing and assuring businesses producing meat, wine and dairy; and generating the evidence to ensure our decisions and advice are based on the best available science. Our functions include providing information and advice to policy-makers and to the general public in connection with the matters within our statutory objectives, monitoring developments in science and technology on these matters and commissioning research on them. We have similar functions in relation to the safety of animal feed and other interests of users of animal feed.

Our statutory powers include the power to issue guidance on control of foodborne disease, and the power to gather and publish information about the food system in support of our objectives, and to publish our own advice. We also have specific powers as a regulator, to enforce food controls directly with some businesses and to oversee the enforcement of them by local authorities, which are described in the food regulatory system section below.

[We are governed by a Board](#), rather than ministers. Our chair and other members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and the Welsh and Northern Ireland governments. We work closely with Food Standards Scotland, which is the equivalent public body for Scotland.

Our work is underpinned by the latest science and evidence and agreed at our open Board meetings. Transparency is a guiding principle for the FSA.

HM Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive contribute to our budget, which in recent years has [been about £140 million](#).



PDF

[View FSA corporate information document: Food you can trust as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#)
(17.4 MB)

Our mission and vision

Our mission is 'food you can trust', and our vision for the food system is one in which food is safe, food is what it says it is, and food is healthier and more sustainable.

Food is safe

Food is vital to everyone, every day. We all have the right to expect that the food we eat will not make us ill. This is why we will prioritise keeping the level of foodborne disease low. We do this in many ways.

They include setting the food safety regulations, monitoring the food safety inspection system, our direct inspection work and our surveillance and programmes to prevent foodborne disease.

We also respond to food incidents, taking action to protect consumers when there is concern around the safety or quality of food and feed – this includes microbiological quality and contamination of food by micro-organisms or foreign matter; allergens; composition; chemical contamination; adulteration and labelling of food.

Delivering this part of our vision requires us to innovate, evolve and react to changes across the food system.

Food is what it says it is

Consumers should be confident that food is what it says it is. That is why we will ensure food is authentic and properly described. We have a National Food Crime Unit, and we also support local authorities in their work. This is essential to maintain the confidence of the public and our international trading partners in UK food. Food authenticity also plays an important role in food safety.

Food is healthier and more sustainable

As the only department entirely focused on food, we will use our skills and expertise, supporting government partners and others in the wider food system who lead on health and sustainability.

Our strategy

The food sector is developing rapidly, fuelled by new technologies and changing business models, such as the growth of food bought through online platforms. The sector is now dealing with the impact of higher food and energy prices, labour shortages, and the impacts of the cost of living as consumers and businesses try to cut costs and energy usage.

Our strategy sets out how we will continue to ensure that people have food they can trust in this changing environment. This is through our roles as, described in the next section, and through our guiding principles for how we will operate, such as supporting innovation, being risk-based and proportionate, and making it easier for businesses to do the right thing for consumers.

We are looking for ways to use data and new technology to make regulation more proportionate, and working with influential businesses to drive change.

[Read our strategy.](#)

What we do

From policy making to evidence generating and regulating, here's what we do to keep food safe.

We are an evidence generator

We have a global reputation for science and research. From the rapid assessment of risks to consumer safety, to developing new surveillance techniques to identify risks more quickly, to understanding consumer values, attitudes and behaviours.

We publish our evidence in line with our commitment to transparency. This means it is freely available to others making policy and decisions, to inform guidance to businesses and so the public can understand the basis for our decisions.

We are also responsible for designating the official laboratories that carry out important chemical and compositional analyses on food and feed samples taken by local authorities or port health authorities.

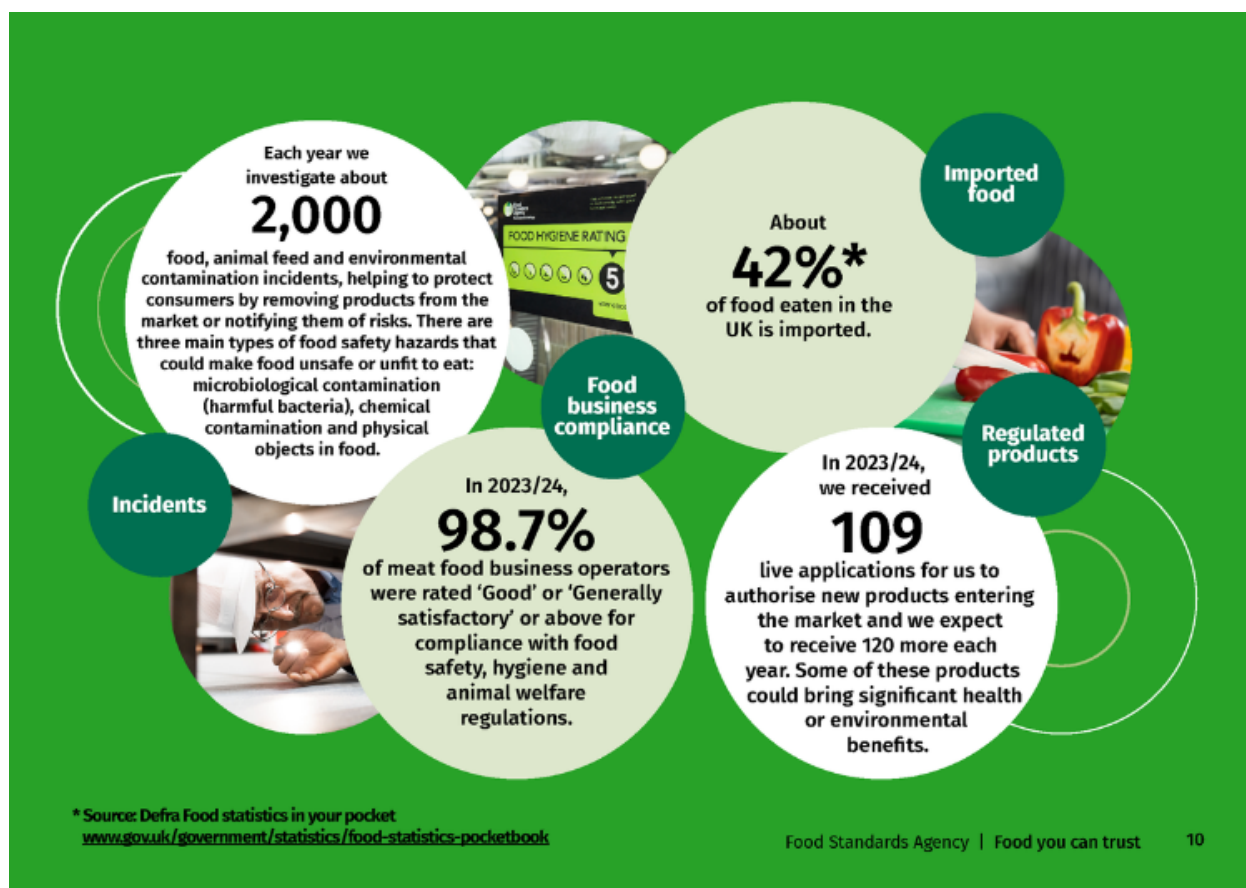
We are a policymaker

We advise ministers on food safety, food authenticity and consumer interests in relation to food in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The policy areas we advise on are different in each nation (see section: The food regulatory system). Our advice is based on science and evidence.

We support the government’s work on trade opportunities for the UK, by providing risk assessments of countries that want to start importing to the UK and demonstrating our own food safety arrangements to countries we export to. We provide policy advice to support delivery of effective and risk-based official controls – these are inspections, audits and surveillance, sampling in food businesses.

We provide policy advice to ministers on our statutory regimes for pre-market authorisations for new food and feed products, ensuring they continue to keep people safe first and foremost, while also providing an effective service to businesses and removing barriers to innovation. We are developing a new regulatory regime for precision bred food and feed and preparing for implementation. ([Precision breeding](#) describes a range of genetic techniques that can alter the DNA of plants (and animals) in a quicker and more precise way but resulting in outcomes that could have been achieved using traditional methods).

We contribute to the development of the Windsor Framework policy and implementation whilst managing the operational implications on Northern Ireland consumers. We inform cross-government work to develop and implement policy on import controls and ensure food and feed standards are improved or maintained.



We are a regulator

We regulate the food system in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We directly deliver controls in meat, primary dairy and wine production, and oversee the delivery of controls in other parts of the food system.

FSA staff and veterinary contractors inspect, audit and assure businesses, including the signing of export health certificates. We work with local authorities who inspect local businesses selling food – setting the inspection framework, providing advice and guidance, and monitoring their performance. We do the same for port health authorities, who inspect food imports. We are reforming the food safety regulatory framework to deliver more proportionate and risk-based assurance.

We assess which new types of food and feed products should be authorised for sale on the market in Great Britain and advise on the implications of regulatory changes in Northern Ireland. We, with [Food Standards Scotland](#), carry out risk analysis for these regulated products and provide advice to ministers, who decide whether the product can be placed on the market in England, Wales and Scotland.

We provide guidance to food businesses. We use surveillance to identify risks to consumers and spot potential food safety incidents, and we respond to these when they happen. This includes working with manufacturers, retailers and local authorities to trace sources of outbreaks of foodborne disease and co-ordinate action such as product recalls to protect consumers and businesses. Our [National Food Crime Unit](#) works to tackle serious fraud and related criminality in food supply chains.

We are a watchdog

We review and report on food standards and consumer interests in relation to food, using horizon scanning, intelligence and surveillance. We, with Food Standards Scotland, publish an [annual review of food standards across the UK](#).

We speak out publicly about areas of consumer interest, when we have evidence or expertise that could make a difference. This includes providing advice to ministers on whether Free Trade Agreements maintain statutory protections for human health to support reports produced for the UK Parliament under Section 42 of the Agriculture Act 2020, and separately we provide advice to ministers on requests to access our markets for specific commodities.

We are a convenor and collaborator

Food is a devolved matter. We work closely with other departments in UK Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, and with Food Standards Scotland, to deliver shared priorities and ensure consumer interests in food are represented.

We are committed to cross government working to seek consensus on the advice we provide to ministers in each country. This includes participating in Common Frameworks – these are cross government processes that ensure [a common approach is taken in devolved policy areas](#).

We also bring together other parties to address issues in the food system, working with academia, civil society and businesses to support shared goals and objectives. We share insights and evidence on the interests of citizens to help inform thinking across government.

See [Our Partnerships](#) for more information about how we work with others.

Our people

More than 1,500 people work for us to make sure food is safe and food is what it says it is.

Together we also play our part in helping to make food healthier and more sustainable for everyone.

Our people include statisticians, analysts, researchers, inspectors, enforcement experts, policy professionals, economists, veterinarians and frontline inspectors, who work alongside our operational delivery partners to inspect abattoirs and other primary production sites.

As a non-ministerial government department, we are [governed by a Board](#), rather than ministers. Our sponsor department is the [Department of Health and Social Care](#). Our Board sets the overall strategic direction of our organisation.

[Our Chief Executive](#) is responsible for ensuring that FSA activities are carried out efficiently and effectively and is accountable to the Board for the exercise of their powers. The CEO is a principal accounting officer so is directly accountable to Parliament for the value for money of the FSA's activities.

[The Welsh](#) and [Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committees](#) provide advice and insight to the Board relating to food safety and standards in their respective countries.

The Board is also guided by independent [Scientific Advisory Committees](#), which draw on the views of more than 100 experts, ensuring that our guidance is always based on the best and most recent science and evidence.

Our approach and the context we work in

We use a scientific, evidence-based approach to ensure food is safe and what it says it is.

Our approach

We have developed seven guiding principles that set out how we will deliver our strategy.

Our guiding principles:

1. We are the trusted voice on food standards, protecting consumer interests
2. We are science and evidence led
3. We are open and transparent
4. We work with, and through, others
5. We make it easier for businesses to meet their obligations and do the right thing for consumers
6. We are risk-based and proportionate
7. We are innovative

More about [our guiding principles](#).

Did you know 90% of people have heard of the FSA? And of those, 72% trust us to do our job?

Source: [Food and You 2](#) (published September 2024)

The context we work in

In the UK food sector:

- £146.7 billion = Agri-food sector contribution to national Gross Value Added in 2022 (UK)
- 4.2 million people = Employed in the agri-food sector in 2022 (Great Britain)
- £245.5 billion = Consumer expenditure on food and drink in 2023 (UK)
- £24.4 billion = Food, feed and drink exports in 2023 (UK)

Source: [Defra Food statistics in your pocket](#)

Of the 600,000+ registered food businesses, England, Northern Ireland and Wales:

- 4,000+ = Primary producers
- 17,000 = Manufacturers and packers
- 1,000+ = Importers/exporters
- 9,000+ = Distributors/ transporters
- 121,000+ = Retailers
- 407,000+ = Restaurants and caterers

Source: [Annual local authority food law enforcement figures](#) (2021/22 and 2019/20)

The food regulatory system

The food system is complex and its regulation involves multiple bodies.

The Food Standards Agency operates in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales and has different policy responsibilities within these countries.

[Food Standards Scotland](#) is the non-ministerial government department of the Scottish Government responsible for food safety, food standards, nutrition, food labelling, feed official controls and meat inspection in Scotland.

Our areas of policy responsibility

In Northern Ireland only:

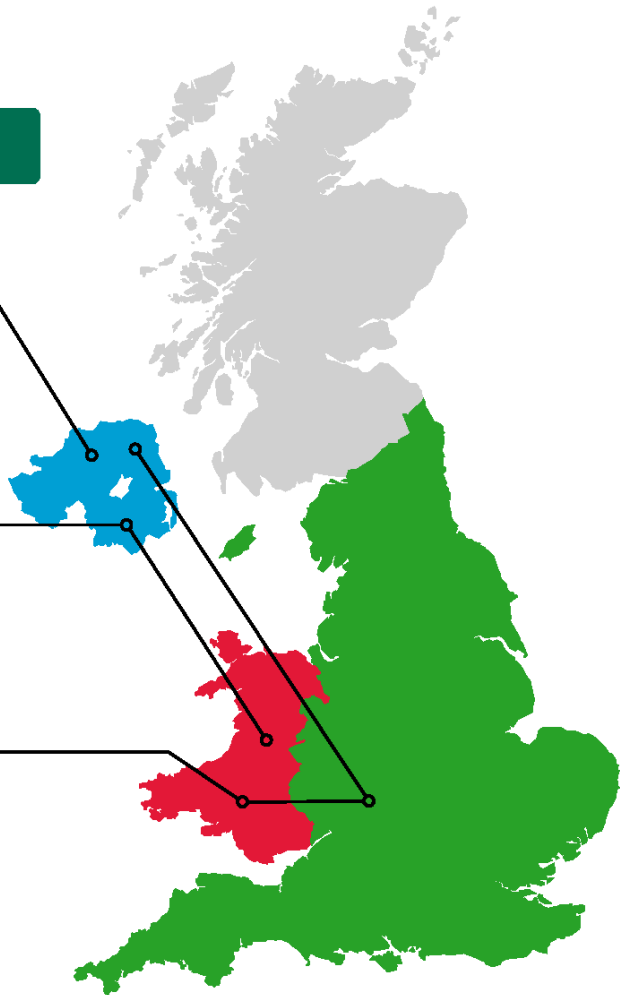
- Nutritional standards, and labelling
- Dietary health and surveillance

In Northern Ireland and Wales:

- Compositional standards and labelling

Across Wales, England and Northern Ireland:

- Food and feed safety and hygiene
- Food safety labelling, including allergen labelling



Our areas of policy responsibility

Across England, Northern Ireland, and Wales:

- food and feed safety and hygiene
- food safety labelling, including allergen labelling

In Northern Ireland and Wales:

- compositional standards and labelling

In Northern Ireland only:

- nutritional standards, and labelling
- dietary health and surveillance

Others' areas of policy responsibility

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs: Other food labelling in England (includes composition standards, country of origin)

Department of Health and Social Care: Nutrition standards, nutrition food labelling in England

Welsh Government: Nutrition standards, nutrition food labelling in Wales

Who enforces food controls?

FSA delivery

Meat Hygiene Inspectors and **Official Veterinarians** conduct hygiene, document and physical checks and take samples from approved producers of meat (including abattoirs and cutting plants).

Qualified Veterinarians conduct checks on animal products and deliver animal welfare checks. (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is responsible for the meat operations delivery on behalf of the FSA in Northern Ireland).

Wine Standards Inspectors conduct quality authenticity, labelling and traceability checks, and provide guidance and support to growers, wine producers and traders.

Dairy Hygiene Inspectors inspect primary production premises, check liquid raw milk, raw cows drinking milk and raw drinking milk production, whilst promoting best hygiene practices.

Imported food controls delivery

Local and port health authorities in England, local authorities and the Animal and Plant Health Agency in Wales, and local authorities and DAERA in NI are responsible for imported food controls delivery.

Port Health Officers conduct risk-based document checks, identity checks, physical checks, and take samples of food imports.

Official Veterinarians and **Official Fish Inspectors** conduct checks on animal products.

Local authority delivery

Food Safety Officers conduct food safety and hygiene official controls. They inspect premises to check that food is stored and prepared safely.

Food Standards Officers check that food meets safety, composition and nutrition labelling standards (for example, labelling of allergens, use-by dates, nutritional and compositional information).

Food businesses regulated by local authorities include food producers, food processors, catering establishments, takeaway and food delivery, retailers and approved dairy, meat and fish establishments.

Delivery of **animal feed** controls is the responsibility of local authorities in England and Wales, and DAERA in NI.

The FSA and local authorities together deliver **shellfish** official controls.

Food and feed businesses responsibility

Under **UK food and animal feed regulations**, it is the responsibility of food businesses to ensure that all food and feed placed on the market is safe, that its quality is what consumers would expect and that it is not labelled in a false or misleading way.

Our partnerships

We strive to build strategic, collaborative partnerships in the UK and abroad.

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Our Food Hygiene Rating Scheme is delivered in partnership with about 330 local authorities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. They carry out hygiene inspections in about 600,000 premises – enabling consumer choice and improving hygiene standards in food.

Scientific partnerships across government and with academia are critical to meeting our science and evidence needs. We lead on the Pathogen Surveillance in Agriculture, Food and the Environment (PATH-SAFE) programme, a £24.4 million cross-government programme, funded by HM Treasury, to explore novel methods for improved detection and tracking of foodborne pathogens and antimicrobial resistance through the whole agri-food system.

Strong partnership working also helps us to understand and reach the consumers we seek to protect. For example, partnering with online platforms like Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats has helped us to increase transparency of information on hygiene in food businesses, enabling consumers to consider food safety when ordering food online. Collaborating with charities like Allergy UK and Anaphylaxis UK helps us to better understand and support people living with food hypersensitivities.

We work with other government departments on projects which can support food safety, authenticity, health or sustainability. For example, in England we have worked closely with colleagues in the Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, and local authorities on a pilot that might help to assess and improve the level of compliance with School Food Standards. In Northern Ireland we have produced a guide to healthier and more sustainable vending and introduced nutritional standards for snacks and drinks.

We work in international fora to safeguard food entering the UK and to be at the forefront of international developments in food safety. Read about [our work with partners to influence international food safety standards](#).

Our history: Protecting your plate since 2000

Here are just a few highlights from the first 25 years of the Food Standards Agency

2000: Creation of the FSA and commitment to openness and transparency

The FSA was created as an independent government department working across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland to protect public health and consumers' wider interests in relation to food. We were established after several high-profile outbreaks and deaths from foodborne illness.

At launch, we made a commitment to operate openly and transparently. Our statutory objectives include consulting on our activities, and making our decisions, and the information on which they are based, accessible to the public. From the beginning, we have held our Board meetings in public – ground-breaking for its time, and still so now.

2005: Launching ‘Safer Food, Better Business’ to make food hygiene easier for small businesses

In 2005 we launched ‘[Safer Food, Better Business](#)’ to help small and micro businesses to adopt good food safety procedures.

Designed to meet the needs of different types of businesses – including small catering companies, small retail companies, restaurants and takeaways – this guidance continues to be a core part of our offering and most restaurant kitchens now have a printed copy. In 2023 alone there were more than 600,000 page views to the ‘Safer Food, Better Business’ page of the FSA website and nearly 550,000 downloads of the guidance.

In Northern Ireland, catering businesses use the [Safe Catering guide](#) to help them comply with food legislation. This food safety management tool offers practical and comprehensive advice to caterers to help them produce a food safety management plan based on the principles of HACCP

2007: Initiating front of pack nutritional labelling

In 2010, our responsibilities for nutrition standards and nutrition food labelling in England and Wales were moved to the Department of Health and the Welsh Government respectively. Prior to this, we led on the early development of voluntary front of pack nutritional labelling on prepacked foods.

The label shows, at a glance, whether food is high (red), medium (amber) or low (green) in fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt, as well as the total energy (calories and kilojoules) provided.

The labelling, now in widespread use, was designed to encourage consumers to look for and demand healthier food and give an incentive to businesses to produce that food.

We continue to influence the scheme and a recent consumer campaign in Northern Ireland entitled ‘[Check the Label](#)’ encouraged consumers to use front of pack labelling by highlighting the nutritional value of commonly purchased foods.

2010: Improving hygiene standards in food businesses

In 2010, we launched the voluntary Food Hygiene Rating Scheme to provide the public with information about the hygiene standards in food businesses.

We operate the scheme in partnership with local authorities. They give businesses a hygiene rating, from 0 at the bottom to 5 at the top. The scheme became statutory in Wales from November 2013 and in October 2016 in Northern Ireland, making it mandatory for businesses to display their ratings.

Hygiene standards have improved – businesses achieving the top rating of 5 went up from 54% in 2013 to 76% in 2023. Research shows that businesses with higher ratings are less likely to be responsible for outbreaks of foodborne illness.

2013: Horsemeat crisis

The horsemeat crisis was a food scandal that rocked consumer confidence in UK food and cost the industry hundreds of millions of pounds. The discovery of horsemeat in products that were labelled as beef led to the recall of millions of products across Europe.

We now work more effectively with industry, who in turn are much better at probing in detail along their supply chain. The sampling which industry carries out allows us to make more informed decisions on the action we need to take to protect consumers. We have also improved the way the FSA gathers other intelligence, using data and predictive analytics to monitor risks.

In the wake of the crisis, we established the National Food Crime Unit (NFCU) to boost our investigatory expertise in food fraud. The NFCU now has a team of about 80 people whose focus is on preventing, detecting and investigating serious fraud within food supply chains.

2014: Reducing Campylobacter poisoning

In 2014, [campylobacter](#) was the most common cause of bacterial food poisoning in the UK, affecting more than a quarter of a million people each year.

To tackle this, the FSA launched Acting on Campylobacter Together (ACT). This included working with farmers, slaughterhouses, and retailers to reduce the presence of campylobacter and possibility of cross-contamination and educating consumers and caterers on good hygiene practices.

2018: Piloting use of blockchain technology as a regulatory tool to drive and verify compliance in the food chain

In 2018, we successfully completed a pilot using blockchain technology in a cattle slaughterhouse. It was the first time blockchain had been used as a regulatory tool to drive and verify compliance in the food chain.

Blockchain takes records from each stage along the supply chain – from the arrival of the animal at the slaughterhouse, to the packaged meat – and puts them in a block. Each block is ‘chained’ to the next block, using an encrypted signature. This allows it to be shared and checked by anyone with permission (from farmers to slaughterhouses), rather than having a single central system controlled by one organisation.

Blockchain could increase the transparency of the supply chain, as information about a particular animal can easily be shared across the chain. It is tamperproof, as it involves multiple copies of data. It improves traceability, as the identification of a product’s journey helps assure quality. It is timesaving, as blockchain improves operations by reducing unnecessary activities, such as data duplication.

2019: Improving the quality of life for people living with food hypersensitivities

In 2019, the government carried out an Allergen Labelling Review following the death of teenager Natasha Ednan-Laperouse. Natasha died from an allergic reaction to sesame in a baguette, which was not labelled with allergen information.

The FSA Board recommended full ingredient and allergen labelling on food that is [prepacked for direct sale \(PPDS\)](#) – food packed on the premises before a customer orders it, like some salads or sandwiches. The government agreed with this recommendation.

A new legal requirement was introduced effective from October 2021 requiring businesses to provide a full ingredient list on PPDS food with the allergens emphasised, giving people with food hypersensitivities the ability to make safe choices when buying food.

2020/2021: Supporting business through change: ensuring food remains safe and what it says it is

Brexit: Ahead of the UK's departure from the EU We took on new responsibilities taking over some functions delivered by the EU. We now approve new types of food that come on sale here, set rules for checks of imported food, and more. We use new predictive modelling systems, using global open data sources to determine risks to the UK.

COVID-19 pandemic: Our risk assessments of COVID-19 from food were key in informing guidance produced for both food businesses and consumers. We supported food business operators in the post-lockdown recovery and helped make it simple for them to operate safely.

In 2021, our recovery plan was implemented to help local authorities get back on track and clear the backlog of food inspections that built up as local teams successfully targeted their resources at the highest risk businesses while fighting COVID-19.

According to our digital registration service 37% of new ventures registered since the start of the pandemic (March 2020) were run from domestic kitchens at private addresses. [Our 2022 campaign encouraged as many of these new start-ups to register with their local authority.](#)

2022: Annual review of UK food standards

We published with Food Standards Scotland, [Our Food: An annual review of food standards across the UK](#), the first comprehensive report of food standards in the UK.

It provides a baseline assessment of our food standards, following the UK's exit from the EU, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We will use this series of reports to provide an objective, data-driven assessment of the safety and standards of food over time. We have repeated the assessments each year.

2023: Commitment to innovation and proportionate risk-based regulation

We worked in partnership with Defra on supporting the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill through parliament, achieving Royal Assent in the spring. We also worked to develop a proportionate framework for regulating precision bred organisms (PBOs). The framework will form the basis upon which PBOs are authorised and placed on the market as food and feed in England. [More about precision breeding.](#)

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