Meat Hygiene Controls and Testing

TNS-BMRB report

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Executive summary

TNS-BMRB was commissioned by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to conduct a nationwide series of 'citizens forums', with the goal of establishing an ongoing dialogue with the public on food standards. This programme is now in its third year, with this year’s focus exploring attitudes to meat hygiene and views on potential changes to meat hygiene controls procedures. The format was evening workshops taking place across the UK between June and July 2010.

Attitudes and approaches to meat hygiene

Respondents did not ordinarily give any thought to meat hygiene and it was generally trusted that meat purchased from butchers and supermarkets was safe. Any methods people did employ to ensure meat safety tended to be subconscious, for example developing familiarity and trust of particular suppliers. As with views on meat quality, it was felt that the more locally sourced the meat was, the more trustworthy it would be. This correlation applied accordingly to meat from regional, British, European and global providers with the latter being the least trusted. People rely heavily on visual appearance to discern meat safety. When eating out, meat safety, if considered at all, was judged primarily according to the perceived quality of the establishment.

Views on current meat hygiene procedures and controls

There was little initial concern to understand meat control procedures at farms and abattoirs for two reasons. Firstly respondents’ concerns were more naturally focused on safety risks at the later processing stages of storage and catering. Secondly, strong regulation was assumed to exist at abattoir and processing stages and it was ‘taken as given’ that a government body would enforce it, though it was not assumed that this enforcement would be in the form of a continuous official presence. When provided with information about current controls, respondents were impressed by their level and rigour. Their confidence was underpinned by:

- Evidence of the traceability of meat;
- The attention to every animal;
- A constant independent inspectoral presence; and
- A lack of interest in the risks posed by microbial infections.

Three main concerns were raised about the safety implications of current controls, which stemmed from respondents’ interest in the freshness and traceability of meat. These were:

- Transportation and storage of imported and UK reared meat. Freezing times and journeys were considered vulnerable points because they were harder to monitor.
• A ‘responsibility’ gap between the FSA and local authorities. The transfer of responsibility was seen to create the risk of a lapse in control of standards.
• Retail, catering and consumer responsibility. Concerns were driven by a high awareness and little control of hygiene standards in these areas.

Views on potential changes to meat controls
Suggestions for changes were greeted with initial scepticism primarily because respondents were satisfied with what they had learned about current controls but these were overcome during discussion. Concern was voiced that a cost-cutting motive should not be prioritised over safety as well as a desire to protect the British farming industry from decline. Discussions of changes were geared around considerations of how to balance the competing aims of maintaining standards, whilst modernising the system to reduce waste. Specific reaction to potential changes were as follows:

Investigating a change from traditional post mortem meat inspection tasks to checks which better address microbiological hazards: accepted as sensible and prompting little interest. It was considered important to adapt inspections to new disease risks and experts were trusted to make these adjustments. Respondents’ main concern was that diseases that had been believed to be eliminated could return if they were not spotted through visual inspection. Changes would therefore be accepted if the FSA showed it continued to monitor the ‘old’ diseases as well as new microbial risks.

Ante-mortem inspection, a change from official veterinarians to official auxiliaries (meat inspectors). Respondents were responsive to the idea of ante-mortem checks being carried out by official meat inspectors rather than vets. Perceived benefits were reduced salary costs and improved standards through tailored training. Drawbacks identified were public preferences for ‘experts’, a fall in standards and increased expense through duplicated roles if vets were still required to assist inspectors. It was felt that these issues could be addressed through training to standardise practice, assurance of inspectoral independence and confirmation that the introduction of vets under EU regulations had not significantly raised standards.

Earned autonomy for industry. Opinions were polarised, according to whether respondents trusted Food Business Operators (FBO’s) use of privileges. Supporters felt this change would focus support for abattoirs that needed it, that penalties would be better enforced and that by incentivising improvements, standards would be driven up overall. The alternative concern was that abattoirs could become
complacent, with employees cutting corners and inspectors losing impartiality – all without any financial gain for taxpayers. Many respondents remained sceptical of this change, but all agreed that for the system to work, the FSA should conduct unannounced inspections and ensure that best practice was disseminated which would help poor performers.

Conclusions and implications for the FSA
Due to strong implicit trust in supermarkets and regulation and a focus on evidence of meat quality that they can see and experience, consumers give little or no consideration to meat controls in their day-to-day purchasing. When informed of current procedures, respondents were highly satisfied with the systems in place. In terms of potential changes, consumers welcomed the principle of shifting the balance of compliance further onto industry and modernisations to improve standards – as long as these were not motivated by spending cuts and an independent monitoring presence was maintained.

In order to make more informed decisions, consumers called for
• clearer information around country of meat origin to prevent marketing which was seen as deliberately misleading; and
• a means to date meat from the point of slaughter
Overall however, respondents felt that any consumer information should be carefully handled in order to increase confidence and choice rather than fuel concerns and confusion.

Most importantly, if changes are to be introduced consumers would be most reassured by:
• A clear statement that any changes would not have a negative impact on public health; and
• Continuing demonstration by the FSA that they independently monitor industry standards.
1. Introduction

In December 2005, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) Board agreed to develop more creative and experimental ways of engaging directly with individual consumers and to construct a new model for consumer engagement. Central to this aim was the establishment of a nationwide series of consumer forums to enable the FSA to establish an ongoing dialogue with the public on food standards.

The forums provide the opportunity for the FSA to innovate in the way it makes decisions to protect public health and consumer interests in relation to food safety. In particular, the forums help to frame issues the FSA focuses on, and ultimately the advice its gives, from a consumer perspective. Specifically, the forums aim to:

- understand the “top of mind” concerns of UK consumers;
- develop deeper understanding about particular concerns that consumers have in relation to food;
- test FSA policy and ensure that the views of consumers are taken into account at all stages of the policy making process.

This report outlines findings from year three of the citizens’ forums, exploring shopping behaviour, attitudes towards meat hygiene and current meat controls. The report also examines views on potential changes to meat hygiene controls, associated issues and any concerns.

1.1 Approach

The Citizens’ Forums use a deliberative method which, at the start of the first workshop, starts by gathering data from participants providing only minimal background information as would be the case in any normal focus group. However during the sessions, expert witnesses provide context and in-depth information to the group, informing participants’ discussions. Therefore the deliberative method gains a much deeper understanding of consumer attitudes than traditional focus group discussions.

Each group was moderated by an independent facilitator, and representatives from the FSA were on hand to answer questions and help clarify any areas of uncertainty. Stimulus materials were used to stimulate discussion and provoke debate (see
appendix 1.3). The findings were subject to a full analysis, which forms the basis for this report. A full methodology can be found in appendix 1.

The methodology this year involved a series of five workshops across the UK convened over two waves. Each workshop comprised 10 participants; the first wave of discussions lasted 90 minutes and the second wave lasted two hours.

The discussions in the first wave of the forums, (developed via a topic guide included in appendix 1.2), specifically explored the following areas:

- Approaches to purchasing meat;
- Attitudes to meat hygiene; and
- Views on current meat control procedures.

The second wave examined potential changes to meat controls and explored the following areas:

- Views on the level of information about meat available in shops;
- Views on slaughterhouse changes;
- Views on ante-mortem changes; and
- Views on earned autonomy for industry and FSA allocation of resource according to risk.

### 1.2 Report outline

With chapter one being the introduction, the second chapter of this report explores purchasing decisions and factors influencing the selection of fresh meat. Section three looks at respondents’ attitudes to meat hygiene and their assumptions about meat controls. Section four examines participants’ reactions to information about current meat controls and any related concerns and section five outlines attitudes to suggested changes to meat controls. Finally, section six draws the findings together to suggest the implications and conclusion of findings for the FSA.

All quotations are verbatim, drawn from transcripts of the forums.
2. Attitudes and approaches to meat hygiene

2.1 Overall approaches to meat safety
Respondents did not ordinarily give any thought to meat hygiene. When prompted, it was generally assumed that meat purchased from butchers and supermarkets was safe. If people gave any thought to meat safety it was in relation to their immediate environment and potential hazards which they could actually see. In restaurants, take-aways or fast-food outlets, hygiene standards became a consideration because respondents had a high awareness but little control over the conditions for the storage and preparation of food.

“I think most people have a concern when they are buying…cooked food because you don't have any control...you're dependent on the people who work either in the stores being suitably trained in their hygiene processes, and you're dependent on probably people like these guys [FSA representatives] ensuring that the premises are up to standard.” (Male, Belfast)

2.2 Approaches to meat safety when buying meat
Although meat safety was not necessarily top-of-mind when shopping, some respondents did subconsciously safeguard the quality of the meat that they bought. Those who did so reported routinely buying their meat from the same shops, becoming familiar and trusting of particular suppliers. For some, a butcher who they regularly purchased meat from would be trusted as supplying only good quality meat, for example. Beyond this, respondents described the freshness of appearance of meat, the cleanliness of the establishment and the origin of the product together as indicators of a product’s reliability.

“Our local butcher’s got the board up telling you where it’s from, the slaughterhouse, you look at the people who are selling it, you just look to see if it’s a safe environment you feel.” (Female, Aberdeen)

As with respondents’ views on meat quality, it was inferred that the more local, the more trustworthy the product in terms of the meat controls it may be subject to. The correlation applied to local, UK reared, European and inter-continental meat, which
was the least trusted. This was directly linked to respondents’ interest in freshness and accountability. However, these were not issues which respondents had previously given much thought, and would not ordinarily affect their approach to shopping.

“I feel a lot more comfortable about buying meat in this country than anywhere abroad.” (Female, London)

Figure 1: Consumer preference and perceived safety

Outside EU  European  British  Regional

Whether butchers or mainstream supermarkets were likely to uphold the more stringent standards around meat hygiene was disputed, whilst remaining of little concern overall. Many respondents reasoned that supermarkets were likely to be over-cautious around use-by dates and food safety to avert the risk of being penalised. A few respondents were therefore sufficiently confident to buy products cheaply and use them several days after their sell-by dates.

2.3 Approaches to meat safety when eating out

When eating out, meat was risk assessed according to quality of the establishment, which were ranged across a spectrum. Meat sold from the back of a van, outside regular markets, or late at night from cheap burger or kebab vans were classified as ‘no-go’. Unhygienic conditions, poor quality cuts and unfresh meat were attributed to cases of food poisoning and the reasons these places were unsafe. Respondents’ impressions were based on the price of the food, word of mouth, how clean or hygienic the place looked and on respondents’ own experience of a place. Only a few young male respondents reported buying food from places they considered unsafe, and saw these as times of personal irresponsibility and would not be surprised if they got food poisoning.

In take-aways and restaurants where the quality was doubted, many female respondents avoided certain meats altogether. Some younger respondents,
particularly males, suggested they knew when they were eating irresponsibly on a
night out by buying a kebab or burger from a place they did not trust, but did not
worry about this. A few older respondents recalled buying food when they were
younger that they would not buy now that they had children and were more aware of
food safety and quality.

However, most respondents with families reported buying the same quality of meat
for their children and older relatives as for themselves.

Being able to see the meat clearly even within cooked meals to verify its quality was
important to respondents, particularly female shoppers. Chicken was commonly seen
to be safer than red meats in Indian curries or Chinese food, for example, as its
colour and consistency were more clearly visible; darker meats which were
‘disguised’ but were liable to be ‘fatty’ or poor cuts, would be avoided altogether on
these occasions.

2.4 Assumptions and expectations of meat controls
Respondents had generally given little prior thought to meat controls. There was little
interest or concern in understanding controls at the earlier stages of meat processing
in farms and abattoirs. It was assumed that strong UK regulation and legislation
existed in the background, and this faith in standards in the UK also extended to a
certain extent to imported meat which was expected to be checked upon arrival.

Respondents associated higher safety risks, and a consequent need for closer public
scrutiny, at the later stages of processing: in food preparation and storage. Respondents did not question the safety of meat before it arrived on a retailer’s shelf.
Within Europe, for example, questions were raised around transportation; whilst for
meat imported from countries such as Argentina or Thailand, there was less faith in
the safety of produce.

2.5 Expectations of responsibility for meat controls
Responsibility was expected to be shared by different agents at each step along the
production line, although ultimately a government body was expected to make and to
enforce regulations and legislation. This was ‘taken as given’.
Respondents naturally placed a burden of responsibility on retailers. Supermarkets, particularly the larger retailers, were expected to take responsibility for ensuring that the meat they purchased from abattoirs was safe and to be accountable to individual incidents arising from meat they had sold. Respondents were confident that both farmers and retailers would be scrupulous in upholding standards, because their livelihoods depended upon it and they could not afford to lose profit through penalties and business through its impact on reputation.
3. Views on current meat hygiene procedures and controls

3.1 Initial reactions to information about meat controls

Overall, respondents were impressed and reassured by the level and rigour of meat control procedures, expressing pleasant surprise at how stringent they are. Whilst initially sceptical that the process represented was an accurate portrayal of daily practice, respondents expressed an underlying faith that market forces drove overall standards which ultimately led them to feel that controls would be respected. Respondents held the view that large retailers in particular would deem the financial imperatives for total compliance with regulation to be too strong to risk slackening practice, as it would result in penalties and loss of business.

3.2 Areas of confidence in current controls

Respondents expressed confidence in the strength and resilience of controls. This confidence was underpinned by the following:

- Evidence of the traceability of meat;
- The attention to every animal;
- A constant independent inspectoral presence; and
- A lack of interest in the risks posed by microbial infections.

Traceability

All respondents were surprised to learn that cattle were tagged and given passports that allowed tracking and traceability of produce at various stages in the process. This traceability was welcomed because it linked meat to its origins (reflecting an area which, as already highlighted, was important to them as consumers), brought accountability to farmers and showed careful attention to animal health (and therefore ensuring the quality and safety of the meat). The continuity of documentation across different stages was also felt to connect the various stages in the production process which indicated that high standards were maintained throughout. This was also felt to be important, reflecting a desire for continuity.

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1 Respondents across all discussion groups were given information about current controls in a video. A script of this video is included in the appendix.
Attention to detail
The number and detail of checks conducted on every animal was a surprise to respondents who felt this indicated a high level of care and attention.

Respondents also commented that the scale and level of resource required to conduct this number of inspections was very high and made comparisons with standards in other public services. They saw this positively and were not critical of this resource allocation.

Inspectorial independence
The constant independent presence of an inspector from outside industry was praised. It specifically addressed a concern amongst some respondents that financial pressures would tempt the food industry to boost profits by selling meat which was not fit for human consumption. Official vets were automatically trusted for their expertise and independence. Having learned about the role of official inspectors, respondents thought them to be essential to upholding regulation of standards.

Low interest in the risk of microbial infections
Of less interest were microbial infections which could not be picked up by the naked eye. Very few respondents mentioned this aspect of the information provided on the video; even where comments were made (that this had lessened confidence in controls), these were not a cause of further or wider debate.

“What is the worst case scenario about something they can’t spot and what does that cause, those bacteria?” (Female, Cardiff)

Microbial infection was interpreted as bacteria which could be eliminated through cooking, and described in terms of ‘bacteria levels’. As such, this risk was seen as a typical and unavoidable part of the natural environment. Respondents discussed the management of this risk in relation to food preparation rather than as a meat control issue specific to the slaughterhouse or processing stages.

3.3 Areas of concern about current controls
Stemming from respondents’ interest in the freshness and traceability of meat, three main related concerns were raised about the implications of the information on
controls that they had seen. These concerns mirrored respondents’ approaches to choosing meat, their association of safety with quality and a preference for local and traceable produce:

- Transportation and storage of imported and UK reared meat;
- A ‘responsibility gap’, between the FSA and local authorities;
- Preparation: retail, catering and consumer responsibility; and

In addition, animal feed and veterinary medicines posed some concern.

**Transportation and storage for imported and UK reared meat**

The time that elapsed from the point of slaughter was considered to contribute to the risk that meat would be unsafe. Concerns were raised in particular in relation to imported meat, both in terms of the overall regulation of standards overseas, but also during transit. Longer distances were seen to pose greater risks; the controls and procedures applied in countries further afield such as Argentina or Thailand, for example, were frequently mentioned.

A concern with transportation reflected respondents’ interest in determining the actual age of the meat from the point of slaughter. The time taken to freeze meat or the length of the journey from slaughterhouse to supermarket shelf was expected to affect the meat’s taste and quality. These were considered vulnerable points because they were seen to be important to meat hygiene but difficult to monitor. Temperature controls in the lorries transporting meat or the time taken to freeze a carcass, for example, were considered essential areas to regulate.

**A ‘responsibility gap’, between the FSA and local authorities**

Respondents did not like the transfer of responsibility between the FSA and local authorities. This point in the process was seen to pose a higher risk of safety hazards as there may be a gap in accountability or a lapse in control of standards. Less commonly, respondents were concerned that controls could fail where the slaughterhouse and farmer were in areas that were regulated by different local authorities.

**Preparation: retail, catering and consumer responsibility**

Respondents were particularly concerned about the preparation and handling of meat, in retail, catering and in the home. This was driven by a high awareness and little control of the hygiene standards in the catering and retail industry. It was also
underpinned by a strong belief in the responsibility of the consumer themselves to protect their own health. There was a keen awareness of the potential for human error or direct negligence and respondents argued that all earlier controls could amount to nothing if standards slipped at later stages of preparation. Consumers were also thought to need more understanding of their own responsibilities to ensure meat was stored and handled hygienically.

Animal feed and ingestion of drugs
Respondents also queried how animal feed and veterinary medicines were regulated and what happened to rejected meat. This was partly prompted by a concern arising about how BSE could have occurred in the context of such strict regulation, though respondents were reassured that certain controls had been introduced following the outbreak.
4. Potential changes

4.1 Overall receptiveness to potential changes

Initially, respondents greeted the suggestion of changes to meat controls with some scepticism, in part due to confidence and faith in the current system. On further debate there was some enthusiasm for the changes, marked by a fairly strong division of opinion which emerged along gender lines. There were three main reasons for doubts about the case for change:

- Satisfaction with current controls;
- Concern that a ‘cost-cutting’ motive was being prioritised over safety; and
- Concern to protect the British farming industry from decline.

Satisfaction with current controls

Respondents were impressed with what they had learned about the state of the current system and were happy that it ensured high standards. ‘If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it’ was the recurring phrase used across several groups, which shaped respondents’ early considerations of potential changes. Again, respondents referred to the later stages in the production chain as the priority for improvement or further consideration. However, there was also an interest in modernisation as a way of reducing waste spending.

Concern about a cost-cutting motive

Many respondents queried whether government pressure to reduce budgets was a motive for changes and were particularly resistant to this idea. Women in particular feared that pressure to make cost savings would lead the FSA to slacken regulation and ‘cut corners’ which risked people’s health, so the current costs should be firmly defended and never compromised. All respondents clearly agreed that the FSA should not let budget pressures undermine the robustness of meat controls.

Women tended to be satisfied with the current costs of inspection and had little interest in seeking efficiencies, because their primary concern was to safeguard current standards. The quoted budget spending was not viewed as excessive but as money well spent, because a rigorous process was crucial to protecting people’s health, particularly the vulnerable.
Younger men appeared more relaxed and in favour of changes to modernise the system. They were more optimistic that cost savings could be found alongside improvements to the process of inspections and were open to this possibility. However, several respondents were sceptical that savings would bring any return for the tax payer or consumer and felt that costs were therefore irrelevant in terms of the public interest.

These differences in perspective were also reflected in respondents’ attitudes to expertise. Many female respondents reasoned that because vets were currently employed to inspect animals and visual inspections were still being used, they must be a necessary part of an effective system for identifying disease. Younger men tended to doubt the need for a vet, as vets were also seen to be ‘generalists’ who may not be expert in cattle. These early views altered as respondents explored the issues in greater detail.

**Concern to protect the farming industry from decline**

Another early concern for respondents was whether changes could have a damaging effect on the farming industry and British economy. This concern materialised in two ways. Firstly, respondents felt that farmers had been weakened with the loss of business during the BSE crisis and should not suffer further by bearing the brunt of the costs of compliance with new regulation. Secondly, at a time when public confidence in British meat was still fragile, respondents suggested that bringing safety issues to public attention with an implied reduction to regulation could backfire against the industry in both domestic and export sales.

“It is a question of public confidence, the fact that there have been outbreaks of disease within the meat products – the public need to know that they’re being checked regularly.” (Male, London)

The subsequent discussion of changes was geared around how to balance the competing aims of maintaining standards, which was particularly emphasised by women; whilst reducing waste through modernisation, which was particularly emphasised by men.
4.2 Changes to post-mortem checks

There was little interest in or concern about the adaptation of post-mortem inspections from traditional inspection tasks to checks which better address microbiological hazards. There was some desire to maintain the status quo but ultimately respondents felt that, as long as any changes were based on evidence and made gradually that meat quality would be secure. They assumed that costs in this case would not filter down to them, so changes would not impact on the consumer.

Changes to post-mortem checks: Benefits

The main benefits of adjusting inspections in the slaughterhouse were based on the perception that:

**It is important to adapt inspections to assess new disease risks.** Everybody expressed the view that experts were best placed to determine which diseases were relevant and that they could be trusted to do so, once earlier confusion about bacterial risks had been resolved. Initially respondents had assumed that bacteria or micro-organisms were a part of the environment which should be managed by careful cooking. However, they later concluded that it was appropriate for tests for new diseases to be undertaken and for the system to be adapted to accommodate these checks.

**Experts should be trusted to make any necessary adjustments.** Respondents welcomed updating the inspection process to include checks for new diseases, which were accepted as additions rather than substitutes for visual inspections. This trust in experts’ decision-making underpinned the discussion of changes to post-mortem inspections in the slaughterhouse.

“You just have to trust their judgment because they [the FSA] are the professionals.”
(Female, Cardiff)

Changes to post-mortem checks: Drawbacks

The main potential drawback considered to be relevant was:

**Whether diseases that had been believed to be eliminated could return.** Respondents were interested in the information showing regional variation in incidence of disease and this was used to suggest that diseases which are believed
to have been eradicated in an area could return through transmission from other areas. It was therefore considered dangerous to ignore these diseases completely.

Changes to post-mortem checks: Conditions of acceptance

Overall, respondents favoured any changes deemed appropriate by the FSA on the conditions that they:

Show that they continue to monitor risks of the return of ‘old’ diseases with visual inspections.

“Even if it’s just odd ones here and there, I don’t think they should abandon the visible checks. There should still be a certain number, just to make sure that those things aren’t coming back.” (Female, Cardiff)

Base any decisions on robust research. As discussed above, respondents were conscious of the impact of reductions in inspections on public perceptions of the industry. If visual inspections were to be phased out, respondents suggested that Defra or the appropriate body would need to ensure they had a sound evidence base for their decisions.

Manage communications to the public about the safety of any changes. Respondents felt that for changes to be accepted by the public, they would need to be made slowly and should ideally not be drawn to public attention. When changes received attention, clear communications around the reasons for their introduction would need to be given to allay any public safety concerns, which it was hoped would prevent any negative publicity growing out of hand.

4.3 Ante-mortem changes

Respondents were responsive to the idea of ante-mortem checks being carried out by official meat inspectors rather than official vets. Learning that ante mortem inspections by vets were introduced in 2004 as a result of EU regulation, and that anecdotal evidence indicated no change in the quality of checks carried out strengthened respondents’ support for a ‘return’ to the previous UK system.

Ante-mortem changes: Benefits

The perceived benefits of a change of officials were:
**Reduced salary costs.** Most groups expected that a trained inspector would be paid a lower salary than a vet, who was assumed to be over-qualified for the tasks at hand. Respondents felt that changing the individual responsible for ante-mortem inspections from a veterinary surgeon to a trained meat inspector would make good financial sense.

**Improved standards through tailored training.** By tailoring inspectors’ training, it was hoped that they could develop specialist skills in identifying disease which would be superior to those of a vet, who would have general training.

**Ante-mortem changes: Drawbacks**
The reasons given for potential drawbacks related to changes to ante-mortem checks were:

**Public perceptions of vets’ expertise.** Younger, female respondents in particular felt that a vet's professionalism, expertise and wide-ranging knowledge were reassurances that any type of pathology would be picked up. Public perceptions of vets and a faith in experts were also considered to be important factors, and it was felt that there could be negative press coverage of a change.

“There’s a level of confidence you get from the presence of a vet.” (Female, London)

“I like the idea of professionals doing professional work.” (Female, Cardiff)

**Losing progress made under the introduction of vets.** Several respondents felt that they needed to know whether the introduction of vets had improved rates of disease identification before they could decide whether they had proven value during ante-mortem inspections.

**Increased expense by duplicating roles.** Many respondents felt that the success of this change would depend upon the meat inspector being competent to deal with the majority of issues arising. If they lacked the confidence to make decisions around complicated cases and regularly consulted a vet, this continued reliance on vets for problems beyond expertise would duplicate work and cost more money.
Ante-mortem changes: Conditions of acceptance

Respondents concluded that for the replacement of vets with trained meat inspectors to be safe and effective, the following conditions would need to be met:

Training and standardise practice. A regulated system of training with approved certification of qualifications and standards was thought to be necessary in order to guarantee that inspectors had the appropriate skills sets.

The independence of inspectors. As with other inspectors at all stages of meat processing, respondents stressed that their credibility hinged upon their independence from industry and that ideally they should be employed by the FSA. This was expected to prevent against the temptation for food businesses of incentives to allow unfit animals into the food chain.

Confirm that the use of vets had not significantly improved standards in terms of the rates of identification of diseases in cattle.

4.4 Earned autonomy

Reactions to the information on potential changes to resource allocation were initially very mixed and aroused strong feelings. Respondents’ views on earned autonomy hinged upon whether they had faith in food businesses’ use of this new privilege. Opinions were polarised according to whether respondents expected autonomy to lead to complacency and cutting corners, or to exemplary practice which drove up standards.

Earned autonomy; Benefits

The perceived benefits of earned autonomy were:

More support for abattoirs that need it. Some respondents understood that the time FSA inspectors would save through fewer inspections of high performing abattoirs could be redeployed to support and advise abattoirs that needed it. This need was appreciated and respondents welcomed the close monitoring and practical guidance on how to improve their processes that would be enabled by a re-balancing of resource.
Focusing more resources on enforcement of penalties. Respondents welcomed the implication that a move towards a more risk-based approach would mean the FSA would have more flexibility to focus more enforcement resources on operators whose practices posed a health concern. This was hoped to result in reduced risk overall.

Driving up standards by incentivising improvements. Some respondents were enthusiastic about the prospect that the incentive of industry autonomy would drive up standards overall. It was also felt to hold the potential to create constructive competition between supermarkets to publicise exemplary practice as it was achieved. It was hoped that supermarkets with excellent performance would be able to offer products with a reduced risk of infection.

“If it was being driven by the chain, the excellence is being driven down [so] we are less likely to buy chicken or whatever that is a bit dodgy.” (Male, York)

Earned autonomy; Drawbacks/risks

Perceived drawbacks of earned autonomy were:

Abattoirs’ complacency. It was a widespread concern for respondents that, having achieved autonomy of inspections due to excellent standards, slaughterhouse staff would become complacent and standards could quickly slip. Standards were seen to depend on the individual staff involved, so changes in personnel were also given as a reason that standards could drop suddenly.

Loss of inspectoral impartiality. Industry was seen to prioritise profit rather than safety and was therefore expected to be less vigilant than the FSA. Some respondents were also concerned that inspectors working for a food business could never be impartial, as they would protect their firm by non-reporting of malpractice.

No financial benefit to taxpayers. Most respondents did not consider there to be a financial benefit in passing the cost of inspections from the taxpayer to industry, either because they prioritised safety over budget issues or because they assumed that any cost savings to the tax payer would simply be passed on by industry.
Across groups, respondents’ acceptance of the suggested shift towards industry-led inspections was conditional on the understanding that the FSA would:

**Conduct regular unannounced inspections or ‘spot checks’.** Many respondents suggested that the introduction of regular unannounced inspections by the FSA or another independent body would provide the necessary security against a decline in the rigour of safety procedures within those companies granted autonomy. The proposed frequency of these inspections ranged from every three to every six months.

**Assist poor performers by spreading best practice.** The chief benefit of a risk-based approach to inspections was seen to be a more dynamic approach to setting standards whereby supermarkets were motivated to appear exemplary. This was hoped to open the industry up to greater cooperation and the sharing of good practice, which it was hoped the FSA would facilitate.
5. Information needs

5.1 Information consumers would like about meat products

In order to make more informed decisions, consumers wanted to know where meat was from and to have a simple means of gauging how fresh the meat was. The freshness and age of meat mattered because it was expected to influence quality and taste, but did not present a safety issue to consumers. With total confidence in the controls in place in the UK at the stage of slaughter, respondents sought no further reassurance about this area; the focus for consideration became the controls for transportation standards for imported meat and the later stages of preparation. More specifically, respondents expressed interest in:

- Clear information on meat origin;
- Dating meat to reveal its ‘true’ freshness.

Clear information on meat origin

Consumers called for clearer information around country of meat origin, specifically to prevent marketing which was seen as deliberately misleading.

Consumers clearly value information about meat origin because it increases the perceived value of the product. Many respondents liked seeing information about the exact source of UK meat. Although this was seen as something which supermarkets generally only included for marketing purposes, it was information which was welcomed.

“They were trying to make it really personalised and local and ethical.” (Female, Cardiff)

By contrast, consumers objected to labels with ‘product of the UK’ where this meant they had been packaged rather than reared in-country, but was seen to imply the latter. This issue was driven by two related concerns about traceability, both around regulatory standards in other countries and in the health risks arising during transportation and storage.

“It gave me the impression that because they had put the union flag on…that’s enough to fool the customer into thinking, oh I’ll just have these, and chuck them in the basket.” (Male, York)
A lack of clear information on meat origin on packaging could create doubts about its quality. Very general labels, such as ‘from the EU’ on sausages, were felt to be too vague. Similarly, some respondents did not know the meaning of symbols such as the ‘red tractor’ or a Union Jack flag and felt these confused rather than assisted consumers.

The introduction of this clear labelling on all produce may have the effect of increasing consumer confidence in UK produce, but this was not deemed essential. Committed customers of butchers or supermarkets trusted their provider and did not think these details were important. The crux of the problem was in identifying misleading marketing rather than genuine concerns about the safety of imported produce. The research does not therefore suggest that the addition of this information is necessarily required.

“It’s up on the wall and you can notice it [a board displaying meat codes]. But I didn’t notice it was there…it’s not something you would look for in a butcher’s…because it’s my wee local butcher. I have always used him so I suppose it’s trust as well as anything else.” (Female, Belfast)

Dating meat to reveal its true freshness

Consumers were interested to know how long ago meat had been slaughtered to help them decide how good the meat would taste. However, the provision of this information may fuel concerns rather than increase consumer confidence and did not constitute a clear need.

Stemming from respondents’ interest in the freshness of meat, it was suggested that retailers should date meat produce from the point of slaughter as well as giving a ‘use by’ date. It was felt that this would provide a more ‘honest’ depiction of the length of the journey from farm to fork and reveal the true freshness of meat for consumers. This was driven by the perception that differential storage times had an impact on the ‘freshness’ and the consequent quality and taste of meat. A few respondents also noted that frozen meat had less information for traceability than fresh produce, which was expected to mean that meat had been slaughtered a long time ago and was therefore a less valuable product.

“Get the genuine shelf life, from start to finish.” (Male, London)
However, when the FSA gave respondents further information about the role of freezing and temperature regulation in dating meat, the complexity of the information confused rather than reassured them. The calculation of best before dates was harder to translate into information which was useful to a consumer than had been expected. If consumers are to be given further information about the timescales involved in the processing of meat from slaughterhouse to supermarket, it is essential that this is provided in a form which does not foster misunderstandings of the effect of meat storage on the taste of produce.

5.2 Information consumers would like about changes to controls

A clear statement that any changes would not have a negative impact on public health, with assurances and demonstration that industry-led inspections are effective. This should include information to the effect that:

- Reformed controls would cover ‘old’ diseases picked up through visual inspections, as well as ‘new’ microbiological risks.
- The change in personnel from vets to trained meat inspectors would not lower the success rates in identifying risks.

The FSA to demonstrate that they continue to independently monitor industry standards. Consumers suggested the introduction of unannounced audits or periodic inspections, but most importantly, they sought assurance that the FSA would keep a watchful eye and that controls were not left entirely in the hands of industry.
6. Implications and conclusions

6.1 Consumer perceptions of current meat hygiene procedures

Consumers gave no consideration to meat safety and controls prior to purchase because of a strong implicit trust in supermarkets and background regulation. It was assumed that controls were established and maintained by experts with scientific and industry knowledge which was independent from commercial interest and respondents were therefore confident in the safety of the procedures. Because respondents took a greater interest in the stages of meat preparation which were within their immediate experience and sight, concerns were focused on later stages in the process. Consequently, respondents were more interested in regulations applied to catering industry and how to ensure these were upheld by Local Authorities.

When prompted and informed about current procedures, consumers are highly satisfied with the current standards of meat controls at slaughterhouses, in ante and post-mortem inspections. In particular, two features of the inspection process added to respondents’ approval of the procedures. Firstly, an interest in the farm land or conditions that meat came from meant respondents were particularly impressed with the traceability of meat; this was also seen to ensure farmers’ accountability. Respondents were glad of the rigour and scale of this work and did not therefore consider any changes to be necessary. Secondly, the visual element of meat inspections was easy to grasp because respondents relied on their own inspection of meat’s appearance to gauge its quality. However, they were slower to recognise that microbiological risks presented a safety concern and this information had to be impressed upon them.

The information on meat controls had the effect of raising their confidence rather than decreasing it. Respondents reported no changes in their shopping decisions as a result of the discussions, other than those with an interest in food miles seeking better information on country of origin before buying produce. As discussed, other respondents were confident in UK standards or felt that the price of meat drove the choices they had.
6.2 Consumers’ views on reform options

Consumers were content to see changes in the process which placed the burdens of compliance on industry and reflected modernisations to improve standards – as long as these were not motivated by spending cuts and an independent monitoring presence was maintained. In many cases, consumers saw little personal value in changing the controls, because they were content with the current system and did not expect any cost savings to be passed on to them. It was suspected that if the aim of changes was to reduce costs, then this was likely to mean a slipping of standards overall. Women in particular expressed interest in additional procedures, such as introducing microbiological testing, rather than substitutions to current methods, such as replacing a vet with a meat inspector.

**Slaughterhouse:** consumers are happy with changes, once assured that new inspections would be just as comprehensive. Despite initial difficulties in understanding the risk posed by microbial infection, consumers are happy for experts to make changes as they see fit. Being more comfortable with visual inspections which made intuitive sense and appeared rigorous, it was important consumers understood that inspections would not lose this attention to detail. Otherwise, this area was not considered to be an important change.

**Ante-mortem:** consumers would welcome the creation of a bigger role for meat inspectors, if adequate training and standardisation was put in place. As long as the introduction of vets had not brought significant improvements in rates of risk identification, consumers were happy that the role could be filled by somebody without general veterinary training. However, women in particular felt that the public’s strong preference for experts such as vets would mean that any replacement for them would need strong credentials which proved their competence.

**Earned autonomy:** consumers do not trust industry to maintain standards if left unchecked, but support a shift from public to private resourcing of inspections. Consumers felt it was appropriate that retailers should shoulder the burden of complying with controls, as long as they remained within view of the FSA and accountable to them. Any shift to greater industry autonomy would need to come with strong assurances that an independent body would retain oversight of controls, through monitoring by conducting occasional checks.