



**Scottish Food Crime
& Incidents Unit**

**Criminal Justice Committee
SFCIU Annual Report**

June 2025

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| Prepared by | SFCIU |

Introduction

In April 2015, Food Standards Scotland (FSS) was established under the Food (Scotland) Act 2015 as the new public sector food body for Scotland. FSS is a non-ministerial office of the Scottish Administration, independent from Scottish Government Ministers, and accountable to the Scottish Parliament, currently reporting to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

On 25 September 2024, at the evidence session on food crime, attended by Ron McNaughton, Head of the Scottish Food Crime and Incidents Unit (SFCIU), and Ian McWatt, Deputy Chief Executive of Food Standards Scotland (FSS), the Criminal Justice Committee agreed that it would welcome an annual report from the SFCIU on its work in tackling food crime; *Scottish Parliament, Criminal Justice Committee, Official Report, 25 September 2024, Col.23*. This Annual Report covers the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

The report aims to outline the following:

- Current SFCIU food crime control strategy priorities
- Investigations undertaken
- Case studies
- Food crime prevention
- Multi-agency and partnership work
- Future activities

Food crime is described as serious fraud and related criminality in food supply chains and has an estimated cost to the UK of around £1.96 billion per year¹. Crime targeting the food chain causes serious harm to consumers, damages confidence in food supply and adversely affects business and UK food security.

Although the majority of food and drink on sale in Scotland and the UK is safe and authentic, the food industry remains an attractive target for criminals as economic pressures, changing consumer demands, environmental impacts and geopolitical events create new opportunities to commit crime.

Control Strategy

The SFCIU [Food Crime Control Strategy](#) outlines the Unit's current priorities. Through a risk analysis and intelligence led process these have been assessed as key threats and are the focus for tackling, mitigating and preventing food crime in the food, drink and feed supply chains.

- **Meat and Meat Products** - criminality in the meat and meat products supply chain impacting on authenticity and traceability
- **Animal By-Products** - entry of illegal product into the food and animal feed chains.
- **Alcohol** - illicit and counterfeit alcohol in the supply chain
- **Supply Chains of High Risk** - fraudulent activity relating to supply chains of high risk

The Unit complies with the National Intelligence Model (NIM), which is a business process used by police forces and other law enforcement agencies to gather, evaluate and manage information and intelligence to deliver the control strategy, assess risk, allocate resources and guide operational decisions. Strategic and tactical tasking and coordination group (TTCG) meetings led by FSS further facilitate this process.

¹ [The Cost of Food Crime Phase 2](#), Food Standards Agency, March 2023

Horizon Scanning – Forecasting the Future

FSS undertakes horizon scanning and emerging risk analysis which provides support in identifying new, emerging and recurring risks and vulnerabilities in relation to food crime. The results are considered within the TTCG process.

Additionally, SFCIU is an active partner in government, law enforcement and industry multi-agency groups, who all share intelligence to drive horizon scanning profiling. Horizon scanning activity is also undertaken jointly with the FSA's National Food Crime Unit, which has responsibility for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Internationally, SFCIU has established working relationships and processes with: EUROPOL, INTERPOL, the European Commission, EU member states and other countries to share intelligence and information which informs the global landscape in relation to threats and risks to the food chain.

Investigations

The SFCIU is currently involved in multiple live investigations in relation to all of the control strategy priorities. As a Specialist Reporting Agency and where there is sufficient evidence of criminality, SFCIU submits report directly to the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service (COPFS).

Seizure under the Proceeds of Crime Act (2022) (POCA)

In July 2023, a conviction was secured in relation to a DNP investigation undertaken by SFCIU. DNP, or 2,4-Dinitrophenol, is an industrial chemical popular amongst individuals wanting to lose weight rapidly, including bodybuilders and people with eating disorders.

In February 2025, an agreement was reached between COPFS and the accused's legal team that the benefit he had gained from his illegal activities amounted to £937,635 and the amount available to be seized was £31,050. A confiscation order was made to that effect which was in addition to a 3 year custodial sentence.

Case Study – Counterfeit Alcohol

Potentially lethal counterfeit alcohol

Previously reported to Committee, as a result of intelligence received, the SFCIU recovered 231 bottles of counterfeit vodka containing isopropanol from convenience stores across the central belt of Scotland in August 2024. Isopropanol is potentially lethal to humans if consumed in sufficient quantities.

This is a long running investigation in partnership with local authorities and other law enforcement agencies. Support was also provided through Police Scotland's National Multi-Agency Tasking and Delivery Board with a focus on the involvement of organised crime.

To mitigate risks to public health, a Community Impact Assessment was undertaken in parallel with the investigation. From the outset, a multi-disciplinary meeting was called by SFCIU, involving Public Health Scotland, NHS, National Poisons Information Service, Police Scotland, local authorities and the Scottish Ambulance Service, who initiated relevant actions within their agencies. FSS led the media response.

This swift, co-ordinated action substantially reduced the risk to the public, prevented deaths, and disrupted further sales.

A number of local authorities have reported alcohol licence holders to respective licensing boards where breaches of licensing conditions have been identified. To date, those considered to be in breach of conditions have had their licence revoked.

One individual has also been reported to COPFS for Culpable and Reckless Conduct for their part in selling the counterfeit product and the investigation is currently ongoing.

Case Study – Fraud: Scottish Grown Tea

Fraudster convicted after selling fake Scottish grown tea

In 2018, in collaboration with a number of local authorities, SFCIU commenced an investigation into Thomas James Robinson, aka Tam O'Braan, of Amulree, Perthshire, selling tea he claimed had been grown at his own plantation and at 'single tea estates' around Scotland, and which he said had been processed on his premises. He also sold in excess of 22,000 tea plants to 12 unsuspecting growers across Scotland and a grower in Jersey, further claiming they were grown from seed/cuttings from his plantation in Scotland, all of which he knew to be untrue.

Robinson operated in plain sight, courting mainstream media from around the UK and Europe to promote the myth that he operated a successful commercial tea plantation, under the business name of 'The Wee Tea Plantation'. He falsely claimed to have university qualifications in agronomy and science, and that he was a tea expert, which enabled him to develop more effective methods of growing tea in a Scottish climate. He pretended to have received non-existent international tea awards and industry accolades to proclaim his branded products as being the best tea in the world. To further bolster his credentials, he falsely claimed to have served in the army and was a multi-millionaire. His strong media presence portrayed a man of integrity, expertise and reputation, which helped facilitate sales of his 'Scottish' tea as a premium product at greatly inflated prices to high-end hotels and retail establishments in Edinburgh, London and Paris.

Through extensive investigation, it was identified that Robinson had initially sourced a quantity of tea plants from a nursery in England, with which to establish a plantation at his home in Perthshire, thereafter ordering the vast majority of plants from a grower in Italy, at a fraction of the cost he charged to buyers. This also proved to be an elaborate part of his fraudulent scheme and offered credibility to his claims that he could source sufficient quantities of tea grown in Scotland to meet with customer demands. The truth was, he purchased quantities of world teas from wholesale suppliers in the south of England, which he simply repackaged, labelled and sold under the falsehood of being grown at plantations in Scotland.

Robinson defrauded consumers and businesses, who had bought 550kg of his fraudulent tea to the value of £278,634, and tea growers who had purchased plants from him to the value of £274,354.

During the investigation, SFCIU investigators interviewed 81 witnesses, noted 110 witness statements, and seized 446 evidential productions, which unravelled the various falsehoods Robinson had perpetrated in the setting up and operation of his fraudulent scheme. This included speaking to many of the journalists who had initially reported on Robinson's story as a successful entrepreneur.

Unique to this case, Aberdeen University undertook an ionic study on samples of tea sold by Robinson, which greatly assisted the investigation in forensically identifying that it was highly unlikely to have been grown in Scotland. Police Scotland supported the investigation

in obtaining banking warrants to seize and examine Robinson's accounts, which provided supporting evidence identifying victims of his crimes and the illicit profits gained by him.

Between 6 and 29 May 2025, at Falkirk Sheriff Court, Robinson was subject to trial by jury and found guilty by unanimous verdict on two counts of fraud and was remanded in custody. He will also be subject to a hearing under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, with a view to seizing assets obtained through his criminal activity.

There are many victims of Robinson's fraudulent scheme. A number of people, duped by his convincing façade, had invested substantial personal savings to establish their own plantations in the hope that it would provide a substantial return, only to find it had been sold to them on false promises. There remains a number of legitimate growers of tea in Scotland, who are determined to establish a commercially viable enterprise over the fullness of time. By his actions, Robinson has tarnished a fledgling industry before it has had a chance to gain a foothold in this country, and harmed the reputation of Scottish grown products.

On 25 June 2025, Robinson was sentenced at Stirling Sheriff Court to three and a half years in prison.

Crime Prevention Strategy

Prevention and enforcement are complementary approaches to tackle food crime. It is multi-faceted and consistent with the Unit's remit. Delivery is per the food crime prevention strategy plan which is monitored throughout the TTCG process and community impact assessments bespoke to ongoing investigations.

A prevention activity of note was the launch of the online [FSS Food Crime Risk Profiling Tool](#), which offers a free risk assessment to businesses to help identify and mitigate any vulnerabilities. To promote this FSS hosted a webinar on food crime prevention attended by 230 professionals across the food sector with expert guest speakers providing key inputs on reducing risk to businesses.

Multi-Agency and Partnership Working

SFCIU has developed links with stakeholders and partners to:

- Develop an enhanced intelligence picture
- Understand risk and vulnerabilities in the food, drink and animal feed supply chains
- Undertake joint enforcement, disruptive or preventative activity
- Undertake horizon scanning activity and identify emerging risks
- Ensure our food is safe and authentic
- Ensure responsible food businesses are enabled to thrive

Some recent and ongoing partnership activity with industry, law enforcement and regulators are also detailed below.

Industry

- SFCIU has developed a long standing relationship with Food Industry Intelligence Network (FIIN), an industry group of the largest UK food retailers, which has been beneficial for understanding food crime risks. Previous joint work has been an enabler for a necessary change in EU legislation.
- SFCIU maintains regular contact, including through established work groups, with various industry representative bodies, including Quality Meat Scotland (QMS), Safe and

Local Suppliers Approval (SALSA), Red Tractor, Scottish Grocer's Federation, Scottish Food and Drink Federation, and the Scottish Whisky Association.

Law Enforcement and Regulators

- SFCIU are active members on a number of multi-agency working groups which allows for intelligence sharing and forensic support for ongoing investigations.
- SFCIU provides the intelligence support to Scottish local authority food teams and the Animal and Plant Health Agency in Scotland.

International Partners

- SFCIU is currently a lead agency for Operation OPSON, which is a EUROPOL and INTERPOL joint ongoing operation targeting fake and substandard food and beverages. In November 2024, SFCIU hosted the annual Operation OPSON meeting in Edinburgh which attracted representative from over 40 countries, industry stakeholders, Police Scotland, HMRC and UK Government agencies. The European Commission was represented by officials from the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and the Directorate-General for Health & Food Safety.
- A representative from OLAF attends the SFCIU Food Crime TTCCG.
- SFCIU currently chairs the Global Alliance on Food Crime made up of membership from Australia, Canada, USA, UK and New Zealand. Members are working together on; co-ordinated operational and strategic initiatives, sharing intelligence with the aim of reducing the threat from food crime, reducing the vulnerability to industry and consumers and building domestic and global capability.

Future Activities

Future activities will continue be intelligence-led and processed through the SFCIU Intelligence Bureau. Horizon scanning data will continue to be assessed by SFCIU analysts with a view to meet the challenges and demands of the future by anticipating emerging issues and presenting solutions for consideration in the TTCCG process.