

Our Food 2022: Conclusions

Our report highlights record numbers of people experiencing food insecurity in 2022.

In his first Christmas address to the nation last year, King Charles referred to the “great anxiety and hardship” experienced by people struggling to “pay their bills and keep their families fed and warm” His message reflected the experiences of many people as they struggled to cope with the rising cost of living.

The challenge people faced is reflected in the apparent paradox that, even as food prices rose, the overall amount we spent on in-home food went down by around £8 billion during 2022. Our own research shows that with higher housing costs, energy bills, petrol, and other household expenses, many have had to pare back our food budgets to make ends meet. Households across the income spectrum have been forced to make sacrifices as a result of cost of living pressures.

Our report highlights record numbers of people experiencing food insecurity in 2022. One in five households in England, Wales and Northern Ireland reported eating a “reduced quality, variety or desirability of diet”, while one in ten households also reported “disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake” according to the FSA’s research. In Scotland, 41% of adults expressed concern about being able afford food compared to 25% in 2021, while the number of adults skipping meals and reducing portion sizes to save money also increased sharply.

These are distressing figures that show the scale and human cost of the inflationary pressures experienced across the UK in 2022. They also carry a warning for the future. When you consider that research published by the Food Foundation in June 2023 showed the poorest fifth of UK households need to spend 43% of their disposable income to achieve government healthy eating guidelines, it is reasonable to conclude that economic challenges present, and will continue to present, a barrier to good dietary health.

Only time will tell whether the differential patterns of inflation we have observed across the Eatwell food categories result in any long-term changes in our diet and health outcomes, but we cannot afford not to take what action we can right now to mitigate the risks. We believe it is vital that the government, the food industry, and regulators continue to work together so that healthy food is accessible to all.

Our assessment of standards in other parts of the food system – through data gathered on incidents, food crime, safety and hygiene in food and feed establishments – suggests that, overall, food standards remained stable in 2022. Intelligence and checks at the border do not suggest any significant change in the safety of imported food from outside the EU during 2022; however, the full picture remains incomplete until we have access to similar data for EU imports. We will continue to press the Government to introduce these checks as scheduled in January 2024.

Critical challenges

Just as last year, our conclusions on the overall state of UK food standards in 2022 are cautious and qualified as we believe there are several critical challenges ahead.

The first is local authority resourcing. If there are not enough people with the right skills to deliver essential food controls, local authorities cannot reliably identify, verify, and provide assurance on our food system and monitor and respond to problems in our food supply chains. The analysis in this report sets out the long-term decline in funding for local authorities and the reallocation of their resource away from food safety and food standards duties over the last decade. There are also worryingly high rates of unfilled vacancies in these posts.

It is vitally important that local authorities devote sufficient resource to food safety and standards controls and that they have the funding to do so. Local authorities, professional bodies, and others such as FSA and FSS, who rely on the environmental health and trading standards professions, also need to work together to ensure these professions attract and retain people for the future.

Local authority teams deserve credit for the way that they have restored inspection volumes since the pandemic, but we are concerned that the many pressures being placed on them – in making up the post-pandemic backlog of inspections, dealing with the increasing numbers of food business opening up (including the rising number of online food operators) and taking on additional responsibilities following EU Exit – are hampering their capacity to conduct critical food safety and standards checks. These pressures have also resulted in a decline in sampling activity by local authorities in recent years, making it more difficult to detect potential safety and authenticity issues.

The second relates to the availability of Official Veterinarians. During 2022, the FSA faced specific, complex challenges in recruiting and retaining vets as Official Veterinarians (OVs) to fulfil our statutory role in abattoirs - ensuring animal health and welfare, and food safety and security is maintained. Without OVs in abattoirs every day, abattoirs cannot legally operate. If sufficient OVs are not available, this would not only have animal health and welfare consequences, it could disrupt domestic food supply and the ability to export products of animal origin. There is a widely documented shortage of vets in the UK, with the UK historically relying heavily on overseas vets to fulfil public health roles. This shortage is more acutely felt in abattoirs because UK vets consider this role to be less appealing than other veterinary work such as private practice. More recently, veterinary shortages within the UK have resulted in higher salaries as demand for vets has increased, which has impacted recruitment in public health roles. Historically, there has also been pressure to reduce charges to industry for vet services and the financial constraints on the public purse means it is very difficult to compete with private sector salaries.

The FSA has relied on the continuation of temporary measures granted by the RCVS allowing appropriately qualified veterinarians from EAEVE-accredited universities to work as Temporarily Registered Novice OVs (TRNOV) under supervision during 2022 to help us deal with the capacity challenges within the veterinary profession. We need to recruit and retain enough vets to continue delivering official controls in slaughterhouses, as well as securing an adequate pipeline of trained professionals in the longer term. Without this, the meat supply chain cannot operate continuously and we risk having insufficient numbers of vets to sign export health certificates. The shortage of vets in the public sector has implications for the whole of Government and industry. We now need to consider more significant and fundamental steps to address this serious issue.

The third relates to import controls. We note the UK Government plan to introduce a new imports Border Target Operating Model in 2024, though are disappointed by the delays in implementation. These controls will help provide assurance that EU food and feed imports meet our safety standards and allow us to identify and stop potentially unsafe food at an earlier stage. We echo our call from last year to ensure that these controls are implemented without any further delay to provide a greater level of public health protection.

A constructive and open partnership

There are three key lines of defence in making sure that food is safe and authentic - food businesses, local authorities and FSA/FSS.

Our final message, therefore, is the need for a constructive and open partnership to solve these problems, working together in the interests of consumers in the UK and those abroad who trust in UK food. It has never been more important for everyone involved in food production, manufacture, or distribution and those who govern the system to work together to keep the consumer safe.

At a time when consumers are facing real challenges in purchasing food, and businesses are facing significant cost pressures in producing and supplying food, it is critical that those with power and influence in the system do everything we can to create a food system that seeks to provide safe, healthier, and more sustainable food for everyone and ensure that the high food standards we enjoy in the UK are maintained.