

Evaluating our guidance on cross contamination

Area of research interest: [Foodborne pathogens](#)

Study duration: 2012-01-01

Planned completion: 1 November 2012

Project code: FS245013

Conducted by: PSI

Background

Serious outbreaks of *E. coli* O157 were reported in Scotland during 1996 and Wales during 2005. They resulted in the deaths of some affected individuals and in serious long-term health problems for others. Both outbreaks were attributed to cross-contamination arising from poorly managed food handling practices in the commercial setting. In response to this, the Agency established a programme of work to reduce the risk of similar outbreaks occurring in the future.

In 2011 the Agency embarked on the development and dissemination of new guidance for industry and enforcement officers. The purpose of this guidance was: to increase recognition of the threat that *E. coli* O157 poses to public health the need for stringent measures during food production to control cross-contamination risks associated with the pathogen.

The guidance was produced upon principles that were subject to a formal public consultation in 2010. In February 2011 the Agency published the detailed guidance and an additional fact sheet summarising its content. Training for local authorities enforcement officers was also provided alongside this.

The FSA is committed to evaluating its activities, both in terms of assessing impact but also in gathering process feedback to assist continuous improvement. Research Approach

This study aimed to:

- support the Agency in developing and executing an evaluation of the *E. coli* O157 cross contamination guidance
- carry out new primary research to identify awareness of the guidance and to gather feedback from both businesses and enforcement officers

The evaluation consisted of several stages. These were:

- a scoping stage to help inform the second stage of a quantitative survey
- a quantitative survey of both food business operators and local authorities to gain a better understanding of how the guidance has been received and used
- a qualitative follow-up stage to explore more deeply some of the issues from the survey

The Agency will use the results of the evaluation in order to consider enhancing the content and delivery of the guidance in the future.

Results

Dissemination:

- In terms of sector, butchers were prioritised for dissemination by 90% of surveyed local authorities, followed by caterers (by 28%)
- Various businesses were prioritised if they were regarded as 'high risk' (by 80%) and based on the type of equipment they used (by 20%)

Awareness of guidance:

- 56% of the surveyed businesses were aware new guidance had been issued by the FSA.
- Awareness was higher in butchers (80%), reflecting their prioritisation for dissemination, with a reasonably consistent level of awareness across the other sectors
- Only delicatessens (47%) and catering (49%) fell below 50%

Views on the content:

- The majority of surveyed businesses believed that implementation of the guidance was a legal requirement (86%)
- 55% reported that their awareness of the risks of cross-contamination has been enhanced by the guidance materials

Views on the ease of understanding:

- 63% of surveyed local authorities found the full guidance easy/very easy to understand, with 9% saying it was difficult to understand
- 67% of businesses found it easy/very easy to understand and only 1% difficult to understand. Difficulties were related to the guidance being too 'technical' or long and how to practically implement it

Scale and range of changes made by businesses:

- 31% of businesses reported making changes as a result of the guidance
- Butchers (44%) and restaurants (31%) were the most likely to report having made changes
- The most common changes reported were use of a designated clean area (67%) and separation in storage and display (60%)

Challenges in implementing the guidance:

- 53% of butchers and 70% of non-butchers reported that nothing was notably challenging when implementing the guidance
- 17% of butchers found the introduction of separate complex equipment challenging, but fewer than 10% of businesses cited any other changes as notably challenging

Enforcement approaches:

- In line with FSA expectations, the most common change reported to inspectors had been local authorities making businesses aware of the guidance (49%) and providing more detailed information
- 21% conducted longer visits and 18% changed pro-formas or checklists
- Over half of the local authorities visited had revised their aide memoire for high risk foods establishments and increased their overall inspection time

Improvements to the guidance:

- One third of local authorities stated that no improvements were necessary
- Among those who suggested changes, the most common suggestions were to include more practical examples (23%) or to provide clearer language and better explanations of terminology (17%)

Research report

England, Northern Ireland and Wales

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