



Scottish people's priorities and preferences for food safety information

Food Standards Scotland (FSS) is an independent public sector food body working for consumers in Scotland. The organisation ensures that information and advice on food safety and standards, nutrition and labelling is independent, consistent, evidence-based and consumer-focused.

For communication to be effective, an understanding of the target audience's knowledge, behaviours and attitudes is essential. In order to fulfil its primary role of consumer protection, FSS undertakes a broad range of consumer research and audience segmentation to augment this understanding. To add to this body of evidence, this research was undertaken by the University of Stirling in 2017, co-funded by FSS, and sought to identify:

- What food safety issues the public prioritises
- What types of information individuals feel would influence their food handling behaviour
- Where the public claim that they would like to hear more food safety issues

This briefing summarises the findings of that study, focusing on consumer opinions, attitudes and preferences for information sources on food-related issues. The findings contribute to the existing body of evidence on consumers in Scotland's preferences for food safety information and where to access such information. This evidence can be used when raising awareness about food safety so that it not only increases the reach of information but also encourages the adoption of safer practices.

Study

An online survey was used to collect consumer opinions. A representative sample of 2,300 people in Scotland participated in the study in 2018. The sample comprised 53% female respondents versus 47% male. Around 37% of the participants were between 18 and 44 years old, 45% were aged 45-65, and around 18% were over 65 years old. Approximately a quarter of the individuals have children under 18 years old. More than half of the individuals had experienced a food-borne incident and lived in deprived areas.

Preferences for food safety information and their impact on food handling practices

The findings showed the top five food safety topics that most individuals would like to hear from food authorities are:

- How to store food safely
- How to handle food safely
- How to cook safely
- Types of food risks
- General food safety information

These preferences are consistent across gender, regions, and whether or not individuals are from deprived areas.

More than 60% of individuals found information on the storage, handling and cooking of food influential in changing their food safety practices. Information on the consequences of having poor food safety behaviour was also impactful. Only a small proportion of the sample (around 10%) said none of the potential information would influence their food safety practices. This was more or less similar across the country – 11% in central Scotland, 13% from northern Scotland, and 8% from southern Scotland.

Key findings

- Information on how to store, handle and cook food safely, along with the consequences of poor food safety were identified as the most influential in changing individuals' food safety practices.
- Individuals also highly prioritised hearing information on the various foods and behaviours that are most risky.
- More than half the sample indicated that they would like to hear more about food safety at every location, except for the workplace.
- Supermarkets were identified as the location where members of the public were most interested in receiving further information, followed by TV adverts, GP surgeries, and cooking websites and programmes. However, results varied, with age being a significant factor in determining preferences.
- The public priorities on information and where to receive it did not vary across regions with different levels of deprivation.

There was little difference in the views of male and female respondents. Males thought that information on how to cook food safely would influence their food handling practices.

Individuals who said they were somewhat knowledgeable about general food safety were much less likely to report that none of the information would be influential.

There is evidence that the youngest age group (18-24) is less likely to feel that none of the information is influential. On the other hand, older age groups are more likely to find information on handling and storing food and information about specific bugs that cause food poisoning more influential than younger individuals. For younger individuals, hearing personal experiences from people who have suffered from food poisoning was found to be more influential in changing food practices.

Preferences for the source of food safety information

Individuals were surveyed on their preferences for hearing more food safety information, across 14 different sources. More than half self-reported that they would like to hear more at every location except for the workplace (48%). This indicates that the public would be receptive to more information from a variety of sources. 70% of the sample claimed that they like to hear more information from government websites, although this was not among the top five locations where individuals wanted to hear information.

The top five locations where people wanted to hear information were:

The most popular location for food safety information was the supermarket



82% of respondents wanted to hear more information via TV advertising

81%

Cooking programmes on TV



78%

of respondents claimed that they wanted to receive more information at the GP surgery



74%

of respondents wanted more information from cooking websites

There were some differences in preference according to gender. Women were more likely to want more information from cooking websites and blogs, as well as social media, compared to men. These information sources were also highlighted by individuals from more deprived areas of Scotland.

Some regional variations were observed. The north of Scotland showed slightly lower levels of individuals wanting information, however, for all regions of Scotland, Supermarkets, TV adverts, Cooking programmes on TV and GP surgery were all within the top five locations with the highest proportion of individuals wanting more information at these locations.

Cooking programmes and blogs have a strong correlation with age. Younger individuals are more likely to want more information from cooking programmes while older individuals are more likely to want more information at their GP surgery. Older age groups also want more information at local libraries. Supermarkets and TV adverts remain high across all age groups.

Recommendations

- Information on good cooking, storing and handling practices (alongside the potential consequences of poor practice) should continue to be part of FSS messaging.
- Consideration should be given to including GP surgeries as a channel for reaching consumers, especially where older individuals are the primary audience.
- Consumers identify supermarkets as sources of information, indicating that it will be beneficial to FSS to continue to partner with the multiple retail and grocery sector as a key communications channel.
- Further analysis of these findings will enable a deeper understanding of public preferences in terms of information and communication methods.

About this research

This research was co-funded by Food Standards Scotland. The briefing is based on research undertaken by:

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