

Food hypersensitivity

We work with partners to deliver a step change in how food hypersensitivity is understood and managed.

The FSA has a long-term ambition to improve the quality of life for people with food hypersensitivities (food allergies, food intolerances and coeliac disease). We work with partners inside and outside government to deliver a step change in how food hypersensitivity (FHS) is understood and managed. We focus our work on developing policy, research and evidence, informed by consumer and business engagement, and supporting enforcement.

Our vision

Our work aims to:

- improve quality of life for the estimated 2.6 million people with FHS.
- reduce the burden and cost to the National Health Service (NHS)
- increase workplace productivity by reducing FHS illness incidence
- increase economic activity of food hypersensitivities people within the food and hospitality sectors.

Objectives for 2021/22

- examine the potential options for developing a food allergy safety scheme that would enable people with food hypersensitivities to make safer choices when dining out.
- explore the 'data gap' as to the extent and nature of allergic reactions, particularly when buying food outside the home. To test this through a 'proof of concept' process for a Food Allergic Reaction Reporting Mechanism (FARRM) tool.
- gain stakeholder insight and input into FSA's work on FHS and build the strong stakeholder relationships and alliances needed to affect the cultural and behavioural changes.
- support businesses and local authorities to prepare for the implementation of prepacked for direct sale (PPDS) legislation from 1 October 2021.
improve understanding of the current causes and impacts of the increased usage of Precautionary Allergen Labelling (PAL) through gaining feedback from food industry stakeholders to inform policy development and potential interventions.

Progression of key areas

Examining options for developing a food allergy safety scheme and review of evidence on allergen information for consumers

We developed our work looking at how food businesses can improve provision of FHS information to consumers when eating out or ordering takeaway food, so they can make safer choices.

We examined the potential of creating an allergy safety scheme which would provide consumers with information they could use to decide where to eat. Alongside this, we developed our research base on whether the presentation of allergen information could be improved by examining consumer preferences and how businesses compile information for their customers.

Explore the ‘data gap’ in allergic reactions and to test through a ‘proof of concept’ for a FARRM

The FARRM project was initiated to consider the feasibility and design of a mechanism to improve the FSA’s understanding of the nature and extent of food hypersensitivity reactions and near-misses, particularly those which do not require hospital treatment and often go unreported.

A FARRM ‘proof-of-concept’ platform was hosted on the FSA website from November 2021 to February 2022 and generated a total of 498 reports of adverse reactions. Whilst this level of response broadly aligned with expectations, it demonstrated significant issues with maintaining public awareness, consumer motivation to place a report and data validity. Consequently, the FHS Programme Board decided not to progress FARRM and instead focus on alternative ways of capturing the scope and type of data required.

Gain stakeholder insight and input into FHS and build strong stakeholder relationships and alliances

We established an expert panel which allowed us to collaborate with charities, trade bodies, academics, clinicians and local authorities.

We also held our third FHS Symposium, gathering a range of stakeholders to discuss perceptions of FHS and how best practice can improve outcomes, attracting over 600 delegate registrations.

We ran our second iteration of the [‘Speak Up For Allergies’ campaign](#), aimed at 18-21 year olds, in March 2022.

Support businesses and local authorities to prepare for the implementation of the PPDS Legislation

New allergen labelling requirements came into effect in all four UK nations from 1 October 2021. The FSA implemented the prepacked for direct sale (PPDS) legislation and have supported businesses and local authorities to successfully implement the new rules. The PPDS legislation requires food businesses to label this type of food with the name and ingredients list, with the 14 major allergens emphasised within the list. We provided additional resources on a dedicated hub on the FSA website including sector guides and help with the labelling of PPDS products.

We also produced two well-received webinars aimed at local authorities and businesses respectively which were recorded and are available as training resources. We continued to publicise the changes through industry events aimed at small and larger businesses and produced more tailored advice for local authorities in resources available to them via our dedicated communications platform.

In the run up to the implementation date, we delivered targeted advertising to ensure the message was reaching businesses on their need to prepare. We achieved widespread media interest, including coverage on major news programmes, and strong public engagement, which contributed to raising consumer awareness achieving over 105,000 page views on the PPDS hub during 2021/22.

Improve understanding of the current causes and impacts of the increased usage of PAL

PAL refers to voluntary labelling to indicate that one or more regulated allergens could be unintentionally, but unavoidably, present in a product, and thus pose a risk to susceptible consumers. This is often present on labels in the form of 'may contain...' or other similar statements. There is consumer and business concern that these statements are used inconsistently, and consumers often feel this form of labelling does not provide reliable information on which to base their choices.

We launched a public consultation from December 2021 to March 2022, to gather a broad range of stakeholder views to inform our work. This consultation received over 2,500 responses and was supported by 14 targeted workshops with businesses, local authorities and consumer groups. The findings from this consultation will inform our work as we develop our approach to this issue in partnership with the food sector, local authorities and consumers.

Next steps

During 2022/23, we will focus on key topics agreed by the FSA Board as outlined below:

- improving the provision of information for consumers, with a priority focus on the accuracy of information.
- achieving a step change in the knowledge, skills and food safety culture of staff in the non-prepacked sector.
- continuing work on Precautionary Allergen Labelling (PAL) to improve the way it is applied by industry and to improve its effectiveness as a consumer information tool.
- evaluation of the implementation of the PPDS legislation by surveying consumers, food businesses and local authorities. We will assess if businesses and local authorities need additional support from the FSA.

Campaign: Allergen labelling change on pre-packed for direct sale foods (Natasha's law)

Aims:

The main aims were to promote the new regulations through an awareness campaign targeting both businesses and consumers; provide helpful advice to food businesses who sell prepacked for direct sale food and ensure they were supported to make the necessary changes to be compliant; and to make sure that consumers, particularly those with a food hypersensitivity are aware of the changes.

When:

March 2021 to October 2021.

Spend:

£85,000

What we did:

This activity follows on from work conducted in 2020/21. During the reporting year the campaign was split into stages to help focus the messaging and ensure that businesses were targeted in a timely manner with relevant messages. Below are some highlights from the campaigning and promotional activity.

Dedicated information hub:

A dedicated hub was created on food.gov.uk in February 2021 to support food businesses implementing the new regulations. The hub provided resources for businesses including a decision tool, labelling guidance, sample labels, technical guidance and sector specific guidance. The decision tool proved to be popular with over 67,000 visits from 1 January to 31 October 2021.

Online advertising:

We ran online advertising on Google, Facebook and Instagram for two weeks in March 2021 and September 2021. This promotion secured a total of 9.3 million impressions and generated 83,000 click throughs to the dedicated information hub.

Webinars:

In July and August 2021, three webinars were held to help engage with food businesses and local authorities. The food business webinar was attended by almost 400 people and has since had over 2,800 views on YouTube. A total of 800 local authority officers attended the live webinar from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland with an additional 1,500 views on YouTube. 90% of businesses who attended the webinars rated the overall experience as excellent or good.

The FSA in Northern Ireland (NI), along with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Environment (CAFRE) and district councils, held a webinar for NI businesses. Over 160 local food businesses and caterers attended the event.

Implementation day: 1 October 2021

We used the implementation day as an opportunity to reach food hypersensitive consumers to let them know how the changes in the allergen labelling law will impact them. In collaboration with the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation (NARF), we secured 89 pieces of coverage which included 10 national newspapers, 21 media interviews and generated 876,767,128 opportunities to see for Natasha's Law which potentially exposed everyone in the UK to an FSA mention an average of 4 times during that day.

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