

Conclusions

Food standards usually play a hidden but essential role in people's lives, helping us to eat well, stay safe and make the best choices for ourselves and our families.

Our first annual report on food standards comes after the UK food system has faced two years of significant upheaval. The COVID-19 pandemic shut down swathes of the hospitality industry, brought disruption and uncertainty across food supply chains, and piled additional pressure on local authority environmental health, trading standards teams and FSA and FSS inspectors.

In addition, as a result of the UK's departure from the EU, ministers and food regulators are now directly responsible for food law for the first time in nearly 50 years. As a consequence, the UK Government and devolved administrations have new and significant responsibilities to discharge, such as negotiating trade deals and authorising novel foods.

And there are more changes ahead. As we write, the impact of the conflict in Ukraine is being felt across food supply chains, and rising global food prices are a matter of national and international concern.

The evidence set out in this report suggests that overall food safety standards have largely been maintained during 2021. Against the background of change and uncertainty, this is a remarkable achievement.

However, this is a cautious conclusion. The pandemic disrupted regular inspections, sampling and audits across the food system, reducing the amount of data we can draw upon in assessing business compliance against food law requirements. It also changed patterns of behaviour. For example, people ate out less and supermarkets narrowed the range of items they stocked. This has made comparisons with previous years difficult for some key performance indicators, such as the numbers of allergy alerts issued.

While food safety standards have largely been maintained, both organisations recognise there are significant risks ahead. Evidence from this period points to two particular points of concern in the system.

Firstly, there has been a fall in the level of local authority inspections of food businesses. The situation is in the process of being repaired – in particular in food hygiene inspections of cafés and restaurants – but progress is constrained by resource and the availability of qualified professionals.

The second is in relation to the import of food from the EU. To enhance levels of assurance on higher-risk EU food like meat, dairy and eggs, and food and feed that has come to the UK via the EU, it is essential that improved controls are put in place to the timescale that the UK Government has set out (end 2023). The longer the UK operates without assurance from the exporting country that products meet the UK's high food and feed safety standards, the less confident we can be that we can effectively identify potential safety incidents.

It is vital that the UK has the ability to prevent entry of unsafe food and identify and respond to changing risks. Although we have considered these challenges carefully and put other arrangements within our control in place, they are not, in our view, sufficient. We are therefore committed to working with government departments to ensure that the introduction of these improved import controls provides high levels of protection for UK consumers.

These twin concerns about the capacity for inspection and the enforcement of future standards for imported food reinforce the need to expand investment in sampling programmes, such as the FSA's basket of foods survey and FSS's targeted food sampling activity. Local authorities also need sufficient resources to carry out their part in assuring that food is what it says it is.

Looking to the future, we recognise that considerations about the impact of trade and new free trade agreements go beyond safety standards. They include consumer concerns on broader standards linked to production such as animal welfare and sustainability, and questions related to national food security. These concerns tie in with a greater consumer appreciation of current UK food standards, including in domestic production, and a recognition of the contribution domestic food systems make to communities and the economy. These are issues that we will turn to in future reports.

Above all, the findings in this report highlight the need for food policy to keep pace with consumers' expectations, concerns, behaviours, and values – particularly as their personal circumstances change.

Our research shows that concerns about price, health and the environment are high amongst the public's priorities. Although there have been some modest and welcome improvements in people's diets, especially the reduction in the consumption of free sugars, the overall picture shows that too many of us are not meeting dietary recommendations – a fact reinforced by the high and increasing numbers of people in the UK who are living with obesity. This in turn creates an avoidable pressure on health care resources as well as significant impact on the wider UK economy in terms of lost productivity, premature death, and disability.

There is an important and ongoing conversation underway about what role the government should play in addressing issues of health and sustainability that go beyond immediate matters of food safety and authenticity. In the face of the steep rises in food prices, and wider pressures on household incomes, which are a subject of intense concern as we write this report, we recognise that it is almost certain to become more challenging for consumers to access affordable healthy and sustainable food this year.

The FSA and FSS are among many national organisations with responsibility for different aspects of food policy. This is a complex eco-system and the security, safety and sustainability of our food system, for people and the planet, are not issues that can be neatly disentangled. The question that shadows this report is how we can make sure that current cost of living pressures do not become a crisis for food safety or exacerbate the challenges we already face to public health and environmental sustainability.

This extends far beyond the powers we have as regulators. But it is one that we need to help to resolve, working with business and governments, and in partnership with all those involved in the food system. Affordable food must also be good food, for the sake of our health and the environment. We owe this to consumers today and for future generations.