BRIGHT HARBOUR

Food Standards Agency

Consumers and the Food System Under Covid-19

A Bright Harbour Collective Report for the Food Standards Agency

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This report presents a snapshot of the UK public's shifting food attitudes and behaviour under Covid-19 and lockdown, based on **qualitative research with 28 UK citizens conducted in June and July 2020**. Our sample was drawn from citizens in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and represented a range of variables including age, gender, lifestage and household composition, and employment status. We aimed to explore:

- **how household food behaviours changed** under Covid-19 (e.g., how people chose, shopped for and prepared food)
- **views around food behaviours and risk management** during Covid-19 and looking forward, as lockdown began to ease; and
- **impact on wider attitudes around the UK and global food systems.**

Fieldwork took place days before the reopening of pubs and restaurants in England, weeks before easing began in Wales and Northern Ireland. Some of our data is therefore speculative: participants imagined what they might do in the future. We ask the reader to keep this in mind: future-focused data should be taken as indicative of broad attitudes in the moment of questioning, not predictions about the future.

Key findings

1. Audience differences shaping food attitudes and behaviour under Covid-19

Experiences, views and behaviours were highly variable between different participants, and over time. In particular, risk sensitivity varied enormously, driven by the below factors in different ways. Participants' baseline risk sensitivity seemed to become more influential as time went on; those that tended to be less proactively in managing food risks before Covid-19 tended to default to this tendency as the weeks went on.

- **Generalised drivers: cognitive dissonance, habit, implicit risk evaluation and social influence**. Reflecting the findings of previous FSA research, people often found it uncomfortable thinking of food or their established food habits as 'unsafe' - variously driving denial, proactive risk management, or delegation to others (e.g. Government). Risk evaluations relied on often implicit calculations of risk versus reward. Social influence was also very strong: people looked to those around them to decide what was a 'normal' and 'safe' response.
- **Covid-specific drivers: health risk, geography, employment and trust.** People who felt most at risk from Covid-19 unsurprisingly tended to be more cautious and display more changes in household food behaviour to manage risk. In general, urban residents were more risk-sensitive than residents of rural areas with lower transmission rates. Employment was also a factor: some felt they did not have the 'luxury' of being too risk sensitive if their jobs required daily exposure to the outside world. Those with higher trust in the Government's approach to Covid-19 were less stressed than those with lower confidence.

2. Household risk management and food

- **Fears of food-borne virus transmission were widespread - seemingly cemented by early scientific evidence on surface survival rates.** Early media reports that the virus could last on surfaces for up to three days were influential, cementing concerns about virus transmission via food or packaging for many.
- **Many 'decontaminated' food or food packaging in the early weeks of lockdown**, though for most this behaviour ended as time went on.
- **Others took no risk management behaviours at home** - either because they were not feeling very risk conscious, because they judged that the transmission risk was low, or because they had a low sense of agency (e.g., because their out-of-home transmission risk was high due to employment circumstances).

3. Wider changes in household food views and behaviours

- **Experiences were highly variable.** Some found themselves very pressured under the pandemic and reported only perceived negative disruption to their household food habits. Others found that lockdown provided a break from routine that allowed for more connection with and enjoyment of food.
- **Meal preparation and food sharing.** Many found that they had become more connected with food and the sharing of food as a household under lockdown conditions, and hoped that this would continue as lockdown began to ease. Others had faced increased stress and reduced time to cook and prepare food.
- **Diet, nutrition and health**: Some had become much more health conscious during lockdown. However, many others had responded to increased stress and other pressures by increasing reliance on snacking, quick foods, ultra-processed foods and/or takeaways as a result.
- **Food shopping and supplier choices**: Logistical pressures (e.g., lack of delivery slots, reduced opening hours) and concerns about virus transmission (e.g., whilst waiting in long queues) had caused shifts in suppliers for many.
- **Grow your own**: Due to a mix of concern about Covid-19, and for some also a reconnection with food, some participants had begun to grow their own food at home. Some explicitly tied this to a desire to avoid transmission risk.

4. Views on food businesses and navigating decisions as lockdown eases

- **Covid-19 transmission remained the most pressing concern for most.** Although risk sensitivity continued to vary, virus transmission was a much more salient worry than other potential risks such as food fraud or hygiene issues. However, a sizeable minority worried that businesses may feel pressured to 'cut corners', for example using out of date food once lockdown began to ease.
- **Trust in the food business had mostly strengthened under pandemic,** driven primarily by a perceived robust 'return to normal' after early disruptions like product shortages. This effect was stronger for supermarkets than it was for local suppliers; some had noticed price increases in smaller shops under pandemic.
- **Participants were eager for clear rules and the enforcement of social distancing.** Participants found it exhausting to decide what was safe or not in each food business, and were eager for consistency. 'Covid safe' declarations seen in some shops were compelling, suggesting that the approach was

regulated and controlled - even in the absence of information about who had provided the assurance. They were reassured by supermarkets' perceived ability to invest in-store infrastructure and virus protocols (e.g., distancing rules, screens, mask-wearing), and by larger premises well placed for social distancing.

- **Heuristics were a powerful safety cue**. Participants reported that they would be far more likely to visit food businesses that could clearly and visibly provide adequate social distancing. Other cues like mask-wearing, clear social distancing protocols, and perceived food handling 'touchpoints' were also compelling.
- **Behaviour was strongly influenced by local social norms.** Participants in more rural locations had much lower concerns. Predicted future behaviour was also influenced by social influences within households, for example with parents feeling under pressure by children to 'get back to normal'.
- **Participants weighed up post-lockdown decisions as a series of trade-offs.** They calculated not just the severity of the risk (e.g., how likely is it that I would catch the virus in this circumstance?) but also the attractiveness of the reward (will the pub feel normal and be a relief, or will it all feel too strange?).

4. Thinking about food systems

- **Reflecting previous research, most participants were not thinking in depth about UK or global food system issues.** Immediate concerns around Covid-19 and managing the many changes that it had brought took priority. Except for those directly affected, potential for system disruption (e.g., global shortages, supply chain issues, etc) was of low salience.
- **However, awareness of food systems issues were more prominent than in past research,** mostly via issues that were perceived as quickly resolved. For example, early supermarket shortages had called attention to supply chain issues - interpreted as driven by 'panic buying' rather than wider drivers like 'just in time' supply chains. Virus worries had also raised awareness of the idea of 'touchpoints' and how many people were involved in local supply chains.
- **A few participants also reported much more profound shifts in their thinking about food systems under lockdown conditions**, **tied to social justice concerns.** For example, one participant had begun to think about who held 'the power' in global supply chains, and formed strong views around the need for more local food systems. Another, very engaged with the Black Lives Matters movement, had begun thinking about how issues like inequality, poverty, immigration and global inequality intersected with the food system.
- **Brexit was of low salience across the sample**. Those that were thinking about the impact on food systems issues assumed mostly neutral or negative impact.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Context for this work

This report presents the findings of research conducted in June and July 2020 with 28 UK citizens across England, Northern Ireland and Wales. It represents a 'snapshot' view of changing public attitudes and behaviours around food under Covid-19.

For many of us in the UK, food became a focal point of change under the pandemic and lockdown, which forced people to choose, shop for, and sometimes even prepare food differently. Early on, some found supermarket shelves empty for the first time in memory. Eating out paused, home food preparation increased. Carers often found themselves preparing seemingly endless meals for their families whilst juggling work and care. Many turned to food to provide a sense of stability or comfort under uncertainty. For many, uncomfortable questions of safety emerged: can I catch Covid-19 via food packaging, or food itself? Can I safely shop for the food I need?

This research represents a moment of UK public experiences around food in what seemed to be a point of relative stability under pandemic. By June 2020, Covid-19 was a 'new normal', and many had settled as well as they could into new routines. They were still not comfortable by any means, still uncertain - but the change was less shocking. They were mostly at home, and household routines provided a space of control and choice for many (not all). Yet, all were on the precipice of further change - England was mere days away from pub and restaurant restrictions easing, and all beginning to imagine yet another 'new normal' as lockdown eased.

How these months were experienced, and the depth of change in behaviour and attitudes, was as variable as experiences of pandemic itself. Many had the privilege to 'wait it out' and decide what felt right, working remotely from home and/or shopping online. Others were forced by circumstance to navigate the issues 'out in the world' - regardless of their concerns about the virus. Risk sensitivity was much higher for urban residents than for those in areas with reduced Covid-19 spread. Those shielding or mindful of vulnerable loved ones responded differently than those that felt relatively safe. And so on: each experience was different.

In this work we explored the impact of these changes and pressures on people's attitudes and behaviours: on their household food behaviours; sense of and management of risk; and views on UK and global food systems. Views were changeable, complex, and sometimes contradictory. Some had experienced profound shifts in views and habits that they expected to last long after lockdown. Some had been so stressed under Covid-19 that there had been very little space for anything but getting through each day as it came. Some were very eager to simply 'return to normal'; others were uncertain about how 'normal' that return might be.

We reference throughout the FSA's existing rich evidence base on household food behaviours, risk attitudes, understanding of and engagement with food system issues, etc. In particular, we have drawn on longitudinal survey data (Food and You); the FSA's quantitative Covid-19 Tracker data; and a range of deliberative research with the public conducted from 2014 onwards including the FSA Strategy 2015-2020; Our Food Future; Trust in a changing world; and Transparency.

1.2 Our approach and sample

The insights in this report were developed through three iterative stages of research. Further method and sample details are contained in Appendix A.

1. **Ongoing review of relevant evidence**, including weekly input from the FSA's Covid-19 Horizon Scanning programme - a multi-method, collaborative exploration of emerging challenges to the UK food system under pandemic.

2. **4 x 5 person focus groups with UK citizens in Bristol, Cardiff, London and Northern Ireland.** Our sample represented a broad cross-section of the UK public across variables including age, gender, ethnicity, mental/physical health, work status, lifestage and caring responsibilities. Prior to research sessions, participants also completed a **brief pre-task** exploring concerns, downsides and benefits, and food habit changes under lockdown.

3. **15 x 1-hour in-depth interviews** - Building on the emerging findings of the focus groups, we also conducted in-depth interviews to deep-dive into people's journeys under pandemic, changes in attitudes and behaviours at different points in their experience, and what drove change. 7 of these were conducted with previous focus group participants so we could explore issues in more depth; 8 were conducted with fresh-recruited sample.

All research sessions were conducted by telephone or video depending on participant preference. The mix of methods allowed us to explore trends emerging in the national statistics at the level of individual experience, and also to compare what people were willing to express publicly (in group sessions) with what they revealed about their experience privately (in depth interviews). This was particularly important given evidence of strong social norms and bias; often in the 'privacy' of a 1-1 session people reported more nuanced views and further changes in behaviour.

Participants were recruited using a mix of list and free-find methods. Full informed written consent was collected via digital signature. Participants were provided with reimbursements in line with industry norms to thank them for their time and input. All interviews were recorded and analysed using a mix of methods including: structured analysis and documentation against a set template (a spreadsheet with columns for each of the main research objectives); two dynamic team discussions to identify key themes and drivers; and full-team reviews of findings.

Chapter 2: Audience differences shaping food attitudes and behaviour under Covid-19

In this research, audience differences in views and behaviours around food under pandemic were highly variable, both between participants and for each participant over time. For some, Covid-19 brought mostly food pressures and stress; for others, lockdown was a period of reconnection with, reflection on, and deep enjoyment of food. Some found themselves very unsettled by perceived food risks, mostly related to virus transmission - others felt safe, or had others to manage these risks for themselves.

As explored below and in the Chapters to follow, how people navigated food issues under pandemic was variable, changeable, and sometimes even contradictory; views, behaviours and interpretations had not stabilised at time of the interviews in June 2020.

2.1 Key factors shaping responses to food-related risks under Covid-19

Under Covid-19, people had to manage two new and unsettling types of 'food risk': 1) management of virus transmission risk when shopping for food (e.g., via social distancing and supplier choice) 2) minimising perceived risks around food-borne virus transmission when handling food and packaging.[1] As detailed in Chapter 4, other more generalised risks like food hygiene, food crime, or food fraud were far less salient.

Below, we explore individual-level drivers that influenced how people understood and managed risk, and how these varied over time. In later Chapters, we detail key media messages, images, frames and moments shaping behaviour as lockdown evolved.

Covid-19 specific factors: health risk, geography, employment, and trust.

Four context-specific individual-level factors seemed to shape individuals' risk management under Covid-19. The first, unsurprisingly, was **health status and perceived virus risk**. Those who felt that they were at more risk from Covid-19 (due to existing health issues, age, ethnicity, obesity, etc), or were in contact with/caring for people judged vulnerable or shielding, tended to be more cautious.

> "I am the main carer for my elderly mummy, she doesn't live with us so I have been going between two households and have been extra careful. We disinfect all foods as they come into the house and even my daughter ordered something the other day and left it on the step for 48 hours before touching it….I keep telling them, we have to protect Granny." - F, 58, furloughed now working, NI

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[1] As discussed further in Chapter 4, this risk was not necessarily realistic or in line with FSA and Government guidance - but was still a powerful concern for many.

Second was **geography**: those from rural areas and/or the devolved nations, where transmission rates were lower, tended to be less concerned.

> "People that don't seem to understand that there is a global pandemic going on right now. So just coming up to you not following the arrows and didn't see anything wrong with it, not wearing protection or anything like that, it's just like a normal shopping trip for them." F, 24, supermarket worker, Cardiff

Third was **exposure, often tied to employment**. Although many were working from home under pandemic, others worked in jobs that required them to be out in the general public (e.g., grocery assistant; builder; bus driver). These people found that the circumstances of their work prevented detailed risk containment measures: their work exposed themselves to a heightened baseline level of risk.

> "I'm still working. So maybe I'm slightly less scared… wrong word, maybe it's just… your life does go on. I have to leave the house every day. There's people touching the stuff in supermarkets or people touching stuff in a takeaway, so you just have to hope everyone is adhering to the rules of hygiene and everything or you'll end up eating nothing but your own vegetables in your garden. That's not very practical with my family." - M, 40, full time employed Cardiff

Although some of these individuals seemed fairly comfortable with the situation, others were clearly distressed. For example, a young participant who worked in a major supermarket throughout lockdown was visibly upset by her lack of control and choice, and her perceived inability to keep herself safe in the way that felt right to her.

> "People just don't seem to care. Some are wearing masks, most are not, they are meant to follow a one way system but they don't. I've given up, I'm so frustrated with it." - F, 24, supermarket worker, Cardiff

Fourth was **trust in Government and its approach to Covid-19 management**. Those who trusted the official approach to managing Covid-19 were less invested in deciding on the 'how' of risk management themselves. Being able to delegate decision-making to others seemed to significantly reduce the stress involved in risk management.

> "To be honest, I am not too worried about Covid, I feel that it is being managed well." - F, 61, part time worker now furloughed, Bristol

Generalised individual drivers: four risk response drivers from previous evidence

Four key drivers evidenced in previous FSA research in terms of how people understand and assess food risk also seemed to play a role in responses:

1. **It is highly uncomfortable for people to think about food in terms of 'risk' or 'safety'[2]**. Eating is a pleasure, a necessity, a social glue, a daily routine. To question food safety raises uncomfortable cognitive dissonance; it does not feel good to question something you enjoy and that you have to do.

2. **People have very habitual patterns of assessing and managing risk - generally, and in terms of food risk specifically.** Some 'tackle it' head on and try to reduce risk; some deny it or try not to think too hard about it; many delegate risk management to others (partners; parents; food shops; the Government).[3]

   Approaches seem in part driven by generalised trust levels and trust in the food system, as well as demographic variables like age, gender and lifestage; women are often more risk-conscious than men, and parents tend to manage risk more carefully than those without children. But it is also a matter of identification: what kind of person am I? What is 'not enough' or 'over the top' for 'people like me'?

3. **Risk assessments around food are contextual and implicit - people intuitively weigh up the severity and likelihood of risk against the salience and strength of reward**. How much do I want this? How positive are my associations? What do I imagine might go wrong? How likely do I think this? How severe might be the consequences?[4] These judgements are heuristic, implicit and highly influential (also, often incorrect).

4. **Responses are highly socially influenced.** People look to others to assess what seems to be safe and 'normal', and to validate their own decisions and management strategies. They also look to authority figures and experts for guidance - delegating to simplify their decision making.

2.2 Key factors shaping wider food experiences under Covid-19

Most of the participants we spoke to reported established food habits and patterns were disrupted by pandemic - for better and worse. They were buying food differently, eating different foods, and preparing food differently. However, how these changes were experienced varied widely, according to two key factors.

1. **Health status and perceived vulnerability to Covid-19 played a huge role in shaping food experiences**. Many found that under lockdown, their food habits hardly changed - apart from practical and logistical issues like changing food suppliers, or needing to queue to get into shops. Conversely, some reported that

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[2] EG, see participants' discomfort when discussing assumed versus actual risk of food poisoning. FSA (2014). FSA Strategy 2015-2020.
[3] Ibid. See also FSA (2018). Trust in a changing world.
[4] FSA (2015) Risk and Responsibility.

risk-management influenced every decision they made when shopping for, handling or preparing food, every day.

2. Second, as explored in more detail in Chapter 4, **participants reported widely varying 'space' - in terms of time, money, emotion, and cognitive load - under Covid-19 and lockdown**. Variation partly aligned with other demographic drivers of social inequality or privilege (e.g., socio-economic status and income security) - but also with factors like life-stage and caring responsibilities.

For example, many of the participants we spoke to reported that the pressures of pandemic left them with less time, a lot to manage emotionally, and sometimes also less money to help navigate these challenges. Many were newly providing full-time care for and/or homeschooling children or teenagers, often still whilst delivering full-time jobs. Some were caring for family members with health issues or other needs. Some were worried about or had lost work, and were reeling with the implications of pandemic on their finances. Many were feeling the impact of lockdown on physical and emotional health. For many of these participants, getting meals out the door to feed everyone was often just yet another task to be completed; there was little space to question habits, engage with food differently, or deeply enjoy the food they cooked and shared.

> "Because we're at home, we're now having to plan lunches that feels a bit of a burden to think about all the meals a day rather than and have to really think about the evening meal." M, 52, full time employment, London

Others found that Covid-19 and lockdown had opened up space and time for thought and reflection. Typically, these were participants with fewer financial worries and limited caring responsibilities, or better-off workers who were no longer commuting. For these participants, food often became an 'event' to look forward to, and they reported increased connection and enjoyment. As reported in Chapter 4, a minority of these found themselves using some of this time to think about and reflect on systemic issues like supply chains, sustainability and social justice - typically showing more change in behaviour and attitudes (e.g. considering veganism, buying more locally, etc).

> "Since working from home, I've been doing a lot more cooking, normally it's my husband who does this, as I get back from work too late but I've enjoyed taking on this role. I've been doing a lot of baking etc. with my daughter (aged 10), it beats home-schooling and allows us to have some time together." - F, 49, working full time from home, NI

2.3 The changing and unpredictable nature of response over time

All the above factors seemed to come into play in different ways and timepoints under pandemic. Via this qualitative snapshot of responses, we have attempted to outline the pattern of these responses below; we ask the reader to keep in mind that these are based on a small sample and would need scaled-up quantitative validation to confirm.

Early in lockdown, risk sensitivity was often highest: the consequences of catching Covid-19 felt uncertain but likely severe (e.g., pneumonia, or death), management strategies were as yet unclear, and there were no established social 'norms' to follow.

Even in this period, responses varied highly. Some went to extreme lengths to manage risk during this period - most of those with health risks or other 'vulnerable' people in the household, but also some who felt fairly safe, and were not typically very risk sensitive. Some, typically those who were low risk sensitivity in normal times, and perceived they were less vulnerable to Covid-19 than others, felt relatively unconcerned: for example, shopping as 'normal', if inconvenienced by queues.

As time went on, social norms, expert influence and identification became more important: What are my friends and neighbours doing? What is the Government recommending? For many who were less risk sensitive generally, or not particularly worried about catching Covid-19, risk versus reward came into play: is it really worth this much time and worry to scrub down my groceries every week?

Over time, personal baseline risk approaches seemed to have increasing influence for many; people largely 'returned to type' in terms of how they assessed and managed risk, and how much effort they put into this. The exception to this was often (but not always) those who were shielding or in close contact and protecting somebody vulnerable in another household, who had normed a different level of responsibility and accountability. Often, their own rules and management strategies were stricter than those of the people around them, or sometimes even than the Government and expert guidance. Some of these participants felt any slip up would result in a Covid transmission to somebody they cared about.

Chapter 3: Household Risk Management and Food

Below, we explore the ways in which Covid-19 raised new and often uncomfortable questions for people around food safety, centring around perceived risk of virus transmission via food and packaging. We also explore participants' risk management practices and the ways these tended to evolve as pandemic continued.

3.1 Fears of food-borne virus transmission were widespread - seemingly cemented by early scientific evidence on surface survival rates

As explored below, at time of interview most participants believed Covid-19 could be transmitted via food and/or food packaging.[5] Most were unaware of official guidance from the FSA[6] or elsewhere to the contrary - or of how that evidence and understanding had evolved over time. Participants often found it difficult to articulate where and how they had formed their views, but early evidence on surface survival rates for Covid-19 seemed to have been influential - communicated during the early days of lockdown, when risk sensitivity was highest.[7]

> "I think I read or saw on the news that it can linger for three or four days on something as I understand it, because we're being told, even like post, leave it for three days before you open" - M, 48, furloughed worker, Bristol

3.2 Questioning food safety was uncomfortable, to varying effect

Previous FSA research has highlighted how deeply unsettling many people find thinking of food in terms of 'safety' - e.g., to consider risks such as food contamination, food crime and fraud, or food-borne illness. The reasons for this discomfort are deep-seated, often hard for people to articulate, and full of cognitive dissonance. Food is a source of joy, fun, escape, and contentment; is deeply embedded in our identities, cultural and social practices, and daily routines; and is a daily requirement for health and nourishment. It invokes a sense of responsibility to nurture those we care for. To question food safety upends these positive associations: can I trust what I put in my mouth? Is it safe to feed this to those I love?

Many participants, particularly those who were more risk sensitive, reported that under Covid-19 they were uncomfortably aware of perceived risks when handling, preparing and eating food. Some were scared even to touch food: what if they touched a

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[5] For clarity, this early data reflected tests using very high virus concentrations rather than more naturalistic conditions. EG, see Emanuel Goldman (July 2020), Exaggerated risk of transmission of COVID-19 by fomites, The Lancet.

[6] See FSA Guidance on Coronavirus.

[7] E.G. Daily Mail: 'Coronavirus can survive on surfaces for three days, says NHS'

'contaminated' food item and then their face or mouth? Previously benign foods like broccoli suddenly seemed suspect for some: was coronavirus lingering in hidden spaces? Might they successfully control risk outside the home - then unwittingly invite coronavirus in via a mouthful of veg, or a bar of chocolate?

> "I think it's panic and fear [I'm feeling] - like, what am I touching? Where's it been? How do you know? Am I gonna pick it up? I might pick it up, scratch my face, forget and eat it." - London Focus Group

3.3 Risk management behaviours such as food and/or packaging cleansing varied between participants and over time

Participants reported highly variable responses to this heightened sense of risk. Quite a few had at some point engaged in Covid-19 risk management behaviours around food - for example, washing produce with soap, 'disinfecting' food packaging with sanitiser or detergents, or leaving food in entryways or cupboards for a day or two before use.

Many of these participants reported that as they realised the time these kinds of measures could take, they quickly relaxed their approach - finding they didn't have the time or emotional space to spend their energy this way. The salience of the potential risk (Covid-19 transmission via food) felt out of touch with the cost of management (time and worry spent). Others continued this kind of risk management for weeks or even months, but stopped as virus transmission rates dropped and risk sensitivity decreased.

> "We got fed up with doing it because it was taking longer to wipe everything than it was to actually go and buy it. So for the first couple of months or maybe five weeks, every time we shopped, we wiped everything down before we put it away. Then we thought this is just a waste of time." - M, 65, self employed, car manufacturing, Cardiff

However, some of those with high risk sensitivity, typically those managing health risks or shielding, had continued this practice at the point of interview. Several mentioned they planned to continue even after lockdown eased - until whatever point they personally judged that risk was low enough to stop. It was notable how much time and energy, over months, these participants had dedicated to controlling risk at home, and how long they expected these measures might last.

> "My husband has serious heart condition from a stroke a few years back so all of our food is delivered now (Sainsbury's priority list)...when it comes in, it takes about 2 hours to wipe down and disinfect everything." - F, 63, Retired, Cardiff

Others reported that very little had changed for them at any point under lockdown, in terms of how they managed food inside the household - whilst generally sharing the same views about risks around food-borne transmission. Reasons varied. Most of these

participants had low risk sensitivity generally, or felt that risk of transmission via food specifically was probably low. Some simply felt too overwhelmed and running too low in terms of attention and energy to worry about it.

> "I'm pretty sure if you are cooking the food then there won't be any risk of Covid-19… it kills off everything else, why not that too." - M, 24, furloughed bar manager, Bristol

Some actually had quite serious concerns - but didn't feel they had the ability to take effective action. For example, the supermarket worker discussed in Chapter 2 worried about Covid-19 transmission risk, including via food, but wasn't taking any protective measures at home - feeling it would be 'too little too late.'

> "Okay, at first I was conscious, but people don't respect the two meters. You know you just have everyone coming up to you, in your face and sometimes I just can't be bothered….it's annoying as I've just accepted I'm going to catch it at some point. You know, some of them will come right up to you and say 'I know I do have symptoms, but I have no one else to do my shopping'… It's very stressful, work doesn't show you any respect. I'm going to get a pizza later to cheer myself up!" - F, 24, supermarket worker, Cardiff

Chapter 4: Wider Changes in Household Food Views and Behaviours

Participants reported widely varying behaviour changes in how they chose, cooked and consumed food under lockdown - broadly reflecting and confirming the findings of the FSA Covid Tracker[8]. As elsewhere, patterns of change varied enormously across the sample, and were often unpredictable and inconsistent across timepoints. Below, we explore some changes reported, drivers of these, and participants views on which changes they hoped would continue post lockdown.

4.1 The importance of time, 'space' and money to variations in household food behaviours and attitudes under Covid-19

As discussed in Chapter 2, the 'time and space' participants had available during the early months of pandemic varied widely, in ways that deeply shaped behaviours and attitudes around food - and often aligned with demographic factors like household income, employment status and lifestage/caring responsibilities.In particular, income and financial security played a critical role in participants' responses under lockdown.

Some lower-income participants noted that their biggest food concerns under Covid-19 centred around managing limited food budgets under financial uncertainty - sometimes, in the context of perceived rising food costs, people reported that some shops were charging more for the same food under pandemic. Although not discussed directly, it is also statistically likely some participants struggled to afford food under Covid-19,[9] with concerns about whether and what they would eat dwarfing other concerns.[10]

4.2 Shifts in household food behaviour under Covid-19

Meal preparation and food sharing

In previous FSA research on public food attitudes, people have often spoken nostalgically about the 'lost art' of home cooking, bemoaning the ways in which busy modern lives have made it harder for us to put attention into the food we cook and the meals we share with family.[11] For many, the biggest upside of Covid-19 was the space it created to return to these 'bygone' practices.

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[8] FSA Covid-19 Consumer Tracker, Wave 3 June 2020.

[9] In the June FSA Covid-19 Tracker, one in five respondents (22%) reported that they were very/somewhat worried their household could not afford food in the next month.

[10] See FSA research on food insecurity, conducted concurrently with this piece of work, for a discussion of UK household's experiences of food insecurity.

[11] EG see FSA (2016) Our Food Future.

Many participants reported an increase in home-cooked meals and baking under Covid-19 - a positive change that was considered by some as a highlight of lockdown. This qualitative evidence aligned closely with the Covid Tracker data, in which two in five (39%) stated that in the last month they had cooked more food from scratch and a quarter (26%) reported that they had eaten more meals with their family.

For some households, home-cooked meals had become a family focal point, providing structure during strange times, and enjoyable shared moments amidst uncertainty and stress.[12] Respondents spoke positively about sharing recipes with friends/family; following chefs via social media and of cooking being a new bonding/shared experience within the home. For others, food preparation became a welcome distraction from the stresses of living through a global pandemic.

> "I like cooking but was only really cooking on the weekend before Covid. Now it is more of an event: I get my best china out, put the spaghetti in a nice bowl. When life goes back to normal there will be more time pressure." - F, 47, office worker, Bristol

Some expected, or hoped, that these new habits would continue; finding they were enjoying food more, feeling more connected to the food they ate, and building cooking skills. One participant was so inspired he had shifted from barely cooking at all pre-lockdown, to planning to start a food and cooking podcast. Many also noted they had been saving a lot of money cooking at home instead of eating out.

> "I've been picking up different skills on how to cook, which I didn't have before. I realised that the food I get in the restaurant, I can make it just as easily at home." - M, 37, science tutor, London

However, these positive experiences were not shared by all. There were moments in focus groups where people's happy reports of baking bread were met by silence from people who had spent lockdown shielding, worried about money, managing heavy caring responsibilities, etc. Some of these participants had noted that they hadn't had the time or energy to create a lot of food from scratch - actually increasing reliance on heavily processed foods or take-aways, as above.

Diet, nutrition and health

Participants' reports on changes in diet, nutrition and health under Covid-19 varied widely. Some reported becoming more health conscious during lockdown, motivated to reduce the risks of the virus on their bodies. This was in line with the quantitative

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[12] The absence of these moments of food as comfort was notable in the FSA's concurrent research on food insecurity - as was participants' sense of loss.

evidence; over a quarter (27%) of FSA Covid Tracker respondents reported eating healthier meals in the last month during lockdown.

Conversely, as above, others felt that they had increased their intake of processed food, snacking and take-aways under lockdown; in line with the roughly 15% of participants reporting they had eaten more processed food than usual during lockdown. Many simply said they had found themselves reaching for comfort foods whilst managing stress, anxiety or boredom under pandemic - or had simply found it very difficult to maintain healthy habits without the structure of their normal daily routines. For example, one 'gym-buff' participant in Cardiff noted that he had lost all motivation to eat healthily or exercise, and was prone to snacking to fill the time.

Some participants mentioned that they were eating more processed foods because they did not feel comfortable, or have the energy for, more complex supermarket shops. They noted that grabbing something simple, or calling a take-away, had helped them get food without dealing with uncertainties and stress of shopping and social distancing.

> "I'm so tired and stressed after work, I go straight to the frozen section...I just can't deal with people and all their questions. It feels safer having the food wrapped up." - F, 24, supermarket worker, Cardiff

Food shopping and supplier choices

Many participants had noted changes in food shopping and supplier habits - primarily due to logistical reasons like access under lockdown, rather than more reflective drivers (e.g., a desire to support different or more local shops). Many also reported doing much more online shopping to avoid transmission risks.

> "We switched from ASDA to Sainsbury's not because we wanted to but Sainsbury's were the quickest to arrange to get us on the priority list. It's annoying if they get something wrong, you have to wait a week or two for them to correct it, which isn't ideal. My husband and I are shielding due to his heart condition.." - F, 63, retired, Cardiff

A third (33%) of respondents reported in the Covid Tracker that in the last month they had been shopping more frequently at local shops. Likewise, many explained in this qualitative exercise that they felt a greater level of comfort and ease shopping locally as they did not have to contend with long queues (perceived as covid-hotspots) and felt reassured by perceived evidence of reassuring practices i.e. hand hygiene; social distancing and perspex to protect shoppers/staff.

> "The local store, that was good. Everybody in there 90% of the time, observed the social distancing, you know, stayed on the spots that have been painted on the floor. I think we use that a lot more than we used to. And we will probably continue

It was notable that quite a few participants reported they had started to grow their own produce during lockdown. For some, this was driven by evolving healthy eating regimes, the feeling of being more 'connected' to food, or just wanting something nice to look forward to. Others noted they'd started growing food because they wanted to become more self-sufficient - some explicitly linking this to a desire to help reduce reliance on 'outside' food and thus their virus exposure risk. It was notable that many of those who were most anxious about Covid-19, and about food-borne virus in particular, had started small-scale food growing. At the point of interview, efforts were still in early stages, which meant plans were more optimistic than realistic.

"We started growing from seeds so that was like something to look forward to every morning and how they were growing and planting from small boats to larger boats and then we started using them in cooking." - F, 72, retired, Bristol

"It weighs on your shoulders, the safety part. The safety part alone has made me start to grow my own vegetables. " - F, 30, full time mum, London

4.3 Towards the future: what might go and what might stay?

Participants valued the focus on family meals, honed culinary skills and increased mindfulness around healthy eating. There was a sense that home-working and quieter, more insular lives during lockdown enabled this shift in focus. Yet as lockdown eases, as family structures revert back to pre-covid days, as workers return to offices and children to schools, some of these behaviours may be difficult to sustain. It may be that new habits that require less effort to sustain (shopping online; new food choices; new supplier choices) prove more resistant to change over time.

"I think the negative will be once I'm back to work full time, if I can keep up the momentum because of working full time and leaving the house at before eight and getting home after five - it's quite challenging." - F, 38, educational behavioural manager, Bristol

Chapter 5: Views on Food Businesses and Navigating Decisions as Lockdown Eased

Below we explore how participants imagined navigating scenarios like eating out, visiting cafes, pubs or restaurants, and continuing to shop for food as lockdown began to ease. As elsewhere, views were highly variable.

5.1 What were people worried about as they imagined eating out and shopping for food as lockdown eased?

For the vast majority of participants, by far the most pressing 'safety' concern for them in relation to food as lockdown began to ease was risk of transmission of Covid-19. We discuss their variable reactions to this concern below - primarily centring around the maintenance of social distancing. Most were unconcerned about wider issues such as food safety, hygiene, fraud and crime - in line with previous FSA evidence which suggests these are not very salient risks for most. For the majority, these risks played no role in deciding how to navigate the easing of lockdown restrictions.

However, a minority reported very strong concerns about whether food businesses would maintain adequate compliance with food safety regulation as lockdown began to ease - tied with concerns about whether businesses would 'do the right thing' by the public. This was often rooted in awareness of the pressure that food businesses would be under after months of income disruption. They worried that businesses may 'cut corners' - unsure of exactly what that might look like in practice; might they for example substitute cheaper types of meats? 'Horsemeat' remained a powerful reference point for their imaginations: might 'fakes' like that happen again?

Others - a sizable minority in our sample - reported very specific concerns about how food businesses would handle stock over the months of lockdown. Essentially, they worried that when lockdown eased businesses would use stock that had passed use-by dates during the lockdown period, and/or food that had been held overlong in freezers. Those with concerns reported they planned to wait weeks or longer once lockdown eased to eat out - until people had used up the 'tainted' food.

> "The thing I'm concerned about when restaurants eventually open is how long stuff's been in that freezer so I won't be going for the first couple of weeks." M, 68, self employed - car manufacturing, Cardiff

5.2 What factors shaped participants' sense of risk and decision-making?

As we explored participants' views on risk management around the easing of lockdown restrictions on food businesses, it was sometimes difficult to identify what shaped their varying concerns, expectations and plans. Drivers were often implicit, and driven by

hard to articulate factors like social norms or visual framings of risk. As previously, expressed views were also sometimes inconsistent or contradictory.

Trust in food businesses

For many, the strong degree of public trust in food, food suppliers and the UK food system previously evidenced by the FSA, survived unchallenged under pandemic - or even strengthened. Although food shortages during the early days of lockdown were unsettling for those that experienced them, they were reassured by how quickly supermarkets 'bounced back'. This was interpreted as a sign of the strength and resiliency of supply chains and the food system. Likewise, many spoke positively about how quickly major supermarkets were able to implement queuing systems, bring in protections like masks for staff, and generally implement new systems.[13]

> "I think they're doing a great job anyway To be fair, just to get the supermarkets open, let alone getting the staff to agree to go in, I didn't think too much about the food chain." M, 48, furloughed worker, Bristol

This high level of trust meant that overall, most seemed to be approaching decisions around navigating food shopping and eating out as lockdown eased with a high degree of trust in suppliers - with one exception. As noted above, some reported frustration and annoyance with local shops which had raised prices under pandemic. They assumed these increases were driven by increased demand, supply chain issues, or simply opportunism. Whilst not impacting their plans to shop with local suppliers, these actions had damaged participants' goodwill and trust somewhat.

Social norms and identification

There was a strong sense that participants' plans for the future were highly influenced by social norms; they often felt quite confident in their decisions, whatever they were, and as if those were the 'obvious' way to manage risk. When we asked participants about how their friends and families viewed the issue, they often reported that most people felt the same; risk perceptions seemed to have been negotiated often implicitly via conversation, or via 'watching' the responses of others.

Likewise, the influence of participants' 'baseline' risk approaches seemed powerful: participants might variously see themselves as 'trying to make good, safe decisions' or 'not wanting to be too over the top' or 'just trying to get on with it'. This meant that their decisions seemed affected not just by Covid-19 risk sensitivity, but how they handled risk decisions in general - how they identified with this issue.

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[13] We noted however this was not the experience of our young participant who worked in a supermarket herself; she felt rules were unclear, not consistently enforced, and were not focused on staff safety.

Behaviour was also heavily influenced by the views and behaviours of others in the household. For example, parents reported feeling under pressure to 'get things back to normal' for their children. Those with older children were balancing different pressures; teenagers wanting to socialise with friends, feeling frustrated through lack of activities and managing exposure to immediate family and others.

> "They both have birthdays coming up. So it's pressure. They're desperate for things to go back to some kind of normal." - London Focus Group

Trade offs: risk versus reward

As people talked through which situations felt 'safe' or 'unsafe', and how they would manage risks when lockdown began to ease, some explicitly weighed up risk versus reward. Some were not very risk sensitive and so needed little 'reward' to consider eating out, entering a pub or restaurant, etc - and just looked forward to the return of 'normal life.' Others were thinking carefully about whether going out to socialise and experience restaurants/other food outlets was worth it, weighing up the risk of exposure versus the benefit of boost of normality and camaraderie.

Some found this 'weighing up' process very difficult, and found the process itself a turnoff to the idea of going out. They felt that if they did choose to eat out, they would be constantly evaluating their safety, and whether their decision had been right. This was more common in more risk sensitive participants, and particularly for those experiencing more stress, or mental health issues like depression and anxiety.

> "Because I got to have fun and I can't have fun if I'm always constantly worried about things going on around me. It's just gonna be anxiety. So I'd rather go out when I'm calm and relaxed, and enjoy." - London Focus Group

Other participants (often older) felt they had 'more to lose' because of health status or other Covid-19 risks, and said they would err on the side of caution once lockdown eased, adopting a 'wait and see' approach. There was a sense of 'sunk costs' for them: would changing behaviour now devalue sacrifices already made?

> "They say they may have another lockdown. When you hear about that, that makes you think twice. You sacrificed your three months, there's no reason why you shouldn't do so for another few months," - F, 72, retired, Bristol

Visual heuristics: distancing, looking for cue's, and Covid-19 management

Overall, visual cues were by far the most powerful for participants when they thought about risk assessment as lockdown eased. When looking for visual heuristics, people

wanted a clear and concise message. Thinking about the safety of food is taxing and not something people want to focus on given the frequency of and range of situations they have to shop for, handle or cook food.

The importance of social distancing, and the ubiquity of distance-focused guidance (e.g., the '2 metre rule') had been very powerful for participants. It seemed to provide exactly the kind of simple visual heuristic signal participants were looking for, and where they had not seen enough 'space' some reported it had changed where they shopped.

> "I tried to go to a local shop before my husband got the letter that we had to shield. At first it looked OK as it had a sign outside that limited the number of people in the shop, yet when I got in there it was clear that there were more than 3 people… If you can't look after me then you don't deserve my business, I will shop elsewhere." - F, 63, retired, Cardiff

Others reported having seen 'Covid Approved' signs on shop doors or windows.[14] However, they were unclear on the details of these - who the signs came from, what exactly was included in the assessments, etc. Even so, they were positively received. Participants liked the idea that they could delegate their own assessments of safety to someone else, instead scanning for a simple sign; the details of how these decisions had been made was less important than that 'someone' had made them.

Clear rules and social norms

Participants were eager for signs that the rules were clear, consistent and enforced. In practice, this was not always the case: every shop seemed to have a different protocol to learn, in some places protocols did not seem consistent, and other shoppers sometimes did not follow the 'rules.' Many participants found this uncertainty difficult to manage, particularly in the context of often-changing rules of lockdown itself.

Many participants were left frustrated by the amount of thinking and decision making required. It was difficult emotionally (Am I making the right decision for myself/my family? Is this safe? How do I work that out?). It was challenging cognitively (Why do I have to make so many decisions? This is tiring! Why can't the rules be the same everywhere?) And it was a challenge behaviourally (I don't know what is expected of me where, mask on/mask off, different queuing systems, different distances from servers!). This led to a desire for clarity and consistency.

Touchpoints

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[14] It was very unclear exactly what participants had seen. They may have been as simple as signs available to purchase from Amazon.

Controlling the 'touchpoints' in a food journey - how many people touched and handled food before you handled and ate it - was a powerful risk management strategy for some. For example, restaurants or take-outs where you could see the way somebody else handled your food was preferred to those where you could not, e.g. Subway or some pizza restaurants with open kitchens.

> "At the moment, Subway near me is quite good. That would be really empty. There's only one person handling all the food" - London Focus Group

For others, frozen food was considered to have less touchpoints and sometimes a more traceable journey. This made some people feel safer choosing this as an option to minimise their contact with the virus.

> "An online supplier only has certain people working in the factory and the meat I got recently was imported from America - it was beef from America, so it came from another country. I know already it's been through freezing and transport. And no one's really touched the meat beyond the plastic over here because it came wrapped in plastic." - M, 37, science tutor, London

Food Hygiene Rating Scheme Scores

Overall, the FHRS Hygiene Rating System Scores was widely known but not widely referenced and participants did not report having used FHRS to help them make decisions about food under Covid-19. The majority would use Tripadvisor or word of mouth as a means of checking whether a restaurant/take-out/other is up to standard. However, implicit belief was that the majority of food businesses would be checked and have to comply to a certain standard, so therefore they were safe.

When prompted, they were unsure if there would be any connection between FHRS scores given pre-pandemic and the trustworthiness or safety of a business post-pandemic. Often assuming (incorrectly) that FHRS scores were refreshed as often as every few months, they noted that after several months of lockdown, these scores would be 'out of date'. Others assumed FHRS might not include measurement of the kinds of risk measures they now cared about most, such as social distancing. They were interested in FHRS taking these kinds of measures into account in future.

> "I don't know the ins and outs [of FHRS], I'm sure it's pretty strict anyway, to be fair, and a lot of the standards overall would have a knock on effect to COVID anyway. Are they going to change it? I don't know. If those things are quick to change, are they? It'd be nice to think maybe social distancing might come into it." - M, 48, furloughed worker, Bristol

5.3 How did risk perceptions vary for different types of food businesses?

Exposure to risk when shopping for food was a top of mind concern for many participants, although levels of concern varied widely, largely according to risk sensitivity. Most felt relatively safe and comfortable when food shopping with the measures that had been put in place at time of interview in June - e.g., social distancing in supermarkets, staff wearing masks, etc. However, risk evaluations varied by business type.

Supermarkets and grocery providers

Shop size and queue size had clearly become important decision factors for many in terms of choosing where to shop, albeit for varying reasons. For those who were more risk sensitive, smaller spaces or longer queues represented an increased risk of exposure - raising risks you would be exposed to Covid-19, or have to negotiate other shoppers' 'unsafe' behaviour. Others said that they weren't concerned about Covid-19, but found queues somewhat annoying - or wanted to minimise time spent away from home for other reasons (e.g. caring or work responsibilities). Some reported changing supermarkets due to length of queues or lack of physical space.

> "We have been shopping at Sainsbury's since Covid as there are less queues and more space in the aisles which is nice; you don't have to think about touching people." - M, 24, bar manager currently furloughed, Bristol

When we asked participants which providers they would most trust to keep them safe under pandemic, responses varied - but supermarkets tended to be more trusted. This was partially a factor of space: participants felt reassured by bigger aisles, higher ceilings, and places where they had less risk of contact with other shoppers. But it was also a measure of perceived ability and motivation to invest in infrastructure and Covid-19 processes: participants assumed supermarkets had more ability to roll out consistent procedures, and 'a lot to lose' reputationally if they didn't manage risk well.

> "If I'm looking for safe food, I look at where it comes from, first of all, and generally someone who has a large liability and their reputation at stake is going to be much more careful with their food than someone who doesn't. Henceforth supermarkets." - London Focus Group

It was notable that these signs of a professionalised, more 'corporate' approach to food were so reassuring for many. In previous research, similar signals often also sparked distrust, or were perceived as a lack of 'human touch' that people found reassuring in food businesses. This previous trust 'weakness' had been turned to a strength for supermarkets under pandemic.

For a few, higher trust in supermarkets was also tied to reports that local shops had increased prices under pandemic, lowering trust of the communities who use them.

> "I found out that the local suppliers were hiking the prices up and you lose faith and trust in them… but we saw the major supermarkets actually keeping their prices. because they could due to their supply chains. People just put their trust in them." - London Focus Group

Conversely, usually those in more rural areas and/or the devolved nations, were more reassured by smaller suppliers and local shops. For these participants, local shops: 1) were 'known' entities; customers had developed rapport with the people in charge, 2) had lower traffic, and thus lowering exposure risk, and sometimes 3) had shorter supply chains and therefore 'touchpoints, lowering perceived transmission risk.

> "My coach always says we should try and shop locally as they sponsor our team. It feels nice as well to help your local community." - M, 25, bricklayer, NI

Restaurants and pubs

Restaurants and pubs benefitted from implicit beliefs that they were held to a higher standard of accountability and safety measures than take-aways. Most felt you were less likely to have a bad experience at a restaurant and a pub than you were at a take-away - in line with previously evidenced heuristics around safety and hygiene.

There was however some level of resistance to returning to pubs and restaurants and a tension between wanting to uphold the rules versus wanting to have a normal experience and a short relief from the pandemic and lockdown rules. There were concerns over safety; will it be busy? Will they have distancing measures in place? Will they properly collect information for track and trace?

Participants also worried that new safety rules would change their experience; would it still feel the same? Would they enjoy it? How much will it have changed? There was a clear tension between their desire to 'return to normal' and a growing suspicion that lockdown easing would not mean a return of old pre-Covid-19 realities.

> "I would go to restaurants. However, if I'm not going to get the service I'm used to what's the point? It's not going to feel the same as it's just like well, I might as well wait until everythings opens properly and you can sit down and have a natter with your friend or whatever it is without having to worry about being two metres apart." - F- 38, educational behaviour manager, Bristol

Media stories with visuals of busy beaches in Bournemouth and Dorset reinforced concerns about virus transmission, packed spaces and how the public might behave in pubs and restaurants when lockdown restrictions were eased.

> "I definitely want to go to the pub when they open, I'm a single man living on my own. I've talked to friends and family and that but it's not the same. I miss the social connection of a few pints…. saying that if it's as packed out as those beaches, you know in Bournemouth on the news the other day? I might leave it a week or two until it calms down. " - M, 52, unemployed, London

A few directly reported that their risk concerns were people related, not food related. They were apprehensive about how close they would be to other restaurant goers, the queue system and if others would adhere to the rules. Talk of new rules such ordering on an app were off-putting, especially for an older generation.

> "It sounds too much hassle ordering on an app ordering at a table queuing to get in. So you'll be half open anyways. And it really let's be honest as to what the risk is not the food side of it is the other people. And if you don't have to do it, and you don't have to go to a restaurant, let's be honest, you don't have to go to a pub." - M, 48, furloughed worker, Bristol

Take-aways

Attitudes and behaviours towards take-aways under Covid-19 varied across the sample, influenced by overall risk sensitivity and particularly virus transmission concerns, as well as by diet and health considerations. People who were more risk-sensitive around virus transmission often reported concern about take-aways; they had heightened awareness of the 'touchpoints' involved in the food preparation and handling (e.g., the kitchen staff, the delivery driver). Some took steps to decontaminate food packaging/boxes on arrival, although this tended to lessen as lockdown continued and risk sensitivity waned.

> "We will go out without it because there are so many things, whether they make fresh food or whether frozen, who's cooked it, when they froze it, who's cooking it at the time of reheating or who's delivering it. So many people are involved and we don't know, they may be good at hygiene but you don't know whether they have dormant COVID-19 symptoms or we have to be careful for at least six months or one year before we feel confident." - F, 72, retired, Bristol

Some expressed concern about Chinese food specifically, (unfairly) using ethnicity as a shorthand for virus transmission risk. This suggests some risk that Chinese food businesses (or Asian-run businesses that white customers may assume as 'Chinese') may be unfairly financially affected by Covid-19.

> "My daughter and son love a Chinese but at the beginning of lockdown they were not having it because my daughter made the association with Covid...that didn't last long though." - F, 58, furloughed now working, NI

5.4 Towards the future: what might go and what might stay - and what reassurances did the public need from food businesses going forward?

Participants' discussions about the future were fraught with uncertainty and confusion: it is difficult for people to predict their future behaviour in the most 'normal' of times, let alone under a swiftly changing and evolving global pandemic.

But from this research there were a few cues that seemed particularly important for people as lockdown began to ease:

- **Visible proof of social distancing measures** and the steps taken to ensure adequate space - including curtailing 'unsafe' behaviour of other shoppers

- **Other visible safety cues** like staff mask-wearing, or where appropriate, the use of plastic screens/shields in high traffic areas

- **Signs of regulatory or expert 'sign off' of safety**; if these are not provided by an agency like the FSA or other Government body, participants are still likely to place a high degree of trust in any system that is adopted and used

- **Reassurance around safe food handling**, including potentially the 'freshness' of food used after lockdown periods.

Even during the analysis period of this reporting, the situation changed dramatically. Further research is likely needed to understand how people actually navigated food business environments as lockdown eased - and how the many tensions between desire and concern were managed in practice.

Chapter 6: Thinking about food systems

In research sessions, we also explored audience views around food systems more widely - and stability or change compared to previous evidence.

Pre-lockdown, most were thinking about and engaging with these kinds of issues a little, if at all. For our participants in June 2020, this was still the case. Personal food concerns and interactions still took priority over more abstract issues such as UK or global supply chains; sustainability; system incentives and power; traceability; etc.

However, many reported brief moments of 'noticing' or becoming more aware of elements of the food systems, like supply chains or its global complexity - far more than usually reported in FSA deliberative research in previous years. A few, usually those

with more 'time and space' (as in Chapter 3), had newly engaged in deep questioning of the status quo under lockdown, sometimes drastically shifting views.

6.1 What moments or media raised awareness of food systems issues?

Even for those who had not previously engaged in food systems issues, there had often been moments of 'cut through' of these issues during lockdown. Supermarket shortages and concerns about 'touch points' were powerful and most commonly raised - but reports of meat packing outbreaks, fruit-picker shortages, and impact of pandemic on UK food businesses were also discussed.

Public interpretations of supermarket shortages: 'good systems, bad consumers'

Participants' early experiences of supermarket shortages (or media coverage) had overall not raised concerns about food system issues. As discussed previously, although initially unsettling and scary, participants were reassured that supermarkets 'bounced back' quickly - helping them feel confident that 'the system is strong.' None reported reading or thinking about debates around 'just in time supply chains' that might have otherwise called attention to system issues above the level of 'my supermarket.'

The generally accepted interpretation or frame for understanding shortages was that they were caused by 'panic buying.' This idea was also been linked to highly emotional images in the media during this period: 1) viral videos of key workers crying, unable to buy food at the end of long and draining shifts, and 2) images of 'vulnerable elderly shoppers' scanning empty shelves.

> "If everyone had stopped panic buying we wouldn't have had a problem." - F, 47, office worker, Bristol

Outside of a few participants raising that they wished supermarkets had acted faster to ensure those who most needed support could get it, these images and events had cemented ideas that the system is strong, but the public is selfish. The onus was on 'others' and everyday people - rather than raising questions about the system itself, or how it might need to adjust under the long-term impacts of pandemic.

> "I think we did quite well, the supermarkets stocked up again quickly and then they put limits on how much everyone could have… maybe they could have done that a bit sooner." - F, 61, part time, now furloughed, Bristol

For a few (especially those caring for others/shielding) empty market shelves prompted changes in behaviour, e.g. stocking up for future to prevent lulls in getting on supermarket priority lists and 'just in case' alongside an awareness of what happens if we don't get "X". This influenced worries about food but also medicines.

> "It's made me think about things not being available...what happens if I can't get mummy her medicine? And if it's happening to my Mummy, it's happening to lots of other people out there." - F, 58, was furloughed, now working, NI

Virus worries had uncomfortably raised awareness of 'touchpoints'

As discussed previously, worries about virus transmission had raised awareness about the 'touchpoints' involved in getting food to your table. For most, this had simply heightened sensitivity around the number of people involved in participants' food shop, and who handled food when eating out/ordering takeaway. Can I trust the supermarket employees who have touched my produce? What about the people that brought it to the shop? What about the other shoppers? As discussed in Chapter 5, this was uncomfortable, but people found ways to manage these concerns - often relying on heuristics and visual queues to simplify their decision making.

But for a minority in the sample, yet more than typically raise these questions during similar deliberative exercises, lockdown had also raised new questions about high-order, more abstract food systems issues. In depth interviews, these participants spontaneously raised questions about the complexity of people, organisations, systems and countries involved in getting food to the table. They hadn't come to a point of developing a firm point of view, or even necessarily beginning to engage with the complexities involved - but were asking questions.

> "We're far too reliant on other countries for food. But that's just a cause and effect of globalism and the way the world is these days and people want asparagus all year round."   - M, 29, bar worker now furloughed, Bristol

UK systems disruption was of low salience - except for those directly affected

Few participants raised concerns about the potential impact of the pandemic on the UK food system in terms of overall 'health' or supply issues. There seemed to be high confidence the system would adapt, and low awareness of potential challenges.

A few mentioned reading reports about the lack of EU workers to pick UK fruit in the summer season. However, in discussion most (incorrectly[15]) understood these had been quickly resolved, e.g., with one participant mentioning huge numbers of applications for fruit-picking jobs.[16] Discussions did not stretch to the impact this would

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[15] EG Telegraph (27 April 2020) Only 112 of 50,000 UK applicants for fruit pickers take jobs amid farmers' fears over skills and application.

[16] Example media coverage from this moment: BBC (9 April 2020) 'Coronavirus: Thousands apply for fruit and veg grower jobs'

have on UK food systems, e.g. by having to import extra fruit from neighbouring countries.

When prompted to ask whether they had engaged with any food systems issues, some also mentioned news stories of high proportions of cases within some meat-packing businesses. This did not seem to have widely influenced follow-on views and behaviours for the most part, with the exception of a couple of participants who seemed to have interpreted this as meaning meat was 'less safe' given fears about food-bourne virus transmission.

> "There have been lots of outbreaks in meat factories. There was one near me in Merthyr." - F, 24, supermarket worker, Cardiff

Overall, there was also little spontaneous discussion around the potential impact of the pandemic on the UK or global food system, except by participants who were directly affected - e.g., worrying about their own jobs. This didn't seem to have much influence on others views, at least in the short context of a focus group, in terms of prompting discussion of wider issues or 'what if's.

> "Recently there has been talk of food suppliers making workers redundant, so I am now more aware of it and concerned going forward after Covid." - M, 33, HGV driver, Cardiff

Likewise, at the point of fieldwork, Brexit and how this might interact with any other emergent food systems issues was not front of mind for participants. A few said they had 'wondered' about it during lockdown, or had even started trying to connect some of what they knew about Brexit and the food system with 'what might happen' under pandemic; those that were asking these questions tended to assume combined impacts would be negative, for example in terms of price or quality. In particular, the idea that Brexit might mean the introduction of foods such as chlorine-treated chicken had 'landed' with some, and was found to be unappealing.

> "I don't know but I don't think those on the continent have as good meat regulations as we do, I don't fancy eating chlorinated chicken, so I don't know what is going to happen there…" - F, 63, retired, Cardiff

> "We've got the whole Brexit thing looming still. So I think that'll have the same effect. And that probably will affect us more than Covid to be fair. Like what impact is that gonna have on prices? Heaven only knows. So I think this is probably a taster of what we got coming up." - M, 48, furloughed worker, Bristol

6.2 How did these change views or behaviour?

For a minority, these 'moments' have driven deep engagement with the food system and changing views - via an environmental and/or social justice lens

Some participants in the sample reported that they had found themselves thinking very deeply indeed, typically those who seemed more politically engaged generally. For example, one participant said that he had rarely thought about food before, but had begun thinking about and questioning the need for complex, profit-focused, international supply chains - worrying that international food conglomerates held too much power, and wishing that food systems were more localised.

Another participant actually became quite emotional during the interview, talking about the ways in which both coronavirus and the Black Lives Matter Protests had made her more aware of global social justice issues. For reasons she couldn't quite articulate, she said that when she thought about where her food came from, she was now also thinking about who had gotten food to her table, and who had profited from their work. Were fruit pickers around the world being fairly treated - or adequately protected under pandemic? What did it mean for her, a white English retiree, to fill her basket with food grown, handled, packaged and shipped from elsewhere? Which countries benefited most from this system? Was that as it should be?

Most reported being slightly more aware, but have not changed behaviour

For most, these 'moments' of reporting on food system issues seemed to have left a quiet but long tail in people's memories. They were slightly more aware of systemic issues than is typically evidenced in FSA research, sensitising them to consider and notice these issues more readily in the future.

> "Where does this stuff get made? Why are we not making it in England ourselves? And why are we relying on other countries that now can't get anything over the border? So we're kind of up the creek without a paddle. So that was a bit frustrating?" - F, 38, educational behavioural manager, Bristol

The FSA often notices a 'deliberative dip' in its deliberative research exercises with the public. Before deliberation, people are trusting and positive about the food system - focused on positives like food enjoyment, the ready availability of the foods they enjoy, and the perceived safety and quality of the food available to us. But being asked to stop and consider previously 'black boxed' food systems issues like supply chains or regulation is hard and unfamiliar - requiring people to move from the personal to the social, or global. People often find thinking about food at this level quite uncomfortable, because questions are inherently complex, interconnected and uncertain.

Only time will tell whether some of the questions that participants were asking under lockdown will 'stick' - whether they will use these as a launching point for further investigation and inquiry, or whether they will be 'flashes in the pan.' But it was striking

that some of the questions being asked spontaneously typically took hours or even days of discussion and prompting in previous FSA deliberative research. Might participants have been sensitised to pay attention to issues that had previously been 'black boxed'? Might have some of the discomfort we noted be individual moments of 'deliberative dip'?

Key areas of behaviour change

One of the most often reported changes in behaviour around shopping (going to only one supermarket/getting food delivered/queues) led to participants thinking more about **food wastage.** This was considered on a personal level (trying to avoid wasting food/buying appropriate amounts) but also from the perspective of the supermarket and more widely (Why is food thrown away? Are there not people who need it? How can we be less wasteful?). It was unclear how lasting these changes might be as time went on.

> "I have definitely been more conscious about food waste, before I was too busy and didn't take notice but I am planning more now." - F, 61, furloughed part-time worker, Bristol

Others reported having thought more about **local food systems**, and reporting intentions to **shop more locally and seasonally** in the future. Socioeconomics played a clear role here; those within a higher income bracket had more supplier choice.

> "I think people will now start to try and buy more British stuff. You know, you get peppers from Israel and then cucumbers are coming halfway around the world from South America or something. It's crazy. So that they'll try and not be self sufficient but in season, have things fresh, save money, and it's better for them." - M, 65, self employed - car manufacturing, Cardiff

6.3 What next in terms of food system views?

In this research, it felt very 'early' to determine what the impact would be of pandemic on public views of food systems issues - certainly in the long-term future, but even in the weeks and months ahead. Will the public continue to receive reassuring signals that the food supply chain is robust and as safe, as they assume?

As above, only a few had changed their views or behaviours dramatically in the months since lockdown, and this initially felt analytically to the research team like a signal of 'null' change. In most FSA research in years past, a similar proportion of participants typically reported having newly engaged with food systems issues or developed new views in recent years.

But on reflection, it was striking given everything else participants had to grapple with under the first three months of a global pandemic - cognitively, emotionally and practically - that even these few had. Each reported themselves as thinking quite deeply

at some point during March-June 2020 about things that had not been 'on their radar' before, and connecting what had previously felt like unrelated ideas or issue spaces: social justice and the food system; corporate ethics and food business employee treatment; immigration, colonialism and power in food systems.

Each of these are complex sets of issues that in many years of previous FSA deliberative research, have rarely if ever come up spontaneously. To have these raised spontaneously was somewhat surprising, and raises the question as to whether and how views might evolve over the coming months of pandemic. Might those that are already sensitised more easily notice food systems issues - or will other concerns gulf any consideration of issues like supply chains, global connectedness, or sustainability? Will those who have considered more deeply change their behaviour - or will this moment fall away?

Chapter 7: What next?

In exploring the UK public's experience of food-related issues under the early months of Covid-19, this snapshot piece of research raises as many questions as it answers. We explore a few of these below.

What is needed to support informed decision making under Covid-19?

As Covid-19 continues, these findings suggest that more may need to be done to ensure that the public can make informed choices about controlling virus transmission and exposure risks. In particular, there is a need for continued and more potentially targeted communications to confirm low risk of food-bourne virus transmission, and minimal risk of transmission via packaging. Communications may need to disrupt established assumptions about days-long survival of Covid-19 on surfaces. It will also be important to ensure that communications reach people with heightened risk sensitivity, including those managing health issues and/or shielding, given evidence around the continued practical and emotional toll of 'disinfecting' groceries and otherwise managing food risks at home.

Participants were eager for clarity about 'the rules' for food businesses under Covid-19, and to delegate some of their thinking about 'safe' business behaviour to experts. It was notable how well received the 'Covid safe' signs on businesses had been, despite participants being unsure exactly how businesses received these, or who had 'signed them off.' If there is a role for the FSA in providing this kind of reassurance, participants would likely receive FSA guidance with gratitude given high trust in the FSA generally, and in FHRS specifically. However, in the absence of this or other official guidance they are likely to find any system and information provided powerful.

Will reported changes in views and behaviour continue as time goes on?

Participants' contexts have likely changed significantly since the point of research in June/July, shaped by easing lockdown restrictions as well as wider shifts like the end of furlough, the reopening of schools, and so on. It is likely that views and behaviour have continued to evolve as well - particularly given the level of change reported by participants during the few months preceding research.

For those that had found some of the changes brought by Covid-19, there was hope that these would be retained into the future: more connection and engagement with food and cooking; more intentional sharing of food with others; for some, positive changes in diet and health; a new or enhanced interest in issues like food wastage; etc.

However it remains to be seen whether these new patterns can be maintained over time. It seems likely that this will be easier for those with 'time, money and space' as previously discussed - and more difficult for those facing more financial and time pressure. Between the fieldwork and reporting for this project furlough will likely have

ended for many, hopefully signalling a return to work, but potentially ending in redundancy. It would be useful for further research to explore the ways in which evolving attitudes and behaviours are shaped by changing financial contexts.

Other more practical changes such as shifts to new suppliers, or use of online delivery formats, feel more likely to be maintained over time given the minimal effort required to maintain them. These trends should be easy to verify (or not) with further tracking data.

The long-term impact of the increased salience of food systems issues - such as 'touchpoints', supply chains, worker conditions, food waste, etc - is also uncertain. Overall, most participants only reported 'noticing' media reports or 'moments' relevant to systems issues rather than shifts in behaviour or attitudes, or any serious questioning of the status quo. It could be that these 'moments of noticing' translate to more concrete attitudinal or behavioural shifts over time, as people are more sensitised to pay attention to systems issues in the future; conversely, these moments may become memories and spark no further action. Much will depend on how and how often these kinds of issues garner media attention in the coming months.

In exploring continued evolution of views and behaviour over time, we recommend that work explicitly explore region-specific and social-group specific norms and behaviours. Given the variation in experiences evidenced in our sample, exploring changing views and behaviours at a population level may obscure strong trends in for particular locations (e.g., the devolved nations, or more rural locations) or for particular socio-economic or social groups (e.g., lower versus higher household income; people with stable employment versus those without; parents versus non-parents; those with health conditions or concerns and those without; etc).

In particular, the very different experiences and behaviour of people who are shielding and/or those with health concerns may warrant further investigation, given unique concerns around virus transmission risk and more behaviour change in this group.