

Retail Surveillance Sampling Programme during Covid-19 pandemic - Introduction

Project Aim

To carry out targeted surveillance sampling on food products across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to help identify emerging food safety risks during the Covid-19 pandemic as a result of pressures on the global food chain and increase the FSA's intelligence on the food system.

Background

The aim of the Food Standards Agency, as laid out in its Strategic Plan 2015–2020 (4), is to protect public health from risks which may arise in connection with the consumption of food both in terms of how it is produced and supplied, while making sure that “food is safe and what it says it is”.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to a reduction in the amount of sampling undertaken by Local Authorities (LAs) as they minimised the footfall in food and feed business establishments and focussed resources on urgent priority reactive work.

Additionally, it also increased the pressure on the global food supply chain and there were enforcement flexibilities in order to maintain food stocks, and changes to exports and trade flows from exporter countries worldwide.

This targeted programme of surveillance sampling on food products across England, Wales and Northern Ireland has been developed in response to the challenges arising from Covid-19 to deliver useful intelligence on the safety of the food system and provide support to the OLs to ensure that the FSA continues to meet its legislative requirements.

Food and Feed Official Laboratories (OLs)

The FSA are the Central Competent Authority responsible for designating food and feed official laboratories in the UK according to the Multi-Annual National Control Plan (5), as required by the retained Official Feed and Food Control Regulations 2017/625 (6). It has the responsibility for ensuring the United Kingdom has sufficient laboratory capacity and capability to deliver official controls on feed and food safety and standards in order to protect public health. The Official Laboratories (OLs) are not owned or operated by the FSA.

There are currently 5 Public Analyst OLs in England and Wales:

- Hampshire Scientific Service
- Kent Scientific Services
- Lancashire County Scientific Services
- Minton Treharne and Davies Ltd
- Public Analyst Scientific Services

All OLs are accredited to ISO17025 by The United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) and employ suitably qualified staff including Public Analysts, Agricultural Analysts and Food Examiners for enforcement purposes.