

ANGUS COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CONSUMER PROTECTION COMMITTEE -  
RESEARCH TO EXPLORE PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO FOOD SAFETY

REPORT BY DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENTAL AND CONSUMER PROTECTION

**Abstract**

Prior to the launch of the Food Standards Agency in April 2000 research was carried out to investigate the general public's attitude to food safety.

**1. RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is recommended that the Committee note this report for its interest.

**2. BACKGROUND**

The principal aim of the study was to examine the public's attitude to the subject of food safety. A range of services were considered and these included the following:

- Understanding the issues which might be involved in food safety and the public's attitude in general.
- The factors which members of the public take into consideration when purchasing food, eg convenience, nutrition, cost etc.
- The existing sources of information available to the public regarding food safety.
- Levels of concern and priorities.
- Perceived threats to food safety.
- The public's present level of confidence in various food eg meat, vegetables etc.
- Confidence in levels of food safety across different sources of food eg restaurants, takeaways, etc.

The study also aimed to investigate the public's perceptions of the present management of standards relating to food safety. This aspect of the study related to areas such as:

- Perceived responsibility for ensuring standards.
- Confidence in Government's ability to maintain standards.
- Awareness of, and attitudes to recent food scares and the media's perceived role.
- Awareness of the Food Standards Agency eg the expectations placed on it and public attitudes regarding the Agency's intended impartiality.

The study which was carried out in March 2000 took the form of twenty six qualitative group discussions. There were eight people in each group with twenty groups in England and two groups in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively.

**3. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The findings of the study were tabulated in terms of the following headings.

- Factors considered when purchasing food.
- Food Scares.
- Sources of information on food safety.
- Perceived threats to food safety.
- The regulation and enforcement of food safety standards.
- The Food Standards Agency.

The factors considered by the public when making food choices most decisions were based on convenience, price and value. The study found little evidence that food safety is a primary concern when purchasing food and that there is a general feeling of confidence that the food the public purchases was safe.

The main food scares mentioned by the groups were BSE, salmonella and genetically modified food. The BSE scare was considered by many as "catalogue of errors". A number of the participants in the study commented on the stupidity of feeding cows with meat products, the failure of the Government to be open with the public and the ongoing doubts of individuals over the safety of beef.

The study highlighted the confusion of the consumer about the GM food issue and considered that the situation is being poorly handled.

With regards to the sources of information on Food Safety there was a strong indication that the participants in the study mistrusted authority and particularly politicians in relation to the communication of food safety risks to the public. The study also highlighted a strong mistrust of media coverage of food issues.

Amongst the concerns regarding perceived threats to food safety the following were highlighted by the participants in the study.

- The conditions under which poultry are raised.
- The feed given to livestock.
- The effects on humans of pesticides and other chemicals used by farmers on fruit and vegetables.
- The effects of preservatives, colourants and other additives in our foods.
- The condition in which foods are distributed and prepared foods are processed.
- What goes on behind the scenes in areas where food is packaged and sold.
- Whether imported foods conform to UK standards.

The issues raised by the Study regarding the regulation and enforcement of food safety standards the participants perceived that whilst there appeared to be adequate regulations in place they are not adequately enforced. Many of the participants believed that there are not enough inspectors working at local level and that the enforcement regime is underfunded.

However, very few participants would have thought about contacting local environmental health officers in relation to food safety concerns. They felt that that market forces could be relied on to discipline shops and restaurants and that the regulatory system would not be made more effective through liaison with local environmental health officers or trades description personnel.

The issue of labelling was also raised as a major concern by the study. Participants wanted improvements in food labelling,, clearer list of ingredients and increased control on the wording used to describe food eg farm fresh, organic, free range etc.

The information obtained from the study regarding the Food Standards Agency demonstrates that there is a common cynicism amongst the public of how the Agency will work in practice and a concern that a Government funded body will not be able to operate without political interference. It would appear from the study that the Agency will be judged largely on how successfully it establishes its independence of political and food industry interests.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

From the findings it is evident that food is purchased by the public on an economic rather than on health grounds. It is evident from the research that authority eg the Government and politicians are mistrusted regarding the communication of food safety risks to the public.

The study also highlighted a wide range of concerns expressed by the participants relating to food safety. These ranged from how animals were fed on the farm, what chemicals the farmer used in food production to what goes on behind the scenes where food is handled, packaged etc.

The issues raised by the study relating to enforcement were to a degree contradictory.

The replies from participants indicated that the regulations are not adequately enforced due in part to the inadequate number of inspectors. On the other hand participants believed that market forces could be relied on to discipline shops and restaurants.

Finally the Food Standards Agency according to the study will have to effectively demonstrate to the public that although funded by Government it will not allow politicians to interfere in its work of protecting the consumer.

## **5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

There are no financial implications associated with commenting on this study. It may however, affect the future approach of the Food Standards Agency which may impact on the future expenditure of the Council on the Food safety function.

## **6. CONSULTATION**

The Chief Executive, Director of Law and Administration and Director of Finance have been consulted on the contents of this report.

**S R Heggie**  
**Director of Environmental and Consumer Protection**

**JB/FMCI**  
**31.8.00**

No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information were relied on to any material extent in preparing this report).