

## Executive summary

This report describes the key changes in food standards from 2019 to 2021, a period when the UK's food system was affected by our departure from the EU and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Introduction and scope

**This report describes the key changes in food standards from 2019 to 2021, a period when the UK's food system was affected by our departure from the EU and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Food standards, of course, mean different things to different people. For the purposes of this report, we look at standards in two ways:

1. **Food and feed safety (including allergen management)** – that is, ensuring the product is safe to consume, or in the case of feed, safe for introduction into the food chain. A number of factors are taken into account when proposing safety standards, including advice from the FSA and FSS risk assessors and wider as well as other aspects such as the principles that may determine consumer acceptability of risk.
2. **Other standards that support consumers and provide assurance** – this includes provenance and authenticity, production standards (for example, animal welfare and sustainability), composition and nutritional content, labelling and advertising of food, and other information that enables consumers to make informed choices based on the values that are important to them.

Industry compliance with regulatory standards, and the capacity and capability of authorities to uphold them, are essential elements in assessing whether food standards are being maintained in practice. Whilst many standards are mandated in law, there are also voluntary standards, maintained by industry or supported through independent assurance schemes, that can exceed legal requirements and reassure consumers when making informed food choices.

In this report we ask whether our food is fundamentally safe, nutritious, authentic and what it claims to be, all with a view to protecting the consumer's best interests. To answer this, we draw on a range of evidence – including local authority data, official government statistics, compliance returns from import checks, and the FSA and FSS's own research and surveillance activity. Our aim is to show whether standards are being upheld, with a focus this year on regulatory standards. The report overall provides UK-wide analysis but, where possible, we go into individual data across the four nations.

Future reports may also consider broader production standards, such as more specific issues related to animal welfare and the impact of production on the environment, reflecting the increasing public awareness of, and interest in, how our food system works and its impacts on the world around us. These issues are also of relevance when it comes to new free trade agreements, which have generated debate across the home nations due to concerns that they may lead to food produced to lower standards being placed on the UK market.

Finally, we report on how food standards are enforced, exploring the robust system of controls that underpin business compliance, whether at a slaughterhouse, the border, a factory or elsewhere. Our aim is to gauge how effectively the food industry adheres to these rules, and how well we, in turn, support them to do so.

Like the food system itself, food standards are complex and multi-dimensional. As consumers, we all have a view on what matters most when it comes to the intrinsic qualities of the food we eat, and this itself changes over time as our preferences and priorities shift and new events change our food supply chain. As such, the priorities and standards we pursue form part of an ongoing dialogue between industry, consumers and rule-makers about what we ultimately value.

We cannot hope to do justice to every aspect of food standards in the pages ahead, although over time we would like this annual report to grow – and for our data analysis and commentary to grow with it. For now, we make clear at the start of each chapter about which specific aspects of our definition of food standards we are focusing on in each case.

## **Key findings**

The evidence set out in this report suggests that overall food safety standards have largely been maintained during 2021. However, this is a cautious conclusion. The pandemic disrupted regular inspections, sampling and audits across the food system, reducing the amount of data we can draw upon in assessing business compliance against food law requirements. It also changed patterns of consumer behaviour. While food safety standards have largely been maintained, both organisations recognise there are significant risks ahead.

The report highlights two particular areas of concern. Firstly there has been a fall in the level of local authority inspections of food businesses. The situation is in the process of being repaired – in particular in food hygiene inspections of cafes and restaurants – but progress is being constrained by resource and the availability of qualified professionals. The second is in relation to the import of food from the EU. To enhance levels of assurance on higher-risk EU food like meat, dairy and eggs, and food and feed that has come to the UK via the EU, it is essential that improved controls are put in place to the timescale that the UK Government has set out (end 2023). The longer the UK operates without assurance from the exporting country that products meet the UK's high food and feed safety standards the less confident we can be that we can effectively identify potential safety incidents. It is vital that the UK has the ability to prevent entry of unsafe food and identify and respond to changing risks. Although we have considered these challenges carefully and put other arrangements within our control in place, they are not, in our view, sufficient. We are therefore committed to working with other government departments to ensure that the introduction of these improved import controls provides high levels of protection for UK consumers.

## **Outline of the report**

The report is made up of five main chapters, each focusing on a different aspect of the UK's food system. We have listed the key points from each of these below. While the majority of data featured in this report covers the period from 2019 to 2021, we have included historic data where appropriate, as well as our most recent piece of consumer research ([The UK Public's Interests, Needs and Concerns Around Food](#)), which was conducted in early 2022.

### **The nation's plate**

The chapter looks at the types of food finding their way on to the nation's plate and what this tells us about how closely we are following dietary recommendations. It also looks at our eating habits and purchasing behaviours, including the factors that influence them.

1. There has been very little change in the nation's nutrient intake over the last decade, with many people still falling short of official dietary recommendations. However there has been a notable reduction in the average intake of free sugars, particularly in children (though it still greatly exceeds recommended intakes). People are also eating less red and processed meat, and one in four people say they are now adopting 'flexitarian' eating habits, meaning that they are still eating, but cutting down on, meat, dairy and animal products.

2. The pandemic's impact on people's diets appears to be mixed. There is evidence that restrictions led some people to prepare and eat healthier meals at home, but also increased the tendency to indulge in unhealthy snacks and takeaways. People from households with lower financial or food security reported consuming fewer fruits and vegetables, less fish and more sugar-sweetened soft drinks than those who were more financially or food secure.

3. The latest FSA and FSS research shows accessing healthy food at an affordable price is uppermost in the public's mind. More than three-quarters (76%) said they were concerned or extremely concerned about the cost of food.

4. Recent increases in food prices present a growing threat to the standard of food people eat. More than half (53%) of consumers say they feel 'priced out' of buying healthy food; and one fourth consumers now feel the only foods realistically available to them are heavily processed, increasing to around half for households facing food insecurity. It is likely that the quality of the nation's plate may be affected as the squeeze in household incomes intensifies this year.

## **Going global**

This chapter looks at the reported safety of imported food over recent years, as well as the growing debate around how we uphold wider production standards as the UK enters into new trading partnerships. This is important because food safety alone is not a guarantee of high standards.

5. Around 40 million tonnes of food are imported from abroad each year. The EU remains by far the biggest supplier, accounting for over 90% of all beef, dairy, eggs and pork products imported into the UK and nearly two-thirds (65%) of all food and feed not of animal origin.

6. Despite recent volatility in import patterns, there are no signs of any immediate or wholesale shift in trading flows following the UK's departure from the EU, though EU imports of fish, lamb and mutton, and pork have all fallen between 2019 and 2021.

7. Analysis of compliance levels in import controls checks carried out between 2020 and 2021 shows that there has not been any meaningful change in the standard of imported goods as a result of either the pandemic or the UK's EU departure.

8. The UK Government recently announced that full import controls for goods coming from the EU to Great Britain would be further delayed and replaced by a modernised approach to border controls by the end of 2023. Until then, the UK food safety authorities continue to manage risks through pre-notifications<sup>[1]</sup>, which were introduced in January 2022 for certain high-risk food and feed imports, and through enhanced capability and capacity put in place as part of EU exit planning to detect and respond effectively to food and feed incidents.

9. Although there is no evidence that the standards of EU imports have fallen, the FSA and FSS believe the current situation does reduce our ability to prevent foods that do not meet the UK's high standards from being placed on our market. The lack of import controls means we are not receiving official assurance from the exporting country that imports meet the UK's high food and feed safety standards. The absence of border checks could also affect how we identify and respond to safety risks in future, with additional resource required by the UK to maintain

levels of food safety assurance for these imports.

10. New free trade agreements (FTAs) with Australia and New Zealand are in the process of being ratified at the time of writing. The UK Government has a statutory obligation to report to the UK Parliament on whether each FTA maintains statutory protections for human, animal or plant health, animal welfare or the environment. The FSA and FSS are providing advice on statutory protections for human health during this process.

## **Safe and sound**

This chapter looks at how many food incidents were reported over this timeframe and explores the different factors influencing them. It also describes the latest trends in food crime and what is shaping our response to it.

11. Our analysis of reported food incidents shows a fall in the number of incidents in 2020, likely reflecting fewer food businesses trading during lockdown and the narrowing of product ranges by supermarkets. Levels of notifications have since recovered to historic averages.

12. There was a rise in reported cases of contamination by harmful micro-organisms during 2020 and 2021, as a result of more advanced surveillance (in particular, the introduction of Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS) to track the source of outbreaks) and the specific impact of an outbreak of Salmonella in breaded chicken products which triggered increased sampling activity.

13. There was a welcome fall in incidents related to food allergens from 2019 to 2021, which may indicate improvements in industry awareness and practice following a number of high-profile incidents. Widespread EU and UK reporting of ethylene oxide in sesame seeds accounts for many of the reported cases of chemical contamination in 2020 and 2021.

14. The UK's exit from the EU means that it no longer has full access to the European Commission's Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) though it continues to receive notifications concerning the UK. The FSA and FSS have built alternative arrangements with other international partners as well as investing in new surveillance approaches. Levels of incoming and outgoing notifications from EU and non-EU countries have remained stable.

15. There were 100 successful 'disruptions'<sup>2</sup> of criminal activity within the food chain reported by the UK's two food crime units in 2021. Five cases in Scotland have been referred to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service, with three of these being considered under petition procedure reserved for the most serious offences. Last year also saw the first prosecution stemming from an investigation by the National Food Crime Unit (NFCU), related to the sale of 2,4 dinitrophenol (DNP) alongside other offences linked to controlled drugs and prescription only medicines.

16. Despite the pressure put on the food supply chain by the pandemic and the UK's EU departure there has been no evidence of significant exploitation by criminals. There has been no discernible increase in food crime detected over this period.

## **Informing consumers**

This chapter covers the implications for food information after EU Exit, including the steps taken to provide business continuity after the transition period, domestic policy changes to inform and protect consumers, and future developments for improving food labelling transparency.

17. The UK's departure from the EU prompted a series of actions designed to minimise disruption, including new legislation, changes to compositional standards and origin labelling. A new UK Nutrition and Health Claims Committee (UKNHCC) has also been established to provide expert advice and scrutiny on food marketing claims. Existing arrangements remain in Northern

Ireland under  
the terms of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland.

18. Sampling conducted by the FSA and FSS during the pandemic provides reasonable confidence that the basic safety of the majority of food products was being upheld. However, a significant number of products tested did not meet required standards in at least one area, particularly in terms of the quality and accuracy of consumer information. This underlines the need for ongoing monitoring and increased investment in a wider range of sampling activities.

19. This has also been a significant period in the development of domestic policy relating to food information with the introduction of amendments to the Food Information Regulations 2014 and equivalents in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales [3]. Also known as 'Natasha's Law', these new regulations require that all food that is pre-packed for direct sale has clearer information about ingredients and allergens. Mandatory calorie labelling, meanwhile, has been introduced in large food outlets across England.

20. Maintaining food authenticity and information standards in the future means keeping pace with a range of long-term challenges – from addressing shortfalls in inspection capacity, to expanding the scale and sophistication of sampling activity conducted by the food safety authorities. The growth in online commerce also creates further complexity by increasing the number of online businesses requiring oversight and assurance.

## **Keeping it clean**

This chapter assesses hygiene standards across different types of food and feed establishments. It charts the latest available data on legal compliance, in addition to how food businesses are performing according to the two food hygiene rating systems. Recognising the disruption caused by the pandemic, the chapter also looks at what steps are being taken to restore and strengthen inspection systems for the future.

Local authorities across the UK are responsible for carrying out a range of food hygiene checks and interventions at food establishments. Inspections were badly disrupted by the impact of the pandemic, which restricted the ability of inspection teams to physically access many establishments. The data in this chapter needs to be considered in this light.

22. The latest compliance data indicates that over 95% of food businesses inspected by local authorities were broadly compliant (or higher) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Similarly in Scotland, food law compliance status is above 96%.

23. Three-quarters of food establishments in England, Wales and Northern Ireland achieved a top rating of five under the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) (which provides a rating between zero and five), but 3% were rated two or below, requiring some improvement, major improvement or urgent improvement. In Scotland under the Food Hygiene Information Scheme (FHIS), which provides a rating of 'pass' or 'improvement required', nearly 94% of businesses received a pass rating over the past three years, with around 6% of businesses requiring improvement. Data is based on a snapshot of FHRS and FHIS ratings on 31 December 2021. This includes rating assessments undertaken both during and before the pandemic.

24. There was high and stable compliance with hygiene standards in meat and dairy establishments and among feed businesses, with the vast majority given a clean bill of health – though again, audit and inspection activity were significantly curtailed by the effect of social restrictions, with many checks having to be performed remotely. A more conclusive picture should emerge in next year's

report.

25. Both the FSA and FSS are working with local authorities as they resume inspections across food businesses, starting with those establishments with a history of non-compliance or deemed to be high-risk. Early evidence suggests that local authority inspectors are encountering higher levels of non-compliance in businesses they have inspected since the onset of the pandemic. There is, however, insufficient evidence to say whether this drop in standards is more widely reflected across other businesses.

26. Other factors likely to affect food hygiene standards in future include the rise of online marketplaces. These are not inherently risky, but they allow new food businesses to pop up very quickly, with the associated risk that many may be unregistered and operating without adequate oversight or inspection of their practices.

27. Workforce recruitment and retention also present challenges. The FSA and FSS are implementing measures to recruit and retain official veterinarians and meat hygiene inspectors while also supporting local authority efforts to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of environmental health and trading standards officers. We will review the progress made across these areas.