FSA and UKRI join forces with the public to explore food safety

These citizen science projects include exploring the bacteria on home grown produce, parents testing the safety of baby formula, and people with food hypersensitivities analysing the allergens in food bought online.

All of the funded projects are linked to the FSA's Areas of Research Interest themes, covering issues such as antimicrobial resistance (AMR), food hypersensitivity and food safety and hygiene in the home. The funding was delivered in collaboration with the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Economic and Social research Council (ESRC), both part of UKRI. It is part of a wider effort to coordinate activities and develop a joined-up approach to tackle the challenges of maintaining safe food in the UK.

Citizen science projects put the public at the heart of the research process. Rather than being the subjects of the research, citizens are actively involved in collecting and analysing data, and even deciding what questions they want to ask and co-developing the approaches with researchers. Citizen science gives participants the opportunity to directly contribute to scientific research and influence policy.

Professor Robin May, Chief Scientific Advisor for the FSA said:

> 'I'm delighted that the FSA is supporting these exciting citizen science projects across the country. In addition to delivering invaluable data, these projects will allow the communities we serve to help build the evidence on which policy decisions are made. We are committed to using science and evidence to tackle the latest food-related issues and citizen science is a fantastic way of doing this.'

Professor Melanie Welham, Executive Chair at BBSRC said:

> 'Ensuring the sustainable production, integrity and safety of our food are critical challenges that require different disciplines to work together to develop new approaches and novel solutions. BBSRC recognises that public dialogue and engagement around food is an essential part of that and these citizen science projects can demonstrate the power of involving the public in scientific research and make important contributions to maintaining the integrity of our food system.'

Tom Saunders, Head of Public Engagement at UKRI said:

> 'UKRI is committed to breaking down the barriers between research and society and one way we can do this is by enabling the public to be actively involved in research. These exciting citizen science projects will support people from outside of the research and innovation system to bring their lived experience and unique perspectives into the research process, tackling important issues around food safety and standards. We look forward to sharing the outcomes and lessons from these projects with policymakers and the Research and Innovation community.'

All projects will be between six and nine months long and are due to begin in late 2021.

The successful projects are:

Citizen science and antimicrobial resistance - Dr Sarah West, University of York

A pilot study to collect data about food handling practices and AMR bacteria associated with home-grown produce and what impact involvement has on citizens' knowledge and understanding of food safety and AMR.

Finding the right formula – establishing the feasibility of doing science in the home to assess the safety of Powdered Infant Formula preparation - Dr Aimee Grant, Swansea University

A collaborative community science project developed between parents and researchers to test the safety of Powdered Infant Formula prepared at home.

Food allergy awareness champions: Towards improving food safety standards in online food procurement for people with food hypersensitivity - Dr Tassos Koidis, Institute for Global Food Security, Queen's University Belfast

This project aims to understand the safety, efficiency, practices, and behaviours of people with food hypersensitivities when buying food online.

Exploring the chopping board microbiome - Dr Alan Goddard, Aston University

This project will engage underrepresented communities in the West Midlands to investigate levels of foodborne bacteria in the home and produce educational materials for their communities.

Engaging food hypersensitive communities in citizen science - Prof Julie Barnett, University of Bath

This study will explore the experience of people with food hypersensitivities when eating out and what the implications are for relevant industry, policy and practitioner stakeholders.

Using citizen science to explore plant breeding and investigate food-chain transparency for novel breeding methods - Dr Gulbanu Kaptan, University of Leeds

This pilot project aims to improve participants' knowledge of the use of new technologies and gene editing in the food-chain. Participants will be involved at the design and data collection stages of the research. They will also take part in an interactive training and discussion session where they can improve their knowledge of plant breeding and novel methods.