

FSA 22-06-09 Household Food Insecurity: main report

This paper summarises the evidence we have about levels of household food insecurity and food affordability, and the impact on consumers and the food system.

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1. Summary

1.1 Food prices in the UK are rising rapidly. The price of food on supermarket shelves increased by 9% from April 2021 to April 2022. Alongside other rising costs, particularly energy, and with growth in real pay lagging behind, this has meant UK consumers are increasingly struggling to afford food. And this issue is escalating rapidly.

1.2 The FSA has been tracking consumer experiences of food access and affordability for some years. Our data tells us that increasing numbers of consumers are being forced to make difficult choices when it comes to food.

1.3 Household food insecurity is a consequence of wider poverty, but food is often the first expenditure to be cut when disposable income is tight; for example, by 'trading down' in brands or, for some, by skipping meals, reducing portion sizes or reducing their choices. It is increasingly likely that consumers will reduce their spending on food to ensure they are able to meet the increasing pressures on their disposable income due to the rise in energy bills, petrol prices and background inflation.

1.4 Although alleviating poverty is not an FSA policy lead, food affordability cuts right across the FSA's vision and mission. We need to understand how rising food prices and rising levels of food insecurity – which have consequences for consumers' behaviour and for the food system more generally – will affect our ability to ensure that food is safe, food is what it says it is and that food is healthier and more sustainable.

1.5 We are already undertaking a portfolio of work in this area and have increased our evidence provision since the start of the pandemic, and again more recently in response to the increased cost of living. However, there are further options for the Board to consider where the FSA could expand on our work.

1.6 The Board is asked to:

- **note** the work the FSA is already doing on food affordability, including our increase in work since 2020 and more recently in 2022
- **note and agree** the suggestions in Annex A for increasing the level of work the FSA undertakes given the speed at which this issue is accelerating
- **comment on and decide** whether FSA should expand the suggested level of activity, **noting** that other work may need to be de-prioritised to accommodate the redeployment of resource to meet these further activities.

2. Introduction

2.1 The FSA has a statutory objective to 'protect consumers' wider interests in relation to food'.

To support the delivery of the new FSA Strategy, we have recently undertaken a new study to establish, explore and prioritise consumer interests, needs and concerns in relation to food in the UK. The report ([Public Wider Interests in Food 2022](#)) shows that food affordability and food insecurity is currently the most important aspect in consumer decision making and the way that people think and feel about food.

2.2 We have used several terms in this paper, including food insecurity and food affordability.

Household food security exists when people have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life, as defined by WHO. Food affordability is a key component of food security and is the cost of the diet of a household relative to the household's income. When safe and nutritious food is not available at a price affordable to all, then the welfare of some people is jeopardised, which risks the cost of food crisis turning into a future health crisis.

2.3 In this paper we summarise the evidence we have about levels of household food insecurity and food affordability, and the impact on consumers and the food system. We then draw out the consequences for the FSA's ability to deliver food you can trust. Considering each of our different roles in the food system, set out in our strategy, we set out the work we are already doing and what more we propose to do to help protect the interests of consumers and to deliver food that is safe, is what it says it is, and is healthier and more sustainable.

3. Evidence

3.1 Annex B sets out the socio-economic evidence, the potential impacts of this on food safety and the main areas for concern. Our tracking analysis shows that almost one in four consumers (22%) now report skipping a meal, or cutting the size of meals, because they did not have enough money to buy food – this has risen steadily since June 2021. Reported food bank usage has steadily increased since June 2021 (9%), with 15% saying they used a food bank in March 2022.

3.2 Food prices in the UK are rising rapidly. The price of food on supermarket shelves increased by 5.76% from March 2021 to March 2022. This is a substantial rise given that, between 2016 and 2020, food prices rose by 0.93% from one March to the next on average. In 2022, prices rose by more than 0.8% between January and February alone. Economic projections indicate a worsening picture over the next 12 months.

3.3 Our Public's Interests, Needs and Concerns Around Food project ([Public Wider Interests in Food 2022](#)) found that concern around the cost of food is now the top concern reported by consumers when it comes to food. When asked, 42% of people report they are concerned about food prices. Approximately one in five people are trading down, changing what and where they buy, for cheaper food alternatives ([Food and You 2, Wave 3](#)). Our expectation is that these behaviour patterns will increase.

3.4 Price increases, compounded by the rising cost of living, means that household food insecurity has increased in the UK. The latest published wave of Food and You 2 indicates that, 15% - or roughly one in seven - people live in household food insecurity. This increases to one in six in Wales and Northern Ireland (18% and 16% of households respectively) and one in five in the North West of England (20% of households). Our data shows that household food insecurity is particularly acute among younger adults, low-income families, and people who are unemployed. Our analysis also suggests that lower middle-income households are also at risk of food insecurity if there are any further economic shocks.?

3.5 People with low food security are making different and difficult choices.??Those who are food insecure report different behaviours, such as eating less than they should (31%), cutting the size of their meal or skipping meals (30%), being hungry (20%) and losing weight (12%). Our tracking data shows that 15% of respondents reported using a food charity or food bank in March 2022; a proportion that has significantly increased since the year before (9% in March 2021). Food insecure households are more likely to buy food close to its use-by date and eat food past its use-by date, than food secure households ([Food and You 2, Wave 3](#)).?They are more likely to have reduced choices, (for example 'free from foods' are often more expensive) when managing hypersensitivities.

3.6 We also know that the impact of cost-of-living increases on the food system is about more than food choices. Our safety regime is built around assumptions involving effective cooking, storage and cleaning. But all of these are likely to be compromised if people are facing increasing financial pressures. Fuel bills especially may mean that people feel unable to cook food thoroughly (or at all) and indeed even the cost of powering a fridge or freezer may put some consumers under strain.

3.7 Furthermore, people in low food security are more likely to be vulnerable to obesity and malnutrition and to suffer from the anxiety and worry of not having access to sufficient nutritious food. Further data in Annex B.

3.8 In addition to the direct impact on consumers, we are conscious of other potential impacts on the food system that might arise from rising food prices. Work is ongoing to review the potential food fraud risks in particular - including but not exclusive to the potential issues surrounding waste diversion and misrepresentation. We have seen no evidence of these risks manifesting at this time.

4. Discussion

4.1 The evidence clearly shows that consumers are changing their behaviours when it comes to food. As consumers feel the pressure of food insecurity, they are making different choices, which could increase the risk of unsafe practice and unsafe or inauthentic food. Rising food insecurity could also make it more difficult for consumers to eat healthier and more sustainable food. So, the context in which the FSA is working is changing. We do not believe there is a choice for the FSA about whether we want to do work on food insecurity; it is an integral part of our job already. While the underlying causes of food insecurity may not be for us to solve, we need to understand the changing context for consumers and to consider how our work needs to change to reflect their new lived experiences.

4.2 We have been tracking levels of food insecurity for some time, which has given us a bank of evidence and the ongoing ability to see how the picture changes over time. This growing evidence base is one of the most important contributions that the FSA can make to wider efforts to tackle food insecurity, and we know it is valued by government policy-makers and third sector organisations, with frequent requests from others to use our data.

4.3 We are considering whether there is more we can do as an evidence generator, or in our other roles, to respond to this rapidly changing context. In doing so, we have been guided by the principles the Board agreed in our strategy. In particular, we think it is important that:

- to protect consumer interests, the FSA should work to mitigate the risks and impacts of food insecurity where we have the means and capacity to do so
- FSA will be led by the science and evidence and will not compromise on food safety, given that this is the Food Standards Agency's primary remit
- FSA will be open and transparent with our evidence; we should be independent in what we say but do not need to be neutral on food affordability and insecurity
- FSA does not hold policy levers to solve the food insecurity issue, but we will seek to work with, and through others to amplify our voice, communicate, educate, and seek to mitigate food insecurity issues

4.4 We have set out our proposals in detail, taking each role in turn below. A more detailed table of the work we are proposing, and the work that we have considered but do not propose to undertake, is at Annex A.

Evidence Generator

4.5 This is where the FSA does and can continue to add most value. As the independent government department with the exclusive remit for food, we have a crucial role informing the wider debate around food affordability.

4.6 **What we are already doing:** We have put much of our effort into gathering data during 2020 and 2021, interpreting what this data is telling us to inform wider Government priorities and engaging with other civil society actors in this area. In 2020 we stepped up our consumer tracking and explored the lived experience of household food insecurity through qualitative work. We have:

a) measured and published biannual official statistics on household food insecurity since 2016 through [Food and You 2](#). The datasets are available to analyse this by ethnicity, socio-demographic group, region, and disability, and in future reports we will include any clear disparities routinely in our summary report.

b) published a report ([Food in a Pandemic](#)) on attitudes to the food system in a pandemic (2021), which traced changing attitudes to food provision.

c) measured consumer concern and indicators of household food insecurity on a monthly basis through our [consumer tracker](#), with the most recent published data running up to March 2022.

d) published qualitative research into the lived experience of household food insecurity ([FSA Food Insecurity 2020](#)) and analysed the data emerging from [The Public's Interests, Needs and Concerns Around Food project \(2022\)](#) to map the variety of experiences among those in this situation.

e) tracked conversations around food poverty on social media, reporting this each month to colleagues in the FSA and across government to complement our consumer survey data and food price tracking.

f) commissioned work to map the journey food goes on in various models of community food provision (e.g., food banks, food sharing apps), which will be published this summer.

g) in Northern Ireland, the FSA has a partnership with Safefood which commissions research on the cost of the minimum essential food basket for four household types with low-income scenarios. With data going back to 2014, the reports demonstrate the average weekly cost of

healthy food, and the level of household income that may need to be spent on attaining this minimum standard.

4.7 Swift analysis, open sharing of data and ongoing synthesis of the findings has allowed us to act as a provider of timely and reliable evidence to others operating in this space, including: [the National Food Strategy](#), the upcoming Defra Food White Paper and the upcoming DHSC Health Disparities White Paper. We are advising; the Office of National Statistics, on their new index measuring the cost of the basic staples for the poorest consumers (successfully campaigned for by Jack Monroe and dubbed the 'Sam Vimes' index). We have shared this data with Cabinet Office, and we are working with the Equalities and Human Rights Commission who wish to continue using our data to inform their Human Rights Tracker. We are also working with the main NGOs and consumer groups, such as the Food Foundation and Food Ethics Council as well as the main community providers, such as Fareshare, IFAN and the Trussell Trust. We have shared our data with colleagues at DWP.

4.8 How the FSA could expand our work: Our Science, Evidence and Research Division (SERD) are already planning to divert additional resources to dial up our research and evidence effort to further work in 2022-3. If the Board agree, SERD will divert more resources to further work. In the shorter term this will include further synthesis of the evidence base, work to identify and fill evidence gaps, working with others in the research community. Our risk analysis processes look at impact on consumers in the round: consistently including criteria such as; social equity, impact on household food insecurity (as well as healthy/sustainable consumer choices, food waste, animal welfare and trade).

4.9 Until now, we have our data in the public domain but not taken a strong position. We are proposing to interpret and report the evidence more proactively to ensure it is useable to campaigning organisations, and presenting it to policymakers, Parliamentarians and media at their conferences. We could also take a stronger public position in terms of drawing conclusions from the data about the impact on consumers or the food system. This may bring risks and move us closer to the watchdog role.

Policy maker and regulator

4.10 As food affordability is changing the context in which we do our jobs, it is essential that our core functions reflect this. The FSA needs to understand how affordability impacts how our consumers interact with our policies, and whether we need to amend existing ones to adjust to this new environment. For example, the rise in community food provision (e.g., food banks) presents new risks to ensuring that food is safe and what it says it is, which the FSA should respond to.

4.11 What we are already doing: We need to be alive to the risk that household food insecurity leads consumers to adopt riskier behaviours in relation to food. Our work in the Achieving Business Compliance programme on online food sales becomes increasingly important if financial pressures are leading more people to buy food in ways that are less visible to regulators, for example through online marketplaces. We commissioned research into consumers' understanding of online risks, which we are currently analysing.

4.12 We have already carried out a significant programme of work on Best Before End and Use by Dates, with the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), an organisation focusing cutting waste out of our global food system and making it more sustainable. We have published extensive guidance on our website, co-produced with Defra and WRAP, who we have worked with for many years. This can help to reduce waste in the food system, and to raise understanding amongst consumers.

4.13 While it is important that community food provision is not viewed as the solution to food insecurity, we are stepping up our work to make sure that our regulation helps support the provision of safe food through these mechanisms to those who need it. Our research project on community food provision (referenced in 4.6) highlighted areas in which the FSA can support businesses – and non-profit organisations - do the right thing when it comes to supporting consumers and food safety. We are already acting on some of these recommendations, such as providing more accessible, and 'bite-sized' guidance allowing it to be easily shared amongst volunteers, providing our guidance as downloadable products that they can easily share and print off for easy and accessible resources. This is in line with our guiding principle to make it easier for businesses and organisations to meet their obligations and is an opportunity to apply some of the principles of service design we want to roll out across the organisation.

4.14 **How the FSA could expand our work:** As consumers and businesses come under greater financial pressures, it is important the FSA pivots to adjust to our new climate. We should make sure that considerations about affordability are embedded into decision making at all levels; we have already begun to look at how we could do this going forward, with the Analytical Unit considering how to include affordability into impact assessments. We could embed these considerations into other decision making, for example in response to a food incident.

4.15 There may also be more that we can do to encourage greater use of this guidance, especially with some of our partners such as the supermarkets, or with community food providers to ensure this messaging is targeting consumers more directly. We could further provide guidance for businesses who wish to donate to food banks, to ensure that food safety is not compromised in the process and set a standardised approach to those wishing to contribute to their community.

Convenor and Collaborator

4.16 This area has the most potential for the FSA to step up our activities. We have significant amounts of insight and evidence, provided by our evidence generator function. At the moment, we provide our data into other organisations, both across Whitehall and external partners such as the white papers.

4.17 **What we are already doing:** The FSA already works with multiple partners across non-governmental organisations and across Whitehall when it comes to food insecurity, using our links and evidence/data to promote messaging and ensure food safety is constantly on the agenda. For example, in Northern Ireland, the FSA co-chairs the All-Island Food Poverty Network in partnership with Safefood. The network provides a co-ordinated and strategic approach to tackling food poverty on the island of Ireland, supporting the development of consensus on related issues, collaboration and shared learning.

4.18 We are also engaging with food industry partners, such as food retailers and organisations which play major roles in community food provision and food redistribution, to understand how the FSA can help them in areas like reducing waste, and to understand how we can work together to make cheap food good food.

4.19 **How the FSA could expand our work:** the FSA could look to take a more prominent role in convening policy leads across Whitehall and the NGO sector to encourage joined up thinking and informed discussions about the impact of food insecurity across the food sector. For example, we could convene seminars or run joint events with partners, using our evidence as the basis for discussion, to help build a shared picture of the likely impacts of food insecurity and to develop thinking on mitigations. The extent to which we act in this space is naturally constrained by resources – if we run events on this topic, we will have less capacity to do so on other issues (for example, consumer information on sustainability) – and by the extent to which other departments also plan to convene discussions.

Watchdog

4.20 What we are already doing: We are already publishing evidence on levels of food insecurity and planning to report on it in our annual report with FSS on food standards in the UK.

4.21 How the FSA could expand our work: We could be bolder in drawing conclusions from the evidence we have generated and calling these out, for example the potential impacts of food insecurity on people's short-term health (i.e., through risks to food safety) and on their ability to access healthy and sustainable food.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Alleviating household poverty is an issue far bigger than the remit of one single department, nor is it an FSA policy lead. That said, food affordability cuts across and impacts on the FSA's ability to deliver its vision and mission. We need to ensure that all consumers, including those that are facing food insecurity or struggling with the cost of food, are protected and can access food that is safe, whether their food comes from a shop, an online platform or a food bank.

5.2 As consumers' behaviours change due to cost of living increases, the FSA needs to understand this changing context and how it impacts food safety and authenticity and ensure that our work adapts accordingly. As the food regulator we have a role to make sure that a food insecurity crisis does not become a health or food safety issue and so must build on the work we are currently doing to and act within our resources and remit.

5.3 The Board is asked to:

- **note** the work the FSA is already doing on food affordability, including our increase in work since 2020 and more recently in 2022
- **note and agree** the suggestions in Annex A for increasing the level of work the FSA undertakes given the speed at which this issue is accelerating
- **comment on and decide** whether FSA should expand the suggested level of activity, **noting** that other work may need to be de-prioritised to accommodate the redeployment of resource to meet these further activities.