Qualitative research to explore consumer attitudes to food sold online

Executive Summary

Method and sample

This research report provides findings from 12 online discussion groups conducted via video with a range of consumers split across different demographics in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. To allow for exploration of the nuances in participants' online food purchasing behaviours, the discussion groups were further split according to participants' online food purchasing habits. During the 90-minute discussion groups, participants discussed their views towards food sold online. Participants were also shown five online food purchasing scenarios designed to explore whether types of food and/or types of platform affected participants' perceptions of risk. To conclude the discussion, participants were asked about their awareness of controls and regulations currently in place to regulate the online food purchasing industry across different platforms.

Key findings

Participants' attitudes towards buying food online

Across the discussion groups, participants' attitudes towards buying food online were linked to their current food purchasing habits.

Those who did not frequently purchase food online tended to prefer the overall experience of buying food in person. While they typically did not have specific concerns about the safety of food bought online, problems with the quality of food bought online were highlighted. Some concerns about buying food online were related to finances (e.g., perceiving buying food in store to be more cost-effective), or frustrations with unsuitable food substitutions they had received when buying food online. Despite this, participants recognised that buying food online suits some people's lifestyles. They further suggested they would consider buying food online if they were unwell or to support older parents by setting up an online food delivery.

Those who bought food online said convenience was the main driver for doing so. Many participants reported buying food online more frequently than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Other perceived benefits included cost savings, because food purchasing was more focused (contrary to those who did not buy online often). Some also liked being able to order speciality foods online.

There were no notable differences highlighted between participants in England, Wales and Northern Ireland around buying food online, or the ways they considered the risks around doing so. The factors that shaped online food behaviours and attitudes are discussed further below.

Information required when purchasing food online

Dietary requirements and hypersensitivities were considered, with participants explaining that ingredients lists, and nutritional information were important to them when buying food online.

The importance of reviews for participants when buying food online was mixed, with participants not consistently looking at reviews online:

- some felt that reviews were dependent on individuals' preferences and could be misleading.
- for others, particularly those who had or cooked for someone with hypersensitivities, reviews provided participants with reassurance about the safety of food ordered online.

Paying for food bought online

Participants did not view buying food online any differently to making other online purchases. However, where cash payments were required for food bought online, participants sometimes saw this payment method as a riskier transaction, raising questions surrounding the legitimacy of sellers and the extent to which they adhere to food hygiene standards.

Factors influencing consumers' confidence in food bought online

The following factors were identified as influencing the extent to which participants trusted, and had confidence in, the safety of food bought online.

- familiarity: Participants' confidence in food bought online was influenced by their familiarity with establishments, sellers, and platforms. There were frequent references to not feeling comfortable buying food 'from strangers' on apps and social media platforms. Related to this, participants referenced liking buying particular brand names which they knew when buying food online, as they trusted that the food would be authentic.
- sellers' need to protect their reputation: Businesses' need to protect their reputation emerged as an important factor driving participants' trust in the safety of food sold online. Participants assumed that well-known, established food businesses would want to ensure

that the food they were providing was safe to eat, so as not to damage their reputation.
- assumptions about regulation: Participants' confidence was shaped by their assumptions about the level of regulation in place for food bought online. Specifically, participants mentioned concerns around the extent to which they perceived that food businesses and individual sellers would adhere to food safety and hygiene regulations. Some participants questioned whether food hygiene standards were enforced, monitored, or even required by online food purchasing platforms. They also had concerns about the way in which food is stored, packaged, and delivered by food delivery businesses in particular and the implications this may have for the quality and safety of food bought online.
- endorsement: Across groups, endorsement from others (for example, word of mouth or positive reviews) strongly influenced trust in food bought online, especially where this came from people known to participants – again highlighting the importance of familiarity.
- type of food: Food type was another factor affecting participants' online food purchasing behaviours. Across groups, participants consistently described meat, fish, eggs, dairy, and rice as being associated with an increased risk of food poisoning/illness if these foods were undercooked, spoiled, or past their use-by-date. Participants who did not typically buy online were more cautious when buying fresh food online due to the heightened food safety concerns. Packaged, dried foods with longer shelf-lives were consistently considered lower risk, as there was less concern about use-by-dates or issues related to the food being damaged in transportation.
- previous negative experiences: While previous negative experiences rarely stopped participants from ordering food online completely, they influenced participants' confidence in the quality and safety of food bought online. Participants cited negative experiences of takeaway food which was unhygienic (for example, hair or foreign objects found in meals) and complained about mixed up orders.

Assumptions and expectations for online food regulation

While participants agreed that the FSA should be involved in the regulation of food standards for food sold online, they typically did not have strong views about what this should look like in practice.

The general trust in the FSA's regulation of established food businesses extended to participants broadly trusting the food that was sold from such establishments online.

For many, the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) ratings provided reassurance that food sold online through established businesses would adhere to hygiene standards.

Participants did not have a clear view on the specific role of the FSA in regulating food sold online by individual sellers. They did not appear to expect regulators to be proactively monitoring this when individual sellers were using general online platforms, with the risk ultimately seen to lie with consumers themselves. However, there were some participants who wanted the FSA to be a point of contact in cases where food sold online had made consumers seriously ill.

Food Standards Agency
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Chapter 1: Background and methodology

1.1 Introduction to the research

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is responsible for food safety across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Their work includes protecting public health and consumers' wider interests in relation to food, as well as reducing the economic burden of foodborne illness.

With increasing numbers of online food delivery and food sharing platforms, and evidence of more people obtaining food online, this research was designed to understand consumer attitudes towards purchasing food online, including the perceived risks. It sought to capture attitudes around purchasing food through a range of different online retailers: from ordering food through established businesses, which had physical presences, such as using online supermarket websites and delivery service apps, through to obtaining food through social media platforms (for example, Facebook Marketplace) and food sharing apps (for example, Olio, Too Good To Go).

1.2 Research objectives and aims

This research aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What influences consumers' decisions when purchasing food online;
2. What are consumers' attitudes towards risk when obtaining food online and in which ways do these vary; and
3. What consumers' assumptions are about how this area is currently regulated, and how it should be regulated in future.

1.3 Methodology and sample

To answer these research questions, 12 online discussion groups were conducted (comprising 69 participants in total) to explore consumers' decision making and perceived risk when purchasing food online. Fieldwork was conducted between 8th February and 22nd February 2022 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Participants took part in a 90-minute online discussion via video.

To allow for an exploration of the nuances in participants' online food purchasing behaviours, the discussion groups were split by nation and according to participants' online food purchasing habits. Across the 12 groups, discussions were divided into those who:

- don't typically purchase food online in an average month;
- have purchased food online but only through online supermarkets/delivery sites and/or lower risk foods; and
- purchase food online frequently across multiple different platforms (including social media, online marketplaces, and food sharing apps), and higher-risk foods (such as meat and dairy products and/or cooked, ready to eat foods).

To capture a broad range of views on the relevant behaviours, each group brought together a mix of consumers across the following demographics:

- Working Status
- Social Grade
- Rural/Urban and geographic location
- Age
- Ethnicity
- Gender

Additional criteria were also monitored across the sample, including ensuring the views of participants with hypersensitivities and those who had caring responsibilities, were captured.

The design and structure of the discussion groups were informed by the key research questions. Discussions were structured to include a 'warm up phase', where participants discussed typical food purchasing behaviours and spontaneous views towards food sold online. This was followed by an exploration of what information participants would require when buying food online, and participants' perceived risk of buying food online. Participants were then shown five online food purchasing scenarios which were designed to explore whether types of food and/or types of platforms affect participants' perceptions of risk. These can be found in Annex B. Finally, participants were asked about their awareness of controls and regulations currently in place to regulate the online food purchasing industry across different platforms. The discussion guide is included in Annex A.

Chapter 2: Attitudes towards and perceived risk of buying food online

2.1 Participants' online food purchasing behaviours

The three groups comprised:

1. Those who rarely or never purchased food online
2. Those who bought food online, but only through online supermarket websites and/or lower risk foods
3. Those who frequently bought food online, using multiple platforms including through social media and/or food sharing apps and higher-risk foods (such as meat and dairy products and/or cooked, ready to eat foods).

There were no notable differences observed in participants' behaviours or attitudes to buying food online across the different countries. The main differences were instead linked to participants' current and previous online food purchasing behaviours. Consumers' behaviour and attitudes around buying food online are compared and contrasted between participants in Group 1 and Groups 2 and 3 and are discussed below.

2.1.1 Behaviours and attitudes among those not typically buying food online

Participants who did not frequently purchase food online tended to cite practical reasons to explain their food shopping behaviour. They did not tend to have specific concerns about the safety or hygiene of food bought online. These participants generally found it easier to buy food in person, and often said they preferred the overall experience of doing so. For example, participants frequently referenced the human interaction that shopping in-person offers. These participants said they also liked the physical act of getting out of the house to do their shopping, with some referring to online shopping as 'lazy'.

These participants also preferred the greater choice and control that they felt when buying food in person. For example, they often said they enjoyed browsing through items and handling and selecting what they wanted to make sure items were ripe/in-date/good quality. They felt they were not able to do this when buying food online. They also liked being able to go and purchase items when it suited them – not having to wait for a delivery or click and collect slot. For those who were able to easily access shops in-person, buying food online and waiting for their food to arrive was

seen as taking too long.

"If I want something, [buying food online is] just a really long-winded way of doing things."
(England, Do not typically buy food online)

Some participants also felt online food shopping could be more expensive, and thought they were able to save money by buying their food in person. Examples included not able to purchase items in the reduced section in supermarkets or having to pay delivery charges or reach a minimum spend, which may not be suitable for those shopping for just themselves.

Supermarkets providing unsuitable substitutions in online orders was another source of frustration. Many participants recounted instances where alternatives they had received were not appropriate for dietary, or cultural reasons, or because they would not have made a similar substitution themselves if offered the choice in person. While the overall convenience of online food shopping was recognised, some participants mentioned that having to be at home for online food deliveries may not be suitable for people who work long hours outside of the home.

Previous negative experiences of ordering food through the 'Big Three' aggregators (Deliveroo, Just Eat and Uber Eats) appeared to influence the behaviour of those who did not buy food online frequently compared to those who did. These negative experiences were more commonly reported by older participants. For example, participants cited instances where orders had been incorrect or arrived late. This meant they had decided to not use the aggregators very often, preferring to order takeaways by phone or in person.

Some of these participants also worried that aggregator delivery drivers were not subject to food safety and hygiene requirements. This resulted in some participants preferring to use their local restaurants' own delivery drivers instead, who they trusted would adhere to appropriate standards because they were more familiar with the relevant food business.

Despite these concerns, on the whole, participants who did not typically buy food online recognised that online purchasing could be preferable for other people, including those who had less free time, or who were less mobile. They could also see the benefits of buying certain long-life items online, such as tinned goods, alcohol or condiments, as these were less likely to arrive damaged or spoiled. Many said that they had, or would in the future, set up online food orders for older relatives, even if this was something they did not do themselves.

"I am resigned to the fact that when my mum is older, I'll do her online shopping."
(England, Do not typically buy food online)

2.1.2 Behaviours and attitudes among those who bought food online

Convenience was the main reason participants said they purchased food online. The importance of this was especially highlighted by those who said they lacked the time or ability to buy food in person (e.g., if they worked long hours, did not drive, or if they were unwell). Participants particularly liked how online supermarket websites and apps enabled customers to easily re-order the same items efficiently.

"If I have the app and run out of things, I just add it straight to the app. I don't have to write a list every single week. I have it all stored and hit buy when I'm ready to purchase it, so really handy."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buy food online)

Many participants reported buying food online more frequently than they had prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some reflected that this had increased their comfort levels with buying food online. Participants also recognised that this method of buying food was suitable for those who were

shielding, or those who felt more anxious about COVID-19 restrictions who would prefer to avoid shopping in person.

In contrast to those who did not buy food online, participants who did so felt this saved them money. These participants argued it was a more focused way of buying food, allowing them to make better decisions. For example, participants said there was less temptation to make impulse purchases compared to buying food in person. They also felt that online deals could be easily seen and taken advantage of. Others mentioned liking being able to track the total cost of their order as they added items online.

"It keeps you to the point of your shop – you don't get things you don't want."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

Another perceived benefit of buying food online was the ability to buy speciality foods. Participants mentioned buying international foods they could not buy in local supermarkets, or specific foods for dietary or ethical reasons, such as vegan products.

"I shop on Amazon and Instagram for specialty things. I have a lot of food intolerances. If I can't get the specific things I want in the main supermarket online shop, I'll go buy it individually from other sites."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

Participants did not tend to spontaneously mention social media influencing their online food purchasing behaviour. When asked about this specifically, some participants reflected that social media made a difference to their food purchasing. Examples included seeing TV and social media adverts (specifically adverts on Facebook and YouTube) promoting buying food through the Big Three aggregators; recipe boxes (such as Gousto and Hello Fresh); and using online supermarkets. Some participants had bought food in this way after seeing adverts because it was easy and convenient to do so. This was more common among younger participants.

Participants described buying food as a result of online advertising for the following reasons:

Where this aligned with their personal values. For example, supporting local businesses and combatting food waste (e.g., buying surplus local fruit advertised on Facebook), or if they felt their values were aligned to those promoting the products in the advert, or that the influencer was genuine.

"[Talking about online adverts on Instagram] If it's a celebrity I don't like what they stand for, I won't support the brand they're representing. Especially with appetite suppressants and that kind of stuff... If it's somebody who's toting something you don't think is healthy or they're only doing it for the money side of it, that would make a massive difference for me."
(Wales, Frequently buy online)

- where this supported their diet/lifestyle (for example, buying ready-made meals through MuscleFoods seen on Instagram adverts);
- if the establishment/products were recommended (for example, buying seafood from establishments they had seen on advertised on Snapchat which friends recommended);
- or if they had seen products advertised which were suitable for people with hypersensitivities:

"I buy through Instagram and there are a lot of specific pages for people with food intolerances. For example, for Valentine's Day, they were sending out nut-free, gluten-free, vegan, everything-free all across the country."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

Within the groups who frequently bought food online, some participants mentioned having bought food through Facebook Marketplace. This was primarily through established food businesses which had a Facebook page, and typically baked goods such as homemade cakes. While not all participants who frequently bought online had used food sharing apps, such as Olio and Too Good To Go, there was higher awareness and use of these apps among these participants.

2.2 Information required when purchasing food online

Participants reflected on the information that was important to them when purchasing food online. This included:

Full ingredients lists. These were especially important for those who had – or who cooked for people with – hypersensitivities. Participants mentioned this was especially critical when ordering from takeaways and restaurants online. As a result, they often used the same restaurants they knew and trusted.

Nutritional information. This was mentioned by participants who said this was important to them, given their focus on healthy eating and/or fitness training, and where they were mindful of salt and sugar content when cooking for others including children.

Brand names. Participants referenced trusting and prioritising buying from brands they recognised, which they linked to trusting that these products would be authentic and safe to eat. This appeared to be linked to a sense of trust in the reputation associated with bigger, recognised brands – both with regards to particular food items, but also food establishment and retail brands, as discussed in Chapter 3.

"I'm not going to buy any obscure foods I don't know about - it's pretty recognised brands that would be stocked in Sainsbury's. It doesn't concern me."
(Northern Ireland, Buy food online but only from online supermarkets)

Online reviews and comments. While important for some, this was not always information participants said they would look at prior to making an online food order. When participants did consult reviews, this tended to be when ordering from an unfamiliar business, or if participants had, or cared for people with hypersensitivities. Reviews provided these participants with additional reassurance about the food they were ordering. However, participants acknowledged that comments and reviews could be subjective, as they would reflect consumers' personal preferences. Some also worried that reviews may not be genuine.

Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS). Across groups, some participants mentioned checking Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) ratings for establishments when ordering through aggregator apps to give confidence in the safety of the food ordered. This was not something that participants mentioned considering when ordering food from online supermarkets. Participants presumed that individual sellers making and selling homemade food through social media and online marketplaces would not have Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) ratings, which made some feel more cautious about buying food in this way.

Cost. While not mentioned often, this was a factor which could determine the extent to which people order food online, as purchasing takeaways and recipe boxes online were generally considered more expensive.

2.3 Paying for food bought online

Across the groups, participants did not view buying food online any differently to making other online purchases. PayPal, Apple Pay and debit cards were the most popular payment methods,

driven by ease and convenience where participants' card details were already securely saved. This made the online ordering process more efficient. Participants did not appear concerned about paying for food online using bank details, as this was a trusted method they used frequently. However, some participants recognised that people who are older or less tech-literate and not as familiar with online shopping may be more concerned about inputting bank details online.

When provided with online food purchasing scenarios which gave examples of paying for food bought online in cash, there were mixed responses among participants. Where food was being bought from established businesses, such as local restaurants requesting cash payments, participants tended to say they would prefer paying for their order online, as it was more convenient. However, participants who did not frequently buy online appeared to view individual, local sellers requesting cash payments for food sold online as a riskier transaction.

"[In response to Facebook Marketplace scenario] …is there a receipt? If you're paying with cash, then it's a lot trickier to try and get your money back. I wouldn't trust that if I went to Joe off Facebook Marketplace that I'd get a receipt." (Northern Ireland, Do not typically buy food online)

They also thought cash purchases called into question the sellers' business more generally, including how well food safety and hygiene was being managed. However, some reflected that paying in this way could mean consumers could refuse to pay if the products were not as expected on collection.

![Food Standards Agency logo food.gov.uk]

Chapter 3: Factors influencing trust and confidence in food bought online

3.1 Familiarity

Participants' confidence in food bought online was influenced by their familiarity with a given establishment or seller. This was reported across groups, regardless of participants' actual online food purchasing habits were. Participants often described not feeling confident about ordering food from establishments or sellers they were unfamiliar with. They consistently associated a lack of familiarity with higher risk when buying food online. This higher risk was specifically attributed to uncertainty surrounding the quality of the food being sold, and the hygiene standards of the establishment/seller.

The influence of familiarity was evident across different platforms. For example, participants across groups often mentioned only ordering takeaway food via aggregators from restaurants they already knew and where they had positive previous experiences. Some described the importance of having physically visited the establishment, as this gave them more confidence that it was clean and hygienic.

"Places you would regularly eat at, or are aware of, yes. But I wouldn't choose a place I've never been – just local places I know and like."
(Northern Ireland, Buy food but only from online supermarkets)

Similarly, participants' lack of familiarity with sellers on food sharing apps and social media platforms was an important driver influencing participants' reluctance to purchase food in this way. There were frequent references to not feeling comfortable buying food 'from strangers'.

"[About buying food through Facebook Marketplace] This is a random stranger selling food. It's a strong no."
(England, Buy food online but only from online supermarkets)

As well as familiarity with sellers and establishments, participants also discussed the importance of familiarity with platforms. For example, some mentioned having greater trust and confidence in buying food through recognised platforms like the 'Big Three' aggregators or Amazon, compared to through food sharing apps which they had not used before.

Indeed, many participants were surprised that food could be sold through social media platforms, such as Facebook Marketplace, even when they were used to buying food online. Their lack of familiarity influenced their trust in the quality of food sold in this way, as discussed further in Chapter 4.

As discussed previously, participants also said they felt more confident buying food online from brands they were familiar with. Some said that they would be confident buying food online from brands that they recognised and had used previously, even if they were buying from a platform that was less familiar.

3.2 Sellers' need to protect their reputation

Businesses' need to protect their reputation also emerged as an important factor driving participants' trust in the safety of food sold online. This was the case across all groups and was closely linked to the importance of familiarity discussed above. For example, participants assumed that well-known, established food businesses would want to ensure that the food they were providing was safe to eat, so as not to damage their reputation. However, this consideration was mentioned by participants across different business types, including restaurants, food retailers and individual online sellers.

"If your reputation goes down by selling dodgy food... Uber Eats would drop you like a hot potato."
(England, Buy food online but only from online supermarkets)

The importance that participants placed on businesses' need to protect their reputation was also seen when participants reflected on different online food purchasing scenarios. For example, when discussing buying food through the Too Good To Go app, participants consistently focussed on how food sold in this way was ultimately coming from established food businesses, with reputations to uphold. Even though this food was nearing the end of its shelf life, across the groups participants generally said they would feel confident buying food in this way, as they trusted these restaurants and cafes would be adhering to food standards to maintain and protect their reputation.

"[Talking about buying food through Too Good To Go] It's a business premise and so it has legal liability. There's barely any risk involved with this."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

Conversely, participants expressed a lack of confidence in food bought from individual sellers through platforms such as Olio and Facebook Marketplace, rather than established businesses. In these instances, participants were concerned that these individuals could lack accountability when it came to ensuring the quality and hygiene of food sold, as they did not have the reputation of an established business to uphold in the same way. This was especially concerning for those

with hypersensitivities.

"The fact that things like Facebook aren't very moderated, and as someone with a lot of food intolerances, I get nervous."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

However, the influence of online reviews and comments was also recognised, with some participants arguing that this feedback had a similar potential to hold individual sellers to account.

"Reputation is everything. It doesn't take long for somebody to be trashed online if they get loads of bad reviews."
(England, Frequently buy food online)

Businesses and sellers' reputations among consumers were also important to participants. Participants frequently made references to 'reputable companies', which appeared to drive confidence in food bought online.

"First and foremost, reputation is the key part of it. The scores on the doors and that kind of thing: every restaurant has to have that but not every place has a good reputation."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently food online)

This was particularly highlighted where participants said they had trust and confidence in food bought from Amazon because of its perceived reputation. Across groups, participants felt confident that food bought in this way would be safe to eat, even among participants who did not typically buy food online.

3.3 Assumptions about levels of regulation

Consumers' confidence and trust in buying food online was also shaped by their assumptions about the levels of regulations in place for food bought online. Specifically, participants mentioned concerns around:

- the extent to which they perceived food businesses (including delivery drivers) to have and adhere to food safety and hygiene regulations
- what role the online platform had in enforcing regulation for food bought and sold online
- and the extent to which they believed individual sellers' procedures would follow food hygiene standards

Participants trusted food being sold through online platforms from established food businesses (like restaurants and cafes, through aggregator apps, or Too Good To Go). They assumed that these sellers would be subjected to quality control protocols and would have strict food hygiene regulations in place to protect consumers. Participants specifically referenced feeling confident that these establishments would have Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) ratings, which they felt provided them with some reassurance that suitable standards would be in place for food sold online in this way.

Conversely, participants' concerns about platforms such as Olio and Facebook Marketplace were often directly linked to their assumptions about the lack of regulations for selling food through these platforms. Across the groups, participants questioned whether food hygiene standards were enforced, monitored, or even required by these online food purchasing platforms. This led to participants seeing these platforms as being potentially higher risk for consumers.

Linked to this, participants on the whole were worried about individual sellers' cleanliness and hygiene when preparing food in their own kitchens. Reflecting their concerns about the lack of regulation from platforms, participants were worried that these individual sellers selling food through Olio or Facebook Marketplace lacked accountability. As such, participants were

unconvinced whether sellers would be motivated to adhere to food safety and hygiene standards.

"The shops have rules and regulations which they have to follow. John down the road, he might follow them. But he might not."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

However, linked to reputation, participants who had previously bought food through such platforms recognised that it would be in the interest of local sellers to ensure that the food they were selling was as advertised and safe for consumption, in order to sustain their business.

3.4 Endorsement

Across groups, endorsement from others (e.g., word of mouth or positive reviews) was an important factor further influencing trust in food bought online, particularly when purchasing food in new ways. In particular, trust in buying food online increased if endorsement came from people known to participants.

This was particularly evident in discussions around the online food purchasing scenarios. For example, across the groups, participants said they were often reluctant to buy food from platforms they were less familiar with, or they deemed higher risk (e.g., Facebook Marketplace or Olio). However, on reflection, some participants said they may consider buying food through these platforms if products were recommended to them, or well-reviewed. This was seen to be the case across groups and even for higher-risk foods, such as seafood in one instance.

"I know somebody that buys fish, but I know them. I do buy it from their [recommended] place, and I order it through Facebook, but I know that it's decent. I would trust them."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buy food online)

There were more mixed views about the value of online reviews in building confidence and trust when buying food online. Some participants said positive reviews influenced their trust in food bought online from various platforms. For these participants, knowing that other people have eaten and enjoyed the food gave them confidence in the quality, safety, and authenticity of the food.

"I'd go off reviews if it's somewhere I haven't tried before. If it's got good reviews, I'll try it."
(Wales, Frequently buy food online)

However, this was not the case for those with hypersensitivities, who still wanted reassurance that food had been prepared in line with food safety standards. Some participants also expressed concern in the legitimacy of online reviews and how reliable or genuine they are. This linked again to familiarity and highlighted the greater value placed on endorsements from people known and trusted when buying food online.

"Reviews can be very easily manipulated so I wouldn't pay too much attention to reviews online. I'd pay more attention to reviews from my friends or people I know."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buy food online)

3.5 Type of food

Across the groups, participants spontaneously mentioned different foods which they would not feel comfortable buying online, as they deemed them to be higher risk. Participants consistently described meat, fish, eggs, dairy, and rice as being associated with an increased risk of food poisoning/illness if these foods were undercooked, spoiled, or out of date.

Many participants had ordered food online from supermarkets which arrived within a day or two of its use-by date. For participants who do not usually buy online, this had reduced their confidence in doing so. They were more cautious when buying fresh food online due to heightened food safety concerns.

"Fish and meat…I've had experiences where packaging has come opened and that can make you seriously ill and I don't like the idea of it. When you go to a market, you see it, they clean it, and if you go to a supermarket [in person] you can see the packaging is sealed. Physically being in the supermarket makes you feel better than [buying] stuff you don't know [online]."
(England, Do not typically buy food online)

This also extended to some participants being reluctant to buy fresh fruit and vegetables online, due to concerns around fresh food's shelf life and arriving close to its use-by-date. Some participants therefore said they preferred going shopping in person to browse and pick items that had a longer shelf life.

"We always go to the shop, and we literally look for things that are further back in the shelf, the one that doesn't go off the quickest, which you can never guarantee when it's online shopping"
(England, Frequently buy food online)

The quality of food bought online was also a concern for some. Across groups, some participants mentioned avoiding buying perishable fresh fruit and vegetables online, as they were worried about the quality of items selected not being what they would have chosen in person. They also had concerns about this type of food being damaged during transportation. However, there were mixed views, with other participants more comfortable buying fresh fruit and vegetables online. They mentioned feeling more confident as they could wash and prepare these foods themselves at home.

Across all groups, packaged, dried foods were considered lower risk. For some, the concerns relating to the quality of fresh food meant that they only bought non-perishable, pre-packaged foods online. Participants noted that they did not need to worry as much about use-by-dates or issues related to the food being damaged in transportation with non-perishable products. Participants were more likely to trust packaged and sealed food as they assumed nobody had tampered with it before it reached them. For example, even though rice was consistently identified as a higher risk food type, participants were not concerned about hypothetically buying pre-packed microwavable rice (as in the example Amazon food purchasing scenario – see Appendix B), as it was pre-packed and sealed. Participants expressed that this indicated there was a lower risk of damage or contamination.

3.6 Previous negative experiences

Negative experiences ordering food online related to both the quality and the safety of food ordered. For example, participants cited negative experiences of takeaway food which was unhygienic (e.g., hair or foreign objects found in meals) but also complained about mixed up orders. These experiences had influenced participants' decisions, putting them off ordering from the same establishment again. However, there were very few examples of participants who no longer ordered food online at all, because of previous negative experiences.

Chapter 4: Views on online food purchasing scenarios

- Amazon
- Olio
- Facebook Marketplace
- Too Good To Go
- Big Three Aggregators (for example, Uber Eats, Deliveroo and Just Eat)

Below, we draw out participants perceptions of these online food purchasing platforms with regards to risk, and their course of action if they needed to complain about any problems.

4.1 Amazon (pre-packed Ben's Original rice)

Participants generally perceived this scenario to be low risk. They assumed this food would be packaged and sealed, with a low risk of damage or contamination.

Participants generally trusted and understood why Amazon would be used to buy food online. They associated Amazon with convenience and efficiency, even if some said they had not, and would not consider using it themselves. The importance of familiarity and the businesses' reputation was highlighted here again, where participants mentioned preferring to buy food from recognised, established brands and sellers through Amazon, as they trusted that these products would be authentic.

Across groups, participants pointed to Amazon as a reputable company with good customer service: expressing confidence that they would be reimbursed quickly if there were any issues with the food. Some said they felt the same level of confidence buying food in this way as they would when buying food from a well-known supermarket brand.

4.2 Olio (home-made cupcakes)

Participants liked the overall idea behind Olio and how it was intended to combat food waste and support local businesses.

However, across groups, participants expressed concern about the hygiene and cleanliness standards of individual sellers. Participants specifically mentioned not being confident about the exact ingredients being used. They were also worried about the risk of contamination and its implications for those with dietary and/or hypersensitivities. Participants consistently mentioned the risk associated with the seller being a 'stranger'. However, participants across the groups said that they would be more confident to buy food in this way if the seller was someone they knew or had been recommended by someone they trusted.

Participants mentioned a range of different actions they might take if they had a problem with an order. These included contacting the seller directly and asking for their money back, contacting Olio directly to report the seller, or leaving a bad review. However, across groups, participants agreed that they would not take action unless it was a serious issue. This was because they were positive about the impact that Olio and those selling through the platform were trying to have on food waste and the environment.

4.3 Facebook Marketplace (pre-cooked chicken and rice meal)

Across groups, participants agreed that it was high risk to buy food through Facebook Marketplace.

The food depicted in this scenario was also consistently described by participants as high risk. However, as with Olio, if the food was lower risk, and/or if the seller had been recommended by someone they knew, some participants said they would consider purchasing food in this way. These participants either bought food online more frequently and/or had used Facebook Marketplace to buy food before.

However, on the whole, participants did not trust that sellers would adhere to the appropriate food safety and hygiene standards. They were particularly wary of individual sellers using Facebook Marketplace to sell items through, again citing these as 'strangers'.

Due to a perceived lack of regulation enforced by Facebook, participants thought sellers on Facebook would lack accountability. Despite the sellers using the platform to sell food online, participants did not feel they would be able to raise any issues with Facebook directly, because the platform was not focused on food. While participants mentioned contacting the seller directly and/or leaving a bad review if there was an issue with the food purchased, participants felt they would be ultimately unprotected by the platform. There was general agreement that the best course of action would be simply to avoid buying from that seller again.

4.4 Too Good To Go (pre-made sandwiches from a local café)

Across groups, participants generally reacted positively to this scenario, and were more confident buying from an established business than they were from individual sellers. Participants felt that food and hygiene standards would be adhered to for food prepared and purchased in this way.

However, participants across groups agreed that they would feel less confident buying higher risk food types like dairy, eggs, or fish which a business has not sold by the end of the day (as per Too Good To Go's model).

Participants said that if they had problems, they would either contact the seller or the app platform directly. However, participants generally said they were unlikely to take any action against the seller in these instances, given the reduced cost of the food that they had purchased.

4.5 Aggregators (takeaway pizza)

Participants generally trusted the safety of food bought from restaurants through the main aggregators, especially where the food was coming from restaurants that were familiar to them. Participants generally expected food bought in this way to have been prepared in line with food hygiene standards.

However, there were different perspectives on the extent to which food would be transported appropriately, particularly among those who did not buy food online frequently. These concerns focused on whether aggregator delivery drivers would transport food hygienically and at the right temperature.

Participants assumed there was a lack of regulation around this for aggregator delivery drivers. However, the main concern appeared to be that food would arrive late and/or cold, rather than

any significant concerns with food safety specifically.

Participants agreed that the responsibility to address any issues with food bought in this way would depend on the specific situation. For example, participants felt that the aggregator (via their role in maintaining the standards of their delivery drivers) would be responsible if there was an issue with the food arriving late or cold, but the seller would be responsible if there was an issue with the quality or safety of the food.

Chapter 5: Assumptions and expectations for online food regulation

5.1 Awareness of current regulations

Across the groups, there was little detailed understanding or awareness of the regulations in place to ensure that food purchased online is safe to eat. In some instances, participants said that this was simply not something they had considered. They expected that online food would be regulated in a similar way to food purchased offline, but without knowing how in any detail. This expectation was especially common among those who purchased food online more frequently. There were similar assumptions among participants that paying for food online would be secure and safe, in line with other online purchases.

"I don't know what their safety protocols are but there must be some sort of checks down the line, or beforehand." (Northern Ireland, Frequently buy food online)

There was an expectation that regulations would be set centrally by 'government', Some participants mentioned the FSA as having a role in regulating food sold online, reflecting assumptions that this would fall under their remit. However, participants were unclear about what these regulations looked like in practice. Again, familiarity with sellers and trusting businesses' desire to maintain their reputation appeared to underpin participants' expectations that cleanliness levels and food hygiene standards would be adhered to.

"I'm pretty certain that when you place orders for food, every effort is made to ensure health and safety standards." (England, Frequently buy food online)

However, the management of food safety for food sold online was perceived to vary significantly across platforms. Online supermarkets, restaurants/takeaways and other established food businesses offering food deliveries online were broadly trusted. Participants assumed they would be more likely to comply with regulations, compared to individuals selling food that they had made on Olio or Facebook Marketplace.

"Nobody is overseeing Facebook marketplace and Olio to make sure it's safe to buy. It's different when you get a takeaway from a restaurant. What they're selling has to go through protocols." (Wales, Frequently buy food online)

5.2 Perceived responsibility for consumer safety when purchasing food online

There were a range of views on who should be responsible for consumer safety when it comes to purchasing food online. Participants saw roles for online platforms, aggregators, individual sellers and local authorities. However, the level of responsibility depended on how food-focused and established these online sellers were perceived to be. The role of the FSA is discussed in the next section, and particularly focused on regulating established businesses selling food online.

Overall, participants had higher expectations of platforms and businesses whose focus was selling food. They thought that ensuring consumer safety was one of their central responsibilities. For example, in the case of Olio, participants expected that the organisation should monitor customer reviews and conduct due diligence to ensure the food being sold on their platform was adhering to standards. Furthermore, some participants expected to be able to contact these platforms, if food being sold was making customers ill.

"Olio need to be aware what they're sharing. That the people selling the stuff aren't meeting the standards of the picture they're showing."
(Northern Ireland, Do not typically buy food online)

Similarly, aggregators including Just Eat, Uber Eats and Deliveroo were consistently seen as being responsible for ensuring that food ordered through their platform was transported and delivered safely, in line with food hygiene standards. As such, participants consistently pointed to the importance of these companies monitoring their delivery drivers' adherence to food safety regulations. They also saw it as the responsibility of these companies to manage customer complaints where there had been issues with food and liaise with restaurants and delivery drivers accordingly.

"It's up to the company, Just Eat to have those sort of checks in place on their individual drivers."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buying food online)

By contrast, participants did not hold social media platforms, like Facebook Marketplace, to the same standards. This seemed to be because they were not considered to be primarily focused on selling food, but on providing connections between people. Across groups, participants thought that in the case of purchasing through Facebook Marketplace, responsibility for risk lay with consumers themselves, rather than the platform. Participants pointed to the scale of Facebook Marketplace and the lack of an obvious way to escalate issues related to food bought online. As such, they saw consumers as being ultimately responsible for their own safety when buying food in this way, as they could not expect to be protected.

"I would just take it on the chin and move on. Facebook is too big to worry about your qualms over fried rice."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buying food online)

By contrast, participants had different expectations when buying pre-packed food through Amazon. They frequently referred to previous positive experiences of reporting issues with items bought and being reimbursed. They assumed buying food through Amazon would have the same kinds of systems in place and were confident about the established ways to report issues, which extended to food.

Some participants mentioned that individual sellers on Facebook Marketplace and Olio should provide full ingredients lists and specify their food hygiene qualifications when preparing and selling food. However, others again saw the responsibility as lying with consumers themselves when buying food in this way.

"On Facebook Marketplace, I'm not going to expect them to say 'May contain nuts', or whatever allergen advice. You don't get that through the likes of Facebook Marketplace, or if anybody is giving things for free [talking about Olio]. It's at the buyer's risk, I think."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buying food online)

While not common, there were a few participants who felt that there should be increased regulation for food sold via Facebook Marketplace, especially because more food was being sold in this way since the pandemic. However, participants were uncertain about how this could be regulated in practice, or by who.

Across groups, local authorities were frequently referenced as bodies which should have a role in regulating food sold online. Participants specifically mentioned teams in local authorities who were already responsible for food regulation and expected these to be conducting spot checks on local vendors, to ensure food sold online was compliant.

5.3 Perceived role of the FSA in regulation of food sold online

Across the groups, there was a general assumption that the FSA would be involved in regulating food safety for food sold online. However, participants were unable to give details of what this would look like and were generally uncertain about how the FSA would be able to regulate food sold online in practice. There was some recognition that it would be challenging for one organisation to regulate the multiple ways in which food could be sold online.

"It's getting into a bit of a complicated area… with different ways of getting food, like from supermarkets, to takeaways, to Facebook Marketplace. There are a lot of different areas to cover there…regulation-wise. I would imagine there would be a lot of different organisations involved, because of the different ways that the food is being sold."
(England, Frequently buy food online)

The extent to which participants viewed sellers as established businesses informed their views on the role they expected the FSA to play in regulating the safety of the food sold online by these sellers. For example, participants trusted that the FSA and local authorities were regulating established food businesses, and that this translated to broadly trusting food bought online from these establishments. This was particularly the case for those who bought food online frequently.

"I think if [the FSA are] enforcing the checks on the restaurants right from the beginning then that by themselves should be enough to ensure the food is safe. Even if it's done bad online, it's almost there so you don't lose minimum standards… then that should be adequate protection."
(Northern Ireland, Frequently buy food online)

Participants did not seem to view individuals selling homemade food through general online platforms like Facebook Marketplace in the same way as established food businesses. As such, they did not expect the FSA to play the same role as they did for established food businesses, with the FSA setting food hygiene standards and ensuring compliance (although some mentioned local authorities in this context, as discussed above). Participants did not expect regulators to be proactively monitoring food sold online by individual sellers through these general platforms and saw the risk lying primarily with consumers buying food in this way.

However, there were participants who wanted to feel confident that the FSA could be contacted as a point of escalation in cases where food had made consumers seriously ill, even where this food had been bought online.

Chapter 6: Summary and conclusions

Those who did not frequently purchase food online tended to prefer the overall experience of buying food in person. They typically did not have specific concerns about the safety of food bought online. However, problems with the quality of food bought online were highlighted. Participants who did not tend to buy food online wanted to select their own items.

Some concerns about buying food online were related to finances (for example, perceiving buying food in store to be more , -effective), or frustrations with unsuitable food substitutions they had received when buying food online. Despite this, these participants recognised that buying food in this way would be suitable for some people's lifestyles and admitted they would consider buying food online if they were unwell or would set up an online food delivery for older parents.

Convenience was the main driver for those buying food online more often. Participants reflected that they had bought food online more since the pandemic and they liked the overall ease of ordering and paying through apps. Other perceived benefits included cost savings because food purchasing was more focused (contrary to those who did not buy online often). Some also liked being able to order speciality foods online. Dietary requirements and hypersensitivities were considered, with participants explaining that ingredients lists, and nutritional information were important to them when buying food online.

Participants did not consistently look at reviews online. Some felt that these were dependent on individuals' preference and could be misleading. However, for some participants who had or cooked for someone with hypersensitivities, reviews provided participants with reassurance about the safety of food ordered online.

Participants did not view buying food online any differently to making other online purchases. However, where cash payments were required for food bought online, participants sometimes saw this payment method as a riskier transaction. For participants who did not often buy food online, individual sellers requesting cash payments called the legitimacy of their food business into question more broadly, including the extent to which they may adhere to food hygiene standards.

Participants' confidence in food bought online was influenced by their familiarity with establishments, sellers, and platforms. There were frequent references to not feeling comfortable buying food 'from strangers' on apps and social media platforms. Related to this, participants referenced liking buying particular brand names which they knew when buying food online, as they trusted that the food would be authentic. Across groups, endorsement from others (e.g., word of mouth or positive reviews) also influenced trust in food bought online, especially where this came from people known to participants – again highlighting the importance of familiarity.

Food type was another factor affecting participants' online food purchasing behaviours. Across groups, participants consistently described meat, fish, eggs, dairy, and rice as being associated with an increased risk of food poisoning/illness if these foods were undercooked, spoiled, or out of date. Participants who did not typically buy online were more cautious when buying fresh food online due to the heightened food safety concerns. Packaged, dried foods with longer shelf-lives were consistently considered lower risk, as there was less concern about use-by-dates or issues related to the food being damaged in transportation.

Businesses' need to protect their reputations also emerged as an important factor driving participants' trust in the safety of food sold online. Participants assumed that well-known, established food businesses would want to ensure that the food they were providing was safe to eat, so as not to damage their reputation. Linked to this, participants' confidence was also shaped by their assumptions about the levels of regulations in place for food bought online. Specifically, participants mentioned concerns around the extent to which they perceived food businesses (including delivery drivers) and individual sellers would adhere to food safety and hygiene regulation. Some concerns were raised where participants presumed that aggregators' delivery drivers were not subject to food safety and hygiene requirements, and participants were uncertain about how consistently food would be transported at the right temperature. However, their main concern appeared to be related to food arriving late and/or cold, rather than significant concerns with food safety specifically. Participants also questioned the role that social media platforms, such as Facebook Marketplace, had in enforcing regulation for food bought and sold online.

There were higher expectations placed on platforms and businesses whose focus was on selling food, as ensuring consumer safety was seen as a one of their central responsibilities. Participants expected that these organisations would take steps like monitoring customer reviews and conducting due diligence to ensure the food being sold on their platform was adhering to hygiene and safety standards. Where participants were concerned that aggregator companies' delivery drivers were not subject to food safety and hygiene requirements, they saw it as the responsibility of these companies to monitor their drivers' adherence to food safety regulations. Some participants expected to be able to contact the platform and/or company directly if food being sold was not safe. This extended to aggregator companies, as well as food sharing apps. By contrast, participants did not hold more social media platforms (such as Facebook Marketplace) to the same standards because they were not primarily focused on selling food.

While some participants felt that individual sellers selling homemade food online should specify how they managed food hygiene, participants were uncertain about how this could be regulated in practice. They also generally accepted that social media platforms such as Facebook Marketplace would not have responsibility for monitoring this. Participants pointed to the scale of this platform, and the lack of an obvious way to escalate issues related to food bought online. As such, participants broadly agreed that responsibility for any risks lay with consumers themselves, unless the platform was focused on selling food or sellers were established. Linking to the importance of reputability, participants had different expectations when buying pre-packed, non-perishable food through Amazon. They were confident about the established ways to report issues, and trusted buying packaged food in this way.

Across the groups, there was little detailed understanding or awareness of the regulations in place to ensure that food purchased online is safe to eat. There was some expectation that regulations would be set centrally by 'government'. However, participants were consistently unclear about what these regulations would look like in practice. The importance of businesses' reputation was, again clear, with participants (especially those who frequently bought food online) broadly assuming that hygiene standards would be adhered to for food sold online to maintain businesses' reputation with their customers – especially for established food businesses.

Participants agreed that the FSA should be involved in the regulation of food standards for food sold online. However, they typically did not have strong views about what this should look like in practice. The general trust in the FSA's regulation of established food businesses extended to participants broadly trusting the food that was sold from such establishments online. For many, Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) ratings provided reassurance that food sold online through established businesses would adhere to hygiene standards.

Participants did not have a clear view on the specific role of the FSA in regulating food sold online by individual sellers. They did not appear to expect regulators to be proactively monitoring this when individual sellers were using general online platforms, with the risk ultimately seen to lie

with consumers themselves. However, there were some participants who wanted the FSA to be a point of contact in cases where food sold online had made consumers seriously ill.

Across the groups, there were some participants who reflected that the discussion groups had made them think more about the food hygiene risks when buying food online. Other participants said they may consider buying food online in new ways, like bulk-ordering packaged food on Amazon. Several mentioned that they would look into buying food through food sharing apps, like Too Good To Go, to combat food wastage.

![Food Standards Agency logo — food.gov.uk]

Annex A: Discussion guide

Research objectives

The FSA is interested in exploring consumers' perceived risks of purchasing food from a range of online businesses including online supermarkets, food delivery companies, online/social media marketplaces and food sharing apps, across higher and lower-risk foods.

Note: this discussion guide is intended to inform the discussion in each focus group. Questions may not be asked in the order below, and not every question will be asked in each focus group.

Section 1: Introductions

5 minutes

Objectives covered:

- introduce participants to the research
- clarify that groups will be audio-recorded.

Introductions, setting aims and ground rules for discussion

Moderator introduction:

- thank participant for taking part.
- introduce self and Ipsos MORI.
- explain purpose of the discussion:
- ehis research is being carried out on behalf of the Food Standards Agency. They are interested in understanding consumers' attitudes to buying food sold online, and what influences people's decisions when doing this.
- discussion will last 90 minutes.
- set ground rules: no right or wrong answers, interested in hearing everyone's views. Please be respectful of others. May need to move you on in the interest of time, not because we are not interested in what you are saying.
- we will be audio-recording recording this discussion in line with MRS Code of Conduct. The recording will be stored on our secure servers and no one outside of the research team will have access to this.
- following these discussion groups, we will be writing up our findings into a report for the FSA which will be published. However, no findings will be attributed to you and we will not

include your name in any reports.
- any questions?
- introduce note taker
- ask if everyone is happy for the recording to begin
- **turn on recording** and record consent that everyone is happy to participate in the interview, that they understand the aims of the research, that their participation is voluntary and that their responses will remain confidential and anonymous.

Section 2: Icebreaker exercise exploring spontaneous and top-of mind reactions to topic

15 minutes

Objectives covered:

- Icebreaker to introduce participants to each other

Introduction and warm-up exercise

Participant introduction:

Go around and ask for:

- first name
- where and who they live with
- where they most commonly buy food from (online or offline)
- moderator to probe in turn why their favourite place, if not spontaneously mentioned

I'd like to start by asking you what comes to mind when you think of buying food online.

If not mentioned already: What sorts of:

- websites come to mind?
- food delivery companies?
- apps?
- food sharing platforms? (for example Olio or Too Good to Go)
- any other ways in which people get food online? (If not spontaneously mentioned: online marketplaces? (for example Facebook Marketplace, Nextdoor, Amazon)

If any participants are unaware of particular platforms (for example, Olio/Too Good to Go0 Moderator to briefly explain what these are:

Too Good To Go and Olio are food sharing apps which aim to reduce food waste. Through Too Good To Go you can buy food from local cafes, restaurants and shops which hasn't sold at the end of the day.

Olio has a similar model, but also connects neighbours with each other, as well as local businesses, so that surplus food can be shared. This includes sharing surplus home-grown fruit and vegetables, groceries in your fridge if you were going away, or food nearing its sell-by date in local shops. To pick up the food you select through the app and arrange a pick-up via private messaging.

Move on to more general discussion in group:

- why might people choose to buy food online?
- hw often do you buy food online for you or your family to eat in a typical month?

- has this changed in any way since the pandemic? If so, in what ways?
- have you seen any adverts online, or social media posts promoting buying food products online (for example, promotions by influencers/celebrities)? If so, has this influenced your thinking/behaviour in any way?
- have you ever bought food online after seeing any adverts online, or social media posts promoting products?

For groups who buy online:

- are there any particular reasons why you choose to buy food online?
- who are you buying for?
- what kinds of food do you tend to buy online?
- what kinds of platforms do you use to buy food online?

Probe whether local online delivery service/website, or one of the 'big three' online ordering and delivery services

- how do you tend to pay for food online?
- debit/credit card on website/app/platform
- any reason why use this method specifically?
- cash on collection?
- why/why not?
- is the way you pay for food bought online different to the way you make other online purchases?
- what kinds of things are important to you when buying food online, to make sure what you buy is safe to eat?

Probe if needed: comments/reviews of online food? FHRS scores? Allergen information? Anything else?

- how often do you consider these? Why/why not?
- is this the same for all foods, or more important for specific food in particular?
- what kind of information do you need when buying food online?
- does this change for particular foods?
- does this change when buying food for certain people/occasions?
- how often are you able to get all of this information?
- if you are unable to get this information, does this have any impact on your decisions?
- what sorts of things do you think might stop other people from buying food online?

For groups 1, 5 and 9 (who do not buy food online)

If not already mentioned:

- what sorts of things do you think are stopping you from buying food online?
- are there any reasons why you/other people may feel more worried about buying food online?

Section 3: Exploring participant behaviour, levels of trust and confidence in buying food online

15 minutes

Objectives covered:

- explore perceived risk when buying food online, with specific reference to authenticity, food safety and hygiene and food delivery
- understand whether perceived risk is influenced by types of foods and/or types of platforms and reasons for this
- explore current behaviour of those who do buy food online, including what information they require, and methods of payment, and how often this is available
- discuss factors which influence online food purchasing behaviour, including hypersensitivities/caring responsibilities/social media and any (perceived/actual) barriers to purchasing food online

Trust and confidence in buying food online

I'd like to now ask you a bit about levels of trust.

How much, if at all, do you trust that food that is bought online will be safe to eat? (for those who don't buy online. Ask them to think about this in abstract, rathe than something they do themselves)
How does this compare to when buying food in person? What do you think is different?
Does this change depending on the platform food is purchased through?

Probe:
? Online supermarkets
? Online ordering and delivery companies, such as Uber Eats, Deliveroo and Just Eat)
? Online marketplaces/social media
? Food sharing apps?

- to what extent would you trust that food bought online would match the online description, on arrival?
- how much, if at all, would you trust that appropriate food hygiene and food safety standards have been followed, when preparing food to be sold online?
- does this differ depending on the type of food? In what way?
- and what about where online you buy the food – does that make any difference, or not?
- how much do you trust that food bought online is transported and delivered to consumers safely?

Probe: reasons for views, including online vs. offline purchasing
What kinds of risks may be involved here?

For groups who buy online:

- how confident do you feel when buying food online?
- does this depend on the platform you use to buy food through, in any way?
- what if the business you bought through was cash-only?
- does this change in any way when you buy food for yourself, vs. for other people?
- are there any foods you feel less confident about buying? Why do you think that is?
- are there any foods you wouldn't buy online? If so, for what reason?
- what about pet food?
- if not already mentioned: Have you ever had any problems with the quality, or safety of food to eat, when buying food online?
- did this result in any changes in your decisions/behaviour?

For groups 1, 5 and 9 (who do not buy food online)

- what do you think other people think about to make sure the food they buy online is safe to eat?

- **Probe if needed:** comments/reviews of online food? FHRS scores? Allergen information? Anything else?
- how often do you think people consider these? Why/why not?
- if you were to, what sort of foods might you think about buying food online?
- are there any situations/occasions where you might consider buying food online?

Section 4: Presenting participants with different online food purchasing scenarios to prompt further reflection and discussion, including action taken where food was not suitable to eat

35 minutes

Objectives covered:

Further exploration of objectives above as applied to scenarios of particular foods and platforms, including understanding participants' course of action where food purchased online is not suitable to eat/as expected

Scenarios activity

I have some different scenarios showing different ways in which people may buy food online that I'd like to show you to get your thoughts on. Please think about the way of buying food online, and not just what food is being bought in these scenarios.

Moderator to show each scenario, for each ask:

- any initial thoughts about this scenario?
- would you feel happy to buy this food in this way? Why/why not?
- what would you be thinking about if buying food in this way, to ensure the food would be safe to eat?
- is there anything about buying food in this way which worries you?
- o   Would this change depending on the type of food? If so, in what way?
- if you ordered this item through this platform and when it arrived it was not as expected, or not suitable for you to eat, what action would you take?

Moderators to steer conversation away from late deliveries/being overcharged - focus on food safety and quality

- who would you contact?
- what would you expect their response to be?
- would your response differ depending on the type of food which was not suitable to eat?

Section 5: Exploring participants awareness of any current regulation of online food, and thoughts on what process should look like

15 minutes.

Objectives covered:

- explore awareness of controls and regulations currently in place to regulate the online food purchasing industry across different platforms

- explore participants' views on what regulations and complaints processes should look like

Awareness of and thoughts on controls and regulation

Now I'd like to ask you about what you think about regulation for food sold online more broadly.

Moderator to show timeline on slide 6 as prompt

Are you aware of any measures in place to regulate food purchased online?

Probe: Across different platforms? Any differences/similarities with food purchased in person?

Who would you expect to be responsible for regulating food that is bought and sold online?

Explore spontaneous responses first

Who would you trust to be responsible for this?

Probe if needed:

- the platform/website
- the seller (if on online marketplace/food sharing app)
- the delivery company
- the Food Standards Agency
- anyone else?
- explore reasons why/why not

If not already mentioned

- What measures should be in place at the ordering online stage?
- Any information people need included here as standard?
- What about in the packaging and transportation stage? What regulations should suppliers/sellers/delivery companies be adhering to?
- If the food you bought arrives and is unsafe to eat, or is not as described at purchase, should there be anyone else involved in dealing with any complaints?

Section 6: Wrap-up

5 minutes

Objectives covered:

To sum up the discussion and thank participants for their time.

Wind down and close

- Is there anything you have learnt today which might make you change the way you think about buying food online?

- Is there anything else you would like to mention about buying food online, that we have not covered, or that you would like to go back to?
- Thank you for your time today, the findings from our research will be written up into a report for the Food Standards Agency. They will use these findings to inform policies and the development of new regulatory approaches. These will be published but your name will not

be included in any reports we write.
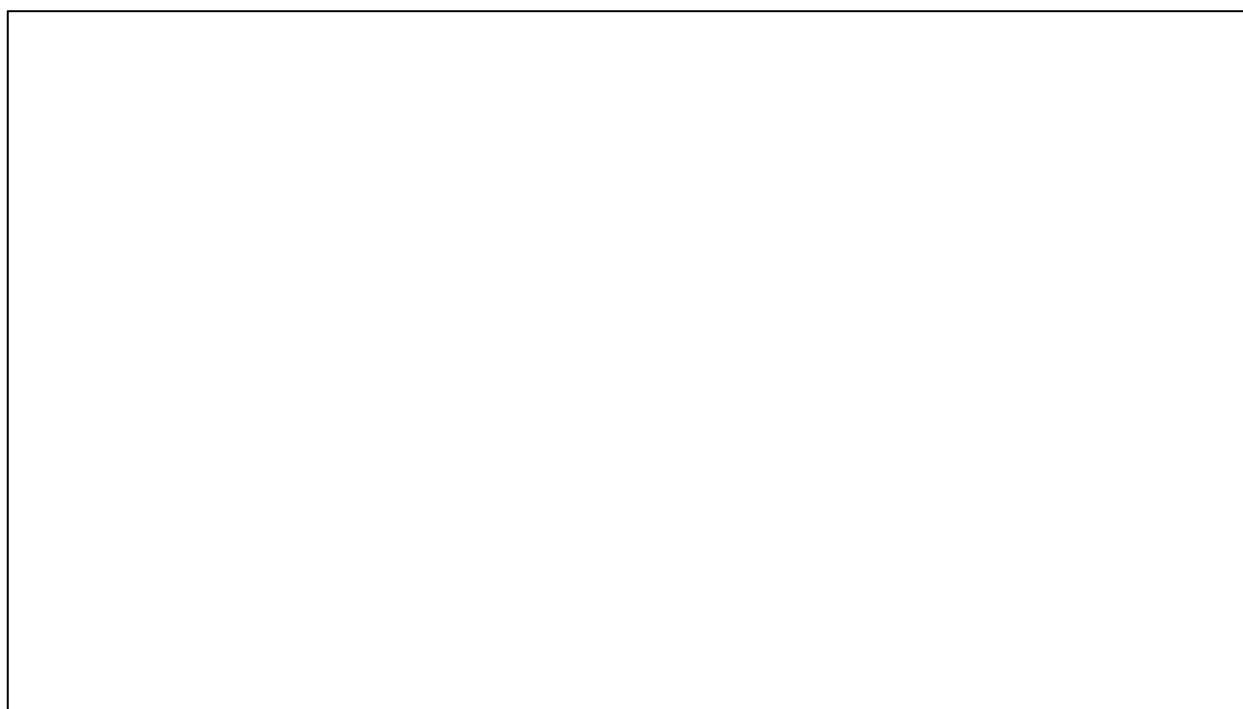
Signposting stimulus

If anyone has any questions about buying food online safely, you can find out more here. I'm going to leave this slide up, so you can take a note of their names and details if of interest. Please let me know if you would like me to send you a copy of this.

Thank and Close.

Annex B: Stimulus material

Stimulus 1

Buying local, home-made baked goods through the food sharing app Olio

- Kai hears about and downloads the food sharing app, Olio.
- they see that someone in their local area is selling home-made red velvet cupcakes and the seller has included several photos of what these will look like
- Kai messages the seller through the app to arrange a time for collection. They pay with cash when they collect the cupcakes.

Stimulus 2
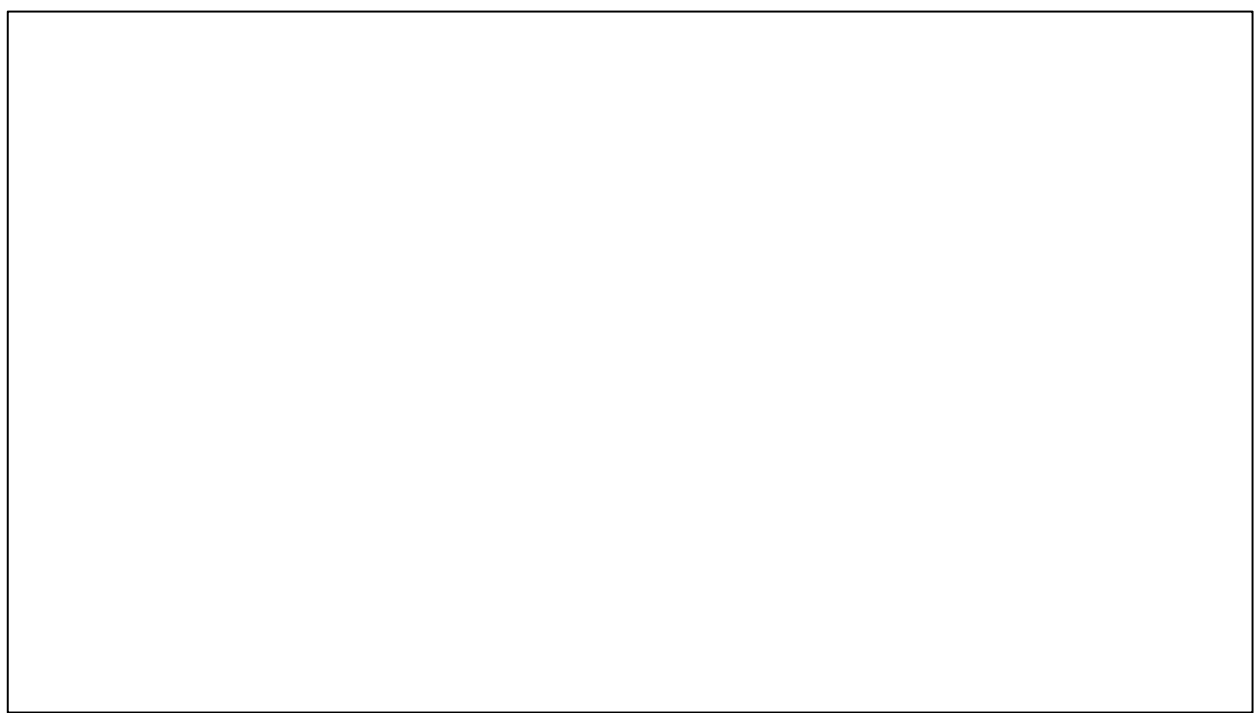
Using Facebook Marketplace to order pre-cooked, pre-made meals for the week

- Aidan works long hours and he struggles to find time to cook when he gets home in the evenings.
- he sees an account on Facebook Marketplace advertising cooked rice and chicken for £7, with an image of the food
- Aidan messages the seller via Facebook messenger to arrange a time for collection. He pays with cash when he collects his food before taking it home to eat.
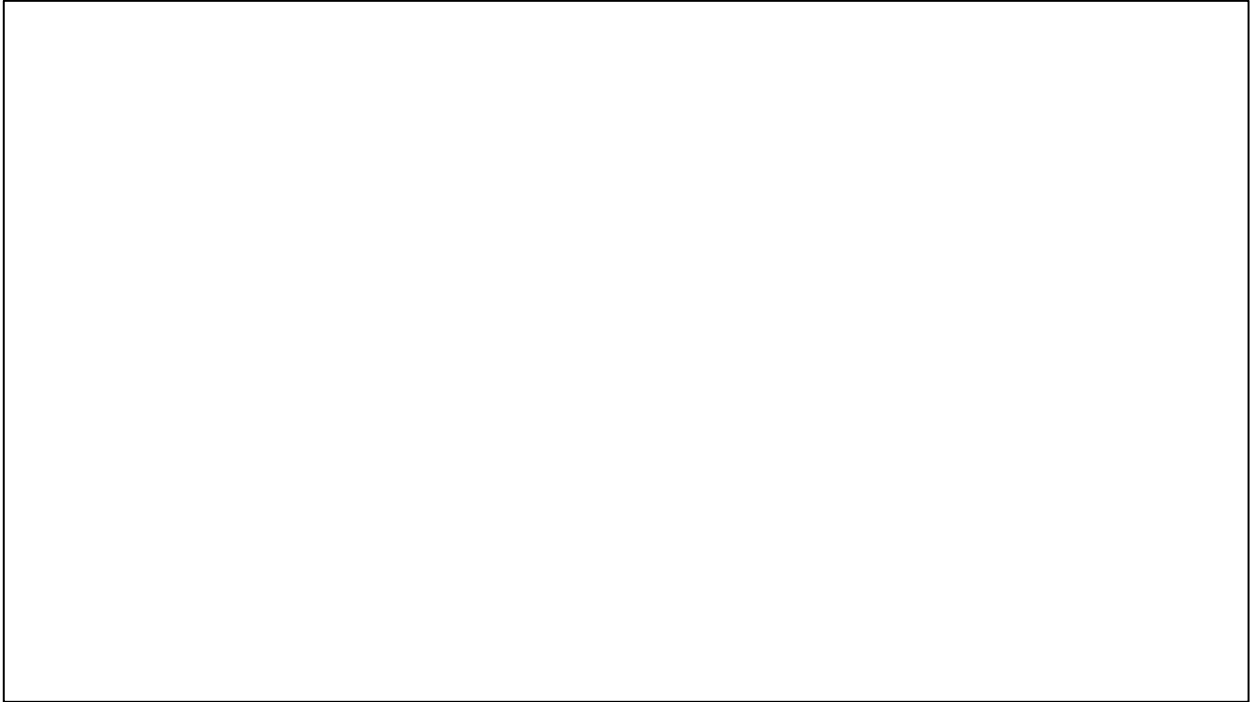
Stimulus 3
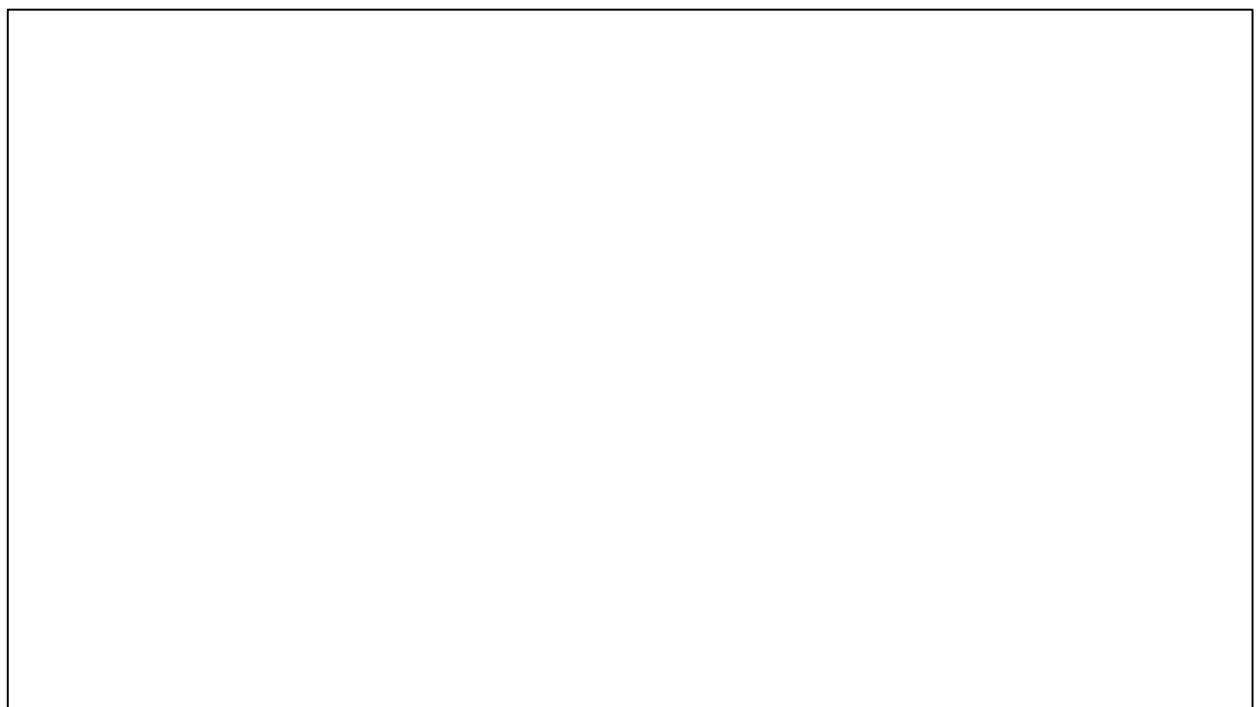
Buying pre-made sandwiches through ships on Too Good to Go app

- Samira's local cafe sells filled, pre-made sandwiches and baked goods
- through Too Good to Go, the cafe sells food that hasn't sold that day and would otherwise go to waste
- Samira uses the Too Good to Go app to buy these sandwiches at a reduced rate at the end of the day.

Stimulus 4

Buying pre-packed food in bulk via Amazon

- Chris likes eating a quick lunch while at work, such as microwaveable rice
- he sees that he can buy packaged microwaveable rice in bulk on the 'Ben's Original' store via Amazon
- Chris buys this bulk order through Amazon and arranges for it to be delivered to a convenient Click and Collect location, to take to work.

Stimulus 5
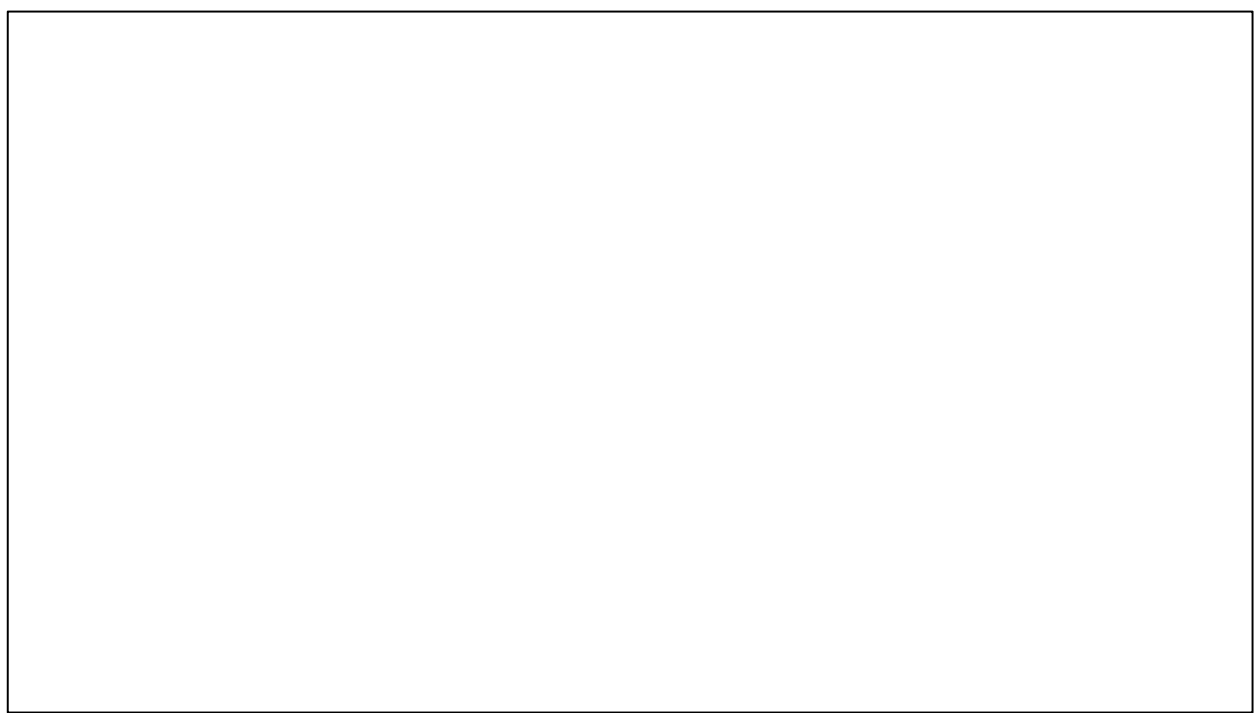
Using food delivery services to order takeaways

- every Friday, Arthur and his family order dinner through an online delivery service
- this week they order a 'Meat Feast pizza' from a local restaurant, via Deliveroo
- the pizza is delivered cooked and ready-to-eat, straight to Arthur's door, within an hour of ordering.

Stimulus 6

What controls and regulation should be in place, when buying food online?

1. Ordering food online

2. Food preparation
3. Packaging and transportation
4. Arrives at consumer