

Our history: Protecting your plate since 2000

Here are just a few highlights from the first 25 years of the Food Standards Agency

2000: Creation of the FSA and commitment to openness and transparency

The FSA was created as an independent government department working across England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland to protect public health and consumers' wider interests in relation to food. We were established after several high-profile outbreaks and deaths from foodborne illness.

At launch, we made a commitment to operate openly and transparently. Our statutory objectives include consulting on our activities, and making our decisions, and the information on which they are based, accessible to the public. From the beginning, we have held our Board meetings in public – ground-breaking for its time, and still so now.

2005: Launching 'Safer Food, Better Business' to make food hygiene easier for small businesses

In 2005 we launched '[Safer Food, Better Business](#)' to help small and micro businesses to adopt good food safety procedures.

Designed to meet the needs of different types of businesses – including small catering companies, small retail companies, restaurants and takeaways – this guidance continues to be a core part of our offering and most restaurant kitchens now have a printed copy. In 2023 alone there were more than 600,000 page views to the 'Safer Food, Better Business' page of the FSA website and nearly 550,000 downloads of the guidance.

In Northern Ireland, catering businesses use the [Safe Catering guide](#) to help them comply with food legislation. This food safety management tool offers practical and comprehensive advice to caterers to help them produce a food safety management plan based on the principles of HACCP.

2007: Initiating front of pack nutritional labelling

In 2010, our responsibilities for nutrition standards and nutrition food labelling in England and Wales were moved to the Department of Health and the Welsh Government respectively. Prior to this, we led on the early development of voluntary front of pack nutritional labelling on prepacked foods.

The label shows, at a glance, whether food is high (red), medium (amber) or low (green) in fat, saturated fat, sugars and salt, as well as the total energy (calories and kilojoules) provided.

The labelling, now in widespread use, was designed to encourage consumers to look for and demand healthier food and give an incentive to businesses to produce that food.

We continue to influence the scheme and a recent consumer campaign in Northern Ireland entitled '[Check the Label](#)' encouraged consumers to use front of pack labelling by highlighting the nutritional value of commonly purchased foods.

2010: Improving hygiene standards in food businesses

In 2010, we launched the voluntary Food Hygiene Rating Scheme to provide the public with information about the hygiene standards in food businesses.

We operate the scheme in partnership with local authorities. They give businesses a hygiene rating, from 0 at the bottom to 5 at the top. The scheme became statutory in Wales from November 2013 and in October 2016 in Northern Ireland, making it mandatory for businesses to display their ratings.

Hygiene standards have improved – businesses achieving the top rating of 5 went up from 54% in 2013 to 76% in 2023. Research shows that businesses with higher ratings are less likely to be responsible for outbreaks of foodborne illness.

2013: Horsemeat crisis

The horsemeat crisis was a food scandal that rocked consumer confidence in UK food and cost the industry hundreds of millions of pounds. The discovery of horsemeat in products that were labelled as beef led to the recall of millions of products across Europe.

We now work more effectively with industry, who in turn are much better at probing in detail along their supply chain. The sampling which industry carries out allows us to make more informed decisions on the action we need to take to protect consumers. We have also improved the way the FSA gathers other intelligence, using data and predictive analytics to monitor risks.

In the wake of the crisis, we established the National Food Crime Unit (NFCU) to boost our investigatory expertise in food fraud. The NFCU now has a team of about 80 people whose focus is on preventing, detecting and investigating serious fraud within food supply chains.

2014: Reducing Campylobacter poisoning

In 2014, [campylobacter](#) was the most common cause of bacterial food poisoning in the UK, affecting more than a quarter of a million people each year.

To tackle this, the FSA launched Acting on Campylobacter Together (ACT). This included working with farmers, slaughterhouses, and retailers to reduce the presence of campylobacter and possibility of cross-contamination and educating consumers and caterers on good hygiene practices.

2018: Piloting use of blockchain technology as a regulatory tool to drive and verify compliance in the food chain

In 2018, we successfully completed a pilot using blockchain technology in a cattle slaughterhouse. It was the first time blockchain had been used as a regulatory tool to drive and

verify compliance in the food chain.

Blockchain takes records from each stage along the supply chain – from the arrival of the animal at the slaughterhouse, to the packaged meat – and puts them in a block. Each block is ‘chained’ to the next block, using an encrypted signature. This allows it to be shared and checked by anyone with permission (from farmers to slaughterhouses), rather than having a single central system controlled by one organisation.

Blockchain could increase the transparency of the supply chain, as information about a particular animal can easily be shared across the chain. It is tamperproof, as it involves multiple copies of data. It improves traceability, as the identification of a product’s journey helps assure quality. It is timesaving, as blockchain improves operations by reducing unnecessary activities, such as data duplication.

2019: Improving the quality of life for people living with food hypersensitivities

In 2019, the government carried out an Allergen Labelling Review following the death of teenager Natasha Ednan-Laperouse. Natasha died from an allergic reaction to sesame in a baguette, which was not labelled with allergen information.

The FSA Board recommended full ingredient and allergen labelling on food that is [prepacked for direct sale \(PPDS\)](#) – food packed on the premises before a customer orders it, like some salads or sandwiches. The government agreed with this recommendation.

A new legal requirement was introduced effective from October 2021 requiring businesses to provide a full ingredient list on PPDS food with the allergens emphasised, giving people with food hypersensitivities the ability to make safe choices when buying food.

2020/2021: Supporting business through change: ensuring food remains safe and what it says it is

Brexit: Ahead of the UK’s departure from the EU We took on new responsibilities taking over some functions delivered by the EU. We now approve new types of food that come on sale here, set rules for checks of imported food, and more. We use new predictive modelling systems, using global open data sources to determine risks to the UK.

COVID-19 pandemic: Our risk assessments of COVID-19 from food were key in informing guidance produced for both food businesses and consumers. We supported food business operators in the post-lockdown recovery and helped make it simple for them to operate safely.

In 2021, our recovery plan was implemented to help local authorities get back on track and clear the backlog of food inspections that built up as local teams successfully targeted their resources at the highest risk businesses while fighting COVID-19.

According to our digital registration service 37% of new ventures registered since the start of the pandemic (March 2020) were run from domestic kitchens at private addresses. [Our 2022 campaign encouraged as many of these new start-ups to register with their local authority.](#)

2022: Annual review of UK food standards

We published with Food Standards Scotland, [Our Food: An annual review of food standards across the UK](#), the first comprehensive report of food standards in the UK.

It provides a baseline assessment of our food standards, following the UK's exit from the EU, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. We will use this series of reports to provide an objective, data-driven assessment of the safety and standards of food over time. We have repeated the assessments each year.

2023: Commitment to innovation and proportionate risk-based regulation

We worked in partnership with Defra on supporting the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Bill through parliament, achieving Royal Assent in the spring. We also worked to develop a proportionate framework for regulating precision bred organisms (PBOs). The framework will form the basis upon which PBOs are authorised and placed on the market as food and feed in England. [More about precision breeding](#).