Food Safety Communication Toolkit

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Contents

Food Safety Communication Toolkit

This document provides a framework for communicating food safety to consumers to support the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in:

- Making food safety communications planning rigorous and consistent.
- Supporting science, policy and strategy teams in understanding how to communicate effectively.

This toolkit has been developed following secondary and primary research, conducted by Ipsos MORI between February and March 2021, comprising:

- **Secondary research**: a rapid desk review of existing FSA research amongst consumers regarding food safety behaviours.
- **Primary research**: qualitative research with consumers across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This toolkit can be referenced in conjunction with the [FSA Risk Communication Toolkit](#) and the FSA's Segmentation work, the former which was developed using the Government Communications Services' [OASIS model](#).

This toolkit provides guidance to follow when developing food safety communications. It is not prescriptive but includes some key principles to support the development of effective communications. These key principles are presented within the COM-B framework and set out key considerations to help enable behaviour change.

Examples from the primary research carried out in 2021 have been included throughout this toolkit, based on response to stimulus materials tested in the focus groups and interviews. It is worth noting that these have been included to further illustrate key considerations when communicating to consumers about food safety, where relevant. Please refer to the final report from this research for a more comprehensive breakdown of findings, from which these examples have been taken.

Principles for communicating about food safety

The toolkit sets out principles for communicating about food safety within the [COM-B framework](#). The COM-B framework outlines the conditions that are required for behaviour change to happen and explores any barriers to behaviour change that an audience may face. There are three components within the framework:

- **C**apability: Are people psychologically and physically able to carry out the behaviour?

- **O**pportunity: Do people have the social and physical opportunity to carry out the behaviour?

- **M**otivation: Do people need or want to carry out this behaviour more than other competing behaviours?

The model below shows the COM-B framework with corresponding toolkit principles.

Behaviour

Capability ⟶ **Motivation** ⟵ **Opportunity**

TOOLKIT PRINCIPLES

Capability	Motivation	Opportunity
• Consider current capability levels of your audience • Build capability with clear and credible communications	• Challenge perceptions of low risk by making risks tangible • Be cautious when using communications that generate shock and fear • Reference social aspects of food safety sensitively to avoid push-back • Be mindful of challenging behaviours that are culturally engrained • Consider whether messengers could motivate behaviour change	• Ensure environments or scenarios presented in communications will resonate with your audience • Identify timely and relevant opportunities to communicate with your audience

Toolkit principles related to capability

- Consider current capability levels of your audience.

- Build capability with clear and credible communications.

Toolkit principles related to opportunity

- Ensure environments or scenarios presented in communications will resonate with your audience.

- Identify timely and relevant opportunities to communicate with your audience.

Toolkit principles related to motivation

- Challenge perceptions of low risk by making risks tangible.

- Be cautious when using communications that generate shock and fear.

- Reference social aspects of food safety sensitively to avoid push-back.

- Be mindful of challenging behaviours that are culturally engrained.

- Consider whether messengers could motivate behaviour change.

It is important to note that COM-B components interact, so interventions must target at least one, and likely more of these components in order to deliver and maintain effective behaviour change. For example, communications that are trying to take effect through appealing to individuals' motivational desire to carry out a behaviour could be easily dismissed if the communication is not clearly asking them to do something that they are easily able to do (relating to capability), or is not presented in the right place or time for the audience (reflecting opportunity).

The following sections of the toolkit sets out key principles for communicating with consumers about food safety using the COM-B framework.

1. Capability

1.1 Consider current capability levels of your audience

Consumers will have differing levels of confidence and experience in handling and preparing food. The levels of confidence and experience of the behaviour you are seeking to communicate is likely to impact the audience's engagement with the message.

It is therefore useful to consider any contextual information[1] you already have about your audience:

- What do you already know about your audience and how confident/ experienced they are in food preparation and handling in general?

- What do you already know about how confident/ experienced your audience is regarding the specific behaviour you are looking to communicate about?

The Food Standards Agency Consumer Segmentation provides further information on attitudes and behaviours towards food that may be of use.

If your audience is **more confident / experienced**:

- They may disengage from simple, 'common-sense' messages feeling that they are aimed at those who are less experienced.

- They are likely to feel they have good food safety behaviours in place for scenarios considered to be high risk for food poisoning, so they might discount the risk. In fact communications that focus on these higher risk scenarios may reinforce these existing behaviours.

  Research found that handling and making sure raw meat is cooked through, cross contamination, cooking for other people, and cooking meat at BBQs were all scenarios considered to be 'high risk'.

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[1] The role of audience insight is also referenced in the FSA Risk Communication Toolkit v2 (August 2020), 2CV

o   Providing 'new' information about risks of food poisoning is likely to stand out to this audience and therefore be engaging.

> For example, when tested in research, messages advising to wash fruit and vegetables to remove bacteria like E.coli was positively received as this was new information to many consumers.

If your audience is **less confident/ experienced:**

o   They may be more open to learning about food safety behaviours but these need to be clear and achievable. Further information about making communications clear and achievable is provided in the following section.

1.2 Build capability with clear and credible communications

Communications designed to build consumer capability will be most engaging when they are clear and credible. Consider the following questions when designing communications:

Will people know what to do?

The behaviour that consumers are being asked to carry out needs to be easy to understand. Using accessible, plain English and short, straight forward messaging will support this. The clarity of the call to action is particularly important where consumers are likely to query suggested changes to behaviours that they have been practicing for years without issue. Providing specific information within communications (for example, specific types of food that a behaviour relates to) supported by scientific information, if possible, can help to build clarity and credibility and overcome scepticism.

Is the action practical and easy to perform?

Promoted behaviours need to be easy to remember, to adopt and implement. Consumers are likely to disengage from communications where the action does not feel achievable. For example, where consumers perceive a need for particular equipment to carry out the behaviour for example, needing a thermometer to monitor the temperature of food, they may disengage from the message.

Is there a clear rationale for why the behaviour is needed?

Making a clear link between behaviours and consequences can reinforce the credibility of communications by providing a clear rationale for carrying out the desired behaviour. Ways to strengthen rationale for behaviours include:

- **Using statistics**. Consider the use of evidence. For example, statistics that highlight the risk described in the communication. Further information about, and other ways to present risks are provided in the [FSA Risk Communication Toolkit](#).

- **Referencing scientific terms**. The use of scientific terms can lend credibility to the reason why you are asking people to change their behaviours.

  For example, research found that referring to specific bacteria such as 'listeria' or 'E.coli' could add gravitas and a serious tone to communications. The reference to E.coli resonated particularly strongly, as it was recognised to be potentially dangerous.

- **Making the invisible (germs), visible**, can be a powerful and engaging way to highlight why behaviour is needed.

  For example, research found an image which showed magnified bacteria on food (shown below) captured the audience's attention. Television adverts that showed germs under UV lighting were similarly recalled as engaging.

Which messengers will be deemed credible?

The channel and/or messenger can also support the credibility of communications, with trust in the messenger playing a key role. The [Ipsos MORI Veracity Index](#) shows that

nurses, doctors and engineers and the most trusted professions. However, it is important to also consider who consumers expect to provide information regarding food safety.

> For example, research found that scientists were seen as credible sources of information, especially during the pandemic. However, questions were raised about the relevance of scientists providing food hygiene advice.

Credible sources of information regarding food safety include:

- **Experienced family members** are often called upon for and trusted to provide food safety advice.

- **Regulatory bodies** such as the Food Standards Agency, who provide impartial and expert information on the subject matter. The role of independent organisations is noted in the FSA Risk Communication Toolkit[2].

- **Celebrity chefs** are considered experts in food storage and preparation with strong public appeal. These individuals need to be recognised experts with a strong background in the food industry.

> Celebrity chefs mentioned in research included: Gordon Ramsey, Jamie Oliver, Lorraine Pascal, Kylie Kwong, Nancy Kwan, Nadiya Hussein, Delia Smith and Mary Berry.

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[2] The FSA Risk Communication Toolkit V2 (August 2020), 2CV, Page 8.

2. Opportunity

2.1 Ensure environments or scenarios presented in communications will resonate with your audience

Where talking about how people behave in specific scenarios, such as BBQs or picnics, think about how personally relevant these will be for the audience. Key questions to consider are:

- **Will the audience be able to relate to this specific occasion?**

  Review any information you have about your audience and how relevant they might find the occasion. The Food Standards Agency Consumer Segmentation may include relevant information. Are there any other occasions or scenarios that may be more relevant to this audience?

  > For example, research found that whilst consumers did not often take part in picnics, they did transport food outside of the home for other occasions such as packed lunches.

  Occasions considered 'high risk' for food poisoning are likely to stand out as relevant to consumers.

  > For example, when tested in research:
  >
  > o People said they often took part in BBQs, so this scenario resonated with them and was associated with a high-risk of under-cooked meat.
  >
  > o People said they were less likely to have a picnic, so this scenario resonated less. They also did not consider picnics to be as 'high risk' situations , when compared with BBQs.

- **How easily can the promoted behaviours depicted be applied to audience's home situations?**

  Remember that even when using a scenario or occasion that will likely resonate with your audience, reflect on how best to build on the consumers' capability

in these scenarios by making sure the promoted behaviour is clear and easy to understand (see earlier chapter).

> For example, written messaging which advised to make sure that meat is always *'cooked through, and the juice runs clear when cut'* was not clear to all consumers. Some were unfamiliar with what 'juice running clear' referred to; images could support clarity of guidance.

2.2 Pick the right moment to communicate with your audience

There are several **timely** and **relevant** opportunities where learning about food safety may more strongly resonate with your audience. For example:

- **Common social interactions** such as passing on good food safety behaviours down through generations - reflecting families being a key source of knowledge and information.

- **Life-stages** that align with changes in responsibility for food handling and preparation.

> For example, research found that responsibilities for food handling and preparation changed:
>
> o   In formal education when younger audiences are starting to learn about food,
>
> o   When young adults leave home for the first time or go to university.
>
> o   When people become a parent.

There may be other instances where responsibilities for food handling and preparation change for your audience. For example, people leaving care, or other instances where people may be on their own for the first time. More information on this can be found in the FSA's rapid evidence review of 'Moments of change and food-related behaviours'.

Consider where food safety communications can be **placed** to specifically target consumers to increase the likelihood of engagement. For example:

- In places where consumers purchase, consume, or interact with food, such as **supermarkets, butchers, takeaway shops and delis,** as well as in **workplace or university kitchens** to serve as reminders.

- On **food packaging**, including **recipe box packaging**, or **consumer guidance from food industry manufacturers** in the appliance industry (for example fridge, or cool box manufacturers).

- On **food recipe websites**, where consumers commonly go to seek recipes and cooking inspiration, which could provide food safety guidance alongside their instructions.

  Websites mentioned in research included BBC Good Food and supermarket websites.

- Where consumers look for health-related information such as **NHS website**, at **GP surgeries** and **hospital waiting rooms**, and even at the gym, to support further understanding of how food safety risks may impact health.

Information provided in these places needs to be straightforward and short to aid engagement. **Channels** chosen to promote this information will likely reach different ages.

For example, research suggests that:

To target older audiences, leaflets, posters (on billboards, at bus stops, on trains) adverts in magazines and on the radio may be more effective.

Conversely, Instagram and TikTok would likely reach a younger audience.

Television adverts and social media advertising on YouTube and Facebook would likely have a much broader reach.

The FSA Risk Communications Toolkit provides guidance for using these different channels, and the FSA Consumer Segmentation work provides further details on channels to be used when communicating to specific audiences.

3. Motivation

It is important to highlight that consumer motivations to enact behaviours will be strongly influenced by the wider content of the message, interlinked with the factors set out above relating to the Capability and Opportunity principles. Communications should therefore be sensitive to this.

3.1 Challenge perceptions of low risk by making risks tangible

Perceived risk of behaviours referenced in communications play a key role in shaping consumer response. The [FSA Risk Communications Toolkit](#) details how consumers can often feel they are able to identify and mitigate food-related risks easily, and that concern for food safety may not always be top of mind.

Correspondingly, where communications highlight problems with a behaviour that consumers have been practicing for a long time without issue, there is likely to be low engagement in the message and the risk. **The risk needs to be tangible to engage consumers in changing their behaviour.**

What makes a risk feel more tangible? Risk is likely to feel more tangible where:

- **The behaviour is already recognised as higher risk**, in the context of food risk overall.

  As highlighted previously, research found that handling and making sure raw meat is cooked through, cross contamination, cooking for others, and cooking meat at BBQs were all considered by consumers to be 'high risk' scenarios.

- **Consumers have personal experience of food poisoning**. For these consumers, the consequence of food poisoning has already been brought to life, and they are keen to avoid this for themselves and others in the future.

How can risks be made more tangible?

- **Presenting 'new' information about the risk**. It is important to note that any new information about risks must be credible (see guidance for building capacity with clear and credible communications above).

- **Providing clear, specific information** regarding the risk of consequences, such as statistics, if available. Further information about presenting risks is provided in the FSA Risk Communication Toolkit[3].

- **Providing a clear rationale** for why a behaviour is risky. Messages which clearly make a link between behaviours and consequences are likely to be more impactful.

3.2 Be cautious when using communications that generate shock and fear

There is a fine line between capturing attention and consumers disengaging from messages deemed to overstate fear and disgust unnecessarily, so this approach should be treated sensitively.

Research found that reaction to this approach was varied. Those who already have a heightened concern of germs could be at particular risk of disengaging from communications employing this approach.

It is important to consider that whilst this approach may engage some consumers, there is also a risk of scaremongering. When developing communications, it is useful to consider that feelings of shock and fear regarding the health consequences of food poisoning are heightened when:

- Providing new information regarding a behaviour that could lead to a serious health consequence.

- Citing illnesses that require hospitalisation.

- Using a serious tone and/ or language.

  Research found that terms such as 'dangerous', 'poisoning', 'toxins' and 'seriously ill' generated a serious tone.

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3 The FSA Risk Communication Toolkit V2 (August 2020), 2CV

- Images suggest behaviours could result in illnesses that require hospitalisation.

3.3 Reference social aspects of food safety sensitively to avoid pushback

Caring for your family and loved ones resonates with consumers. However, engagement with messages around this will be strongly shaped by the wider content of the message.

Among those who are **younger and/ or less confident/ experienced** with cooking, including some first-time parents, taking this communication approach will likely resonate more strongly. However, in these instances, communications need to include a clear and easy call to action. This will ensure that those who resonate with the sentiment of duty of care feel empowered to take action.

For those more confident/ experienced with cooking (including those who are older and have been cooking for children/other family members for years), taking this approach when designing communications could generate feelings of defensiveness and subsequent pushback. This can especially be the case where communication may engender feelings of guilt to encourage the more confident consumer to take action. These consumers may also perceive such communications to be patronising, especially where the call the action is considered overly simple or 'common-sense'

Whilst consumers may resonate with having a duty of care when cooking for friends, engagement is likely to be influenced by whether consumers relate to this scenario specifically.

Cooking for friends was a scenario that some consumers did not strongly relate to in research, perhaps reflecting social restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.4 Be mindful of challenging behaviours that are culturally engrained

Cultural norms can influence engagement with food safety communications. Where behaviours strongly grounded in community experiences and practices are queried, consumers may raise questions regarding the credibility of the message. Challenges to behaviours such as washing chicken or reheating rice must be approached sensitively as they come from long-established cultural practices.

3.5 Consider whether messengers could motivate behaviour change

Celebrity chefs and food-related influencers represent credible sources
of information and may also serve to motivate behaviour change in line with
the audience aspirations. Further information about messengers is provided
in the [FSA Risk Communications Toolkit](#).

Universal guidelines

The following are guidelines relating to images, language and tone which should be considered when designing communications.

Use of images

Key questions to consider when using images:

- Do the images support consumer understanding of the issue?

  For example, research found that an image depicting a magnifying glass highlighting bacteria on unwashed vegetables helped engage consumers by making the invisible, visible.

- Do the images provide clear instructions detailing the desired behaviours or clearly indicate poor behaviours?

  For example, in research, consumers suggested that green ticks or red crosses would be useful to clearly identify correct and incorrect behaviours. However, should this suggested approach be taken, accessibility needs will need to be considered and alt text applied.

- Are the images realistic; do they provide a relatable image of day-to-day life?

  For example, research consumers found communications depicting unrelatable images difficult to engage with. This included images of luxurious kitchens, unrealistic picnic foods and perfectly organised fridges.

Language, tone and phrasing

Key guidelines to consider include:

- Use short and straightforward messaging.

- Use Plain English that is accessible to everyone, including those with English as a second language or non-English speakers, and avoiding acronyms to ensure comprehension.

Words and terms that were picked up on throughout research as being harder to understand were 'poultry', 'nervous system', 'cross-contamination' and 'runs clear' (when related to 'juices run clear in meat that is cooked through').

- Consider the tone of communications.

Research found that a stronger, directive tone (such as including the word 'always') could disengage more confident/ experienced cooks or those already practicing food safe behaviours with no issue, as it could feel patronising.

The content of the message can also play a role in how the tone is perceived.

For example, research found that more confident/experienced consumers tended to disengage from messages that combined a directive tone with a reference to duty of care for family, and guidance that was considered to be simple and common-sense.

- Rhetorical questions and the use of 'you' and 'your' can encourage consumers to think about their own food safety behaviours.

Research saw a positive response amongst consumers to the phrase '*your chopping board might look safe, but is it?',* capturing their attention and encouraging them to reflect on their own behaviours.

Useful resources

- [Food Standards Agency (2020) The FSA Risk Communication Toolkit](https://food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-risk-analysis-toolkit-final.pdf).
  Avalable at: https://food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-risk-analysis-toolkit-final.pdf

- Food Standards Agency Consumer Segmentation:
  Available at: https://www.food.gov.uk/research/research-projects/food-standards-agency-consumer-segmentation

- Government Communications Services (2020) Guide to campaign planning: OASIS.
  Available at: https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/marketing/delivering-government-campaigns/guide-to-campaign-planning-oasis/

- Government Communications Services (2018) Strategic Communications: A behavioural approach.
  Available at: https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/publications/strategic-communications-a-behavioural-approach/

- Ipsos MORI Veracity Index (2020)
  Availabile at: https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/ipsos-mori-veracity-index-2020-trust-in-professions

- Nash, N. Whittle, C. and Whitmarsh, L. (2020) Rapid Review of 'Moments of change' & Food-related behaviours. Food Standards Agency.
  Available at: https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-rapid-literature-review-final_0.pdf

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