

Retail Surveillance Sampling Programme during Covid-19 pandemic - Executive Summary

Results available: Results available

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Executive Summary

This project was commissioned to carry out targeted surveillance sampling on food products across Food Standards Agency (FSA) competent areas in order to help to identify emerging food safety risks and increase the FSA's intelligence on the food system during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The targeted surveillance programme was delivered in partnership by the three Local Authority Food and Feed Official Laboratories (OLs) and the two private OLs in England and Wales. The programme consisted of six sub projects each focussing on commodities and hazards where intelligence suggested that the impact of Covid-19 on the global food chain could potentially impact product safety or authenticity.

- Mince and Processed Meat Composition and Speciation
- Fish and Fish Product Speciation
- Spice and Herb Authenticity
- Basmati Rice and Durum Wheat Authenticity
- Undeclared Milk
- Undeclared Gluten

Samples were purchased across England and Wales from large Food Business Operators (FBOs) such as national supermarkets, smaller FBOs such as independent retailers and internet sites.

In total 1010 surveillance samples were analysed by OLs for authenticity, adulteration and contamination and 829 (82%) were reported as compliant by the Public Analysts with regards to the analysis undertaken. Samples can be deemed non-compliant for a variety of reasons, and the nature and severity of these varies widely. The majority of non-compliant samples within this survey were due to the composition of the product. Sampling was targeted at products and Food Business Operators (FBOs) of highest risk, and the non-compliance rate is not necessarily reflective of the UK market. It should be noted that the compliance rate for large FBOs was higher (92.8%).

Samples were recorded as non-compliant in the following circumstances:

- meat and fish samples tested for speciation were non-compliant if they contained DNA from a non-stated species. (A 1% threshold was used for meat samples).
- meat samples tested for composition were non-compliant if they did not have a qualitative meat declaration, had a low meat content, excess fat or other labelling irregularities.
- herbs and spices tested for adulteration were reported as unsatisfactory if they contained extraneous material such as damaged or unwanted plant parts, dirt or foreign substances.
- Basmati rice samples were reported as unsatisfactory if non-basmati rice varieties were detected or if the marked variety was not at least 97% of the product.
- any undeclared milk protein detected in dairy free products was reported as unsatisfactory.

A total of 300 minced and processed meat products were tested for speciation and composition. No horsemeat was detected in any of the samples suggesting that the measures put in place to increase food security following the horsemeat scandal in 2013 are preventing undeclared infiltration of horsemeat into the food chain.

Of the meat samples tested, 20% contained meat species that the consumer would not expect to find, with beef products having the lowest level of contamination and goat having the highest proportion of adulterated products.

Fewer fish samples than meat samples tested for speciation were found to have been adulterated with 96 out of 100 products reported as satisfactory. The four non-compliant samples were all sold as haddock.

A total of 375 samples of herbs and spices were analysed using microscopy to check for authenticity. Four of the samples had missing or substituted ingredients and approximately 10% were reported as non-compliant due to high proportions of extraneous plant matter being present which rendered the quality of the product as unacceptable.

Milk-free products (140) and gluten-free flours (30) were tested for the presence of the respective allergens. All of the dairy alternative products and gluten-free flours were satisfactory. Milk was detected in six dark chocolate samples, one chocolate truffle sample and one popcorn sample.

One third of samples bought via the internet were reported as not meeting regulatory standards, whereas one fifth of samples bought from smaller retailers and fewer than one in eight from large FBOs were reported as unsatisfactory.

The outcomes from this surveillance programme provide intelligence and evidence on the safety and authenticity of food as well as reassurance that food is safe. Any foods with significant findings were reported immediately to the FSA so that effective action could be taken. The FSA also reviewed all of the results to identify areas of emerging risk and used this to inform post-Covid-19 priorities.

Collaborative working on this project has increased the flow of information between the OLs and the FSA and has bolstered the enforcement network, making stronger connections between national and local knowledge of the food supply chain. Encouraging joined up working between the OLs was recommended by Professor Elliott in his review into the integrity and assurance of food supply networks (1) and this project has facilitated this. Outputs from the project also supported the FSA in acquiring and using data from food sampling as a source of intelligence and to test hypotheses, which was a benefit recognised in the National Audit Office report into ensuring food safety and standards (2). This style of working is demonstrably aligned to the FSA future approach to sampling as endorsed by the FSA Board in November 2020 (3).