

Research into food sampling policies and approach

Area of research interest: [Capabilities](#)

Background

Local authorities are legally required to inspect food and feed businesses appropriately and consistently, ensuring they meet hygiene (microbiological) and legally prescribed food standards and compositional requirements. In addition, the Food Law Code of Practice requires local authorities to set up, maintain and implement a sampling policy and programme.

The FSA wanted to conduct some further research to provide evidence of how local authorities consider and develop their sampling policies, the factors that influence the scope of their sampling framework, how they use and respond to sampling results, and to create methodologies for assessing the effectiveness of a sampling programme.

Objectives and Approach

Research was required to understand:

- How local authorities consider and develop their sampling policies, the factors that influence the scope of their sampling framework and how they use the sampling results;
- To identify key factors that influence the development, implementation and evaluation of sampling policies; and
- To understand what corrective action local authorities take in response to unsatisfactory samples and whether these actions effectively correct the issues identified.

The research used a qualitative methodology with 22 x 45 minute telephone interviews to meet the exploratory nature of the objectives. Interviews were conducted by senior researchers and followed a topic guide that allowed views to be explored in a flexible manner.

Results

Research interviews included discussion on the context of sampling in local authorities, drivers and barriers to sampling and to the development of sampling policies. The themes echo findings from a review the FSA conducted into food standards delivery and of the food and feed laboratory system.

There was a large degree of variation in sampling practice. Even amongst a narrow sample (i.e. mostly local authorities who conduct higher volumes of sampling), there were many differences in budget, structure and approaches to sampling.

However, sampling was seen as a valuable tool in the compliance toolbox. Participants recognised that there was a growing need for sampling, particularly given the growth in novel and imported foods, and the increased focus on allergens.

Participants reported that sampling has decreased over the years due to budget and resource pressures, and it is recognised that some local authorities undertake little or no sampling.

Most local authority participants had sampling policies in place. However, a minority did not have policies, even though they knew this meant they were not compliant with the FSA Food Law Code of Practice.

Research report

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[View Appendix A- LA sampling discussion guide \(LA interviews\) as PDF\(Open in a new window\)](#) (260.47 KB)

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