

Chapter 5: Keeping it clean, hygiene standards in food and feed establishments

Whether in a shop, canteen or restaurant, the safety of what we consume is upheld by a range of standards designed to ensure our food and animal feed is produced, manufactured, stored, and prepared in a safe and hygienic way.

At a glance:

In this chapter, we look at:

- the current level of legal compliance with hygiene standards across food and feed businesses, including the results of the latest food hygiene rating schemes
- the scale of the disruption and challenges to food hygiene controls caused by the pandemic and its potential implications for food hygiene standards
- other key challenges facing the hygiene inspection system, including workforce recruitment and retention, and the growth of online food sales

Introduction

Whether in a shop, canteen or restaurant, the safety of what we consume is upheld by a range of standards designed to ensure our food and animal feed is produced, manufactured, stored, and prepared in a safe and hygienic way. Strict requirements apply to a wide range of businesses, including food shops, restaurants, takeaways, caterers, meat, fish, shellfish and dairy producers, and animal feed manufacturers. They are regularly checked to assess compliance.

Animal feed businesses are also subject to stringent controls and inspections, many of which can trace their beginnings from the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis of the 1980s. As well as stopping people and farm animals from becoming ill, upholding these hygiene standards is key to maintaining the UK's reputation as a trusted exporter of safe food and feed products.

There are a number of key elements that contribute to maintaining high standards of food and feed hygiene:

- clear legislation and guidance for food and feed businesses
- a proportionate and consistent risk-based approach to local authority interventions, to ensure that food business operators (FBOs) are complying with food and feed law
- taking appropriate action to control outbreaks of food and feed related infectious diseases
- taking appropriate action where non-compliance is found
- a well-resourced, trained and competent workforce to monitor and enforce business compliance

This chapter explores what the available data tells us about hygiene standards and highlights the particular challenges faced by those responsible for upholding them.

Figure 34: The annual economic cost of some well-known foodborne illnesses [34]

- Norovirus: commonly transmitted via shellfish, oysters, lettuce, fresh and frozen berries, £1,680 million
- Campylobacter: commonly transmitted via chicken, pigs and dairy products, £710 million
- Salmonella: commonly transmitted via eggs or egg products, red meat and poultry, £210 million
- Escherichia coli (VTEC O157): commonly transmitted via beef and dairy products, £4 million

The role of businesses

Food and feed businesses are responsible for ensuring compliance with hygiene requirements. This means that they need to have effective food and feed safety management systems implemented and maintained. In practice, this includes measures to protect food and feed from contamination such as having high standards of cleanliness, temperature control, and staff competency through adequate training or supervision.

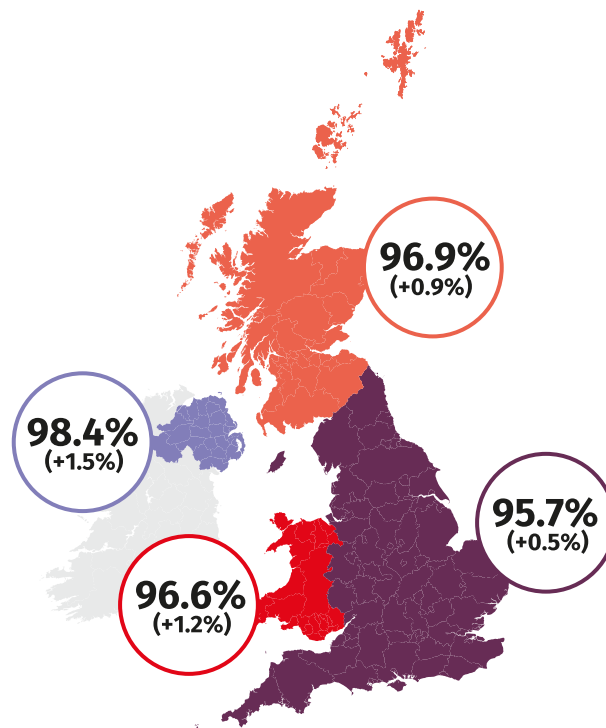
Hygiene in food establishments

Local authorities across the UK carry out a wide range of checks and interventions at food establishments to ensure a high level of food hygiene is maintained and that businesses are compliant with all relevant food laws [35]. These are carried out by food safety officers, such as environmental health officers.

The compliance data collected during the pandemic was affected by a fall in the overall number of inspections, which we describe later in this chapter. There are also some differences in how compliance is measured across the home nations. However, based on available data more than 95% of establishments in England, Wales and Northern Ireland were found to be compliant or better. In Scotland, more than 96% of establishments were deemed to have satisfactory compliance or better under the new Food Law Rating System [36].

Figure 35: The latest reported rates of compliance for UK food business operators

Percentage point change compared to the previous year is included in brackets.

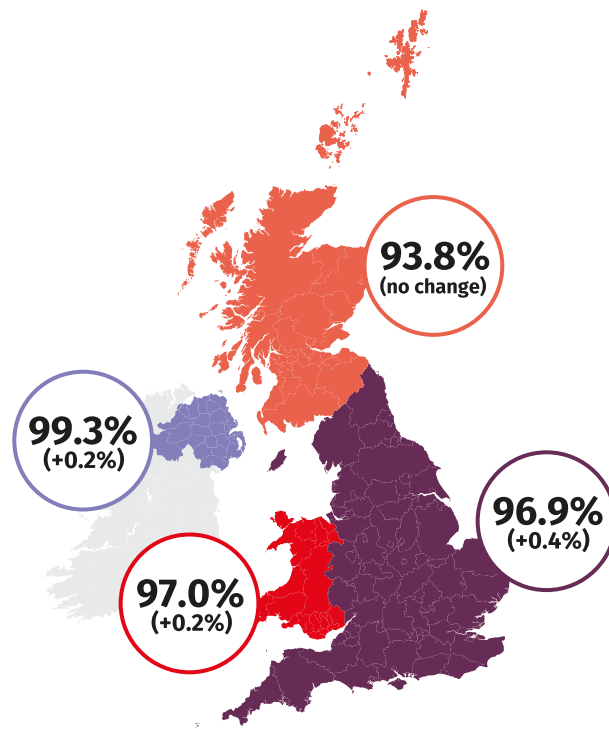


Source: Local Enforcement Monitoring System (LAEMS), Scottish National Database (SND). Figures cover the latest available data, which covers 2019-20 for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and 2020-21 for Scotland.

Similarly, the [Food Hygiene Rating Scheme \(FHRS\)](#) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the [Food Hygiene Information Scheme \(FHIS\)](#) in Scotland shows that the vast majority of restaurants and other places serving food received generally satisfactory or better ratings [37].

Figure 36: Percentage of UK food businesses achieving satisfactory or better ratings for food hygiene, as of 31 December 2021

Percentage point change compared to the previous year is included in the brackets



Figures include all businesses achieving a generally satisfactory rating of three or more as part of the FHRS for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and a pass rating within the FHIS for Scotland.

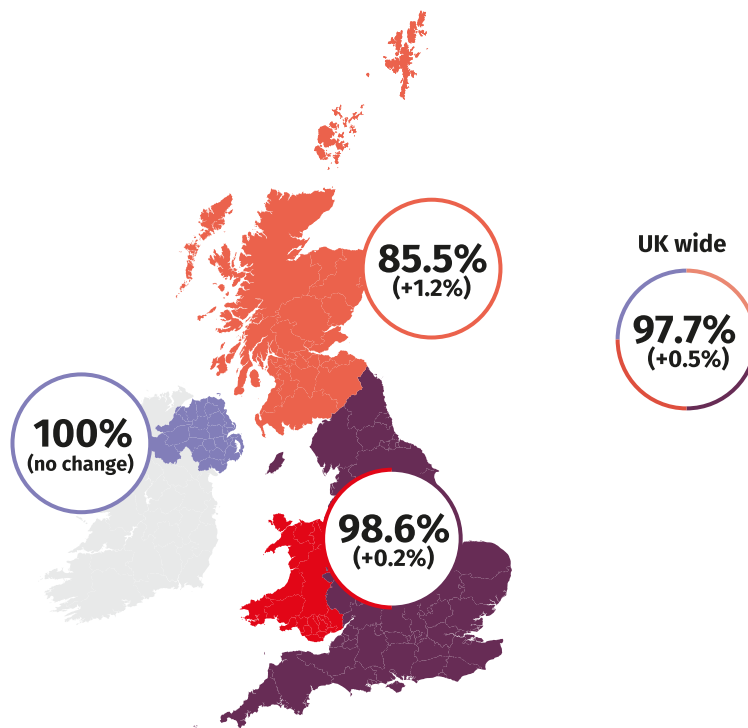
Hygiene in approved meat establishments

Approved meat establishments include slaughterhouses, game handling establishments, cutting plants and wholesale meat markets, and are subject to a specific set of controls to ensure they meet food safety and hygiene standards. Many of the controls for these establishments are delivered by FSA and FSS officials. Food business audits are undertaken regularly at these establishments to verify compliance [38].

While there are differences in the way audits are carried out in Scotland compared to the rest of the UK (see chapter explanatory notes) that are reflected in the available figures, they again indicate the majority of meat establishments are compliant with hygiene standards, with figures in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland remaining broadly consistent with previous years [39].

Figure 37: Percentage of meat establishments rated as good or satisfactory for hygiene in 2020 to 2021

Percentage point change compared to the previous year is included in brackets.



Source: Meat establishment audit data

Hygiene compliance in milk production

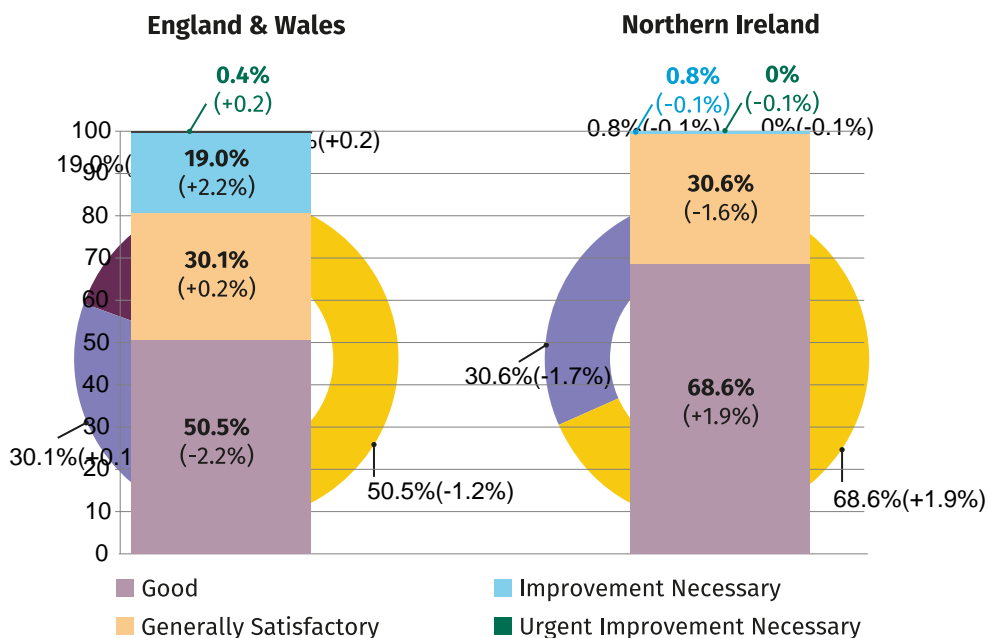
Responsibility for the inspection of dairy establishments varies across the UK, but in all cases the aim is to ensure hygiene standards are maintained across registered farms and dairy producers [40]. Again, the pandemic had a significant operational impact, which is discussed further in the explanatory notes section [41].

In respect of dairy establishments, the most recent rating data available indicates compliance rates of 80.6% in England and Wales, and 99.2% in Northern Ireland [42]. The distribution of dairy establishment types differs between England, Wales and Northern Ireland, which can impact on compliance levels.

FSS has no direct enforcement role for dairy hygiene in Scotland, which is instead the responsibility of Scottish local authorities. Compliance has been measured by looking at what percentage of businesses were issued written or verbal advice. The absence of the need for formal enforcement action suggests high levels of compliance in Scotland [43]. This means that the vast majority of these businesses are operating safely.

Figure 38: Levels of compliance within dairy establishments in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as at 31 December 2021

Percentage point change compared to the previous year is included in brackets.



Source: K2 dairy data system, DAERA Agri-food Inspection Branch, 2021

Figure 39 Proportion of dairy establishments in Scotland receiving verbal or written advice 2019 to 2020 (accessible version)

Proportion of businesses receiving verbal advice in 2019 to 2020 was 14.4%.

Proportion of businesses receiving written advice in 2019 to 2020 was 7.2%.

Source: [Multi-Annual National Control Plan Annual Report 2019](#)

Compliance across animal feed establishments

Animal feed plays an important part in the food chain and failures in feed controls have historically resulted in major incidents, including the BSE outbreak. There are a wide range of legal requirements for animal feed relating to hygiene, traceability, labelling, composition and undesirable substances. Responsibilities for animal feed controls can vary across the nations [44]. There are some important differences in the way the home nations report compliance data, which is outlined in the explanatory notes section [45].

Scotland

From the available data, 94.9% of feed businesses achieved at least satisfactory compliance in 2016, compared to 98.3% in 2017.

England

Feed business compliance remained consistent with 97.9% of businesses having at least satisfactory compliance in 2018 and 97.1% in 2019.

Wales

83.2% of feed businesses had achieved a rating of at least satisfactory compliance in 2020/21. This remained broadly consistent with 2019/20, when 82.8% of feed businesses had achieved a rating of at least satisfactory compliance.

Northern Ireland

Feed business compliance has remained static with 99.3% of businesses achieving at least satisfactory compliance in 2019/20 and 2020/21.

Source: National Trading Standards feed inspection planning data for England, Welsh feed inspection data as reported by local authorities, DAERA feed inspection data and Scottish local authority feed inspections for which FSS have reported outcomes.

Did the pandemic affect food hygiene standards?

The pandemic severely affected the ability of inspectors to assess industry compliance, due to the redeployment of local authority resources to support the pandemic response, and the challenge of gaining physical access to establishments.

This is reflected in the number of food businesses given food hygiene ratings during the pandemic (see figures 40 and 41). Although this is a significant reduction, enforcement officers will still have had a presence within some hospitality premises to carry out COVID-19 compliance visits. While these visits were not always combined with food hygiene checks, many of the principles used to assess whether a premises was COVID-safe also apply to food production practices.

Local authorities have now resumed inspections across food businesses, prioritising those establishments with a history of non-compliance, or those where complaints indicated possible problems. Early discussions with Local Authority Food Liaison Groups [46] suggest that local authorities are now encountering higher levels of non-compliance than before. However, more data is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn about whether the pandemic affected hygiene standards more broadly.

Hygiene ratings awarded fell sharply during the height of the pandemic

Figure 40: Number of food businesses given a FHRs rating in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

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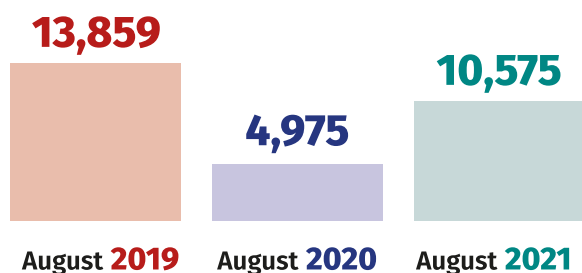
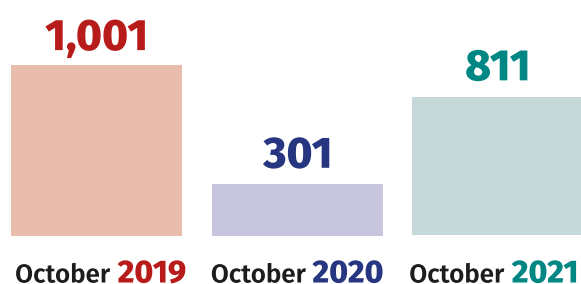


Figure 41: Number of food businesses given an FHIS rating in Scotland

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Looking to the future

Finally, what are some of the big challenges to food hygiene standards in the years ahead?

The first key risk is **workforce shortages**. The pandemic and EU Exit have highlighted the challenges in recruiting and retaining sufficient numbers of well-trained staff. Many local authorities face difficulties hiring qualified staff to carry out inspections, and there have been similar problems recruiting and retaining official veterinarians (OVs) and meat hygiene inspectors (MHIs) in recent years. We will review the impact of recruitment and retention initiatives via analysis of workforce data in future reports [47].

The second key risk is the **growth of online commerce**. With a wide variety of online selling routes now opening up, including via aggregators, online marketplaces and social media platforms, it is becoming ever harder for enforcement authorities to have oversight of all food businesses operating online. In response, FSS and the FSA are working with local authorities and technology providers to understand the scale and changing nature of the online food market and assess any risks this may pose to food safety. Again, we will review progress in future reports.

In summary

- the pandemic significantly interfered with the routine hygiene inspection programmes of food businesses within all four nations. The scale of the drop in the number of local authority food hygiene inspections due to the pandemic was significant – inspections dropped to around a third of what they had been in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland
- compliance data indicates that over 95% of food businesses inspected by local authorities are broadly compliant or higher in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Similarly in Scotland, food law compliance status is above 96%
- the most recent hygiene rating data shows that 97% of food businesses achieved a generally satisfactory rating of 3 or above in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In Scotland, 93.8% of businesses achieved a pass rating
- the most recent audit data available for approved meat establishments indicates compliance in excess of 98% in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and 85% in Scotland. In respect of dairy establishments, the distribution of dairy establishment types differs between England, Wales and Northern Ireland can contribute to a variation in compliance levels. The most recent rating data available indicates compliance in excess of 80% in England and Wales, and 99% in Northern Ireland. The absence of the need for formal enforcement action suggests high levels of compliance in Scotland. This means that the vast majority of these meat and dairy establishments are operating safely
- in respect of feed businesses, there are differences in how we verify compliance with feed law requirements across the home nations which can contribute to a variation in compliance levels. The most recent rating data available indicates compliance in excess of 97% in England, 83% in Wales, 99% in Northern Ireland and 98% in Scotland. This means

that the vast majority of these businesses are operating safely

- given the fall in inspection activity associated with the pandemic it is not possible to determine with confidence whether hygiene standards have fallen or not. Early intelligence from local authority food liaison groups suggests there may have been some impact on compliance but we expect a clearer picture to emerge in next year's report.