

## **FSA Covid-19 Horizon Scanning**

## **FSA Covid-19 Expert Panel Report**

August 2020

### **Executive Summary**

#### **Background**

The COVID-19 expert panel<sup>1</sup> was set up to enable the FSA to draw on its networks of leading researchers and industry experts to help identify the most important implications of the COVID-19 outbreak in relation to food policy.

Between April and July 2020 the panel participated in three stages, identifying key implications of COVID-19 and potential trends amongst consumers and businesses.

#### **Methodology**

We used an online survey to enable timely data collection and reporting. Survey questions were predominantly open ended and inductive thematic analysis was used to identify key themes from the data in stages 1 and 2. Initially, 34 experts in various related fields were invited to join the panel, based on their areas of expertise and experience. The panel grew by the third stage to which 57 individuals were invited, including the original panel, industry experts and other nominated individuals. Stage 3 formed a quantitative assessment of potential trends and adopted the final stage of a driver mapping approach.

It should be noted that panellists were asked to provide their informed opinion, which will not necessarily be evidence based.

#### **Findings**

Stage 1 identified:

- a reduced ability to deliver existing inspection and enforcement activities, and an increase in new businesses and changing business models, as key implications for the regulation of food businesses;
- changes to the supply chain and increased opportunities for food crime, as key implications for food authenticity; and
- consumption of food past its use by date, and new businesses/changing business models, as key implications for food safety.

Stage 2 identified a number of changes to food business practices and processes (following the easing of lockdown restrictions), compared to before the COVID outbreak, including:

- changes to food business practices and processes including:
  - changed business models, usually favouring online and delivery;
  - disrupted food supply chains, with shortages limiting choice; and
  - social distancing, for staff and consumers from production to consumption.
- changes to consumer attitudes and behaviours including:
  - including eating out less;
  - more cooking at home; and
  - a preference for online shopping and deliveries.

Stage 2 also identified that to support consumers and businesses through this period of change, the FSA needed to be a responsive and supportive regulator, as well as providing clear guidance and information (on, for example, food safety at home) to consumers.

Stage 3 identified 4 trends that should be prioritised for policy action:

- Widening of socio-economic equality;
- Increased reliance on welfare, food banks and peer-to-peer marketplaces;
- Diversification of business models (e.g. home delivery of fine dining, wholesalers selling direct to consumers); and
- Increased preference for online food shopping and less frequent 'big shops'.
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## Conclusion

This panel study suggests that the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak have been, and continue to be, affecting food businesses and consumers in variety of ways, requiring different policy responses. A key theme from stage 1 (initial implications) was the reduced ability to deliver existing inspection and enforcement activities and this was thought to impact of food safety and food authenticity, as well as the regulation of food businesses. Themes that were key in both stage 1 and 2 (post lockdown change) related to: business diversification, specifically the shift to online delivery and takeaway, and an increase in home cooking/food preparation. Stage 3 identified four (predominantly long term) trends that should be the focus of policy action, suggesting that the FSA policy response to COVID-19 outbreak needs to be responsive, far reaching, and address the needs of both the consumer and food businesses.

# Main Report

## Background

To inform the FSA's response to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, the FSA developed a multidiscipline programme of horizon scanning activities including: operational analytics, data science, economic, market and social research, intelligence from the food industry and other Government departments, and primary research including qualitative research, consumer surveys and social media listening. The COVID-19 expert panel was set up to feed into this programme of work and help identify the most important implications of the COVID-19 outbreak in relation to food policy.

Drawing on the FSA's networks of leading researchers and industry experts, individuals were invited to participate in a three-stage panel exercise:

1. The first stage in April 2020 asked panellists to identify the **most important implications of the COVID-19 outbreak for food safety, food authenticity and regulation of food businesses**. Panellist were asked to focus on implications that may be experienced in the next 3 months, and to think how these implications could be mitigated.
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2. The second stage in May 2020 asked panellists about **post lockdown changes**, specifically:

“Compared to before the COVID-19 outbreak, how might consumer attitudes and behaviours in relation to food (in and out of home) be different when the UK lockdown restrictions are eased?”

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  - “Compared to before the COVID outbreak, how might food business practices and processes be different when the UK lockdown restrictions are eased?”
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  - Panellists were also asked their views regarding what issues consumers and businesses will face, and what needs they may have.
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3. Drawing on the findings from previous stages (and the wider programme of horizon scanning activity) the third stage, in June 2020, formed a quantitative assessment of potential trends and asked panellists to **rate business and consumer trends** on their certainty and importance to food policy.

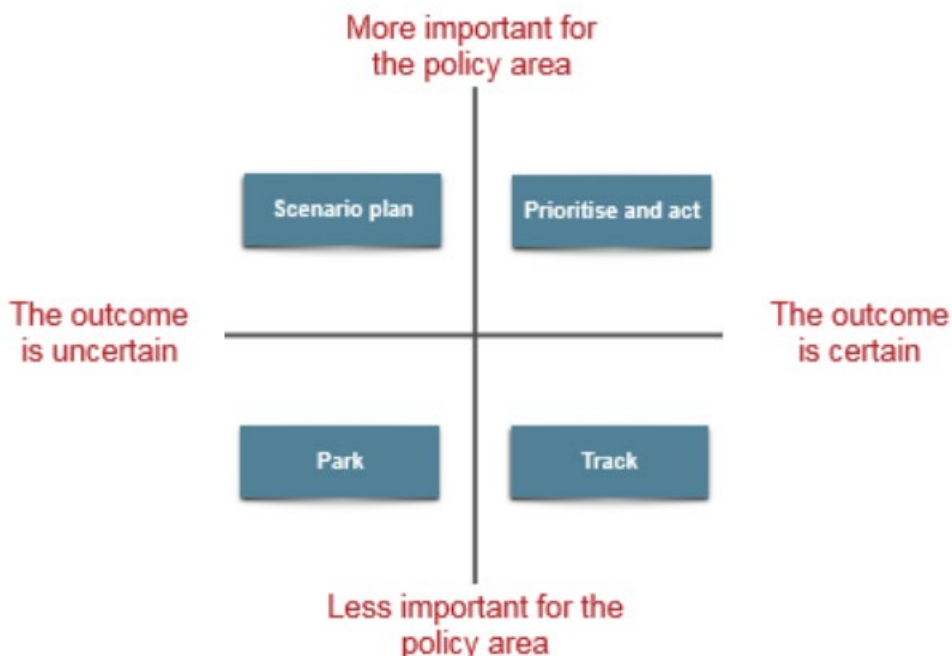
## Methodology

The panel was initially made up of leading researchers in the area of food policy and included members of the FSA's Advisory Councils and committees (such as the Science Council and the Advisory Council for Social Science). Thirty-six individuals were invited to take part in stage one with 18 participating. In subsequent stages the panel was widened to include industry specialists and other nominated experts, with 57 individuals invited to take part (28 participating in stage two, and 23 in stage three).

Given lockdown restrictions, and the need for timely data during a period of rapid change, the panel exercises were conducted virtually using online survey software. Questions were predominantly open ended and inductive thematic analysis was used to identify key topics in stages one and two. Following each of these stages panellists were asked to reflect and comment on the key findings.

The aim of stage 3 was to provide a more quantitative assessment of the implications of the COVID-19 outbreak to inform prioritisation and policy planning. To achieve this, we used an adapted version of driver mapping, from the [Government Office for Science's Futures Toolkit](#). Having identified key trends in previous stages (and the wider programme of FSA horizon scanning activities), panellists were asked to assess the importance and certainty of each trend. In a traditional driver mapping exercise, ratings of importance and certainty would be an outcome of interactive group discussion. Ratings are then used to plot the trends on an importance and certainty matrix and categorise by quadrant, with the categorisation indicating appropriate policy action (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Importance and Certainty matrix



Given the size of the panel and the need for timely data, rather than holding group discussions, panellists were invited to complete an online survey asking them to rate the importance and certainty of key trends. Trends were then plotted by their mean scores. The trends were all rated relatively high in both importance and certainty (on a scale of 1-7), with mean scores for the majority falling above the mid-point of 4. As such, to

increase the utility of the data, those with a mean score of 5 or above are categorised as high.

It should be noted that the findings are based on the panellists' expert opinions, and as such are predictions or expectations, rather than factual statements. Demonstrating this, during stage 3, one panellist noted "we sought views from a number of members on this and there was a huge range of scores, illustrating how difficult it is to predict what may happen."

## Stage 1 findings (April 2020): Early Implications

Stage 1 asked panellists to identify the most important implications of the COVID-19 outbreak for food safety, food authenticity and regulation of food businesses. Panellists were asked to focus on implications that may be experienced over the next 3 months. Across all three areas, key themes of concern related to the impact of a reduction of regulatory oversight/inspection and changing businesses models leading to a lack of awareness of relevant regulatory requirements/practises.

### Regulation of food businesses

**Views about the most important implications for food businesses focused around 3 key themes:**

#### 1. Reduced ability to deliver existing inspection and enforcement activities

Most panellists raised concerns about reduced inspection and enforcement actions coupled with decreased adherence to good practice and regulatory requirements.

Panellists raised concerns about the potential for general reductions in standards; use of sub-par supplies; 'taking shortcuts' in how food is used or in regulatory documentation; changes in ingredients or packaging leading to misleading labelling; and businesses operating unregistered.

Tied to this, panellists expressed a concern that takeaways may be more likely to remain open than restaurants, and thus a higher proportion of operating food establishments are those with lower food hygiene ratings.

There were also concerns that deviation from regulation now may establish lasting behavioural patterns and normalise "cutting corners".

"The takeaway sector often struggle to comply with allergen and other food safety requirements. No planned inspections may lead to lowering of standards, shortcuts, risks not being controlled."

#### 2. New businesses/changing business models

Some panellists referred to new and/or potentially unregistered businesses, as well as businesses undergoing challenging adjustments to their business model, requiring responsive business guidance and support. Panellists felt it was key to consider charitable/local initiatives who are potentially preparing/distributing food to vulnerable groups. Advice regarding COVID-19 and fitness for work was also referred to.

"Businesses may look to use different channels to market e.g. direct to consumer v hospitality and be unaware of different regulatory requirements and/or seek help."

"I would not overlook some charitable\local initiatives preparing or distributing foods to vulnerable communities. Hopefully they are alive to the food safety issues but this sector has grown considerably in recent months and requires appropriate oversight."

#### 3. Availability of PPE and training in usage

- Some panellists felt that there may be issues surrounding the availability of PPE and training for staff in regard to usage.

“Guidance is needed on what food operators should do with face coverings, especially if they are potentially reusable”

**When asked “What might be done (by businesses and/or Government) to manage the risks to compliance with regulation?”, responses were focused around 4 main themes:**

### **1. Guidance**

The majority of panellists identified that guidance would be key to managing the risks of non-compliance. Panellists recommended using existing local authority, trade association, and business guidance, complemented by refreshed online resources. Panellists felt such guidance could include: practical how-to guides for those re-opening and operating differently (perhaps in the style of the CIEH takeaway guidance), COVID-specific advice such as on PPE and social distancing, and routes for businesses to report COVID-specific challenges through virtual two-way communication as part of supportive ongoing consultation.

“Access to clear practical advice and guidance is key”

### **2. Risk prioritisation**

Panellists recommended risk-based prioritisation of inspection and enforcement. This could take the form of focusing on businesses who have previously had poorer self-regulation and/or who are likely to have increased in risk (relative to those FBOs with better self-regulation). Some panellists indicated that dark kitchens, online sales via social media platforms, and volunteers informally acting as food businesses, might be in particular need of surveillance. Panellists also felt that priority should be given to significant risks to public health, rather than the enforcement of new/upcoming legislation aspects where there are minimal food safety issues.

“explore/trial more risk-based official controls”

### **3. Surveillance**

Surveillance was noted by many panellists as a key risk management strategy. Panellists recommended: staggered re-openings to ensure oversight (requiring FBOs to pass LA pre-checks before re-opening), tracking re-opening (through the online business registration portal), and identifying non-registered food businesses (and sharing key information with the relevant LAs).

Panellists felt that surveillance could involve stratified random inspections, targeted food sampling, conducting virtual inspections, and reconsidering powers that can currently only be used once on premises. Additionally, surveillance could take the form of LAs collecting COVID-related compliance data, or exploring key data from 3rd party providers to help target regulatory oversight. One panellist recommended a nationally integrated system across all growers, suppliers, and providers, creating a structure that would regulate, certify, and standardise how food production is managed.

“There would be benefit in an enhanced surveillance based regulatory approach”

### **4. Collaboration**

Panellists noted that collaboration would be key to managing the risks of non-compliance with regulation. Suggestions included: consulting trade associations and BExGs on

guidance, consulting logistics companies that import food, and redeploying inactive food safety professionals as 3rd party EHOs (whether currently employed, furloughed, or made redundant from the private sector).

“suggest additional resources that have skills and expertise are drafted in to help”

## **Food authenticity**

**Views about the most important implications for food authenticity focused around 4 key themes:**

### **1. Increased opportunities for food crime**

Most panellists mentioned implications relating to food crime, referring to adulteration, substitution, misrepresentation and diverting of waste into the supply chain. Panellists believed that the risk of these types of crimes was increased due to the pressure on the supply chain, shortages of ingredients, and possible reductions in enforcement and checks. Increases in online purchasing may also increase the risk of purchasing inauthentic items.

“Food shortages are also likely to generate an increase in food fraud, mislabelling, adulteration and other forms of inauthenticity (with health and safety implications)”.

### **2. Changes to the supply chain**

The majority of the panel mentioned risks arising from changes in the supply chain, mainly centred around using new (possibly unchecked) suppliers, and imports from new markets. This could occur when existing supply chains are stressed, when there are food shortages, or due to increases and fluctuations in demand. Increased pressure on FBOs to maintain supply could also lead to errors, for example in labelling food.

“Continued changed patterns of demand may lead to accessing different supply chains - with possible implications for food authenticity.”

### **3. Reduced ability to deliver existing inspection and enforcement activities**

Some panellists mentioned the risks of reduced inspections, checks and tests, potentially increasing the likelihood of food crime incidents being missed. This was seen by panellists to be due to staff shortages (both in Local Authorities, third parties and laboratory facilities), and either related to staff being unable to work, or being redeployed. Additionally, food businesses may divert more resources away from internal regulation.

“Reduced oversight by LAs, accreditation schemes and third party auditors together with reduced sampling/ testing - unscrupulous traders more willing to take risks, substituting ingredients, making false claims.”

### **4. Increased risk from imported food**

- Some panellists felt that imports were a particular area where risks to food authenticity could occur. As above, risks were mainly around reduced enforcement and imports from new (unchecked) markets.

“I believe the majority of risks will come from imported foods where systems of auditing and inspection have broken down”



**When asked “How do you think the implications on food authenticity could be mitigated?” responses were focused around 4 main themes:**

### **1. Intelligence gathering and industry collaboration**

Panellists noted that good intelligence would be key to mitigating the risks of food crime and other risks to food authenticity. This could be sought from collaborating with bodies such as the Food Industry Intelligence Network, Food Authenticity Network, and relevant trade associations, as well as using the existing intelligence networks of National Food Crime Units. The new FSA surveillance tool was mentioned by 2 panellists as being a means to gathering intelligence.

“Good intelligence to determine if the hazard we all fear is becoming a risk. The FSA tool in development is designed to do this and should be deployed as soon as possible.”

### **2. Communication with businesses**

Communication with businesses such as: training (especially for new suppliers), reminders of legal responsibilities (and repercussions) and campaigns raising the profile of the NFCU, was noted by panellists as a key mitigation strategy.

“a combination of strong messages from central government (particularly against people taking short cuts when it comes to authenticity - and safety - of food) and working with media/ influencers and businesses to reinforce the importance of integrity at this challenging time”

### **3. Sampling/testing/checking**

Some panellists also noted the importance of sampling, testing and checking – not necessarily increasing the levels of checks, but doing so in a more targeted, risk-based way.

“Some targeted formal testing across the food chain should be encouraged and supported by FSA. This could help focus minds, deter rogue businesses and provide some degree of confidence to consumers that enhanced (but suitable) checks are being made.”

### **4. Communication with consumers**

Similarly, some panellists noted that communication with consumers could help mitigate the risks of food inauthenticity. This would take the form of educating consumers to be more diligent about their food purchases.

“and also consumer campaigns - engage with the media to make people more aware of the risks of buying food from the internet. Also engage with Facebook, eBay and Amazon”

## **Food safety**

**Views about the most important implications for food authenticity focused around 6 key themes:**

### **1. Consumption of food past its use by date**

An increased likelihood of people eating out of date food was mentioned by the majority of the panel. Some panellists linked this behaviour to previous bulk buying of perishable food and some felt that this implication would be more keenly felt amongst vulnerable people and/or low-income households.

“People using food after its use by date, particularly vulnerable groups who may not know when they will obtain more food and want to avoid food waste.”

## **2. New businesses/changing business models, and subsequent lack of food safety awareness among new providers of takeaway/delivery services**

Half of the panel referred to the risk from a lack of food safety awareness among new providers of takeaway/delivery services. This was largely linked to FBOs changing business models, but some panellists referred to volunteers and/or food production from home.

“New food businesses setting up to produce food for NHS workers/vulnerable groups often with good intentions but without requisite food safety knowledge...”

## **3. Incorrect storage of food**

Panellists mentioned the incorrect storage of food. Some linked this behaviour to bulk buying and some mentioned that incorrect storage would be a particular issue for vulnerable people and/or low-income households.

“Lack of fridge & freezer space, especially for low income households, may lead to compromise of food safety.”

## **4. Incorrect preparation of food**

The incorrect preparation of food was mentioned by a third of the panel.

“More food being prepared at home from raw ingredients by people who may not normally cook and will not be aware of key food safety messages e.g. not to wash raw poultry, avoiding cross contamination, safe cooking chilling, use of leftovers, safe reheating. Could see more food poisoning -campylobacter.”

## **5. Reduced ability to deliver existing regulation and enforcement activities**

The impact of fewer inspections, controls, auditing and testing was mentioned by around a third of the panel. This was referred to in relation to imports, FBO own controls, and third-party regulation.

“Lack of oversight by accreditation schemes, 3<sup>rd</sup> party auditors and local authority food officers who are not undertaking planned interventions. This could mean shortcuts being taken, food safety controls not being implemented, risks being taken to meet consumer demand.”

## **6. Inaccurate labelling**

An increased risk of incorrectly labelled food, specifically food which has been repackaged or uses substituted ingredients, was mentioned by some panellists. Concerns over subsequent allergen management were also raised.

“Incorrect labelling - particularly allergens. Repackaging of bulk ingredients e.g. flour, dry ingredients, into smaller consumer packs without the necessary considerations to contaminants, packaging, labelling, traceability etc”

**When asked “How do you think the implications on food safety could be mitigated?” responses were focused around raising awareness amongst consumers and businesses:**

### **1. Increasing public awareness**

Ensuring the public had access to clear guidance on food storage and handling was felt to be a key mitigation by the majority of respondents. Respondents also mentioned the benefit of media campaigns and other activities to ensure the guidance was reaching the consumer. Some respondents also mentioned targeting such campaigns at those who are new to home cooking.

“Increased, simple and clear advice on the safe handling and storage of food. Proactive good public information advertisements/videos – food has not been at the forefront of government communications.”

“... social media campaigns coordinated with a special page on the FSA website.”

### **2. Increasing FBO awareness**

Respondents referred to ensuring visible guidance for FBOs, and the need for such guidance to be clear, pragmatic and easily accessible for those changing business models.

“Clear guidance and advice to consumers and business on how to mitigate the risk, this needs to be pragmatic and not just to point out what the regulations expect but also information on how to comply.”

## Stage 2 findings (May 2020): Future trends and needs

Stage 2 asked panellists to identify potential changes, compared to before the COVID-19 outbreak, to the practises and processes of food businesses and the behaviours and attitudes of consumers, once lockdown restrictions are eased. Panellists were also asked their view on the issues and needs of these two groups.

### Food Businesses

**Views about change to the practises and processes of food businesses were centred on 3 main themes<sup>2</sup>:**

**1. Changed business models, usually favouring online and delivery** (mentioned by 20 respondents)

The majority of panellists mentioned that changes in business models would persist as lockdown eases in the UK. The main change identified was the shift to online food shopping and home delivery, which may be reflected in fewer sit-down food outlets and more takeaways.

Panellists also suggested: increased PPDS (prepacked for direct sale) food to prevent contamination and reassure customers; some businesses continuing to supply food when it was not their main business before; growth of SMEs and pop ups; growth of big supermarkets over local shops in a reverse of recent trends, or, alternatively, increased use of other food shops over main supermarkets by wealthier consumers.

“Temporary changes e.g. take-away or delivery services may be sustained”

**2. Disrupted food supply chains, with shortages limiting choice** (mentioned by 19 respondents)

The majority of panellists noted that supply chain disruption would persist. Panellists identified that changed sources of supply may become permanent, whether input supply chains are firmed up or new supply chains are introduced at short notice. There was broad consensus around more limited choices, due to shortages of certain ingredients and simplified supply chains, product ranges, and menus.

“Supply chain disruption - shortages of certain ingredients”

A minority of panellists suggested that availability issues may cause panic buying and that businesses may keep extra food stock as a buffer, or alternatively that suppliers to

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<sup>2</sup> Other changes included: hygiene improvements, technological investment and lowering standards to cut costs (e.g. such as using up out-of-date frozen stock, overlooking pest control, substitution and misleading descriptions).

restaurants may face lower demand. One panellist mentioned that businesses may rely less on imports and increasingly seek domestically sourced products.

### **3. Social distancing, for staff and customers from production to consumption** (mentioned by 14 respondents)

Around half of the panellists mentioned that social distancing would persist as lockdown eases in the UK. It will change food business layouts and associated practices, from production to consumption, for staff and consumers. It may be particularly difficult in restaurants due to limited kitchen space, and make restaurant experiences less enjoyable to the point where they may not be economically viable.

“Still may need to socially distance making the restaurant experience less pleasurable”

A minority of panellists identified risks caused by social distancing, such as reduced interaction with staff for allergen management, front of house staff unable to access back of house to check packaging, and increased food waste (due to low footfall).

### **Views about the issues facing food businesses were centred on 3 main themes<sup>3</sup>:**

#### **1. Disrupted food supply chains** (mentioned by 20 respondents).

The majority of panellists identified disrupted supply chains as a potential issue, both in terms of leading to potential shortages of raw materials such as rice, tea, fresh fruit and vegetables, and vulnerability to increased food fraud such as adulteration.

“supply chains remain disrupted and unpredictable”

#### **2. Change and uncertainty and consequent need for advice and assessments** (mentioned by 18 respondents)

The majority of panellists noted that food businesses will need support and advice during a period of ongoing change. They will need advice on required compliance from re-opening to re-training, as well as safety/hygiene issues, including PPE and implementing social distancing.

“Finding a model that works with social distancing”

Many panellists identified that food businesses will need to deal with a backlog of assessments, audits, inspections, and certifications. One panellist mentioned that there could be issues with equipment maintenance following mothballing (e.g. pests which might have had a chance to become established in food or neighbouring premises, and dangers from stagnant water supplies). One panellist mentioned the need to revise FSMS (food safety management system) or HACCP (hazard analysis and critical control point).

Panellists also raised the potential issue of disrupted staffing. Staff shortages may be caused by losing staff during lockdown and post-lockdown cost reduction. This may be compounded by reduced access to non-UK labour and cause established staff to be

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<sup>3</sup> Other needs included: reduced customer loyalty and confidence, sustainability targets on plastics and food waste, and labelling changes related to allergens and EU Exit.

redeployed to roles. Some businesses will need to manage changed working patterns such as increased homeworking.

“Massive staff changes and staff deficiencies”

Panellists noted that businesses will need a supportive and responsive regulator which gives them responsive, accessible and timely advice. Several panellists indicated that businesses will need support from LAs specifically and expressed concern that this may not be available.

“If customer demand changes and dries up, big temptation to diversify and try new foods/methods but may not be able to access technical guidance or LA staff to advise/guide them”

### **3. Greater financial pressures and subsequent need for cost reduction** (mentioned by 17 respondents)

The majority of panellists identified that food businesses will face increased financial pressure. They variously mentioned this would be due to lost income, investment in recovery, and fewer customers, (due to social distancing and economic recession). Financial survival of restaurants and cafés was particularly mentioned. Many panellists mentioned that food businesses will need to cut costs and rebuild profitability.

## **Consumers**

### **Views about changes to consumer attitudes and behaviours were centred on 3 main themes<sup>4</sup>:**

#### **1. Eating out will be far less common** (mentioned by 16 respondents).

Panellists felt that eating out will significantly reduce in the long term due to consumers having less disposable income, and some feeling fearful of eating out. A small minority of panellists did, however, suggest that there may be a “boomerang effect” where some consumers may eat out more often, and cook at home less, due to having missed their favourite restaurants or cooking fatigue.

#### **2. Eating at home more frequently** (mentioned by 15 respondents).

Many panellists mentioned that changes in eating habits would persist as lockdown eases in the UK. The main change identified was that consumers would be used to cooking more at home (and from scratch) and would continue to do so both out of habit, and for cost purposes.

“More in home eating, having rediscovered the habit and for cost reasons.”

#### **3. Preference for online shopping and less frequent ‘big shops’** (mentioned by 15 respondents).

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<sup>4</sup> Other issues included: increasingly unbalanced diets, and, higher expectations of food establishments (i.e. to provide hand sanitising stations on entry).

Many panellists noted that changes in shopping habits would also persist as lockdown eases in the UK. There was broad consensus that online shopping and deliveries would remain at a higher level than before, and most panellists believed that consumers would remain in the habit of doing more infrequent, bigger shops.

“The 'big shop' once a week, rather than smaller daily shops could well stay - especially if social distancing in supermarkets stays.”

However, a minority of panellists suggested that consumers who had been using small convenience stores would continue to use these. Additionally, some panellists felt that an increased uptake in locally source food may persists.

“Greater use of locally-sourced food”

### **Views about the issues facing consumers centred on 3 main themes<sup>5</sup>:**

1. Clear information and guidance (on food safety, food preparation and eating out) (mentioned by 12 respondents).

Many panellists identified that consumers would need clear information and guidance on how to stay safe both at home and when eating out. For example, guidance on safe food preparation and storage, on making healthy choices, on how to purchase safely online, and up-to-date information on FHRS ratings.

“Need for clear and robust food safety information”

2. Increasing food insecurity for some consumers (mentioned by 11 respondents).

Many panellists raised the potential issue of food insecurity, due to possible loss of income and employment for some consumers, as well as potential rises in food prices. One panellist also noted that those in BAME groups, who are disproportionately affected by COVID, may suffer the most due to their over-representation in front-line and service jobs.

“A growing number of households will struggle to feed their family.”

3. Reduced choice (mentioned by 8 respondents).

Reduced choice was also identified as a potential issue, both in terms of buying food for the home and in eating out. This was thought to be due to supply issues, closures of some food outlets, and uncertain imports post- EU-exit. Panellists noted that consumers may be forced to accept poorer quality items and visit less hygienic food establishments, and that those with dietary requirements may have particularly limited choices.

“Less choice of food, especially for those on specialised diets.”

4. Reassurance that regulation is being upheld (mentioned by 7 respondents).

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<sup>5</sup> Other needs included: increasingly unbalanced diets, and, higher expectations of food establishments (i.e. to provide hand sanitising stations on entry).

Some panellists noted that consumers would need reassurance of continued regulation and enforcement, particularly in light of restaurants and food establishments re-opening. “Confidence that local authorities/ FSA are still prioritising safety and standards”

### Stage 3 findings (June 2020): Trend assessment

Stage 3 provided a more quantitative assessment of the implications of the COVID-19 outbreak with panellists rating, on a 7 point scale, the importance (to food policy) and certainty (of occurrence) of key trends identified in previous stages (and the wider programme of FSA horizon scanning activity). Using a driver mapping approach, mean scores were then plotted on an importance and certainty matrix, with their quadrant position on the matrix indicating appropriate policy action:

- **Prioritise and act:** top right quadrant (high importance and certainty, a clear impact on policy requiring action).
- **Scenario plan:** top left quadrant (high importance but low certainty, requiring further research and exploration).
- **Track:** bottom right quadrant (high certainty but low importance, requiring monitoring).
- **Park:** bottom left quadrant (low certainty and low importance, not of immediate policy concern),

Participants were also asked whether they thought the trend would be long term, (lasting a year or more) or short term (lasting less than 1 year). Trends were categorised as undecided where there was not a clear majority indicating short term or long term.

Table 1: Mean panel ratings of key business trends and quadrant classification.

Trend	Certainty	Importance	Timescale <sup>1</sup>	Quadrant
<b>Diversification of business models (e.g. home delivery of fine dining, wholesalers selling direct to consumers)</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>5.6</b>	<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Prioritise and Act</b>
Increases in food crime	4.5	5.9	Undecided	Scenario Plan
Increased pursuit of national self-sufficiency (e.g. local produce)	4	5.1	Long-term	Scenario Plan
Shift to production-on-demand supply models	4.5	4.3	Long-term	Park
Increased FBO investment in technology (e.g. food robotics, automation)	3.9	4.1	Long-term	Park



Table 2: Mean panel ratings of consumer business trends and quadrant classification.

Consumer Trends	Certainty	Importance	Timescale	Quadrant
<b>Increase in reliance on welfare, food banks and peer-to-peer marketplaces</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>Long-term</b>	<b>Prioritise and Act</b>
<b>Widening of socioeconomic equality</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>6.2</b>	<b>Long-term</b>	<b>Prioritise and Act</b>
<b>Increased online food shopping and delivery</b>	<b>6.3</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>Long-term</b>	<b>Prioritise and Act</b>
Increased awareness of sustainability and social responsibility - Certainty of outcome	4.0	5.7	Long-term	Scenario Plan
Degradation of hygiene practice back to pre-COVID levels	4.3	5.6	Undecided	Scenario Plan
Increased consciousness of health and wellbeing	4.7	5.2	Undecided	Scenario Plan
Less eating out once restrictions are lifted	4.6	4.1	Short-term	Park
Increased cooking from scratch	4.1	4.0	Short-term	Park

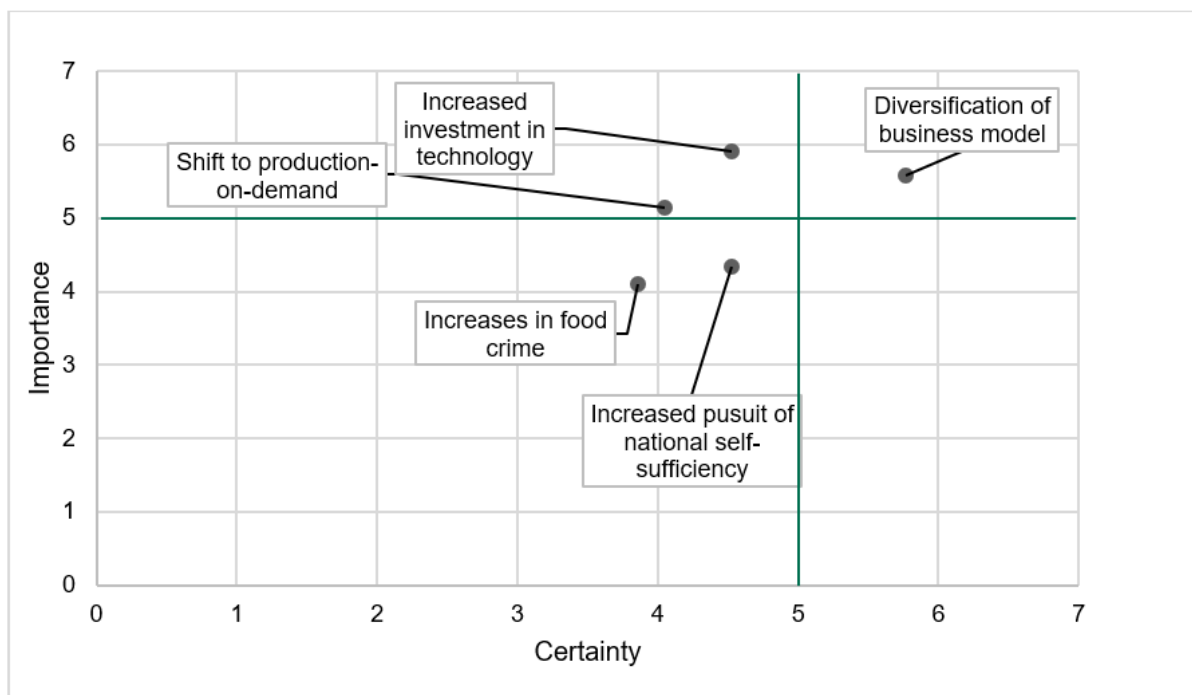
## Food Businesses Trends

The FBO (Food Business Operatives) trends which were identified as most important for food policy (above a score of 5) were the potential **increase in food crime**, followed by the **diversification of business models**, and **increased pursuit of national self-sufficiency**. Figure 2 shows the importance and certainty matrix for the 5 business trends panellists were asked about.

**Diversification of business models** was the only trend with a high mean score for importance and certainty, which places it in the top right “Prioritise and Act” quadrant. In previous stages, this trend was described as FBOs changing their business model during lockdown to account for supply chain stresses, and the change in the way consumers were able to shop. For example, FBOs who would usually supply businesses may have diversified to deliver to consumers directly, and other FBOs may have introduced new delivery services. Panellists highlighted the importance of regulation of these new business models, particularly where non-food businesses have started supplying food. Respondents were split over whether this would be a short- or long-term trend, with 11/21 panellists saying long-term. Figure 4 shows the range of scores given by panellists, and the average score.

**Increases in food crime** was identified as a potential trend in the first two panel stages. Supply chain stresses, increased consumer demand and potential lack of products were identified as risk factors for adulteration, substitution or mislabelling to take place. This trend was rated as the most important for food policy, but it was not rated as high in certainty, which places it in the bottom left “Scenario Plan” quadrant. Again, panellists were split over whether this would be a short- or long-term trend, with 11/21 stating it would be short-term.

Figure 2: Business Trends - Importance and Certainty matrix.



The next most important trend ranked by panellists was “**increased pursuit of national self-sufficiency (e.g. local produce)**”, though there was greater variance in opinions about both the importance and certainty of this trend, which is shown below. The majority (18/23) of panellists believed this would be a longer-term trend. Expanding on their answer to this, one panellist highlighted the role of urban farming in meeting demand for locally sourced produce. This trend falls into the bottom left “Scenario Plan” quadrant.

We also asked panellists to highlight any **additional trends** that may occur, and to expand on their thoughts about the above trends. The main themes were:

- the impact of EU exit. This was raised as a large uncertainty, particularly in terms of the impact on costs, and on the additional responsibilities that FBOs may be forced to take-on as importers
- the increased use of third-party aggregators. This may improve standards as FBOs may have to commit to a minimum standard before being listed
- the impact on smaller businesses

## Consumer Trends

Of the 8 key consumer trends, the majority (6) were rated as high importance for food policy as shown in Figure 3. **Increase in food insecurity, increased reliance on welfare and Increased online food shopping and delivery** were also rated as high in certainty and therefore fall into the top right “Prioritise and Act” quadrant.

**Increased reliance on welfare, food banks and peer-to-peer marketplaces** was raised as a potential implication from Covid-19 in previous panel stages, with the potential to impact on food safety, authenticity and regulation, by virtue of consumers not necessarily knowing exactly what they’re ordering, the risk of out-of-date food being sold, or allergens not being labelled. The panel believe this trend is of high certainty, and high



- The impact of EU exit on consumers. This was highlighted in reference to increasing socio-economic challenges in the UK.
- The importance of home economics skills, so that future generations are confident cooking safely.
- Changes in eating outside the house (but not in registered FBOs), for example, in school and work canteens where packed lunches may increase, and social distancing may impact on lunchtime arrangements.
- The risk of social isolation, particularly for older and disabled groups, and those without access to the internet.
- Food safety risks. As in previous exercises, the possibility of people eating out of date food to save money was raised. One panellist also noted that fuel poverty could lead to people feeling it is too expensive to cook from scratch, as microwaves are cheaper to run for a few minutes.

## Conclusion

This panel study suggests that the impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak have been, and continue to be, affecting food businesses and consumers in variety of ways, requiring different policy responses. A key theme from stage 1 (initial implications) was the reduced ability to deliver existing inspection and enforcement activities and this was thought to impact food safety and food authenticity, as well as the regulation of food businesses. Themes that were key in both stage 1 and 2 (post lockdown change) related to: business diversification, specifically the shift to online delivery and takeaway, and an increase in home cooking/food preparation. Stage 3 identified four (predominantly long term) trends that should be the focus of policy action, suggesting that the FSA policy response to COVID-19 outbreak needs to be responsive, far reaching, and address the needs of both the consumer and food businesses.