

Provision of Allergen Information in the Out of Home Food Sector

Area of research interest: [Food hypersensitivity](#)

Project status: Completed

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Background

This research was commissioned by the FSA in order to understand the allergen information needs and preferences of people with food hypersensitivity (FHS) when eating in the non-prepacked food sector (also referred to the 'out of home' sector). The research also looked at what allergen information food business operators (FBOs) in the non-prepacked food sector currently provide, in what format and why, as well as the feasibility of alternative allergen information approaches.

Methodology

The research used a mixed methodology approach, including a number of stages:

- online ethnography with 27 people with FHS
- 25 paired in-depth interviews with people with FHS and people who do not have FHS
- 60 in depth interviews with FBOs
- 6 in depth interviews with industry stakeholders and trade bodies
- a quantitative survey of 402 FBOs. The sample was drawn with similar numbers of business by size (micro, small, medium, and large) to allow for comparisons across business size, so is not representative of the make- up of businesses in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in terms of size or type.

Key findings

- consumers and businesses feel that there has been improved choice and information for consumers with FHS in the past five years. However recent challenges due to the Covid-19 pandemic have meant businesses have been faced with new challenges such as staff shortages and supply chain issues
- both FBOs and people with FHS feel the consumer knows best about their FHS and the allergens they need to avoid. Both groups would like further standardisation of allergen information
- while consumers have a preference for written information so they can make autonomous decisions and have a normal eating out experience, FBOs emphasise the need for a verbal conversation so that they can understand individual needs and take appropriate actions to ensure consumer safety (most importantly to avoid cross-contact when food is being prepared)
- businesses provide allergen information in numerous ways with no majority approach. These include allergen notices (39%), separate allergen menus (25%), allergen matrixes

(24%) and asking customers (24%)

- the quantitative work found that FBOs (who did not do so already) generally felt positive about changes and felt they were feasible such as full allergen labelling on menus (68%), asking consumers about their allergy (73%) and using allergen matrixes (79%). However, a sizable minority did say these would be unfeasible (32%, 27% and 21% respectively) with smaller businesses more likely to say this
- the qualitative work outlined the challenges for FBOs in implementing these measures. Concerns on full allergen labelling on menus included information overload for consumers, fewer verbal conversations taking place, and concerns around keeping written information up to date
- businesses were generally positive about asking consumers proactively about allergens, but the qualitative work showed a strong feeling this should be a recommendation and not a legal requirement