

IFST COVID-19 Learnings and Observations - September 2020

Institute of Food Science and Technology is the UK's leading professional body for those involved in all aspects of food science and technology. Our charitable object is to support the advancement and application of food science and food technology for the benefit, safety and health of the public.

To respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, IFST set up a COVID-19 Advisory Group comprised of some of our most experienced professional members. They have been actively engaged in preparing guidance and signposting to trusted resources generated by authoritative bodies.

A COVID-19 knowledge hub was created on our IFST website to provide free access to these resources with areas explicitly targeted for consumers, for smaller food businesses and larger food businesses. We have hosted webinars to offer opportunities for discussion and live Q&A to promote knowledge sharing and made these available to view after the event.

<https://www.ifst.org/resources-policy/covid-19-knowledge-hub>

IFST COVID-19 Learnings and Observations

The learnings and observations below are based upon inputs collected from webinar discussions, member questions and discussions within our IFST special interest groups and our IFST COVID-19 Advisory Group.

Government measures to mitigate disruptions to the food supply chain caused by the pandemic

Governments were slow and reactive at first during the early months of 2020, with minimal facilitation of the operational needs of the food system to support the food security of the UK population. This appears to be a direct result of the lack of priority given by the UK Government to food security as a critical element in national security. As an example, it was foreseeable that measures to slow down the spread of disease (particularly social distancing) would restrict the ability of food businesses to function at full capacity - as well as result in consumers buying additional food and other consumer goods supplies to cope with the pandemic and then as a consequence of lockdown. Earlier recognition of these consequences and closer working with the food system stakeholders, especially on food security interdependencies, might have reduced the effects of panic buying.

We believe food supply chain workers were not identified as key workers early enough, which may have contributed to shortages of supply. Early uncertainty about the ability of furloughed food service workers to work in alternative jobs across the food system, for example in food manufacturers or retailers and in enforcement supporting roles, along with a little or no mapping of potential skills gaps relating to food, meant that skilled capacity was

lost. In contrast, healthcare professional key workers were encouraged to return from retirement.

It is worth highlighting that food shortages could have been worse were it not for food businesses stockpiling key ingredients and resources before January 2020 in anticipation of a hard Brexit. This additional buffer capacity smoothed out some of the supply chain shocks in the system.

Significant issues occurred with access to sufficient affordable healthy food, and some problems still remain for many parts of the UK population. It is still unclear for many individuals as to who can apply for food vouchers and other food access support. Some vulnerable groups, for example, the blind and those with some severe mobility issues like motor neuron disease and multiple sclerosis and their supporting families, are feeling left out. We understand free school meal / electronic vouchers for vulnerable children and pregnant mothers are still not reaching all families in need. Some families were waiting 2-3 weeks to receive them, and some not receiving them at all.

Instigating food parcels and streamlining access to on-line shopping and delivery with designated retailers for shielded groups was a good initiative. However, local councils had no guidance on how to execute this food parcel initiative leading to delays. There were also little/no best practice guidelines provided for them to follow on food parcel composition, on safe and hygienic food distribution set-up or overall management of the initiative. The fundamental lack of food hygiene and food standards resource capacity in some local authorities confounded this situation further.

There has been a significant increase in foodbank demand which is expected to continue to grow as the furlough support and rent amnesty comes to an end. Fresh food items are less likely to be available through this channel, only ambient stable and staple foods, which will impact accessibility to a balanced healthy diet. The number of food banks is increasing in response to this demand and a significant number of other types of free meals preparation/delivery operations have become established during the pandemic.

We are concerned that many of these food provision operations have little experience of food hygiene or food safety and are often being run in facilities with no food hygiene prerequisites in place. Some food operations have diversified from, for example, event catering using freshly supplied ingredients producing meals consumed on the same day into large scale ready meal production operations holding raw materials stocks and preparing food products which are intended to be stored and cooked or re-heated at home.

These repurposed operations do not have the in-house expertise pertinent to either the changes in their operational processes and the product formats they are supplying. For example, food labelling and allergens declaration, setting appropriate shelf life use by dates and providing validated storage/cooking instructions, and monitoring food stocks and facility prerequisites such as pest control. The 'Here to Help' campaign by FSA late this summer is now providing some helpful resources for FBOs with repurposed operations. The lack of local authority enforcement resources is however effectively permitting these food providers to operate with inadequate food hygiene controls and gaps in food standards compliance in place, even though they are often supplying the most vulnerable groups in society.

Government food system stakeholder engagement and communication

We are aware that there was a focus by central Government with national retailers and trade bodies on the food sector to ensure national food security. However, we were unaware of a coordinated approach to others in the food system affected by the pandemic outside this group. The food banks mentioned and food business that re-purposed to assist feeding the lockdown population did not benefit from a coordinated approach. We believe that this led to a lack of guidance. In addition, enforcement approaches were not, and continue not to be, aligned – between developed nations and England, or between the various local authorities.

The publication by the FSA of the quantitative risk assessment was well-timed and helped FBOs to ensure the steps they were taking to manage any potential food safety risks. The activities and reports issued by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) on COVID- 19 from March 2020 onwards have been of value in providing background context. Guidance from Food Standards Scotland was beneficial to all food businesses wherever they operate as it looked at the issues operators in the food system were having to deal with in the round. This sectoral approach to food covering food safety and the operational impacts of the pandemic which also highlighted occupational health and safety alongside public health implications was advantageous.

In contrast, early in the pandemic the advice given in England and Wales was more departmentally segmented forcing FBOs to visit multiple websites seeking out either healthcare sector related advice or generic advice and drawing their conclusions on how best to apply this advice in the food sector. This did not recognise that all players in the food system have their own unique food safety challenges and duty of care that is impacted on by any change within the working environment. Large operators have their own in-house teams to manage this often-conflicting risk; smaller businesses were left more vulnerable.

We do believe an earlier approach that dealt with sectors of economic activity as opposed to advice that was aligned by government departmental responsibilities would have benefited the food system and other sectors. Advice from BEIS OPSS for food service businesses has now been developed and updated as issues arose and need for food sector guidance recognised. More recently, the 'Here to Help' campaign by FSA late this summer is now providing helpful resources.

An ability for the whole food system to be dealt with in a coordinated way we believe would have supported the food system more comprehensively through COVID-19 and indeed at other times. This is especially true of SMEs in the food system who rely on their local authorities for advice and guidance. We know this local authority resource is constrained within normal operations. This capacity challenge became critical for engagement with food operations on the ground as EHOs stepped up into their broader public health roles. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted that there is no alternative route to get to FBO SMEs and provide them with supporting holistic advice in a time of rapid change.

An all-inclusive approach to the food sector could, we believe, have driven a more effective timely public-private interaction mitigating the impact of the overnight closure of food service supply and allowed for the repurposing of these resources.

As an example, milk production previously contracted for food service was being thrown away – unnecessary wasted resources which could have been re-directed and processed

into butter and skimmed milk powder. A lack of infrastructural capacity to repurpose excess liquid milk at short notice exacerbated the problem. Other similar examples continue to exist – artisan cheese makers disposing of cold store stock due to lack of food service customer demand.

The demand for eggs in food retail significantly increased. However, eggs for food service are not usually Lion marked so could not go into retail without concessions and the cardboard supply needed to make egg boxes was diverted into making cartons for on-line delivery resulting in a return to using plastic egg cartons. Food businesses focused on the wholesale market cannot switch immediately to retail markets if stocks of retail packaging are unavailable or the processing equipment cannot accommodate retail packing configurations – a real pinch-point in this crisis. The impact of the supply of non-food components on food supply are not well understood or considered and we would recommend these aspects should to be given greater recognition when considering overall food supply resilience.

Greater coordination and intervention by DEFRA, FSA and local authorities working with the food supply chain could have played a more active role in helping all adapt faster in the face of the unprecedented shift in market dynamics.

The scale of the food supply chain and its importance to the daily lives of millions in the UK is reflected in the number of government departments and agencies that have responsibilities and legitimate interest and involvement with the food supply chain. The intricacies and duplication of responsibilities across UK and devolved nation's government bodies complicates and confounds engagement and communication. This divergence of responsibility and accountability, without an overarching UK Government ministerial lead for food, has not helped at a time when we have need for agile, responsive and coordinated activity by stakeholders in the food supply chain. This need is critical at a time of rapid change but also on-going.

Suggested mitigating measures and approaches to support food system resilience to further impacts from the current pandemic

From our experience and from our above observations, we would make the following suggestions and recommendations:

There is a critical need for agile, flexible and reactive UK government involvement through novel forms of public-private engagement processes. Engagement based upon a spirit of common endeavour that crosses current government departmental boundaries and involves relevant actors from each segment of the food system as well as relevant technical service providers to the food system would provide the timely food system insights and oversight needed to judge the impact of multiple factors and events to ensure protection of the public and the supply chain securing food system resilience. We believe that this would address the current challenges which duplicates efforts, wasting limited resources on all sides, confounds communication and prevents oversight. This would also address the ongoing need for support in specific areas of the food sector due to the exceptional shift in

supply vs demand between different channels of the food system. For example, food service and hospitality have minimal demand at present, outside of staycations or emergent direct-to-consumer models. Food retail have rationalised the breadth of food available on their shelves and there is continuing increased demand for foods such as eggs, meat, dairy and bread/bakery.

Labour resource issues continue with exceptional movements in labour availability and a lack of access to professional skilled resources in UK. There has been no obvious consideration of the need for the food industry and wider food system to have access to skilled and unskilled labour resource needs in the same way as other key worker areas during the COVID-19 pandemic. Skilled food safety professionals in the public and private sector have been furloughed or laid off when these are the skills needed on the ground to help small businesses, NGOs and charities, as well as local authority led initiatives, adapt to supply food safely to all communities in the UK. The impact of this will significantly increase as UK agriculture and horticulture requires labour through the coming months (e.g. crop picking), and the food system as a whole, including enforcement requires increased levels of specialist technical and logistics resources to manage EU Exit e.g. meat hygiene inspectors, EHO, TSO, port health authority inspectors, veterinarians and public analysts. ***The inherent lack of recognition in the UK of the need for skilled food professionals as part of a licence to operate for a food business operation will impede UK resilience to maintain and improve UK food security and effectively adapt to the changing and increasing demands of the coming months and years.***

More proactive alignment across UK including devolved nations is needed, especially regarding the regulatory approaches taken and guidance provided. Differences in public health management requirements relating to COVID-19 between local authorities and between devolved nations has been and continues to be confusing and difficult to manage for all business sectors. Approaches to requirements for COVID-19 risk assessments, re-opening of food businesses and enforcement visits has differed. The current multi-agency models which cross UK and the devolved nations for food policy, regulation development and enforcement bring unnecessary and unhelpful complexity when they are supplied by a common food system and are in place to support a common population. A clear and aligned structure for food operation registration, development of food policy and regulation, enforcement of food operations and the food products they supply, and oversight of the interdependencies of food supply chain operations across the wider UK is urgently needed to ensure UK food system resilience given the coming system challenges of EU Exit, further waves of public health issues (flu and COVID-19), and likely severe weather events.

There is a proliferation of rapid scientific publication without full peer review in the current COVID-19 situation. There are multiple unhelpful articles being published relating to food, food packaging and SARS-CoV-2, especially in pre-publication releases which are not scientifically robust.

The Parliamentary Office for Science and Technology provide useful resources as to how to understand research evidence. They are also providing useful articles relating to COVID-19, including an article on the effects of COVID-19 on the food supply system in July 2020. However, IFST would ask that further guidance is generated to facilitate appropriate interpretation and judgement of the robustness of such science publications to avoid

potential misinformation – for the scientific community and for the lay reader. We need government science to help industry and the public in this current crisis in science validation, consultation and peer-review without impacting the need for speed in dissemination of new findings.

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