RESEARCH PROJECTS

Small and Micro FBO Tracking Survey Wave 4

IFF Research

Keywords: Behaviour and perception

https://doi.org/10.46756/001c.123489

FSA Research and Evidence

Small and Micro Food Business Operator (FBO) Tracker Survey: Wave 4 (2023)

Food Standards Agency food.gov.uk

IFF Research

FBO perceptions of the FSA

98% ..of businesses were aware of the FSA...

...and **32%** of businesses **knew a lot about** the FSA

30% ..of businesses who had heard of the FSA **had contact with them** in the last 12 months

94% felt the FSA works hard to ensure food safety standards are maintained

93% felt that the FSA can be trusted to use any information businesses give them appropriately

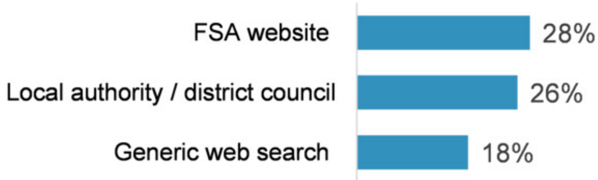
90% felt the FSA is good at identifying where poor standards exist

Those who contacted the FSA rated these key metrics out of 10:

- **8.8: Trustworthiness**
- **8.7: Ease of use / access**
- **8.5: Clarity of comms**
- **8.5: Approachability**

Sources of information

85% of businesses felt informed about regulations affecting their business. **31%** felt **very** informed, rising from 27% in 2021.



Information provided to customers

91% Provided info on allergens in food

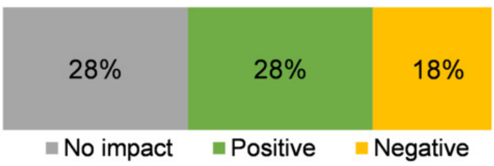
90% Provided info on cross contamination

An increase from 79% in 2021

Businesses most often communicated allergen information **verbally on request (47%)** or in writing as a **separate notice on display (39%)**

Awareness and assumed impact of smarter regulation

Assumed impact of smarter regulation



17% of businesses were aware of Smarter Regulation

20% thought changes will have a minimal impact on business

9% thought it will benefit customers

1. Executive Summary

Background

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has been tracking small and micro Food Business Operator (FBO) attitudes towards food-related topics, and trust in the FSA and food system, since 2018. This has helped inform engagement and intervention activity targeted at businesses with fewer than 50 staff. This report comprises results of the fourth wave of this now biennial tracking survey, with previous waves conducted in 2018, 2019, and 2021.

Objectives

1. To ‘unpack’ attitudes towards regulation and deepen insights and knowledge of small and micro enterprises,
2. To measure trust in the FSA and extent to which FSA is considered a modern, accountable regulator.

Method

A total of 556 interviews were conducted via a Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) methodology between October and November 2023. All interviews were with small (10-49 employees) and micro (less than 10 employees) FBOs based in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales.

The sample was selected from the FSA’s business database which was matched by company name and address using a commercial sample provider (Market Location). The sample was drawn using country, size, Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) rating, and sector targets. The data was weighted to be representative of the in-scope micro and small FBO population across England, Northern Ireland, and Wales at the time of sampling.

Key findings

Online sales and use of third-party platforms

The number of FBOs who take food orders via their websites has remained stable at around a quarter (26%).

Over three quarters of FBOs now have a social media presence (77% up from 71% in 2021) but only 13% of FBOs use social media accounts to take food orders. The most common social media accounts in 2023 were Facebook (73%) and Instagram (44%).

The use of third-party platforms to sell food products has remained consistent at 14% of all FBOs. The most common third-party platform used by businesses were Just Eat (7%) and Deliveroo (7%), closely followed by Uber Eats (6%).

Four in five businesses that trade online reported that online sales represented less than a quarter of total sales (78%).

Barriers facing FBOs

FBOs reported that the most common barriers to the success of their business were: changes in consumer behaviour and demand due to the cost of living (71%); high inflation or increased interest rates (70%); and energy costs (60%). These top concerns are markedly different from 2021 where the most common threat was the availability of food supplies or disruption in the supply chain (54%) and changes in consumer behaviour and demand due to COVID-19 (55%).

Potential impacts of Smart Regulation

FBOs were typically unaware of the government's commitment to Smarter Regulation (UK Government's review and reform of retained EU laws) (81% unaware; 17% aware).

Information and guidance

Nine-in-ten FBOs that sold food directly to consumers provided information on allergens contained in the food that they sell, in line with findings in the last wave (91%). The majority (72%) of those who didn't provide this information, sold pre packaged food and so wouldn't have provided this information to consumers directly.

Of those that did provide allergen information, the majority provide information on allergens that might be present due to cross contamination (91%), a notable increase since 2021 (79%).

The most common way to provide allergens information was verbally on request (47% up from 40%), and in writing as a separate notice on display (39% up from 33%).and provide information on allergens that might be present due to cross contamination (91%)

Almost all FBOs provided some form of training to their staff on food safety guidelines and regulations (93%) which has decreased from 2021 (98%).

Experiences and perceptions of the FSA

Awareness of the FSA was high with almost all FBOs in 2023 aware of the FSA, consistent with previous waves (between 97%-98% in all waves) and over four in every five FBOs were confident in the FSA to conduct its core objectives.

Three in ten businesses had had some form of contact with the FSA in the last 12 months in 2023 (30%), down from four in ten in 2021 (40%). Of those who did communicate with the FSA, high ratings were given for the FSA's approachability, ease of access, clarity of communication and trustworthiness (between 8.5 and 8.8 out of 10), in line with 2021.

Confidence in the food safety system

FBOs expressed high confidence in food safety and hygiene standards and regulations with at least eight in ten agreeing that: regulations are effective at protecting the public from food related risks (95%), are reasonable for food businesses to meet (94%), are reasonable to retain information or records for (91%), are enforced in a fair and constructive manner (90%), add value to their business (86%), and are easy and practical to comply with (86%).

Confidence in food businesses in the UK was also high with more than four in five confident that UK food businesses ensure: food is safe to eat (89%), unsafe food is withdrawn/recalled correctly (88%), information on food labels is accurate (88%), FHRS ratings are displayed (87%), records are kept of where food is from and this information can be shown on demand (83%), and clear and accurate information on allergens is provided on non pre-packaged food (82%).

Business experience of food safety processes and interventions

The proportion of businesses who reported receiving any FSA intervention in the last 12 months has increased since 2021: Over half received an inspection (56%, up from 41%), almost a third received advice or training on food regulations (30%, up from 21%), and 16% received information on registration or re-registration premises (up from 10%).

Food crimes

FBO awareness of the National Food Crimes Unit was low with less than one in five being aware (17%) similar to 2021 (20%). Similarly, the proportion of FBOs who had been a victim of a food crime in the last 12 months remained low (8%; 7% in 2021). Being supplied or offered a food product believed to have been stolen was the most common food crime experienced (25% of FBOs that experienced food crime).

Importing and Exporting

Only 3% of FBOs were importing and 1% were exporting in 2023. Since 2018, the proportion of businesses importing or exporting has decreased but in 2023, rates were similar to 2021 (4% importing, 1% exporting). Businesses that had changed their importing practices in the last 12 months suggested that the UK's exit from the EU, changes to import costs, and business growth were the leading factors which caused their businesses to change importing practices.

2. Background and methodology

Background to the survey and research objectives

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has been tracking small and micro Food Business Operator (FBO) attitudes towards food-related topics, and trust in the FSA and food system, since 2018. This has helped inform engagement and intervention activity targeted at businesses with fewer than 50 staff.

The survey was initially developed to assess the perceived impact of changes as a result of the UK's exit from the European Union (EU), and the Achieving Business Compliance (ABC) programme, which aims to modernise the regulation of food businesses in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Since then, it has evolved to regularly track small and micro FBO views on a range of subjects.

This represents the fourth wave of the tracking survey, and covers the following aims:

- To 'unpack' attitudes towards regulation and deepen insights and knowledge of small and micro enterprises
- To measure trust in the FSA and extent to which FSA is considered a modern, accountable regulator

This report comprises results of the fourth wave of this now biennial tracking survey, with previous waves conducted in 2018, 2019, and 2021. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey was not carried out in 2020 and from thereon, the survey became biennial.

Research methodology

Fieldwork was conducted by IFF Research, an independent research company. Following a period of cognitive fieldwork where the questionnaire was tested among a small subset of businesses, a total of 556 interviews were conducted via a Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) methodology. This included a period of pilot fieldwork in October 2023, where 14 responses were captured, followed by mainstage fieldwork throughout November. All interviews were with small (10-49 employees) and micro (less than 10 employees) FBOs based in England, Northern Ireland, and Wales. The interviews lasted 29 minutes on average.

The sample was selected from the FSA's business database which was matched by company name and address using a commercial sample provider (Market Location). The sample was drawn using country, size, Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) rating, and sector targets. Screener questions at the start of the survey ensured that only in-scope businesses completed the survey. To be in scope, an FBO needed to have at least one site, have less than 49 employees. In line with the approach taken in 2018, 2019, and 2021, FBOs in Wales and Northern Ireland were over-sampled to ensure there was a robust sample for analysis in these nations. The wave 4 targets were the same as those used in Wave 3. These targets are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview targets by sector, rating, and number of employees

Sector grouping	England	Northern Ireland	Wales	Total
Manufacturing	30	10	10	50
Wholesale	40	10	10	60
Retail	130	20	20	170
Accommodation	30	10	10	50
Food and beverage service activities	270	50	50	370
FHRS rating	England	Northern Ireland	Wales	Total
0 to 2	30	10	10	50
3	40	10	10	60
4	80	20	20	120
5	270	50	50	370
Awaiting inspection / Exempt	80	10	10	100
Number of employees	England	Northern Ireland	Wales	Total
Fewer than 10	410	70	70	550
Between 10 and 19	60	20	20	100
Between 20 and 49	30	10	10	50
Total	500	100	100	700

In line with previous waves, the data was weighted to be representative of the micro and small FBO population across England, Northern Ireland, and Wales at the time of sampling. IFF Research obtained information on the underlying population of businesses eligible for the tracker in terms of sector and size from NOMIS on 26 July 2023. The most recent business population data available was filtered on small and micro FBOs (i.e., less than 50 employees) operating in England, Northern Ireland and Wales and sectors in-scope for the research (using the UK Standard Industrial Classification (SIC)).[1]

Once eligible business population counts had been obtained, the FHRS ratings in England, Northern Ireland and Wales was applied to derive the number of eligible businesses in rating groupings.

More details can be found in the supplementary technical report.

Notes on the report

Throughout the report references to business size are based on number of employees unless otherwise specified. Sole trader refers to a self-employed business owner with no employees.

The term 'service activities' is used throughout the report as shorthand for the 'food and beverage service activities' sector. This sector incorporates restaurants, cafes, pubs, and other catering businesses.

When percentages are provided in the text for sub-groups such as by size and sector, the sub-group percentage shown is statistically significantly different to the average of those not in this sub-group, at the 95% confidence level. The phrasing "most likely", "more likely than average" or "particularly likely" etc. is used as a shorthand for this. All differences reported are statistically significant unless otherwise stated.

It should be noted that the base size for some groups is particularly small (lower than 50). Although findings reported for these subgroups are statistically significant, caution should be taken when interpreting these results due to small base size. The base size for subgroups are even lower when questions are routed to a subset of respondents.

Unless explicitly noted, all findings are based on weighted data. Unweighted bases (the number of responses from which the findings are derived) are displayed on tables and charts as appropriate, to give an

1 The sectors chosen as in-scope is consistent with those sampled in waves 1 and 2, with the exception of Primary Food Producers (who were excluded in wave 3) and sectors that specialised in the production of animal feed. Table 2 in the appendices presents the SIC codes of these sectors and how they will be grouped during fieldwork and analysis.

indication of the robustness of results. The only exception to this is where questions have a low base size due to survey routing (asked to fewer than 50 respondents). In these instances, results are reported in a qualitative style, and unweighted figures are used (e.g. *6 out of 40 businesses*).

On charts, arrows are typically used to denote a significant difference between 2023 and 2021 findings, and asterisks (*) are used to indicate a significant difference between a subgroup and the overall percentage. Please note that results may not always sum to 100% due to rounding and/or due to businesses being able to select more than one answer to a question.

3. Online Sales and the use of third-party platforms

This chapter outlines the online presence of companies and how they use their own website, social media, and third-party platforms when taking orders for food. It examines whether FBOs have a website, use a third-party website, or social media to take orders. Lastly, it explores how online sales have changed since 2021 when national business restrictions responding to the Covid-19 pandemic caused these rates to increase.

Companies use of their own website

Over half of businesses had a website (53%), a decrease from 60% in 2021. As shown in Figure 3.1, businesses in the manufacturing and accommodation sector were the most likely to have a website (93% and 92% respectively). Compared with 2021, the proportion of businesses in the manufacturing sector with a website has increased (93% from 65% in 2021).

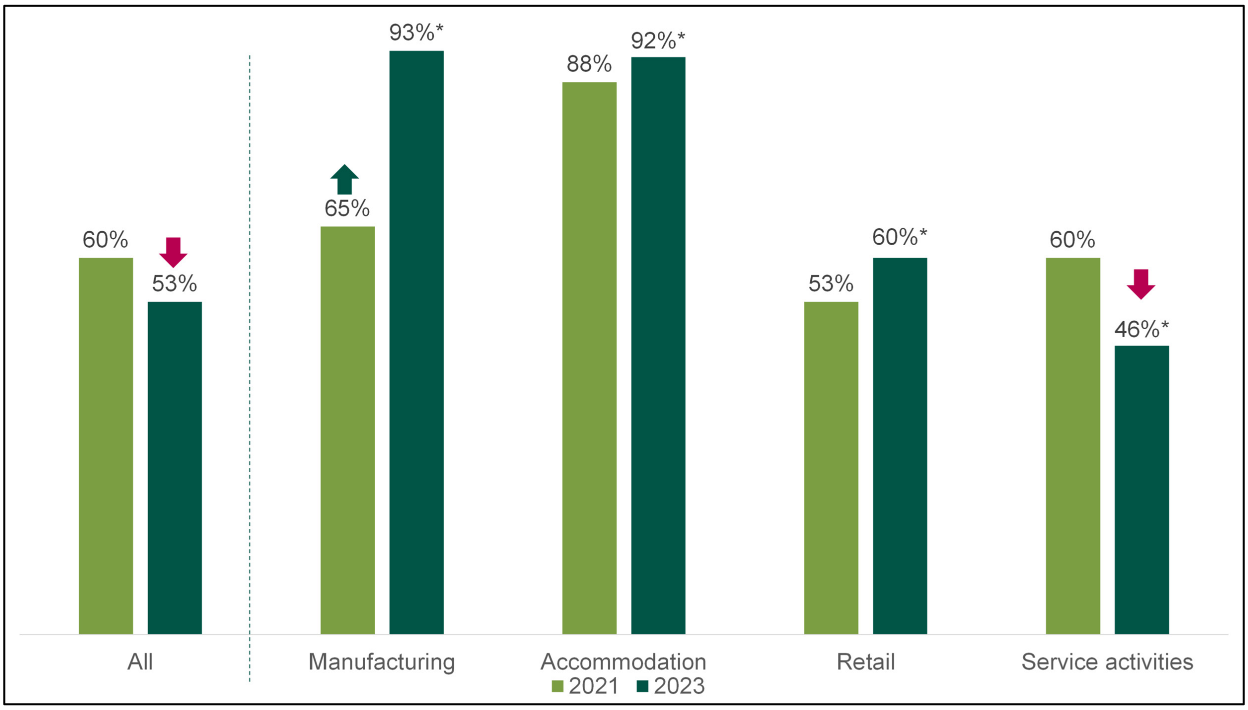


Figure 3.1. Wave-on-wave difference in the proportion of businesses with a website by sector

Base: All businesses 2023 (556). All businesses 2021 (700); Manufacturing (2023: 51, 2021: 114), Accommodation (2023:59, 2021:110), Retail (2023: 198, 2021:138), Service activities (2023:206, 2021:256). Wholesale sector excluded as 2023 base was 42. Arrows indicate significant difference from 2021.* indicates significant difference from the mean.

Businesses with 25-49 employees were more likely to have a website than those with less than 10 employees (91% compared to 46%).

Taking food orders through websites

FBOs were asked whether they used their website to take food orders. In 2023, 14% of businesses reported they used their website to take food orders, a small drop from 15% in 2021. As shown in Figure 3.2, businesses in the accommodation sector were the least likely (3%).

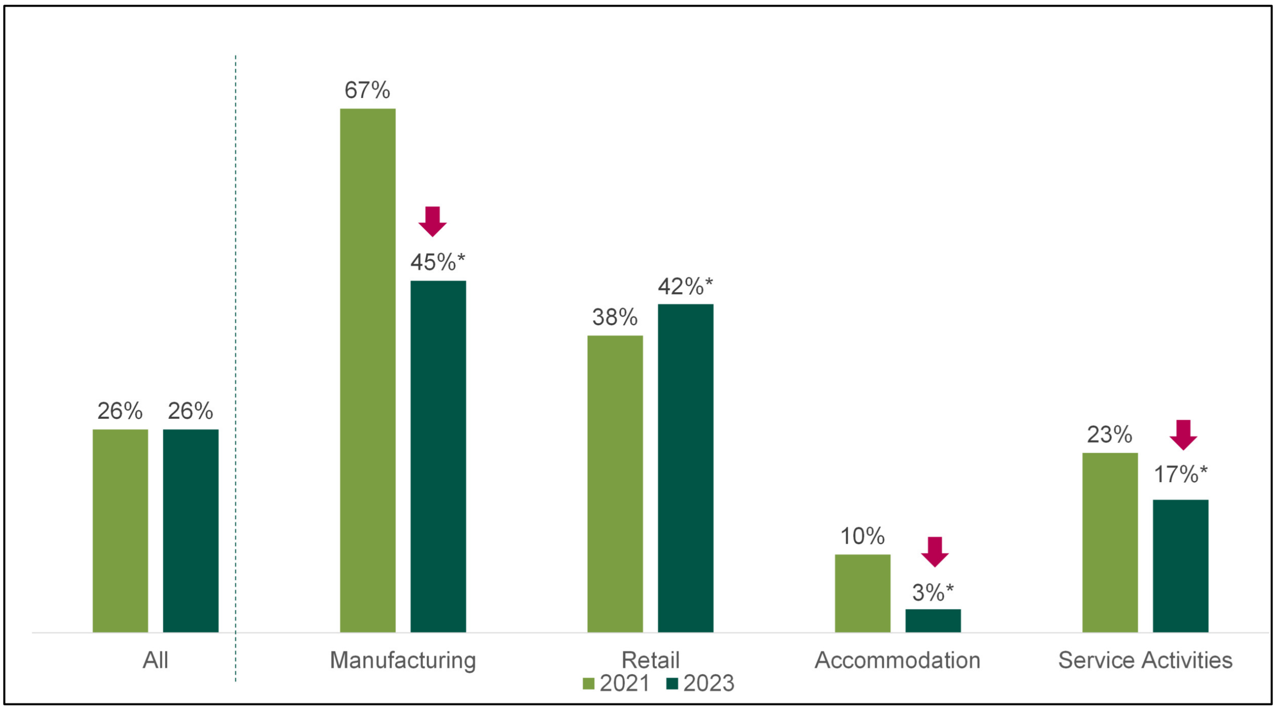


Figure 3.2. Wave-on-wave difference in the proportion of businesses who take food orders through their website

Base: All businesses with a website 2023 (352). All businesses with a website 2021 (470). Manufacturing (2023:47, 2021: 72) (47), Retail (2023:104, 2021:77), Accommodation (2023:53, 2021: 95), Service activities (2023:116, 2021: 156) Arrows indicate significant difference from 2021. * indicates significant difference from the mean

Businesses' use of social media

All businesses were asked which, if any, social media accounts their business used. In 2023, more than three-quarters (77%) of businesses had some form of social media presence, an increase from 71% in 2021. As shown in Figure 3.3, the most common social media accounts in 2023 were Facebook (73%) and Instagram (44%).

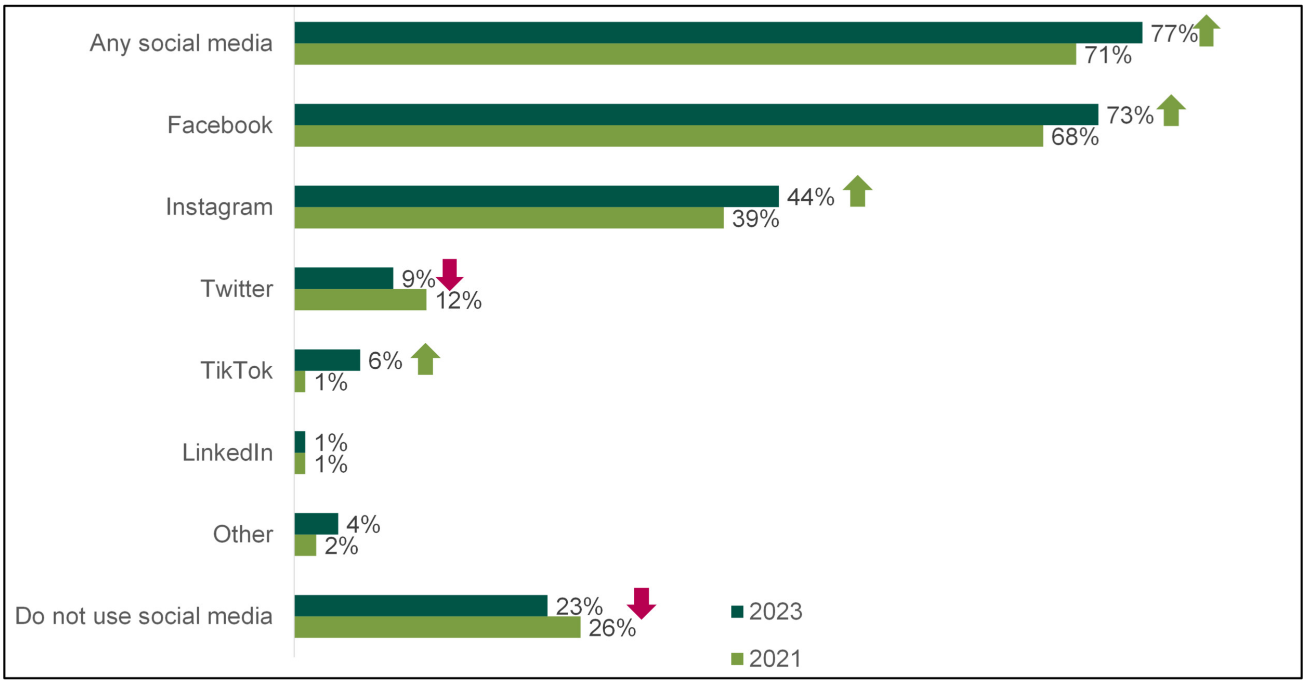


Figure 3.3. Wave-on-wave difference in social media accounts used by businesses

Base: All businesses 2023 (556). All businesses (mainstage only) 2021 (668).

Service activities and manufacturing businesses were the most likely to have any social media account (80% and 77% respectively).

Businesses' use of social media to take orders

An eighth (13%) of all businesses used their social media accounts to take orders, while the majority did not (87%). This is a similar level to 2021 where 11% took orders through social media accounts. Businesses that did take orders through social media mostly did so through direct message (16%), followed by social media ecommerce function (5%). Businesses within the retail sector were the most likely to take orders through direct messages (35%), while those in accommodation were the least likely (1%).

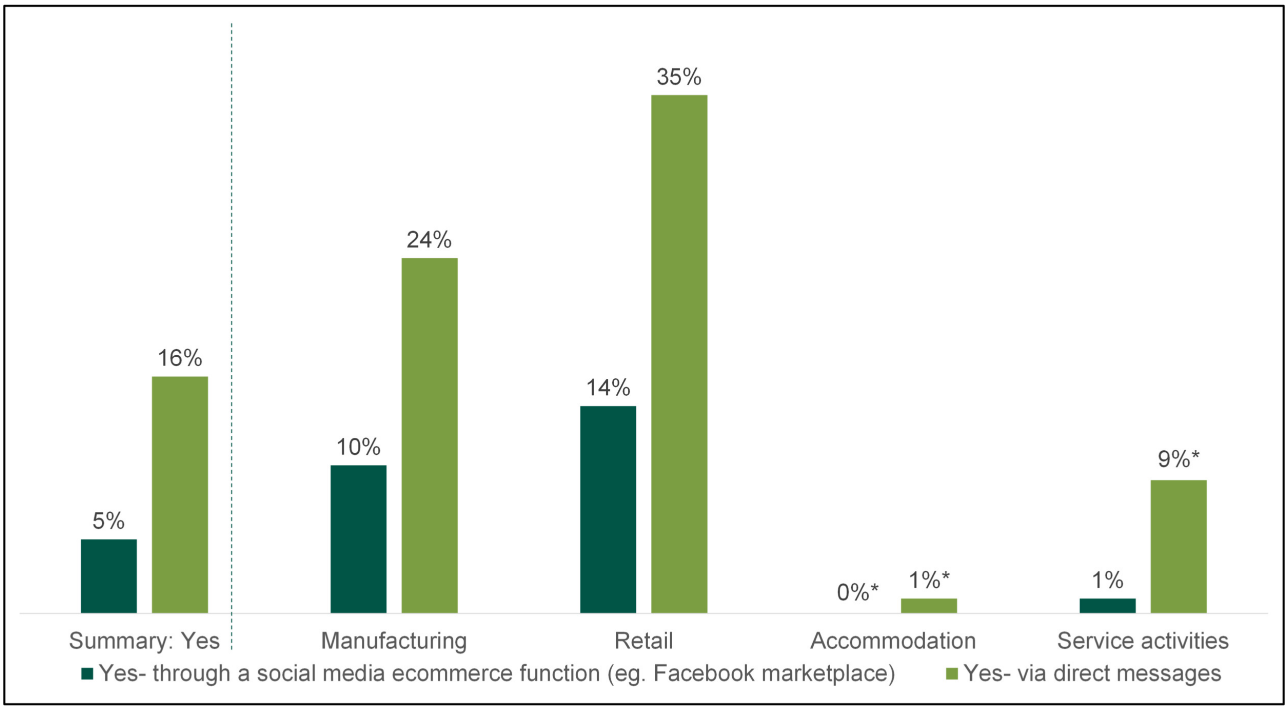


Figure 3.4. Proportion of businesses that take food orders through social media in 2023

Base: All businesses with a social media account. (425). Manufacturing (38), Retail (142), Accommodation (45), Service activities (176). * indicates significant difference from the mean

The use of third-party platforms

Businesses were asked what third-party platforms, if any, they use to sell food products. In 2023, 14% of businesses used third-party platforms to sell food, in line with findings from 2021 (15%). The most common third-party platform used by businesses were Just Eat (7%) and Deliveroo (7%), closely followed by Uber Eats (6%).

Service activities businesses were more likely to use some form of third-party platform (18%) compared to any other sector, with accommodation being the least likely to (0%). Manufacturing businesses were most likely to use ‘other’ third-party platforms (10%) compared to retail and service activities (2%). Manufacturing and service activities were most likely to use Just Eat (10% for both) and Deliveroo (9% and 10% respectively). According to business size, those with 25-49 employees were the most likely to use Deliveroo (17%), whilst those with 10-24 and less than 10 were less likely (2% and 8% respectively).

Businesses that trade online were asked if they did so using another business name. Only 1% of businesses reported that they did.

Online sales

All businesses that trade online were asked how much of their sales turnover was currently accounted for by online sales, across all platforms used. The majority (78%) said that less than a quarter of their sales turnover was accounted for by online sales, and a further 4% said less than a half.

All businesses that trade online and had been trading more than two years were asked if their online sales had changed since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic: almost a quarter (24%, down from 36% in 2021) said that it had increased, 15% said it had decreased (similar to 13% in 2021), and 26% said it stayed the same (up from 18%).

4. Barriers facing businesses

This chapter outlines the proportion of businesses that were facing barriers to their business and what these barriers were. It examines the list of concerns or threats posed to businesses in the survey and compares them to last wave. Lastly, it will examine the types of staff that businesses are struggling to recruit and how this compares to last wave.

Barriers facing businesses

Businesses were presented with a list of potential threats and concerns and asked to select which they felt were particular barriers to the success of their business. As seen in Figure 4.1, nearly all (91%) said at least one of the listed threats was a barrier to the success of their business, up from 86% in 2021. The most common barrier in 2023 was changes in consumer behaviour and demand due to the cost of living (71%), followed by high inflation and/or increased interest rates (70%) and energy costs (66%). Changes in consumer behaviour was also a common barrier in 2021, with 54% being concerned about the impact of COVID-19. In 2021 FBOs were also concerned about the availability of food supplies or disruption in the supply chain (55%), which was less of concern in 2023 (35%).

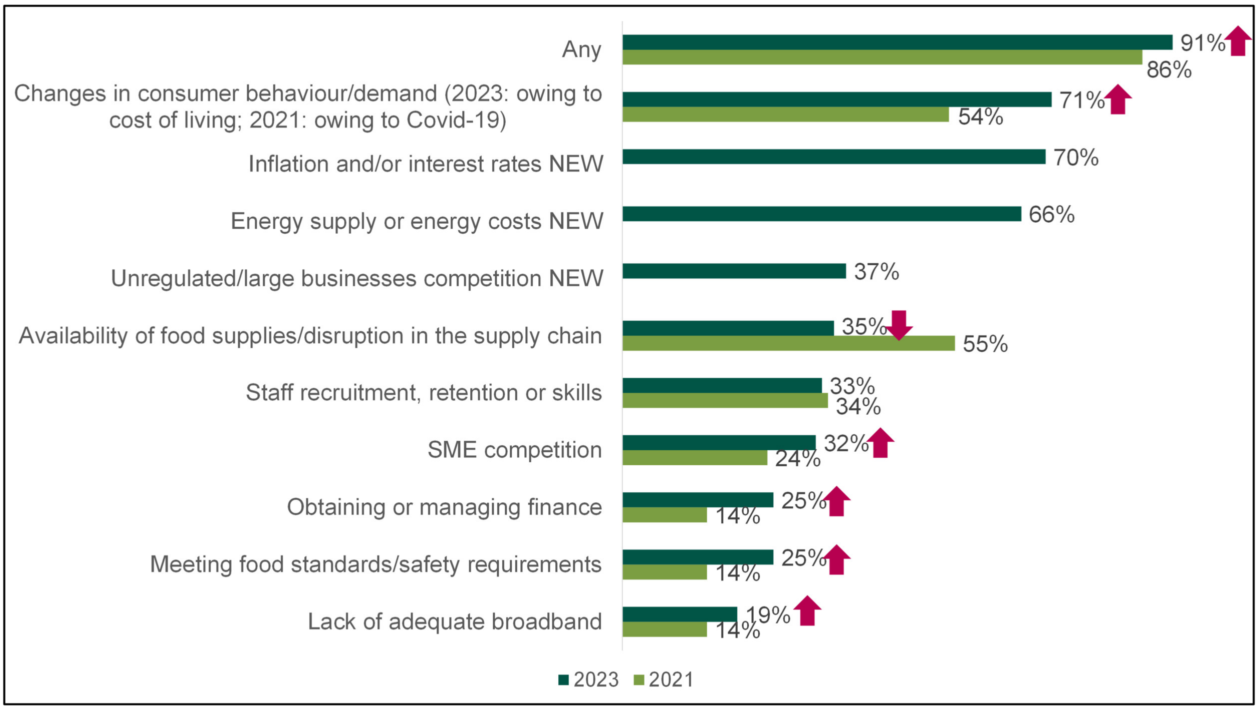


Figure 4.1. Threats and concerns that are barriers to the success of businesses

Base: All businesses 2023. (556). All businesses. 2021. (700). Arrows indicate significant difference from 2021. Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

Like in 2021, manufacturing businesses were the most likely to report they had at least one barrier to the success of their business (99%) in 2023, whilst businesses in the accommodation sector were the least likely to report any barriers (86%).

There were many differences in concerns, threats, and barriers by sector. Competition from unregulated businesses and/or large businesses dominating the market was more of a concern for Manufacturing (52%) and Retail (47%) FBOs, when compared to Accommodation (20%) and service activities (32%). Manufacturing businesses were also more concerned about the availability of food in the supply chain (54%) when compared to average (35%). Lastly, service activities FBOs were more likely to be struggling with recruitment (36%) than FBOs in retail (26%) or accommodation (20%).

FBOs with less than 10 employees were more likely to be concerned with competition from unregulated businesses and/or large businesses dominating the market (39%) when compared to businesses with 10-24 employees (26%).

There were also differences by nation, with FBOs in Wales being less likely to be concerned by changes in consumer behaviour and demand due to the increased cost of living (59%) compared to businesses in England (72%) and Northern Ireland (71%).

Recruitment issues

As shown in Figure 4.1, a third (33%) of FBOs were concerned about staffing. These businesses were asked to specify which types of staff they were struggling to recruit. The top three role types were the same in 2023 as in 2021 with kitchen staff (39%), waiting staff (38%) and workers with specialist skills (33%) being the most common. However, there was an increase in several less common concerns this year with general labourers (2023: 18%; 2021: 8%), shop assistants (2023: 14%; 2021: 7%), managers (2023: 9%; 2021: 2%), seasonal workers (2023: 8%; 2021: 0%), and all staff roles (2023: 4%; 2021: 1%) increasing in frequency.

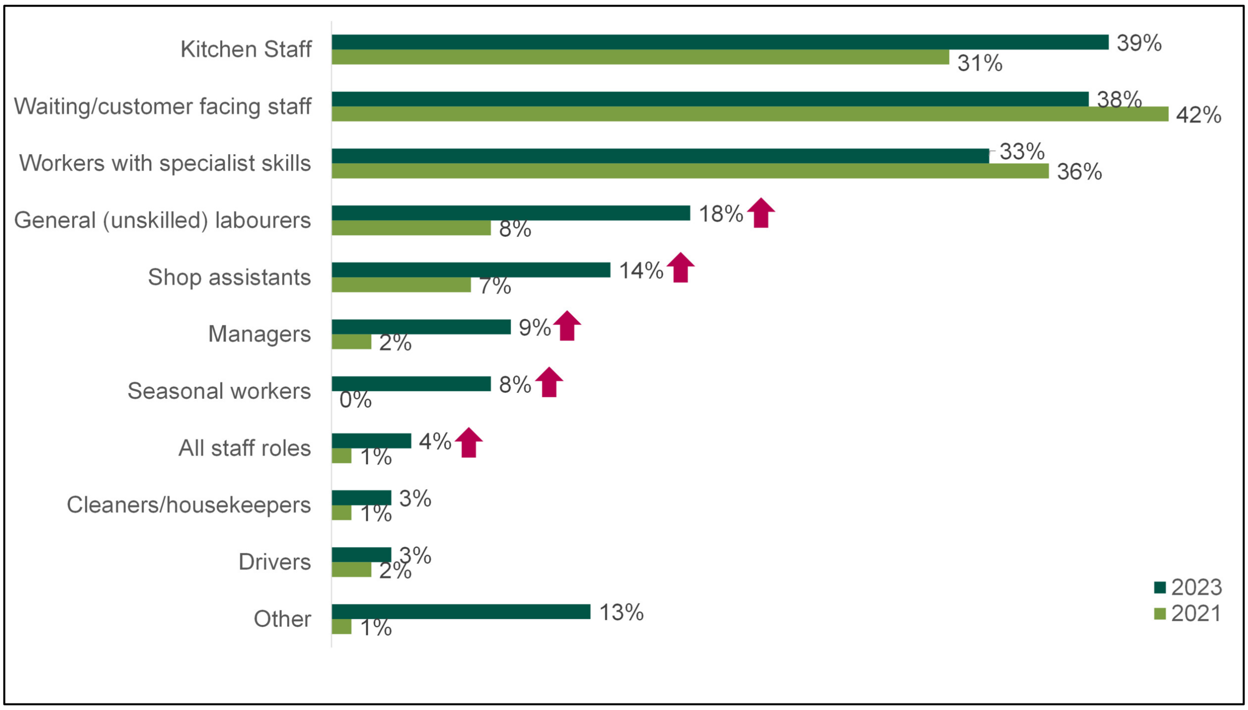


Figure 4.2. Types of staff FBOs concerned about staffing were struggling to recruit

Base: FBOs with concerns about staffing in 2023. (182). FBOs with concerns about staffing in 2021 (239). Arrows indicate significant difference from 2021. Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

5. Potential impacts of Smarter Regulation

This chapter outlines FBO awareness of Smarter Regulation, what impact they think reforms may have on their businesses, and the reasons why. There are no comparisons made to 2021 as these were new questions for 2023.

Upon exiting the EU, existing EU food law was incorporated into UK legislation under a special category called 'Retained EU Law'. This allowed for consumer protection to be maintained and provided consistency for businesses to meet their legal obligations. The UK Government are now seeking to review, and reform retained EU laws and regulations to ensure that all areas of UK regulation work as well as they can under a programme called 'Smarter Regulation'.

FBO understanding of smarter regulation

FBOs were asked if they were aware of the UK Government's commitment to Smarter Regulation. 17% of businesses were aware, with accommodation businesses (32%) and companies with an FHRS Rating of 4-5 (19%) most likely to be aware of the UK Government's commitment to Smarter Regulation. Businesses that were less likely to be aware of the UK Government commitment to Smarter Regulation were companies with an FHRS Rating of 0-3 (3%) and service activities businesses (14%).

FBO opinions on the impact of potential food law reforms

FBOs were asked what impact they thought potential food law reforms might have on their business. Over a quarter of businesses were positive in their opinions on the impact of potential food law reforms (28%). Service activities (31%) and businesses with an FHRS rating of 5 (31%) were most likely to have thought potential food law reforms would have a positive impact on their business, whilst retail (28%) businesses were most likely to think there may be negative impacts. Businesses with 25-49 employees were more likely to think there would be a positive impact (39%) compared to those with 10-24 (23%) and less than 10 employees (28%).

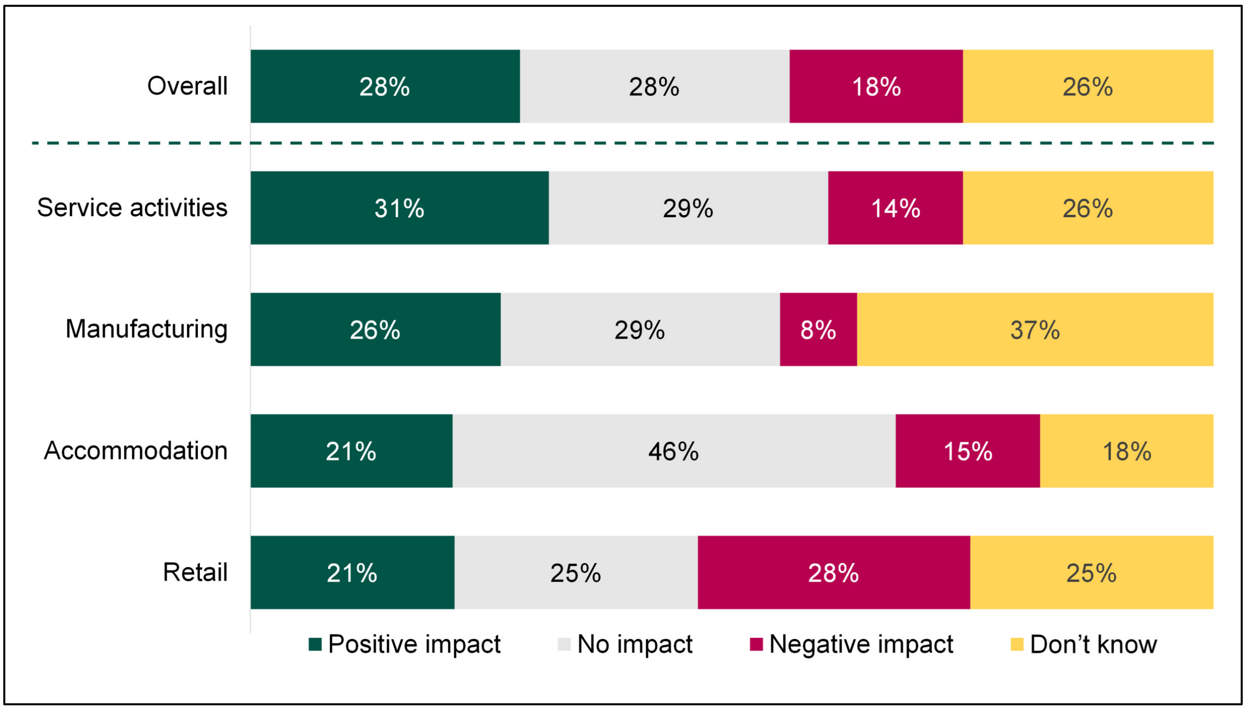


Figure 5.1. Business sectors opinions on the impact of potential food law reforms

Base: All businesses (556)

Of those who thought the changes would have a positive impact, the main reasons for this were they thought it would benefit customers (22%), raise standards (17%), and streamline systems (11%). The most common reason for thinking the changes would have a negative impact were that the changes would increase costs (19%), increase burden on businesses (18%), or that the changes would not consider small businesses in their design (16%).

6. Information and guidance

This chapter investigates how informed businesses feel about all regulations affecting them, the most commonly used sources of information on food safety guidelines and regulations, and the preferred language for receiving food safety communications. It also investigates the proportion of businesses providing food safety training to staff and how this information is delivered.

Whether allergen information is provided by businesses

All businesses that sell directly to customers were asked whether they provide information on allergens contained in the food that they sell. Consistent with 2021, nine-in-ten businesses (91%) said they do, while only 8% said they did not and 1% did not know. Retailers were less likely to provide information on allergens (87%) when compared to the average (91%). Of the 8% that did not provide information on allergens, the majority 72% of those were selling prepackaged food which would have had allergen information on the packaging.

Businesses that provide information on allergens were asked if they provide information on allergens that might be present due to cross contamination. Nine-in-ten businesses (91%) said they did while only 8% said they did not and 1% did not know, an increase from the last wave where 79% of businesses said they did. FBOs in the service activities sector were the most likely (93%) to say they did. In addition, businesses with no FHRS rating were the most likely to not provide information (77%).

Allergen information format

Businesses that did provide allergen information were asked how they provided this information to customers and clients. The most common way to provide allergens information was verbally on request (47%), followed by in writing as a separate notice on display (39%) and in writing on menus and shelves (27%). These were also the most common ways to provide information in 2021, as shown in Figure 6.1. It is interesting to note that 7% of businesses provided allergen information in writing upon request. This dropped from 2021, where 22% of businesses that provided information on allergens did so in writing upon request. Four fifths (82%) of FBOs providing allergens information in a folder or welcome pack were those in the food and services activities sector.

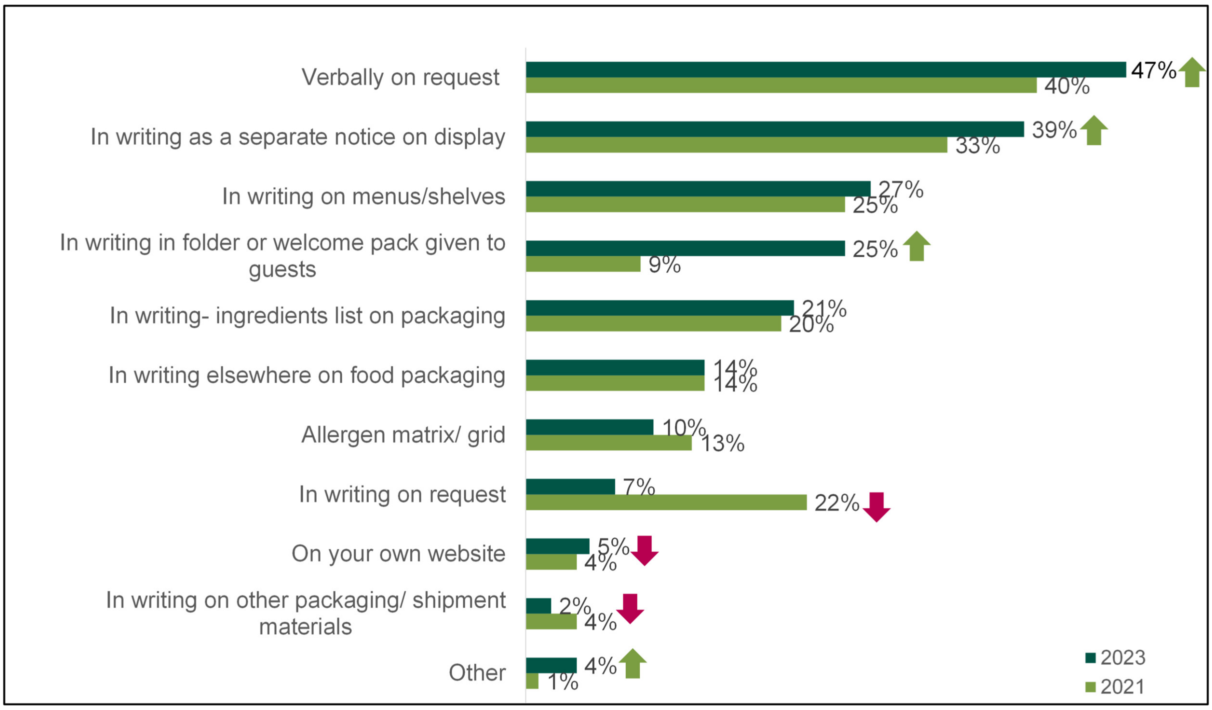


Figure 6.1. Format allergen information if provided to customers or client

Base: All businesses who provide allergen information: 2023 (505); 2021 (638). Arrows indicate significant differences from 2021. Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

The type of allergen information provided varied by sector. Businesses within the accommodation sector were the most likely to provide information verbally on request (53%) followed by those in service activities (52%).

Preferred language for communications

FBOs were asked what their preferred language for communications on food regulations. English was selected as a preferred language by all but one business which only selected Welsh. Despite English being the preference, 3% of businesses also selected a second language they would like to receive communications in[2].

[2] The languages mentioned were Turkish, Thai, Chinese, Korean, Gujarati, Persian, Tamil, Greek, Japanese, Spanish, French, German, Bengali, and Welsh.

How staff are provided with information and training

Almost all FBOs provided some form of training to their staff on food safety guidelines and regulations (93%), however this has decreased since 2021 (98%). Over a third (35%) of businesses gave updates verbally to staff and a quarter (25%) provided formal training for existing staff as shown in Figure 6.2.

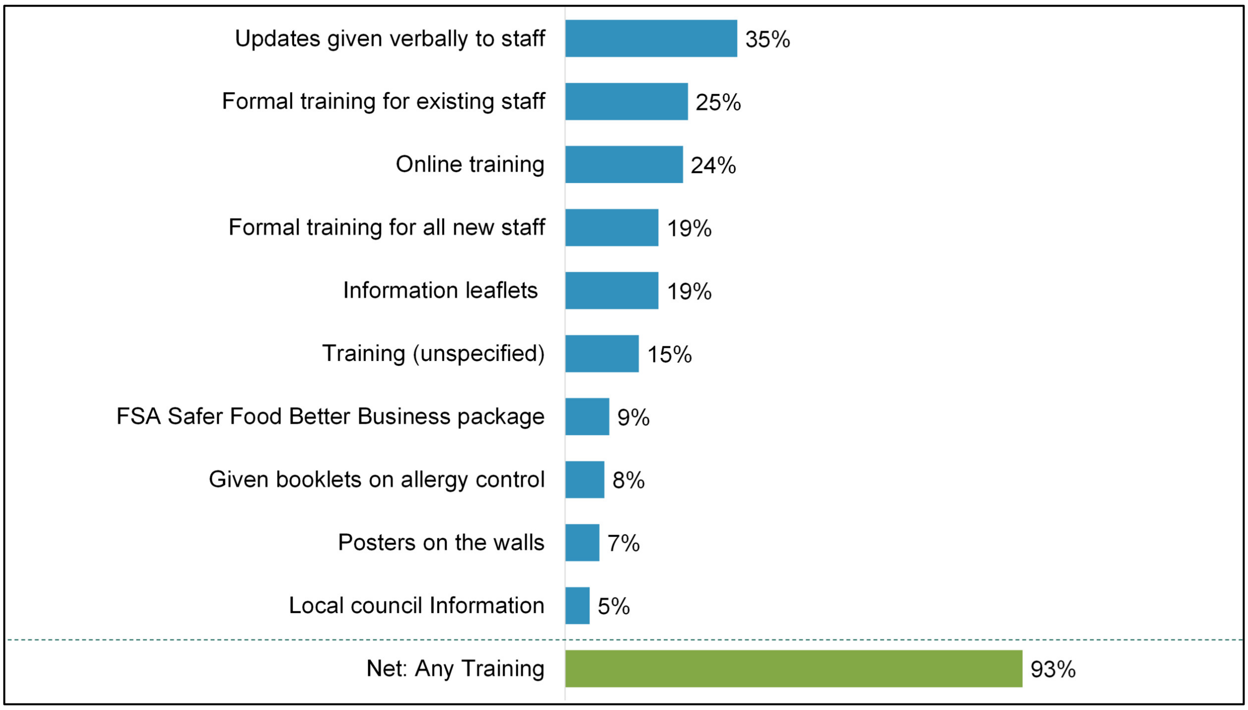


Figure 6.2. Information and training provided to staff

Base: All businesses (556). Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

As shown in Figure 6.2, the most common form of information provision was verbal updates to staff (35%), although those in the accommodation sector were the least likely (21% compared to 35% overall average). Manufacturing businesses were the most likely to provide formal training for existing staff (41%), whilst the accommodation sector were the least (8%). Businesses in the manufacturing sector were also the most likely to provide information through posters on the walls (17%).

Accommodation businesses were the most likely to provide local council information (16%) compared to the overall average (5%). Businesses with no FHRS rating were less likely to provide any information or training (86%), as well as businesses with no food hygiene or standards inspection (91%), and those with less than 10 employees (92%, compared with 99% of businesses with 10+ employees).

Encouraging customers to make healthier choices

All businesses were asked what steps they had taken to help customers make healthier choices. Almost half (49%) of these businesses had taken steps to help customers make healthier choices in the last 12 months, with the most common steps including providing a wider range of healthier options (83%) and making changes to ingredients or cooking methods.

How informed businesses feel about regulations affecting their business

All businesses were asked how well informed they feel about regulations that affect their food business overall. It is important to note that all survey respondents identified themselves as the person in the business primarily responsible for food safety and therefore they were likely to be typically more informed about regulations than other staff members.

The majority of businesses (85%) felt either very or quite well informed about regulations affecting their business, a small decrease since 2021 (89%). Businesses that packaged food to be sold to other businesses were significantly more likely to feel informed (94%) than average (85%), as well as businesses who traded online (92%).

Common reasons businesses reported not feeling informed about regulations included: not receiving information directly, a lack of contact from regulators, and that they had not researched it.

Sources of information about food safety

Businesses were asked where they get information about food safety guidelines and regulations, food allergies and product recalls. Almost all (97%) cited at least one source, most commonly the FSA website (28%) or the local authority/district council (26%). Since 2021, less businesses have used the FSA website (28% from 37%) and there has been a rise in online third-party platform support (11% from 6%).

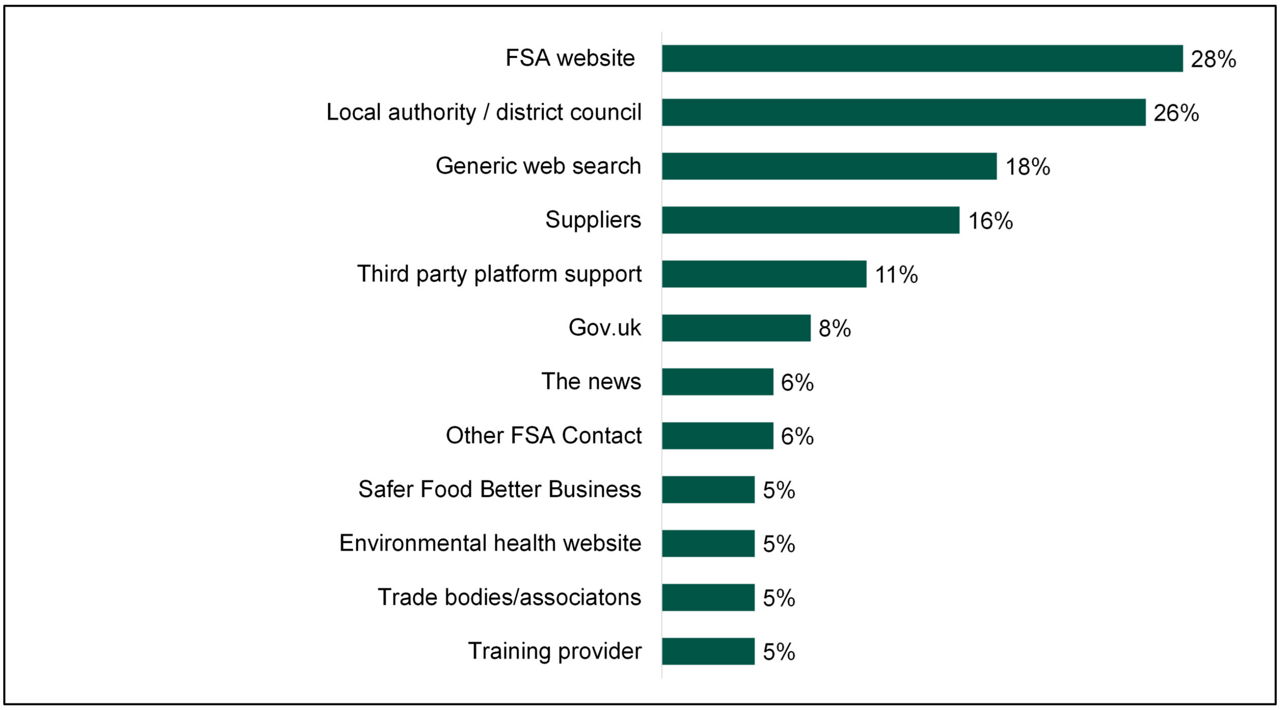


Figure 6.3. Sources of information about food safety guidelines and regulations

Base: All businesses (556). Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

Sources of information about food safety guidelines and regulations varied by business type. Those in the manufacturing sector were more likely than average to use the FSA website (55%). Those in the accommodation sector were most likely to get information from their local authority or district council (41% vs. 26% overall). Manufacturers were more likely to use trade bodies and associations (13% vs. 5% overall).

Use of the FSA website also varied by size, with almost half (47%) of businesses with 25-49 employees using the FSA website, compared to 26% of sole traders, suggesting scope to raise awareness and engagement with the website for micro businesses. Businesses with no FHRS rating were most likely to get information from suppliers (28%) compared to average (16%).

Variation was also seen by country, particularly in the use of local authorities and district councils as a source of information. These were cited by 59% of businesses in Northern Ireland, but only 26% of businesses in Wales and 25% of businesses in England. Businesses in Northern Ireland were less likely than those in England or Wales to use the FSA website (19% vs. 29% and 28% respectively).

Subscription to FSA news and alerts service

Businesses were asked if they have ever subscribed to FSA news and alerts service. Only 6% of businesses subscribed, with manufacturing and wholesale businesses the most likely (26% and 23%), and accommodation businesses least likely (3%). Subscriptions were more common in businesses with 25-49 employees, with 14% of those subscribing.

7. Experiences and perceptions of the FSA

This chapter covers awareness and knowledge of the FSA, as well as experience of and confidence in the FSA.

Awareness and knowledge of the FSA

Almost all FBOs were aware of the FSA (98%, consistent with 2021), however most did not know much about the FSA, with six in 10 (62%) saying they only knew a little about the FSA or had only heard of them (a fall from 68% in 2021). Businesses in the service activities sector and those with a FHRS rating of 4-5 were more likely to know a lot about the FSA (36% and 30% respectively).

Contact with the FSA

Those who had heard of the FSA were asked whether they had had any interactions or contact with the FSA in the last 12 months, and the channel that they had used.

Three in ten of businesses who had heard of the FSA had some form of contact with them in the last 12 months (30%), down from 40% in 2021. Accommodation and retail businesses were the most likely to not report any contact with FSA (78% and 74% respectively), as well as those with less than 10 employees (72%).

The most common form of communication was visiting the FSA's website (29%). Only 1% of businesses that had heard of the FSA called the helpline or emailed the helpline email address.

Businesses in the manufacturing sector were the most likely to have visited the FSA's website (46% and 41% respectively), as well as businesses with no FHRS rating (42%), whilst accommodation businesses were the least likely (22%).

Ratings of contact with the FSA

Businesses were asked to rate the FSA based on their experiences of contacting them. Most businesses rated the FSA high for trustworthiness (93%) and ease of use/ access (95%). The FSA were given high ratings of approachability (91%), although this was lower for manufacturing businesses (70% and 75% high ratings). Businesses with an FHRS rating of 5 were most likely to rate the clarity of information provided by the FSA as high (98% compared to the average 92%).

Businesses with 25-49 employees were more likely to score trustworthiness, ease of use, and approachability higher than those with less than 25 employees. Businesses with a 4-5 FHRS rating were more likely to score trustworthiness, ease of use, and clarity of communication higher than those with a lower or no FHRS rating.

Confidence in the FSA

Businesses that had heard of the FSA were asked to rate their agreement to a series of statements about the FSA achieving certain goals. Overall confidence in 2023 was high with no changes in the scores since 2021. Each statement is taken in turn below.

Most businesses were confident that the FSA works hard to ensure that food safety and standards are maintained and improved (94%). Businesses with an FHRS rating of 5 were more confident that the FSA works hard to ensure food safety and standards are maintained and improved (96%).

Most FBOs (94%) were confident the FSA can be trusted to use any information they give them appropriately.

Nine-in-ten (90%) businesses were confident that the FSA is good at identifying where poor standards exist and takes appropriate action.

Almost nine-in-ten businesses were confident that the FSA understands the needs of businesses like theirs (87%). Businesses with an FHRS rating of 5 were the most likely to be confident (91%) compared to average (87%). The manufacturing sector were the most likely to be not confident (27%) as well as those with a 0-3 FHRS rating (26%) and a rating of 4 (14%).

Over four fifths of businesses (83%) were confident that the FSA effectively communicates and promotes regulations within the food industry. Businesses with no FHRS rating the most likely to be confident (93% and 94%). In contrast, businesses with a higher FHRS rating (4-5) were most likely to not be confident (17%).

8. Confidence in the food safety system

This chapter explores confidence in the effectiveness of food safety and hygiene standards and regulations, and confidence in the UK food business sector to meet these food safety requirements.

Businesses concern with food from inside and outside the UK

All businesses were asked how concerned they were about food from inside and outside the UK being safe and hygienic and being what it says it is. As Figure 8.1 shows, businesses were more concerned about food from *outside* the UK being safe and hygienic (58%) or being what it says it is (59%) compared to food from *inside* the UK (33% and 29% respectively).

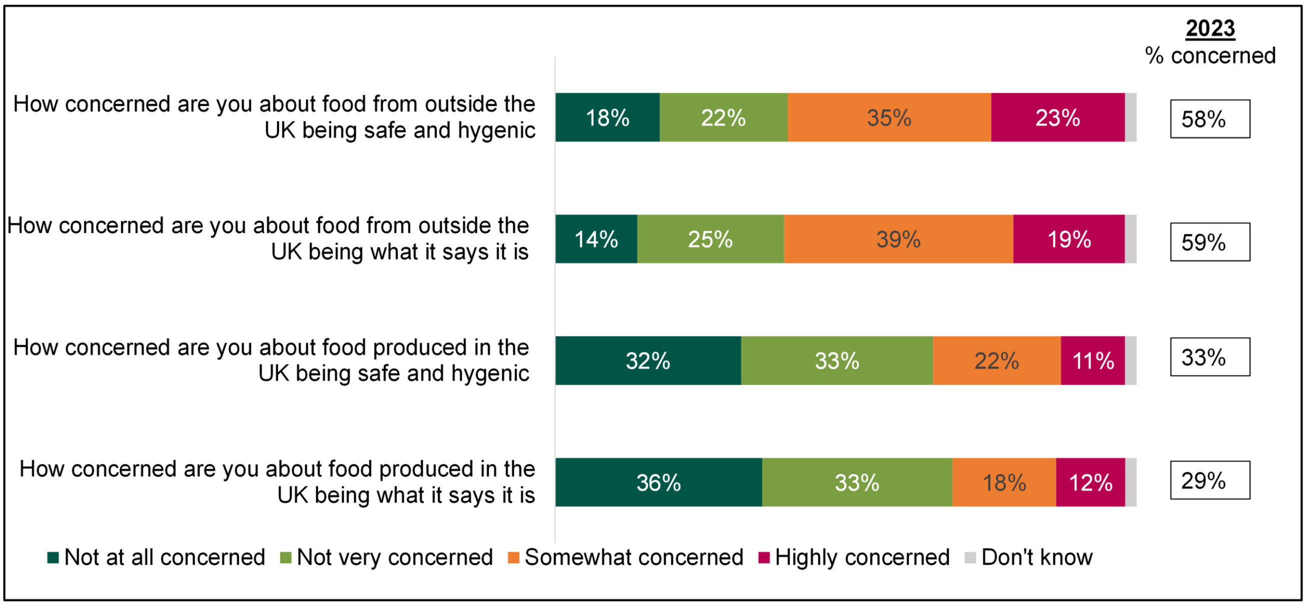


Figure 8.1. Levels of concern amongst UK businesses

Base: All businesses 2023 (556).

Businesses that packaged food on their premises were more likely to be concerned about food from outside the UK being safe and hygienic (67%) as well as businesses with an FHRS rating of 5 (62%). Businesses that had more than one premises were more likely than average to be concerned about food from outside the UK being what it says it is (72%) as well as businesses that packaged food to be sold to other businesses (69%).

Businesses perceptions of food standards and regulations

Most businesses had positive perceptions of food standards and regulations. More than nine-in-ten businesses were confident that food safety or hygiene standards and regulations were effective at protecting the public from food related risks (95%), that they are reasonable for food businesses to meet (94%) and that they were reasonable to retain information or records for (91%). They were also confident regarding measures relating to value and ease of compliance, with 86% suggesting they were confident they added value to their business and 86% feeling confident they were easy and practical to comply with.

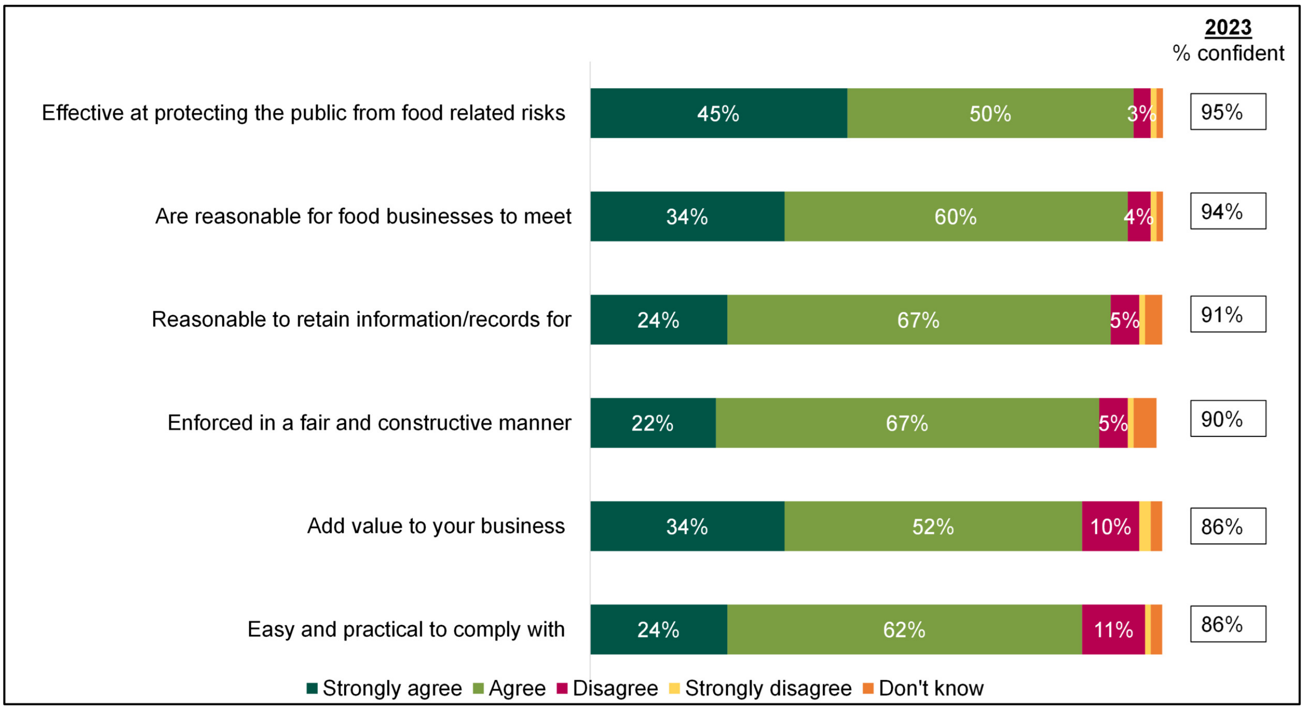


Figure 8.2. FBO perceptions of food standards and regulations

Base: All businesses 2023 (556).

Businesses that had a food hygiene standards or inspection were more likely to agree they were reasonable for food businesses to meet (97%) and they were easy and practical to comply with (90%). Businesses with an FHRS rating of 5 were more likely to agree on every measure.

Confidence in the ways food businesses were monitored and checked

Most food businesses had confidence in the methods used to monitor and check food safety, standards, and hygiene. As illustrated in Figure 8.3, nearing nine-in-ten businesses (87%) were confident that such methods helped low performing businesses improve, with more than a third (36%) very confident. This finding marks a significant increase since 2021 (87% vs 81%). A further 86% of businesses were confident that the methods used to monitor and check food safety, standards, and hygiene were conducted fairly, with over a third (36%) very confident.

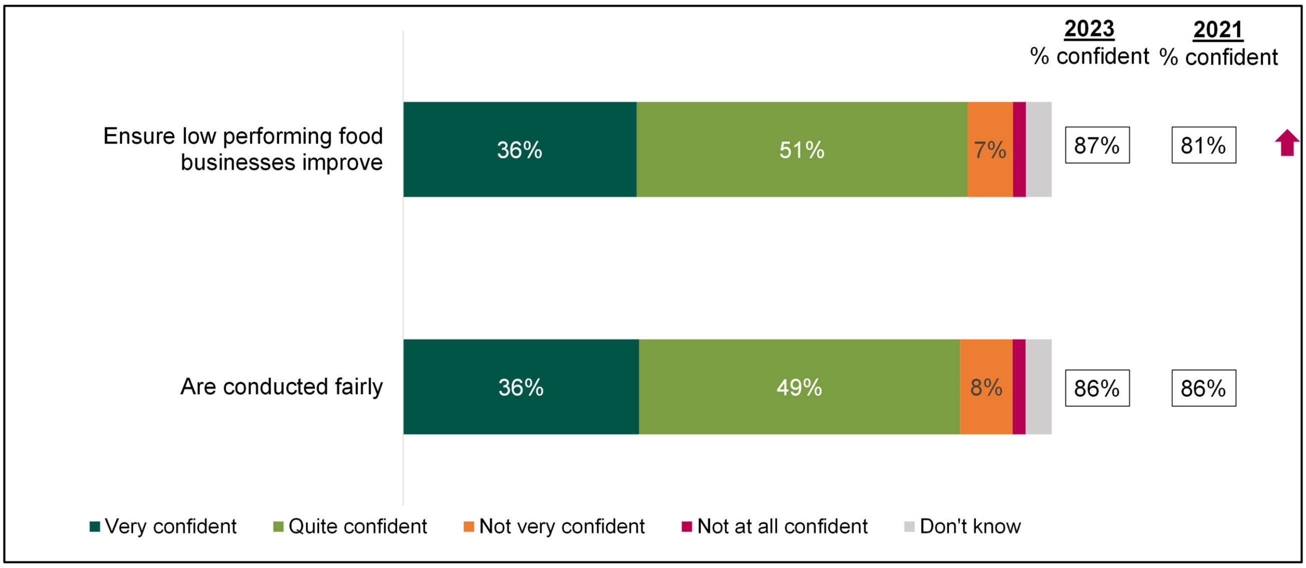


Figure 8.3. Confidence in the ways food businesses were monitored and checked

Base: All businesses 2023 (556). All businesses 2021 (700).

Businesses with an FHRS rating of 5 were more likely to be confident the ways food businesses were monitored and checked ensure low performing food businesses improve (90%) on average, as well as businesses that sold products as a meal to take away (90%). Businesses with an FHRS rating of 5 were also more likely than average to be confident the way food businesses are monitored and checked are conducted fairly (89%) as well as businesses in Northern Ireland (95%).

Businesses confidence in UK food safety

Businesses were asked to consider the UK food business sector as a whole and to describe how confident they felt that the sector met food safety requirements. As presented in Figure 8.4, most were confident that food standards were being upheld.

Nine-in-ten were confident that food businesses in the UK ensured that food was safe to eat (89%) and that unsafe food is withdrawn or recalled correctly (88%). Slightly lower proportions of businesses were confident that records are kept of where food is from and this information can be shown on demand (83%) or that clear and accurate information on allergens is provided on non pre-packaged food (82%). The proportion believing information on allergens was provided dropped from 90% in 2021, although a change of question wording to specify non pre-packed food likely accounts for this change.

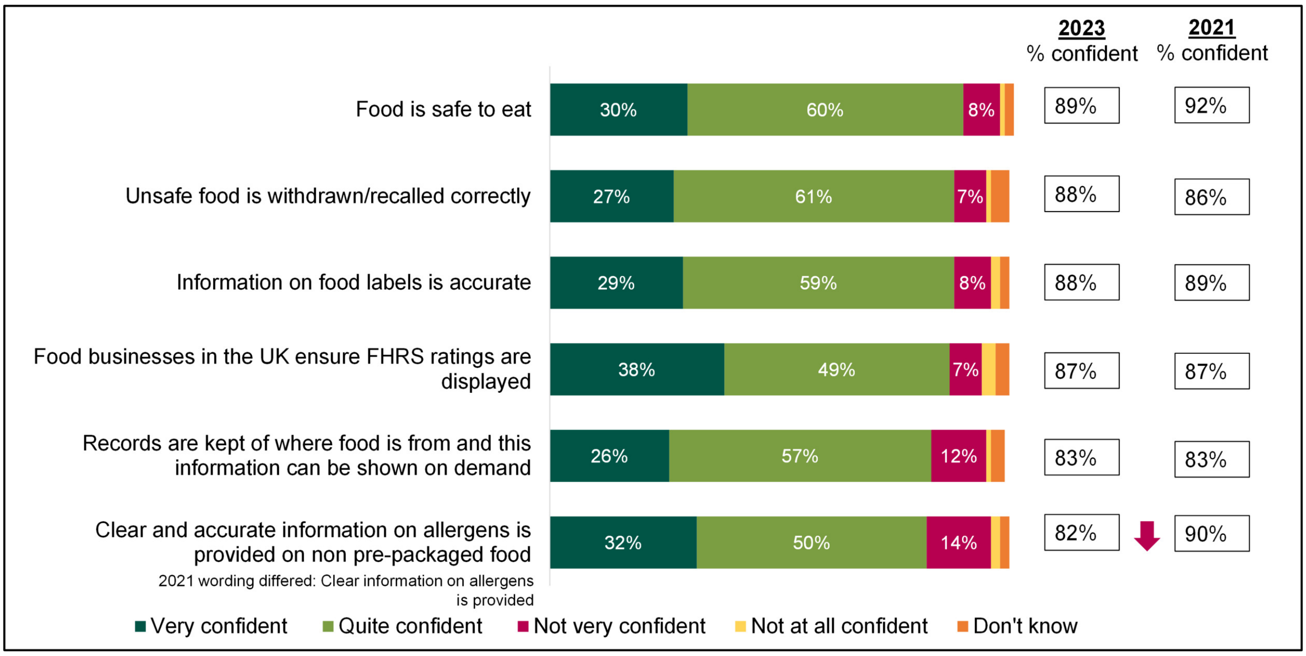


Figure 8.4. Confidence in food businesses in the UK

Base: All businesses 2023 (556). All businesses 2021 (700)

Manufacturing businesses were more likely to be confident that food in the UK was safe to eat (99%). Service activities were more likely to be confident that UK food businesses ensure records are kept of where food is from (87%) and that food businesses in the UK ensure clear and accurate information on allergens is provided on non pre-packaged food (85%).

9. Business experience of food safety processes and interventions

This chapter covers businesses' experience of interventions undertaken in relation to food hygiene and food safety, and the clarity of communication relating to these events. It goes on to explore the mechanisms they have in place to respond to recall or withdrawal requests, including training procedures, and use of the FSA template guidance.

Experiences of food safety processes and interventions

As shown in Figure 9.1, over half of businesses (56%) had received an inspection by their local authority (or in Northern Ireland, by their District Council) in the last 12 months, rising from 41% in 2021, Potentially linked to the increase in the proportion of businesses reporting being subject to an inspection, there was also an increase in the number of businesses receiving advice or training about meeting food safety standards, rising from a quarter of businesses (25%) in 2021 to 30% in 2023. Registration or re-registration was also up from one-in-ten businesses in 2021 (10%) to 16% in 2023.

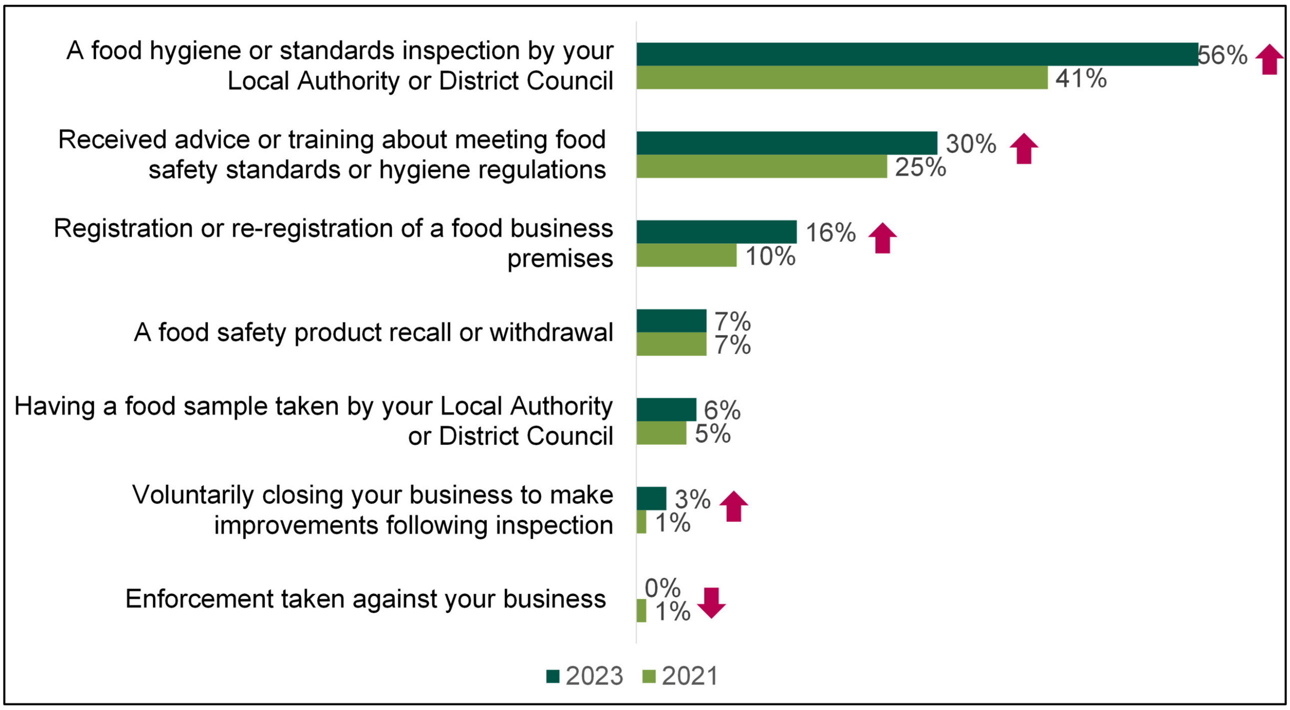


Figure 9.1. Experiences of food safety processes and interventions

Base: All businesses 2023 (556). All businesses 2021 (700).

Businesses with an FHRS rating of 0 to 3 were much more likely to have had an inspection (80%) compared to the average (41%). Businesses with 25-49 employees (54%), businesses with more than one premises (51%), and businesses in Northern Ireland (49%) were more likely than average (30%) to have received advice.

Businesses interactions with Local Authorities or District Councils

All businesses were asked whether they were aware all food businesses, including online businesses need to be registered with the Local Authority or District Council. Nearly all businesses were aware (95%), which remained unchanged from 2021. Businesses that felt well informed about food regulations were more likely than those who were not informed to be aware (96% vs 89% respectively).

Businesses that were aware they needed to be registered were asked whether they registered using the online or paper form. Just over a third (37%) used the paper form to register, just over a third registered online (36%) and over a quarter did not know (28%). Businesses in Northern Ireland were more likely than average to use the paper form (52%) as well as businesses that packaged food to be sold to other businesses (47%) and

Retail businesses (46%). Businesses that traded online were more likely than average to use the online form (45%) as well as service activities (40%) and businesses in England (37%).

After businesses had registered, over half received any guidance information (56%) whilst a smaller proportion had received an advisory visit (42%) or received a visit within one month of starting to trade (40%). Only 14% of businesses experienced none of those.

Businesses with less than 10 employees were more likely to report receiving guidance or information (58%) as well as businesses with an FHRS rating of 5 (59%) and businesses that felt informed about food regulations (58%). Businesses with no FHRS rating were less likely to report receiving any guidance of information after registering (38%).

Written procedures

Over half of businesses had written procedures on how to deal with a recall or withdrawal (54%) whilst less than a half did not (41%). The proportion of those who had written procedures had not changed from 2021 (51%).

Businesses that produced and sold (unpackaged) food on premises (60%) and businesses that felt informed about regulations (59%) were more likely to have written procedures in place than average (54%). Businesses with no FHRS rating were less likely than average to have written procedures in place (52%).

As Figure 9.2 shows, businesses with written procedures in place were most likely to conduct procedure reviews at least every three years (84%). Over three-quarters of businesses with written procedures in place also conducted training at least every three years (77%). Businesses were least likely to conduct mock recall exercises with only a third (33%) conducting them at least every three years and over half of businesses (52%) never conducting them.

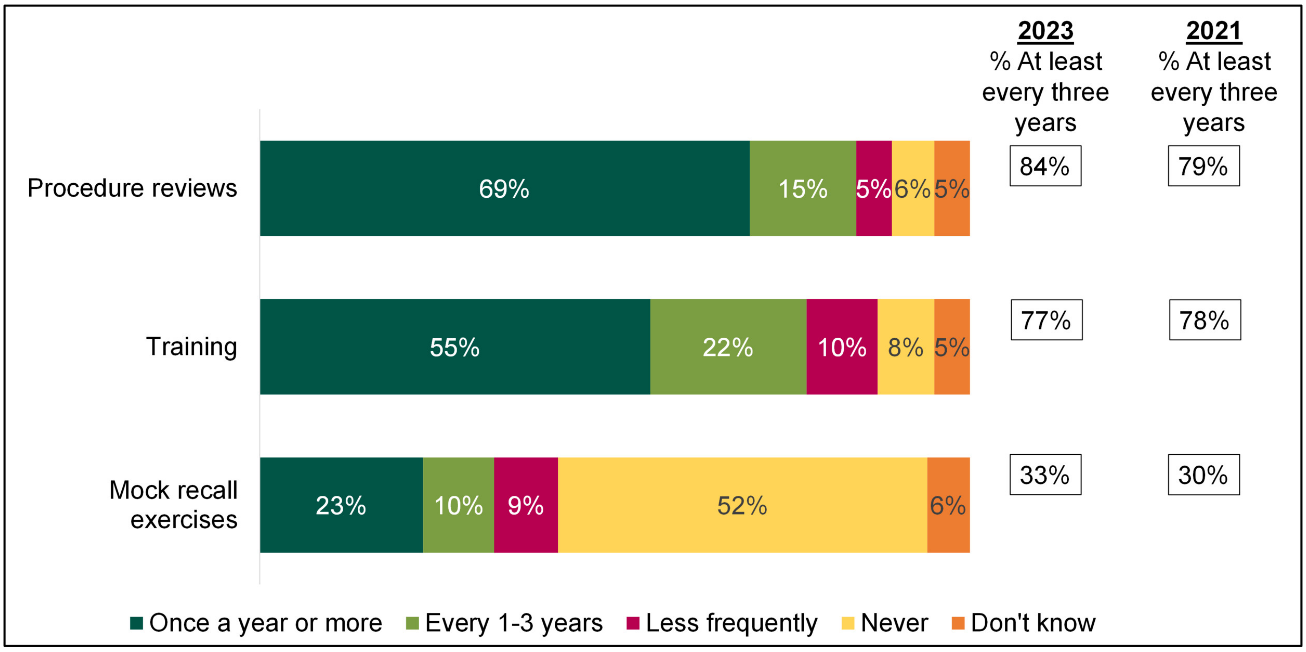


Figure 9.2. Frequency of activities conducted by businesses that have written procedures in place

Base: Businesses with written procedures in place to guide them on how to deal with a recall or withdrawal 2023 (331). 2021 (418).

Businesses that were more likely than average to conduct procedure reviews at this frequency included businesses with 25-49 employees (98%), businesses that traded online (90%), businesses that sold food as a meal to take-away (90%) and businesses that packaged food on their premises (89%). Businesses that were more likely than average to conduct training included: businesses with 25-49 employees (91%), businesses that packaged food to be sold to other businesses (86%) and businesses that packaged food on premises (84%). Businesses that were more likely than average to conduct mock recall exercises at least every three years included those that packaged food to be sold to other businesses (50%) or packaged food on their premises (40%) and businesses that traded online (40%).

Point of sale notices

Businesses with written procedures in place to guide them on how to deal with a recall or withdrawal were asked how they would describe their approach to displaying point of sale notices for a recall or withdrawal. The most common way that businesses displayed Point of Sale Notices was at the till or point of sale signage (32%). A quarter of businesses said it was not applicable to them or they'd never needed to (26%) whilst 17% said they used external signage and 14% said they displayed them in writing as a notice on display. One-in-ten businesses (10%) said they did not have an approach in place.

Awareness of FSA guidance

Two fifths (41%) had heard of the FSA's online guidance and templates for dealing with recalls and withdrawals. Over half (57%) had not heard of the online guidance. This had not changed since 2021. Businesses with more than one premises were more likely to have heard of the guidance than average (70%) as well as businesses with 25-49 employees (65%) and businesses that traded online (52%).

10. Food Crime

This chapter explores businesses' awareness of the National Food Crime Unit (NFCU), the dedicated law enforcement function of the Food Standards Agency. It then examines the prevalence of a variety of food crimes which will be comparable to the last survey wave.

Awareness of the NFCU

All businesses were asked whether they were aware of the National Food Crime Unit (NFCU). Less than one-in-five businesses (17%) were aware of the National Food Crime Unit, with most respondents (81%) having no awareness of them in line with 2021 (80% aware). Businesses with 25-49 employees (31%) and 10-24 employees (23%) were more likely to have heard of the NFCU than businesses with less than 10 employees (15%).

Businesses who were aware were subsequently asked whether they were aware of the NFCU's online assessment tool for helping businesses prevent food crime. Of businesses that were aware of the NFCU, under half (43%) were aware of the NFCU's online assessment tool to help their business prevent food crime. Over half (57%) were not aware of the tool. Service activities businesses were more likely than average to have heard of the tool (50%).

Proportions of businesses experiencing food crimes

All businesses were asked whether they had been the victim of any type of food crimes over the last 12 months. As shown in the chart below, nearly one-in-ten businesses (8%) had been victims of any food crime excluding shoplifting in the last 12 months in line with 2021. The most common crime businesses said they had experienced was being supplied or offered a food product they believed to have been stolen (5%). Other crimes included being supplied with a deliberately mislabelled food product (2%) or being supplied with a food product that was destined for waste disposal (1%).

In all cases except being supplied with a food product that included a substance not on a product's label, the proportions experiencing food crime had not changed since 2021.

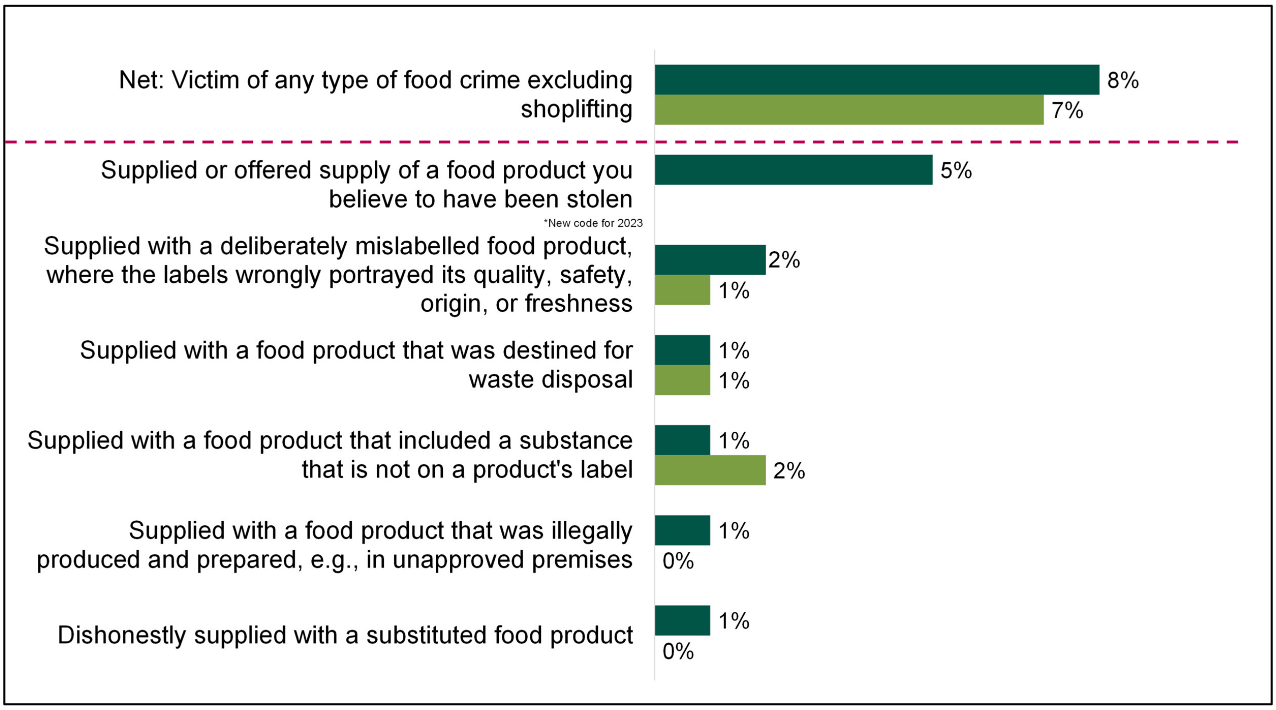


Figure 10.1. Food crimes that businesses were victims of in the last 12 months

Base: All businesses 2023. (556). All businesses. 2021. (700). Arrows indicate significant difference from 2021. Shoplifting is not an NFCU matter and so is excluded from the overall. 16% of businesses had experienced shoplifting in the last 12 months but this was excluded from the chart as it is not an NFCU issue.

Businesses who were more likely to have been victims of food crimes of any type except shoplifting included retailers (11%), importers or exporters (24%) and businesses with an FHRS rating of 4 (16%).

11. Importing and Exporting

This chapter provides evidence on the amount of import and export activities businesses have engaged in over the last 12 months, and how this expected to change over the next 12 months. This will also be data available for comparison to 2021. Please note some questions have not been reported on in this chapter due to low base sizes of below 50 respondents. These questions are F4a, F6, F7a, and F8a.

Overall proportions of businesses importing and exporting

The proportion of businesses importing in total has decreased since 2018 (15%) to 3% in 2023. Importing was more common in Manufacturing (18%) and retail businesses (5%) in 2023.

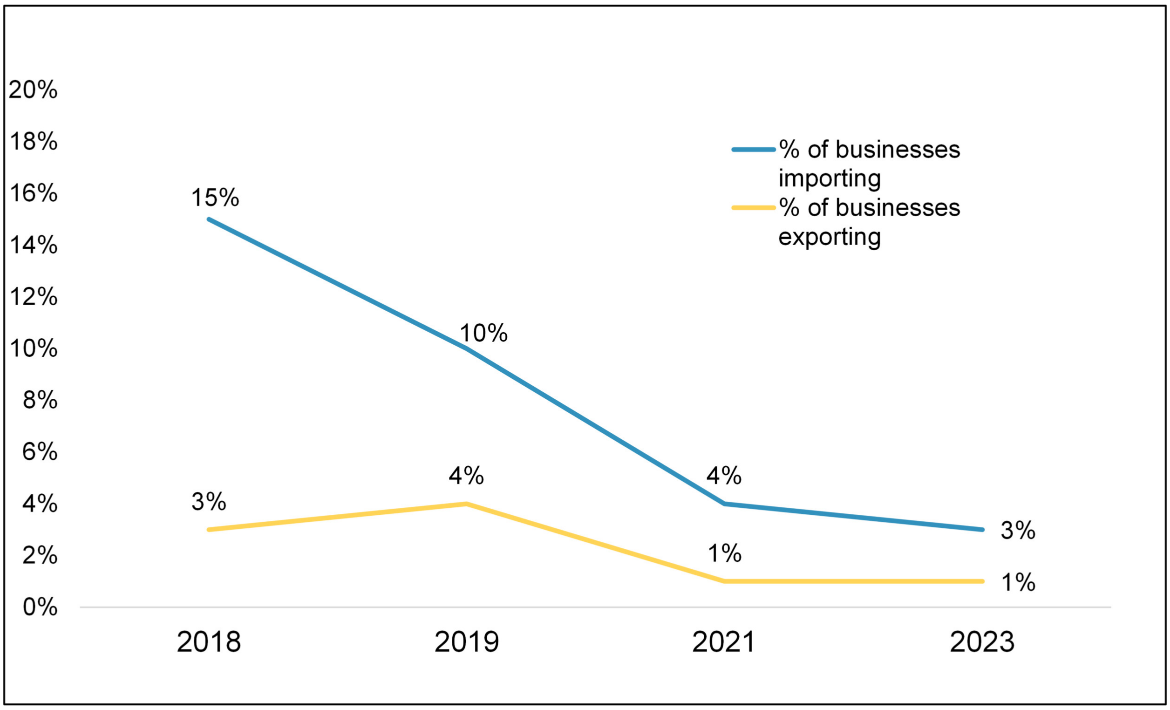


Figure 11.1. Proportions of FBOs importing and exporting since 2018

Base: All businesses: 2023 (556); 2021 (700); 2019 (644); 2018 (530).

Importing was less common for accommodation (3%) and service activities (1%). The proportions of businesses exporting remained unchanged since 2021, at 1%. Most businesses had not imported or exported goods and had no intention of doing so in future (86%). A small minority of businesses did not currently import or export but may do so in future (4%).

All businesses were asked whether they had ever imported from or exported to specific destinations. The highest proportions had done so between EU Countries and Great Britain or Northern Ireland (7%). Fewer businesses imported or exported between Northern Ireland and Great Britain (3%), between non-EU countries and Great Britain or Northern Ireland (3%) or between the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain (2%).

How did businesses get information about importing and exporting

Of those who had ever imported or exported and those who might start importing or exporting in future, the most common ways they got information about related rules and requirements was from a generic web search (Google) (22%), Gov.uk (19%) or through Suppliers (17%). One-in-five of these businesses used none of the these (19%).

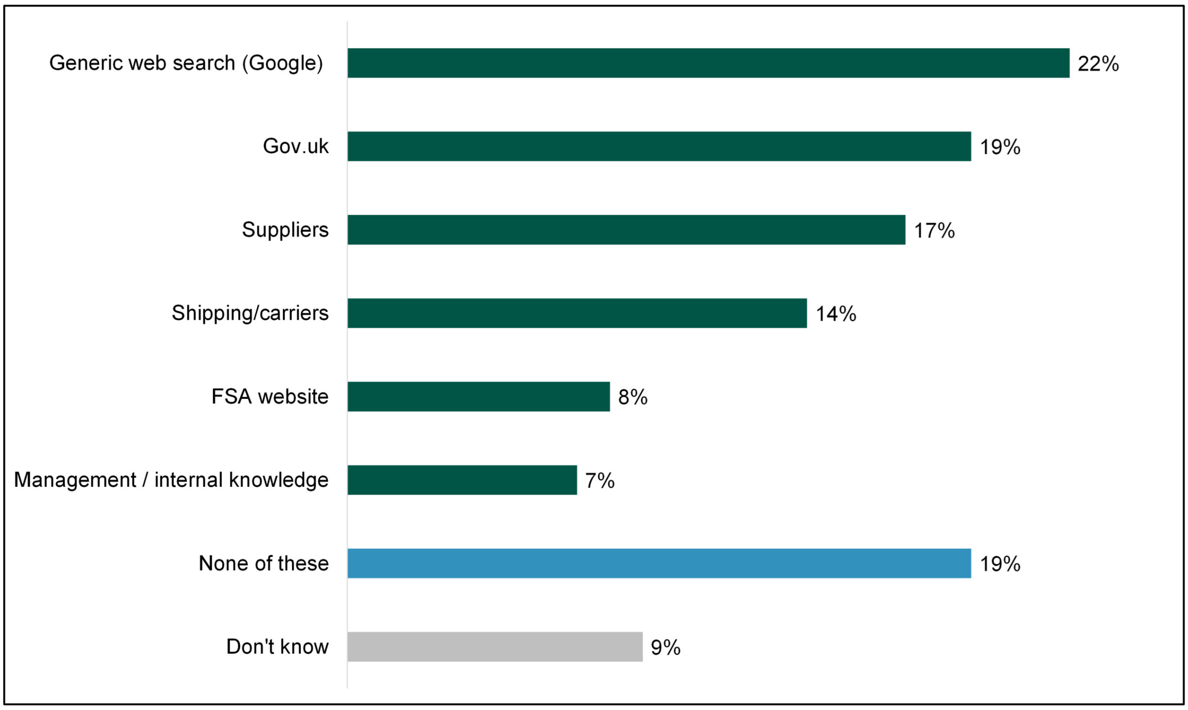


Figure 11.2. Where did importers or exporters get information about the rules and requirements for importing and exporting goods and services

Base: Those who have ever imported or exported or might 2023 (95). Codes with over 5% of responses shown. Respondents were able to select more than one answer.

Importing practices

Of businesses that have ever imported or exported or might, a third (33%) had directly *imported* or purchased goods or services from a supplier, producer or wholesaler situated *outside* of the UK, representing 3% of total businesses. Of these importing businesses, four-in-five were using overseas supplies within the EU or EEA (80%), under half were using suppliers outside of the EU or EEA (46%) whilst one-in-five were using suppliers from the Republic of Ireland (20%).

Most businesses that had ever imported or exported or might suggested they had not made changes to the quantity of imports or changed suppliers in the last 12 months (66%). However, over one-in-ten (13%) said they had decreased the quantity of imports. Another one-in-ten had increased the quantity of their imports (9%), stopped importing products (7%) or changed overseas suppliers due to location (6%).

Businesses that had made changes to importing practices in the last 12 months suggested that Brexit, changes to import costs, and business growth were the leading factors which caused their businesses to change importing practices.

FBOs who have imported or exported in the past and FBOs who have considered importing or exporting before were asked whether they expect to start importing in the next 12 months. The most common response was they would continue not importing (45%) or increase the quantity of imports (11%). Fewer said they would start importing (5%) or decrease the quantity of imports (5%). A third of these businesses (31%) said they would do none of the above.

Exporting practices

Of businesses that have ever imported or exported, a small minority had exported food products outside of the UK, representing 1% of total businesses. Of all businesses that had ever imported or exported or might, nine-in-ten had not changed their exporting practices or changed destinations due to location (90%), however, 4% had stopped exporting products. FBOs who have imported or exported in the past and FBOs who have considered importing or exporting before were asked whether they expect to start exporting in the next 12 months. The most common response was that they would continue not to export (68%). Fewer said they would increase the quantity of exports (7%). A quarter of these businesses said they would do none of the above (23%).

Supplementary Materials

Appendix 1

Download: https://science.food.gov.uk/article/123489-small-and-micro-fbo-tracking-survey-wave-4/attachment/245549.docx