

# Understanding Consumer Trust in the FSA and Food System

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FSA Research and Evidence

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## Executive Summary

### Background objectives and approach

The FSA observed a decline in consumer trust in the Food and You 2 survey between late 2022 and mid-2023, coinciding with a general decrease in government trust. The FSA subsequently commissioned a project to explore consumer trust in the FSA and the food system, aiming to add to and build on existing evidence and to consider the role of consumer trust for the FSA and its strategy and communications. The FSA sought Ipsos UK's expertise as an independent facilitator to gather and translate evidence and to support the application of insights for the organisation in future scenarios and strategy planning.

The initial evidence gathering took a pragmatic approach, drawing on two existing literature reviews - the FSA's 2018 Rapid Evidence Assessment (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018) and the European Food Safety Authority's 2024 literature review on institutional trust in food regulation (Bradbury et al., 2024) - alongside additional high-quality sources. This was supplemented by secondary analysis of FSA's Food and You 2 survey data and depth interviews with representatives from five relevant government organisations. Insights from the evidence gathering were then translated and applied through a series of internal FSA workshops with Social Science, Strategy, and Communications teams to explore the role of consumer trust for the FSA and implications for organisational strategy and communications. This report covers key themes from the evidence gathering but does not include materials or outputs from internal workshop discussions.

## Key Findings

### Trust in regulators and related concepts

- There is a lack of consensus in the literature about how to define trust. Trust is fundamentally linked to uncertainty and risk, is a belief, has rational and emotional elements, and is not always a choice.
- Two key types of trust are relevant to consumer trust in food and the food system: generalised social trust (trust in unknown others) and political trust (trust in government and institutions).
- Trustworthiness is the extent to which an organisation demonstrates trust-inspiring characteristics. Perceptions of organisational trustworthiness are driven by three factors: ability, benevolence, and integrity. Measuring trust alone may not accurately reflect the trustworthiness of large institutions.
- Distrust is characterised by suspicion of the actions of others and can be based on evidence of untrustworthiness. It is distinct from low trust and more likely to drive changes in consumer behaviour, especially in the food system where it may fuel specific suspicions. Low trust, on the other hand, is less likely to alter overall consumption habits.
- Consumer confidence is often used interchangeably with trust; higher trust in food chain actors leads to greater confidence in the food supply and technologies. Trust is sometimes viewed as being future oriented, while confidence refers to present and past performance.
- Trust in the UK government is at an all-time low, aligning with a downward trend in institutional trust seen globally. However, low trust and high distrust are not new.

### Trust in the food system and the FSA

- Overall trust in the food system remains high. However, consumers have little choice but to trust due to the complexity and uncertainty of modern food systems, and their need to purchase and consume food.

- Consumer trust in food is shaped by views of the state and the food industry but also depends on consumer perceptions of the relationship between the two. Other important factors influencing consumer trust include individual characteristics and preferences (expectations and socioeconomic background), the institutional environment, and societal contexts and influences.
- Consumers have varying levels of trust in different actors in the food system, with higher trust in regulators and farmers, and lower confidence in the food industry, takeaways, and food delivery services.
- Recent concerns influencing consumer views of the food system include food prices, ultra-processed foods, food poverty, and the overall healthiness of diets.

## Building, maintaining and recovering trust

Some important drivers and barriers that influence consumer trust include:

- Perceptions of honesty, competence and benevolence. These factors underpin how much people trust an organisation.
- How organisations handle crises and how these events are portrayed in media coverage.
- Endorsement by other individuals and organisations, increasingly taking place online.
- The degree of personal control consumers feel regarding their interactions and choices.
- Consistency of information from different sources.
- Familiarity and existing relationships with organisations and brands.
- Confirmation bias leading people to interpret information in line with pre-existing beliefs.

## Reflections on trust in practice

Practical learnings from other government organisations and their approach to consumer trust include:

- Overall, transparency, clear communication, and independence from political influence are seen as key factors for building trust.
- Different government organisations approach trust differently. Some regulators see it as important to develop a direct relationship of trust with consumers, while others do not.
- Reflecting this, some organisations see tracking consumer trust as important, while others do not consider this a core measure of organisational performance. Some organisations take a broader approach to trust, emphasising the role of organisation-wide behaviours rather than consumer or public perceptions.
- Building and maintaining trust involves disseminating targeted information, being proactive in addressing issues, establishing the organisation as a reliable source, countering misinformation, selecting relatable spokespeople, and engaging diverse stakeholders in decision-making and events.

## What are the lessons for regulators like the FSA?

- There is much that regulators and other government organisations can do to build and maintain trust. However, the complex drivers of trust mean there is also no simple set of actions or tools organisations can use that will guarantee high levels of trust.
- The link between crisis response and public trust is complex, with many short and long-term factors influencing trust levels, making it challenging to navigate trust crises effectively. However, the way regulators and government agencies respond to crises is critical in maintaining public trust. Having a structured approach to crises responses, such as the Government's Crisis Communications Planning Guide, can help with this.
- Ipsos UK suggested some choices around trust for government organisations and regulators like the FSA, to help frame discussions in internal workshops and to take forward in future considerations. These include:

- Organisations might choose to prioritise other metrics related to the performance of their sector from a consumer perspective (e.g. customer satisfaction, consumer detriment) and not on trust.
- Regulators can choose to engage consumers directly or work through trusted industry, government, and third-party stakeholders to build trust.
- Regulators may emphasise maintaining consumer trust as an ongoing priority or focus on being trusted during crises.
- Regulators need to consider whether to focus on ensuring they are trustworthy or to prioritise measures of consumer trust.
- Regulators may aim to improve overall public trust or target efforts on building trust within specific priority groups where trust is low, or distrust is high. This can be especially important if trust issues are linked to regulatory problems like risky behaviours or ignoring crisis communications.

## Introduction

### Background and context

Between late 2022 and mid-2023, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) saw a decline in consumer trust in their organisation as indicated by Wave 7 data of their Food and You 2 survey, in line with a general downward trend in trust in government (Curtice et al., 2024; FSA, 2024b). The apparent decline in trust prompted the FSA to strengthen their knowledge base and understanding around consumer trust and the role of trust in the organisation. The FSA saw this as an opportunity to consider strategy and communications tools and processes around trust, helping them to respond to future challenges and opportunities.

This Ipsos UK report presents the findings from a project for the FSA to gather evidence around consumer trust and use the insights from the evidence in strategy and communications approaches. Ipsos UK were commissioned to explore how the FSA can maintain levels of trust, and how they can rebuild trust when it falls. The project aimed to build upon previous evidence in consumer trust in food, drawing upon academic and grey literature on trust in government organisations and regulators, as well as trust in the food sector. Ipsos UK provided expertise as an independent facilitator to translate existing evidence and insights, engaging relevant

FSA teams in discussion and scenario planning. Through workshops and tailored outputs, the project provided actionable insights intended to inform the FSA's considerations of the role trust plays in their strategy and communications.

To enhance learnings, the FSA wanted to understand how other public sector organisations approach consumer trustworthiness in their organisation. Consequently, the evidence gathering was expanded to include case studies from the literature and interviews with subject matter experts from relevant organisations.

## How the project evolved

At the start of the project, the intention was that the evidence gathered would support the FSA in responding to future changes in trust, as well as informing policy decisions within the FSA's Strategy and Communications teams. However, the team recognised that the project would need to follow an iterative process. As the project evolved, the emphasis shifted to broader considerations around the role of consumer trust for the FSA, and more specifically for its strategy and communications.

As the project developed from the initial research questions the FSA had set out, wider strategic questions were raised throughout the process. Reflecting this, the report focuses on setting out the evidence gathered to support the FSA as it considers key questions related to trust. For reference, the initial research questions the project sought to address were:

- What can the FSA do to maintain consumer trust?
- What factors does FSA need to consider to respond rapidly and effectively to a fall in trust and to regain trust?
- How can the FSA inform and influence longer-term strategic objectives in relation to the mission 'food you can trust'?

## What this report will cover

This report covers key themes from the evidence gathering, Food and You 2 secondary analysis and depth interviews. It does not include materials or discussions from internal workshops facilitated by Ipsos UK for relevant FSA teams and subsequent outputs for internal use.

# Materials and Methods

## Evidence gathering and synthesis

The project began with an initial evidence gathering phase to review and consolidate existing evidence on consumer trust in food and the food system. Reflecting the agreed scope of the study, the evidence gathering was not intended to be systematic or comprehensive. Instead, a pragmatic purposive approach was taken to selecting key evidence that addressed the key areas of focus for the FSA, and to provide stimulus for further internal workshops and discussions. This evidence review prioritises high-quality, robust sources of information, incorporating insights from rapid reviews and other reputable secondary sources.

Two existing and highly relevant literature reviews provided the starting point for this phase, and much of the material for later elements of the project: the FSA's 2018 Rapid Evidence Assessment (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018) and the European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) 2024 literature review (Bradbury et al., 2024) on institutional trust in food regulation. These sources provide a more comprehensive overview of the relevant academic literature on trust and trust in food. The insights from these reviews were supplemented with evidence from other high-quality sources to update and broaden the evidence base around trust for this report.

Secondary analysis of the FSA's Food and You 2 data was also conducted by the FSA's Social Science team, to supplement the evidence gathering and explore potential explanations for the decline observed in trust. This secondary analysis was conducted on trust and confidence questions across three waves of data and adjacent analysis using logistic regression models to determine whether any sociodemographic groups were associated with declining levels of trust. For further details, please refer to Appendix B.

## Depth interviews

To supplement the evidence gathering, Ipsos UK and the FSA project team developed a list of relevant stakeholders – mostly from non-ministerial government departments and regulators – to capture their learnings around consumer trust and their approach to consumer trust in their organisation. The rationale for focusing on these organisations was that they had one or more of the following relevant characteristics: (i) a close link to consumers and/or the public; (ii) a mandate focused on public trust; (iii) had experienced a recent crisis in trust. The combined list of stakeholders was then ranked in terms of priority based on these characteristics.

The stakeholder contacts included those working in communications, insight and strategy departments as well as social scientists, meaning they were able to reflect on key learnings that would be applicable to the FSA. Ipsos focused first on recruiting high priority contacts, including those that were existing FSA contacts, and then moved on to remaining contacts when the list was exhausted. These individuals were sent initial invitation emails that outlined what their participation would involve and asking them to take part.

Interviews were conducted online by Ipsos UK using a semi-structured discussion guide designed to explore the participants' experiences of considering public or consumer trust within their organisation (see Appendix A). The interviews aimed to understand how organisations have approached building and maintaining public trust, and how they managed any declines in trust. In total, five interviews were carried out between the 18th of November 2024 and the 6th of February 2025. The organisations took part on condition of anonymity.

## Workshops to translate evidence and apply learnings

Insights from the evidence gathering phase and depth interviews were organised into themes and collated in a series of presentations to inform internal FSA workshops.

After the initial evidence gathering phase, Ipsos UK facilitated a workshop that brought together representatives from the FSA's Social Science, Strategy, and Communications teams, alongside two members of the FSA's Advisory Committee for Social Science (ACSS). The workshop focused on presenting an overview of the evidence around trust, with a focus on how the FSA could understand and conceptualise building, maintaining and rebuilding trust. This included group exercises to apply learnings by exploring different scenarios around trust and what they might mean for the FSA and how the organisation engages with consumers and stakeholders. The discussion and questions raised in this initial workshop determined the focus for the following workshops, in the sense that these were broadened to explore the role of consumer trust generally for the FSA and its strategy and communications.

Ipsos UK then facilitated two additional internal workshops with extended Strategy and Communications teams to further apply this learning in a tailored way. Firstly, a workshop with the wider FSA Strategy team aimed to explore and apply evidence on consumer trust and to consider how this could shape the FSA's strategy. Secondly, a workshop with the wider FSA Communications team sought to focus on the actions they might take around different scenarios involving trust. This included how the evidence



about trust might influence their communications approaches and messaging to maintain trust, recover from a dip in trust or respond to a crisis in trust.

## Trust in regulators and related concepts

### Defining trust

While the concept of trust is a common one in the academic literature, there is a lack of consensus about how to define trust, and the term is used in different ways (Otto & Kohler, 2018). The lack of consensus partly reflects the huge range of academic fields that consider different types of trust in different contexts. Indeed, the study of trust in organisations has remained challenging given the problems with the definition of trust itself (Mayer et al., 1995).

This report will therefore build on the definition suggested in the FSA's previous review of the literature around trust (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). The review reflects on the relevant literature to suggest a definition of trust as 'a belief that actors develop and rely on when dealing with uncertainty and risk'. It also highlights a number of key points that are important to consider when seeking to understand the evidence around consumer trust, and how it applies to food and food regulation, including:

- **Trust is fundamentally linked to uncertainty and risk.** This means that questions around trust arise when there is uncertainty. Similarly, trust can also be seen as a 'solution' to risk. Trust affects how people understand and perceive risks and risk events, and how they are responded to (Hawkins, 2024).
- **Trust is a belief.** Trust is only partially (or not at all) underpinned by the trustor verifying the claims or statements made by the trustee. As Fjaeran and Aven (2021) note, trust presupposes a situation of risk and involves a choice to make oneself vulnerable to another entity.
- **Trust has rational elements.** Trust can be a form of calculated risk or based on expectations that are consistently met, further reinforcing trust. This suggests that trust building is a cyclic process because with each positive outcome (or where expectations are met) trust is built (Huxham & Vangen, 2013).

- **Trust is underpinned by emotions.** This is clear because there is often a strong sense of a betrayal when trust is breached. For example, a report by the National Centre for Social Research identified that while many people trusted the decisions that the government made during the pandemic and followed the guidance, the revelation that the public health regulations had not been adhered to within Downing Street itself had a corrosive effect on trust (Curtice et al., 2024). Betrayal of trust can have long term impacts.
- **Trust is not always a choice.** Trust plays an imperative role in our everyday lives and is vital for society to function effectively (Hawkins, 2024). People need to trust others to act as citizens and consumers, and they often have no choice about trusting things they cannot control, including the food system.

## Relevant types of trust

There are two key types of trust that are particularly important when considering consumer trust in food and the food system (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018):

- **Generalised social trust.** This refers to the level of trust people have in most others. For example, a review by Dinesen and Bekkers (2017) outlines how generalised social trust refers to the trusting interactions with strangers or unknown others that are a feature of daily life for most people. In the context of the food system and purchasing food, consumers place trust in unknown others frequently. Consumers typically invest little time consciously thinking about trusting the food they eat and therefore have 'weak ties' to producers and sellers of food. This highlights that trust in the food system is effectively a relationship with unknown others and is not necessarily something people can choose. As Macready et al. (2020) note, this is because the average consumer cannot – even if they wanted to – substantiate whether a product contains the ingredients mentioned, or whether it has been produced according to the rules. Consumers therefore put their trust in different actors within the food system without necessarily knowing who they are (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). This dynamic also highlights how consumers have little choice in practice but to have trust in the food system.

- **Political trust.** This refers to how much people trust government and government institutions, including regulators like the FSA. There is an extensive literature based on this concept of political trust. Political trust differs from social trust, as it goes beyond the individual and includes elected governments and administrators. However, social trust does contribute to political trust (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) guidelines on measuring trust suggest that while trust between people matters, trust in institutions also underpins a successful society (OECD, 2017). The guidelines suggest that a community cannot function if it does not trust that its institutions, such as parliament and the civil service, can act competently to achieve their goals (OECD, 2017). Political trust has also been used interchangeably with institutional trust (Kim 2014; Medve-Balint and Boda 2014 in Bradbury et al., 2024). Some define institutional trust as a broader idea that looks at expectations of how institutions and social systems should treat citizens or as an attitude towards institutions (Bradbury et al., 2024).

There are different models that seek to explain trust, and the related concept of trustworthiness. One of the best known was first described by Mayer et al. (1995), with other related models being developed since then (see for example Macready et al., 2025). The Mayer et al. model seeks to explain trust by considering levels of perceived risk and the trustor's propensity to trust, as well as how the outcomes of any interaction can reinforce trust. At the core of their model is that perceptions of organisational trustworthiness are made up of three factors:

- **Ability** is the belief that the actor is indeed able to act in a manner that warrants trust. This is dependent on the actor doing a good job, being competent and skilled.
- **Benevolence** is the extent to which the actor is believed to be transparent and honest, and act in the interests of the trustor. This means the actor is being informative and open in its actions.
- **Integrity** is the belief that the actor is motivated to act in a manner that warrants trust. This means the actor is acting in the interest of those being asked to trust them. This is judged based on things like openness, consistency, and not having vested interests.

Another well-known model is the trust equation (Maister et al., 2000). While there is overlap between concepts in this model and the three factors above, the trust equation adds the extra factor of self-orientation. This suggests that when an organisation is seen to be acting in its own self-interest this can undermine trust.

## Key concepts related to trust

In addition to describing different types of trust and the overall dynamics of trust, there are other important concepts in the literature which are relevant to understanding the role trust plays in the context of the FSA, food regulation and the food system (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018).

**Distributed trust** refers to the level of trust people place in the aggregate of others' recommendations. This stems from the importance of first impressions and word of mouth from other people in shaping trust (Abdul-Rahman & Hailes, 1997). The literature around distributed trust is highly technical and based on computer science. However, it can be applied to the food sector given the increased prominence of consumer ratings on services, particularly online (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). For example, an FSA qualitative research study about online purchasing found that consumers consult online reviews when ordering from unfamiliar business. This gave them greater assurances about the food they were ordering (FSA, 2022). The concept of distributed trust is important commercially because recommendations from others can build trust in a product or organisation. According to a Nielsen study in 2021, 88% of people globally trust recommendations from people they know more than any online communications channel (online banner ads, mobile ads, SMS messages and SEO ads) (Nielsen, 2021). The views of others are held in high regard, particularly in the absence of other ways to determine whether an organisation or product can be trusted.

**Consumer confidence** is a term that is often used interchangeably with trust in the literature, with discussion about whether there is a distinction or not. The European Food Safety Authority's (EFSA) 2024 literature review highlights that trust is relational, a belief and is future oriented (Bradbury et al., 2024). The review notes the difference between trust and confidence in that the trust is future oriented, while confidence refers to present and past performance.

The relationship between consumer trust and confidence is built on by Macready et al. (2020), who highlight that higher trust in food chain actors (such as farmers, manufacturers, retailers and authorities) leads to greater confidence in the supply of food products and technologies used to produce them. This is because trust can only be attributed to animate entities, such as those who produce food. Thus, greater trust in these entities breeds confidence in the food system as a whole.

More broadly, confidence and trust are usually seen as closely related and dependent on one another. For example, a study by Wellcome identified that confidence in national institutions is strongly associated with the level of trust in those institutions (Wellcome, 2019). This shows that confidence and trust are linked and suggests that higher confidence can lead to greater trust.

There is evidence that both confidence and trust tend to be higher in modernised food systems. Countries with modern supply chains and standardised processes report greater confidence than consumers in countries with local shops and traditional food supply chains (Meagher et al. 2019 in Bradbury et al., 2024).

**Trustworthiness** is usually defined as the extent to which an organisation demonstrates characteristics that inspire trust. Trust and trustworthiness are distinct but related concepts, and the use of consumer surveys has been criticised for being unable to separate the two. For example, research carried out by the Edelman barometer showed that countries such as China and India have trusted institutions, but also score high on indexes that suggest a lack of trustworthiness, such as corruption (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). In addition, Onora O'Neill notes that placing trust and mistrust in others can be more damaging or costly in institutional settings, specifically in large and complex institutions that dominate public and corporate life (O'Neil, 2022). As a result, levels of consumer and public trust appear to tell us little about the trustworthiness of large institutions. As such, some argue for more complex measures of trust, combining aspects of trustworthiness, rather than relying on simpler consumer trust questions (Hewlett et al., 2023).

**Distrust** is a distinct concept that should not be conflated with low levels of trust. Distrust is defined as being an attitude that reflects suspicion or cynicism about the actions of others; people are deemed untrustworthy because there is evidence they cannot be trusted (Lenard, 2007). Low trust is less likely to drive changes in behaviour, while distrust is more likely to do so (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). This is relevant to the food system, because consuming food is necessary for people to sustain themselves, so low trust is unlikely to dramatically change consumption habits. However, distrust may lead to suspicion that in turn shapes consumer behaviour in more specific ways.

It is also worth noting that there are discussions in the literature around whether trust is always good, and whether distrust is always bad. For example, some level of distrust is desirable in democracies to ensure those in power are held accountable. Trust may also be wrongly placed in untrustworthy organisations. This shows not all entities are deserving of trust, given crisis emerges when they fail to be trustworthy (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). On the other hand, others argue that distrust is problematic,

because society will be unable to provide benefits to citizens which depend on trusting relationships (Lenard, 2007). Distrust can also be seen as 'constructive', especially in a world of fake news and false data, given distrust can encourage people to find alternative data sources or other official statistics to challenge them (Lehtonen, 2019).

## The crisis in trust

Recent surveys have found that trust in government in the UK is at an all-time low. For example, the British Social Attitudes survey in 2024 found that 45% said they 'almost never' trust governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above party interests. This marked a record low of public trust and confidence in government (Curtice et al., 2024).

Similarly, the most recent OECD survey on drivers of trust in public institutions showed an increase in the number of people with low or no trust in national governments, highlighting that a lack of institutional trust is not unique to the UK (OECD, 2024). This suggests there has been general downward trend in trust towards government and institutions globally over recent years.

However, measures of trust in the government fluctuate in response to political events and wider contextual factors. This emphasises the importance of understanding this broader context and how it shapes trust in the FSA and the food system, especially as consumer perceptions of macro-level political factors can influence trust (Bradbury et al., 2024).

While the current context around political trust is challenging for organisations like the FSA, it is also important to acknowledge that there is good evidence that low trust and even high distrust are not new. For example, general social trust in others in the UK has changed little over recent decades. This suggests that low levels of trust are a chronic ongoing issue, rather than a new acute one (Ipsos, 2019). Moreover, trust has remained broadly consistent across generations. The Ipsos Veracity Index shows 47% of millennials aged under 28 trusted the ordinary person to tell the truth in 2008, with a relatively small decline to 40% of Gen Z aged under 28 in 2024 (Ipsos, 2024).

## Trust in the food system and the FSA

### Consumer trust in the food system

Overall, trust in the food system remains high. According to the most recent findings from the FSA's Food and You 2 survey, 69% of consumers had confidence in the food supply chain and around nine in ten (89%) were

confident in the safety of the food they purchased (FSA, 2025a). This shows that confidence in the safety of food is high, and most are confident in the food system.

While consumer trust is often seen as essential for food systems to function, in practice, consumers have little choice but to trust. As discussed previously, trust is the only way consumers can reduce the complexity and uncertainty they are faced with in engaging with modern food systems. As Bildtgård (2008) argued, anxiety in the food system necessitates trust, because consumers can only address this anxiety either by controlling their food supply (which is increasingly difficult in the modern world), or by developing trust in the food system.

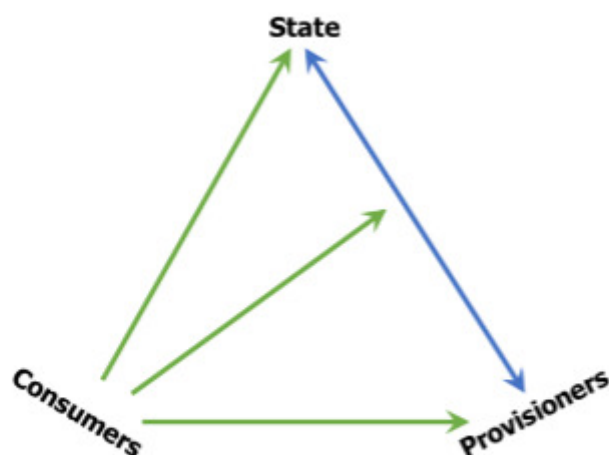
Most consumers also encounter few individuals with whom they can have a relationship of trust in modern food systems. They mostly meet salespeople and service staff, and rarely the producer, processor, transporter, trader, wholesaler, chef, quality controller, auditor or regulator (Bradbury et al., 2024).

This suggests that while it is beneficial to maintain consumer trust, trust itself does not necessarily need to be a priority unless there is a crisis. Even so, the complexity of the trust environment means it is important for the FSA and others in the food system to understand what drives consumer trust. The rest of this section describes the key factors that shape trust, identified during the evidence gathering.

## Contextual factors shaping trust in food

Various models have attempted to capture the external influences when consumers report their level of trust in different aspects of the food system or make a trust decision related to food (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018).

One useful model was described by Kjaernes et al. (2007). They developed the idea of triangular trust to demonstrate consumer trust in the food system. This highlights how overall trust depends on trust in the state and trust in the food industry, but crucially also depends on consumer perceptions of the relationship between the two.



*Based on model in Kjaernes et al. 2007*

Figure 1.1. Kjaernes et al. (2007) triangular trust model, taken from ICF Consulting Ltd. (2018)

By examining variable levels of trust in six countries, they found that in countries where trust in food was high, high trust in the state compensated for distrust in the industry. Conversely, in countries where trust in food was low, trust in the state was not significant enough to compensate for distrust in the industry. As a result, Kjaernes et al. (2007) suggested that actors responsible for shaping trust are likely to be those that are perceived to have the greatest power and control within the system. This means changes in trust in the food system could be linked to government, industry, or perceived power shifts in the relationship between them.

The OECD conceptual framework for trust outlines a similar approach. This model describes three factors that influence consumer trust in food (Bradbury et al., 2024):

1. Individual characteristics (e.g., preferences, expectations and socioeconomic background)
2. The institutional environment
3. The societal and community context

There are similarities between the OECD framework and the Kjaernes et al. (2007) triangular trust model. However, as Bradbury et al. (2024) describe, the OECD framework presents these factors as distinct and separate where they should be viewed as being interlinked. For example, the societal context can be influenced by an individual's characteristics, and vice versa.

Community Research and 2CV's (2018) deliberative forums research set out how consumers described their own considerations around trust in food in terms of three integral factors (see [Figure 1.2](#)):



1. **Context** - The ease with which trust is granted depends on the situation, and who is being asked to trust. Sensitivity may be much higher in certain situations, and for certain people.
2. **Social trust** – The extent to which a person’s social assessment reveals good intentions within an entity.
3. **Cognitive trust** – The extent to which trust is further built by the ability to deliver on what an entity promised a person.

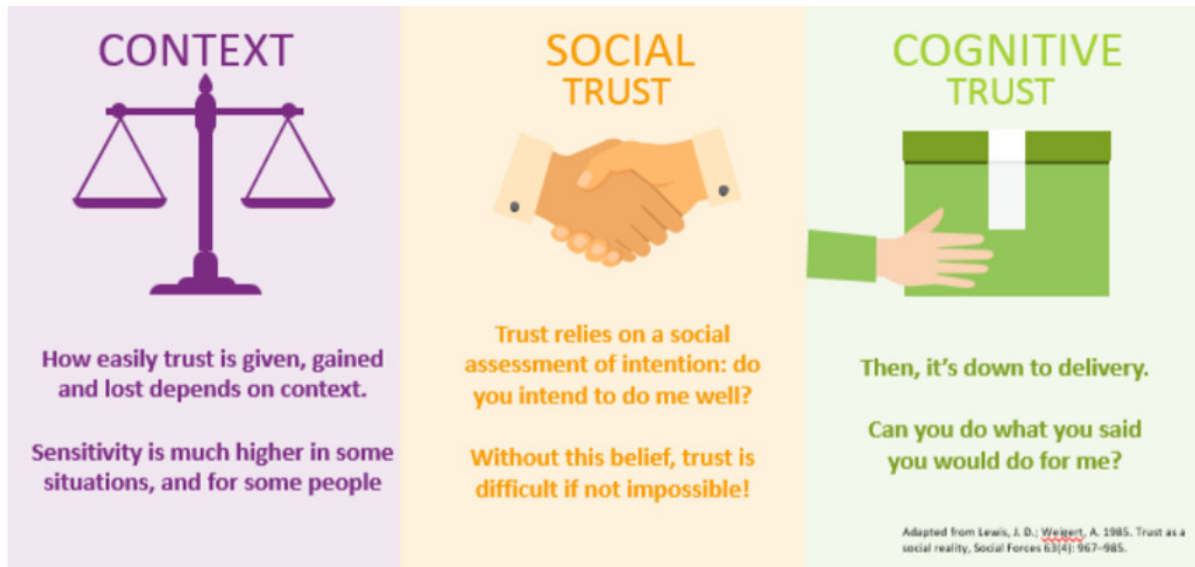


Figure 1.2. Model of factors that inform trust, taken from Community Research and 2CV (2018)

Other attempts to explain consumer trust in food follow a layered, multi-factor approach. Some of the key factors will be explored later in this report.

## Trust in actors within the food system

Overall, there is evidence that consumers generally hold higher trust in food regulators, and lower trust in the food industry (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). Consumers may hold regulators accountable for failing to prevent food fraud incidents and view it as the responsibility of both regulators and industry to manage food fraud incidents (Charlebois et al., 2017; Kendall et al., 2018).

However, the evidence on consumer trust in different actors within the food system is mixed. As of 2024, the Edelman Trust Barometer showed a slight increase in trust in companies within the food and beverage sector between 2023 and 2024 (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024). Charlebois et

al. (2017) also found that trust in public regulators varies between demographic groups. For example, trust in public regulators and in the industry to mitigate food fraud risks is more characteristic of older people.

More recent FSA data shows that confidence in the food supply chain has remained broadly stable, with 60% of consumers saying that they were confident in the food supply chain in December 2024 (FSA, 2024a). The FSA's Food and You 2 Wave 7 data also showed that confidence varies across individual actors within the food system (FSA, 2024b). 84% of consumers had confidence that farmers ensure food is safe to eat and 81% had confidence that shops and supermarkets ensure this. By contrast, 54% had confidence in takeaways, and 39% had confidence in food delivery services to ensure this is the case. The NFU Mutual (2018) Food Fraud Report found that consumers have more confidence in short, local British supply chains, and less confidence in longer international supply chains.

## The context around food

There are a range of contextual issues that are likely to play a role in influencing the public's level of trust in the UK food system (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018).

One long established influence on trust in the food system relates to ethical concerns, which are particularly salient among younger consumers. The Food Ethics Council (2018) explored these ethical concerns in relation to the consideration of the fairness of the UK food system, extending to workers, the environment, and the treatment of animals. They found that 55% of 16 to 24-year-olds surveyed in the UK believed that the food system was 'unfair' to farm animals, in comparison to 32% of over 65s. A further 46% of 16 to 24-year-olds said that the food system was 'unfair' to the natural environment – compared to 28% among those aged 55-64 and over 65. Fanzo (2015) notes that trust built on an ethical foundation is essential, and that ethical concerns leave the public sceptical around the production of nutritious and safe food.

The nature of the UK's retail sector also influences consumer trust in food. UK consumers prefer more processed and off-the-shelf foods compared to other European countries (Kjærnes et al., 2007). As the food retail sector in the UK is so concentrated, trust in the national food system is likely to be linked to trust in a small number of leading retailers. Connors et al. (2022) reported that food concerns seem 'amplified by an increasing lack of trust that key food decision-makers have the public's best interests at heart'. They found that consumers viewed businesses as being hugely powerful in shaping our food systems, but trust in these businesses was low, with 56% of respondents expressing concern for the future over 'the power of big food manufacturers and retailers'. Between them, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda

and Aldi control two thirds of the food retail market, so trust in these retail actors is likely to play a hugely significant role in determining overall trust in the UK food system (Kantar Worldpanel, n.d.).

Further, as buying food moves increasingly online, the food system is likely to face additional hurdles to overcome in establishing trust. As discussed by ICF Consulting Ltd. (2018), online food businesses face added scrutiny from consumers due to the nature of online transactions. Consumers do not receive their product immediately after payment, delivery workers add additional complexity to the 'supply chain', and online transactions can induce privacy and security concerns. The NFU Mutual (2018) Food Fraud Report suggested that takeaways and online sellers have the most work to do to enhance consumer confidence.

There are also other important contextual concerns that influence consumer views of the food system. Overall, the FSA's (2018) Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker data from 2018 suggested that the level of concern about food issues remained relatively stable since 2010, and focused on sugar content, food safety, pesticide residues, and antibiotics and pollutants (Community Research & 2CV, 2018). More recent data from the FSA's Consumer Insights Tracker (FSA, 2024a) highlights that food prices (87%), ultra-processed foods (79%), and food poverty (74%) are all areas of high concern for the public. There have been further investigations exploring these concerns around food that gained relevance in recent years, such as ultra-processed foods (Henson, 2024). Consumers were also very concerned about food poverty and food inequality (76%) and the overall 'healthiness' of people's diets (75%) (Henson, 2024). In other FSA research, consumers associated several negative issues with processed foods, including less ethical and environmentally friendly food production practices, increased use of additives, pesticides, and hormones, decreased 'quality' and 'safety' for consumers, and lower animal welfare standards (Connors et al., 2022). Similarly, unhealthy foods were often presumed to be more processed, less nutritious, and higher in saturated fat, sugar, salt, and additives.

## Trust in the FSA

Given its regulatory remit, the FSA is a key player in relation to consumer trust within the wider UK food system. The 'social license' of food markets relies upon general consumer trust, which Tonkin et al. (2019) suggest requires critical oversight due to their complexity, especially in times of crisis. Consumer trust legitimises the authority of regulatory and government organisations to conduct these oversight activities. Thus, threats to consumer trust present an ongoing challenge within the modern food system.

For the first time since tracking began in 2020, there was a notable decline in trust in the FSA to make sure ‘food is safe and what it says it is’, falling from 78% in Wave 6 to 69% in Wave 7 (FSA, 2025a). This was due to an increase in respondents reporting that they ‘neither trust nor distrust’ the FSA, with distrust remaining low. The Food and You 2 survey also found a decrease in confidence in the food supply chain over the same period, dropping from 76% to 68%. There was a corresponding increase in unprompted concerns about food (from 18% to 28%).

During this period, there was extensive national media coverage about untrustworthy practice within government. This was reflected in the downward trend in trust in government described previously (Curtice et al., 2024). Data from the 2024 Edelman Trust Barometer (Edelman Trust Institute, 2024) also supports this, demonstrating that the UK was the least trusting of NGOs, business, government, and media of the countries included, falling behind others such as Japan, Argentina, and South Korea.

More recent data from Food and You 2 Wave 9 shows that, following an increase in Wave 8, trust in the FSA has returned to Wave 7 levels (69% in Wave 9). However, it should be noted that Wave 9 was conducted in the lead up to the general election, at a time when trust in the government was low and has since recovered to some extent. These findings also showed that 89% of respondents were confident in the safety of the food they purchased, 69% had confidence in the food supply chain and 78% believed that the FSA can be trusted to safeguard against food-related risks (FSA, 2025b).

The FSA’s Consumer Insights Tracker also shows some variation in trust in the FSA – among those with some knowledge of the FSA. The proportion who have trust in the FSA to do its job reached a low of 55% in September 2023 and December 2023, but has since recovered slightly. Trust increased from 56% in September 2024 to 61% in October and 63% in November, before returning to 57% in December 2024 (FSA, 2024a). It should be noted that the Consumer Insights Tracker is not comparable to Food and You 2 due to differences in the methodology, sample and frequency.

Analysis conducted by the FSA on Food and You 2 data (see Appendix B) as part of this project highlights that the extent of the observed decline in trust in 2022 and 2023 varied according to demographics. For example, people with food hypersensitivities were among those who saw the largest decline in trust during this period. However, analysis using logistic regression models found that sociodemographic factors alone do not explain different levels of trust in the FSA. This suggests that other factors that may not be captured in Food and You 2 (and therefore out of scope for analysis) are more likely to contribute towards levels of trust.

# Building, maintaining and recovering trust

As set out in earlier sections, trust in the food system is complex and influenced by a variety of factors. These overlapping factors interact to shape willingness to trust different actors in the food system, and they are all likely to be important in shaping trust in the FSA. Below we outline in more detail these drivers and corresponding barriers to trust (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018).

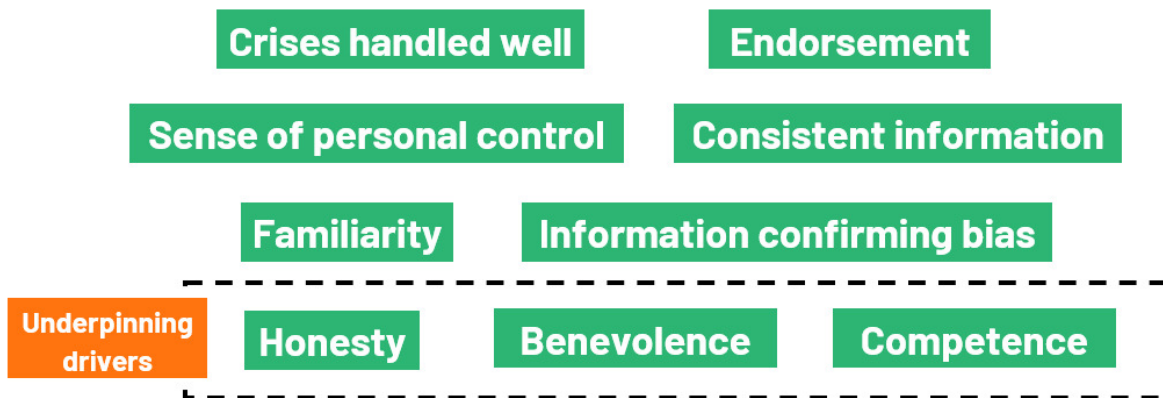


Figure 1.3. Drivers of trust (slide taken from internal workshops)

## Underpinning drivers

The literature consistently highlights several underpinning factors, some of which are depicted in [Figure 1.3](#), as being crucial for building and maintaining trust. These relate to the models of trust described earlier. While specific terms are used in different contexts, the following concepts reflect factors that are repeatedly found to shape how much people trust an organisation (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018):

- **Honesty:** This is judged by consumers based on perceptions of openness, consistency and not having vested interests. However, too much honesty can also be harmful, for example if this calls competence into question.
- **Competence:** The importance of this varies for different actors in different contexts. It is usually not sufficient in building trust on its own and must be paired with things like honesty and openness. However, there is evidence that perceived incompetence quickly erodes trust in organisations. This means an organisation maintaining a reputation for reliability is crucial for protecting and building trust.

- **Benevolence:** Perceived care and benevolent intentions are strong drivers of trust, particularly when paired with honesty and integrity. Consumers often highlight the importance of wanting to know organisations are acting in their interests for them to trust them, and this is important for government organisations.

It is vital to recognise the importance of these underpinning factors when considering the more specific drivers and barriers of trust outlined below.

## Handling and coverage of crises

The media plays a significant role in shaping consumer trust in the food system. Negative media coverage can heighten the perception of risk associated with certain food products and erode trust in institutions (Bradbury et al., 2024). People also tend to be more attentive towards negative information due to negativity bias (Vaish et al., 2008). Eden et al. (2008) found that UK consumers approached food assurance with a high level of scepticism around food information. As consumers are disconnected from food production, their understanding relies heavily on media coverage, making consumer perceptions particularly sensitive to negative media reports, which can diminish overall trust.

An example of how media coverage can damage consumer confidence in the food system is the horse meat scandal (Lawrence, 2013). The sense of betrayal felt by consumers was partly attributed to media representations that raised the profile of food fraud issues, leading consumers to believe that food fraud was a food safety issue (Barnett et al., 2016; Bradbury et al., 2024; Tomasevic et al., 2023). Consumers may hold regulatory institutions indirectly responsible for failing to detect and prevent adulteration through testing and checks (Kendall et al., 2018). In the immediate aftermath of the scandal, a Which? survey revealed a significant drop in trust in the food industry, with 49% of respondents reporting that the crisis had changed their shopping habits, 25% saying they bought less processed meat and 17% saying they bought more products from butchers and farmers' markets (Which?, 2013). These findings suggest that consumers respond negatively to food fraud incidents, even when they may not have been directly affected.

The longevity of the effects of food scandals is contested. Berg (2004) suggests that the damage to trust is usually greatest immediately following a scandal but gradually returns to normal over time. ICF Consulting Ltd. (2018) pointed to a study by De Jonge et al. (2010), which found that consumers' ability to recall food safety incidents was influenced by the intensity and recency of media coverage. Data from the FSA's Wave 6 – Wave 8 Public Attitudes Trackers (2013a, 2013b, 2014) reflects these findings. Whilst none of the trackers specifically asked about horsemeat,

5% of respondents spontaneously reported it as being a food issue of concern in Wave 6, and this fell in Wave 7 (2%) and again in Wave 8 (1%). This suggests that spontaneous concern was low and short-lived and likely to be related to the media coverage that the scandal received. Similarly, looking into the effects of the 2011 German dioxin scandal, Rieger et al. (2017) found that only 'health-conscious' consumers changed their household consumption practices in response to media reports of a food scandal. This shows that responses to food scandals are likely to vary based on consumer characteristics and behaviours. There is also evidence that behaviour changes following incidents are likely an indicator of distrust rather than low trust (Van de Walle & Six, 2014).

It is also worth noting that recovering from negative media coverage during a crisis is possible. If the government and/or the food industry meet pre-existing consumer expectations following a crisis, their response may reinforce trust and aid in its rebuilding (Kjærnes et al., 2007). The manner in which regulators respond to the issue may also influence consumer trust. Government and regulators can rebuild trust by addressing the issue and claiming credit for resolving it or by keeping a low profile and deflecting blame to others for the crisis itself (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018).

The formation of the FSA following the BSE crisis is one important example of how consumer trust can be restored. Wales et al. (2006) argued that the BSE crisis shook the UK's established regulatory frameworks. The establishment of the FSA, combined with increasing retailer power and control over the supply chain, contributed to a new institutional basis for trust in food.

## Endorsement

Endorsement can play a crucial role in building trust, as people are more likely to trust sources that are recommended by others, whether they are known or unknown to them (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). The endorsement heuristic, discussed by Metzger and Flanagin (2013), suggests that people are likely to 'believe information and sources if others do too, without much scrutiny of the site content or source'. Consumers may also follow the lead of others in trusting or distrusting particular entities.

In the past, endorsement was primarily collected through direct interaction between consumers, often in person. However, the digital age has significantly increased the potential for endorsement activity. Online reviews and average ratings of businesses have the potential to influence consumer behaviour, as they can be perceived as trustworthy (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). Wu et al. (2021) suggest that online reviews are perceived as higher quality when they are longer and more detailed. Those that are positive or factual, and those that appear on social networks are also perceived as more trustworthy than reviews that are negative or

emotional, and those that appear on retailer websites. Park et al. (2021) also explored how online reviews can influence trust in restaurant services, with trust perceptions being highest in reviews containing pictures and giving high ratings.

This is hugely significant for online food sales, as trust reduces the perception of risk involved in trading with unknown entities, and online food businesses and takeaways remain among the least trusted bodies in the food system (FSA, 2024b; Thevathayan et al., 2013). Despite the growing influence of online endorsements, consumers are still more likely to build trust through word-of-mouth endorsements from known others, as some people still question the credibility of online reviews and ratings (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018).

## Sense of personal control

Perceived complexity in the food system can act as a barrier to trust or even contribute to mistrust, especially in the aftermath of scandals (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). Complexity is associated with a lack of personal control for consumers. As a result, consumers often prefer smaller-scale, local producers, which provide them with a greater sense of control. Kendall et al. (2019) discuss the concept of relational trust, which develops through reciprocal relationships, such as those formed within alternative food networks like farmer's markets or local butchers.

One approach for regulators to address this issue is through impersonal formal means, such as third-party certification (Kjærnes et al., 2007). However, this approach carries the risk of triggering sceptical responses, particularly among consumers who are already concerned about complexity in the food system.

Increasing consumers' sense of personal control can lead to increased trust in the system. This is connected to shorter supply chains, where trust can be built on interpersonal relationships rather than institutional trust in the broader food system (Zhang et al., 2016). Face-to-face interactions, which are more likely to occur in smaller outlets, also appear to be linked to trust as they offer opportunities to build relationships. As cited by ICF Consulting (2018), Meyer et al. (2012) found that rural Australian participants were more trusting of the food system than urban or metropolitan Australian participants. Rural participants would cite their direct experience of food production and regulation, whereas urban participants were more suspicious and wanted to see more regulation. As a result, actors within larger food systems, such as retailers, may employ marketing techniques to create a more personal feel for their services.



Paradoxically, consumers in countries with modern, concentrated food systems exhibit higher levels of overall trust in the food system compared to those with smaller traditional food outlets. This may be because smaller outlets require trusting a variety of different actors and individuals, while larger systems often only require consumers to trust a single institution.

Within these larger systems, effectively communicating complexity while still allowing for consumer judgements of trustworthiness may be significant. Tonkin et al. (2019) found that simply knowing that protocols and procedures exist for operations and managing food incidents can help build consumer trust. Particularly with regard to regulators, consumers are more likely to trust that regulators are vigilant and to be satisfied with compliance if they believe that regulators are involved in managing and ensuring food label accuracy (Charlebois et al., 2017).

## Consistency of information

Consistency of information can influence the decision to trust (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). If consumers receive information that is consistent across platforms, then it helps to build trust in that information and the entity disseminating it.

This is noted by Buskens (2020), who recognises that there needs to be consistent information from an organisation, but also that confirmation can come from others in a more social way. For example, in online markets positive information or reviews from other buyers increases trust in suppliers. This suggests the consistent spread of information through an organisation and broader social circles helps foster trust.

Consistency can also be linked to process-based trust, or where trust has built up over time based on experience (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). This was highlighted in qualitative research carried out by the FSA on food hygiene, where participants said they were more likely to trust establishments they visited regularly and where they had positive experiences (FSA, 2022). However, a crisis can lead to a loss of continuity and undermine trust (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). This indicates the importance of building trust over time, through positive experiences.

While consistent information can help build trust, inconsistent information can be damaging. One of the challenges is the spread of disinformation and competing narratives. Shahbazi & Bunker (2024) noted that during a health crisis, the interplay between accurate information dissemination, effective communication through social media and public trust is crucial. However, misinformation complicates crisis management by challenging the messaging. The competing narratives can cause challenges for organisations trying to produce consistent information and this can hinder trust.

## Familiarity

People tend to prefer familiar entities over those that are unknown, and this preference is often referred to as recognition heuristic (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). For example, research carried out by the FSA in 2022 concluded that participants consistently associated a lack of familiarity with higher risk when buying food online (FSA, 2022). This suggests that the unknown can breed lower levels of trust when it comes to purchasing food.

More broadly across the food system, levels of trust are often lower when it comes to new food technology (Jackson 2015, Henderson et al. 2011 in ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018) and unrecognised food ingredients (Label Insight, 2016 in ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018).

Being familiar can also support an increase in trust in institutions. For example, those who are better informed tend to be more trusting of governments, NGOs, the media and businesses (Edelman, 2018 in ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). While individuals seeking information is crucial to trust, it is also dependent on institutions being transparent in disclosing such information. For example, Ripamonti (2024) concluded there is a significant positive effect of disclosing financial, public meetings, and performance transparency on government trustworthiness.

## Information confirming bias

Trust can be shaped by confirmation bias. This refers to people's tendency to trust information that confirms their pre-existing beliefs. There is also some evidence that those with low trust in the food industry may also be prone to searching for negative information or media sources that highlight untrustworthy practices, therefore diminishing their trust further (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018).

This can be particularly problematic for novel foods. For example, Dibbets et al (2021) conducted a study on novel foods which showed an eagerness among consumers to obtain negative information about food that looked unappealing, compared to when they were presented with food that looked more appealing. This suggests that when presented with food they are unfamiliar with trust can be an issue, and in turn this can lead to lower consumption. An example of this relates to the public concern over Bovaer in December 2024. When trials with Bovaer were announced, many claims were made online about the safety of the additive, with mentions of Bovaer on the social media platform X 'from virtually zero to over 71,000 in the days after the trial was announced', despite the additive being approved by the FSA (Eardley et al., 2024). Overall, trust can be influenced by preconceptions and the search for information to confirm biases.

## Reflections on trust in practice

This section summarises key learnings about consumer trust in practice from five depth interviews with communications and insight professionals and social scientists in government organisations.

### Understanding trust

There were some common themes when considering the way participants and their organisations understood and approached consumer trust. They emphasised the importance of **transparency**, describing this as being open about decision-making, sharing evidence and data, and engaging with diverse stakeholders at different stages of their work. Examples of this included making committee meetings available to the public and communicating the caveat that even scientific information contains some level of uncertainty.

"It's being open and transparent. It's being consistent in the way we operate. It's being fair and explaining, being able to explain why we make the decisions we do."

Building trust through clear communication was also seen as a priority. The organisations who need the public to listen to their guidance and advice saw familiarity and positive associations with their brand as being important. Participants described how crucial it was to explain decisions in an accessible way, using language that resonates. Clarity of communication was viewed as particularly crucial during a crisis response.

"I think a lot of it is about awareness as well. If they don't know who we are, then we can't expect them to trust us."

"Have the public heard of us? Do they know what we do? Do they trust what we say when they need to hear from us?"

"On the comms side, it would mean us making sure that what we put out into the public domain as far as written material or videos or whatever, was very clear and balanced and understandable."

There was also a recognition of the potential impact of independence on trust, particularly being independent of political influence. There was concern that public trust can be undermined if their connection with party politics or the wider government is viewed as being too close.

"I think trust can be quite tricky when you've got such strong political waves happening."

“I tend to associate trust with – do people think we’re independent? So, trust and independence... I think there’s an interplay there.”

## The role of trust

Organisations prioritised consumer trust in different ways. Generally, participants described trust as being considered important within their organisations. However, some did not have trust as a core measure of organisational performance. Instead, they emphasised customer satisfaction in the organisations they regulated, ensuring that their sector delivers high quality services and meets key performance indicators.

“[Trust] is not an indicator that the organisation monitors and assesses itself against, but customers are one of the strands of work and priority. And I think that we seek to deliver trust by encouraging the sector to do a good job... but trust isn’t necessarily on the agenda of a meeting.”

Some participants described a broader approach to trust and trustworthiness, emphasising the role of **organisation-wide behaviours** in trust. This might include good/confident leadership, positive organisational culture, and staff behaviour.

“...things like the behaviours of your staff, what is everybody like? Are they sound, are they good in meetings, are they good with stakeholders? Have you spent time on your culture and behaviours and ways of working? What’s it like for a stakeholder to trade with you and to work with you?”

Another participant shared how their organisation collects trust data, but that this is for context purposes rather than being a formal performance indicator. For this organisation, consumer trust is not a focus and does not directly shape strategic decisions, partly because it can be difficult to influence directly.

## Measuring trust

Participants in organisations who measured consumer trust used various approaches to do so. One of the most cited was qualitative and quantitative research with the general public or key audiences. Surveys may ask directly about trust, as well as what is of interest to consumers and any behaviours that could be improved. These measures become particularly significant during emergencies. Some carried out this kind of research every few years, while others did so monthly.

“We have an annual reputation research project where we do qualitative and quantitative work, but we don’t do it with the general public. We do it with our key audiences.”

These surveys were supplemented, including through:

- Specific focused research on key issues.
- Evaluations to determine whether messages were trusted or acted upon.
- Reputation trackers conducted among registered stakeholders, customers, and partners.
- Associated measures, such as advocacy (e.g., how stakeholders may speak about the organisation), public awareness, and familiarity.

One participant explained that they are planning how they can standardise trust questions against other organisations to improve comparability.

“We’re trying really to adopt one single question about trust that we can implement in all our surveys. And I think this is important for comparability reasons.”

## Building and maintaining trust

Participants described various approaches their organisations take to maintain trust. One way is to disseminate information that is targeted and appropriate to the audience. This involves simplifying ideas and using relevant content that resonates with the target audience. For example, one participant highlighted how one of their most successful campaigns that helped build trust was to use humour and simple language to differentiate themselves from typical government messaging.

“It helped us to differentiate ourselves from, from this kind of nanny statism and government boring government messaging to something that was actually really funny, a bit stupid would resonate with people that kids would find hilarious, that parents would pick up on.”

The importance of being proactive was stressed by some participants. They discussed using horizon scanning and social listening to identify emerging issues. This allows them to address problems before they escalate, and engage with the public, stakeholders and interested parties. For example, for one organisation, when they identify that a decision they take may impact trust, they proactively communicate with stakeholder groups to explain the rationale. This transparency is an important part of being trustworthy.

“What we did learn is that the earlier you can engage with the various stakeholder groups on an issue that, you know is going to be difficult... the easier it is for the final result maybe to be accepted.”

Another way of maintaining trust is disseminating clear, regular and impactful information to establish an organisation as the go-to source for stakeholders or consumers. Communicating information and decisions in an accessible way helps organisations build awareness around threats and potential crises.

“Think about other agencies during Covid. For example, the European medicine agencies that were not so well known before or even not trusted, but then had a spike in good reputation because they were providing advice or support.”

The spread of misinformation and disinformation is a growing challenge that serves to undermine trust in regulators and government organisations. Participants reflected that providing information at the right time is crucial in cutting through the noise.

“There is a lot of work on trying to debunk these false narratives before the false information is out there. It raises awareness about the fact that false information could be there, and help citizens to detect them, or be more ready when they encounter such information.”

Having the right spokesperson can also be crucial to creating rapport and trust with target audiences. This makes the organisation appear relatable and genuine.

“I think it helps when you have the right spokespeople for the right issue. So in other words, you... don’t put a male finance director up to talk to a group of women about breast cancer. You have a female clinician.”

Similarly, participants also highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement. They felt that the way stakeholders speak about organisations, both professionally and privately, are important for building trust. Organisations often focused on involving diverse groups in decision-making and inviting them to webinars and events.

“We involve many different sorts of elements of society in our decision making. And I think that contributes to our trust.”

“We have text alert system where we push messages to consumers using webinars, events, communications with partners and stakeholders.”

## Key lessons for regulators from other government organisations

- Prioritise transparency** in decision-making, sharing evidence and data, and engaging diverse stakeholders at different stages of work.
- Focus on clear, accessible, audience-focused communication.** Building brand awareness and positive associations is important for establishing trust, especially during crises.
- Maintain independence** from political influence where possible, as this can undermine trust.
- Adopt a holistic approach to trust** that emphasises positive organisational values like good leadership, culture, and staff conduct.
- Gather standardised trust metrics** through surveys and related measures to inform strategy. For example, reputation research with key audiences, message testing, and related measures like advocacy and awareness.
- Proactively identify emerging issues** through horizon scanning and public engagement to get ahead of potential trust issues. Transparently communicate the rationale for difficult decisions to the public.
- Establish the organisation as a go-to information source** by regularly communicating clear, impactful, timely information from relatable spokespeople. This helps combat misinformation.
- Engage diverse stakeholders** substantively by involving them in decision-making and events to help build trust through third-party advocacy.

Figure 1.4. Summary of key lessons for regulators from other government organisations

## What are the overall lessons for regulators like the FSA?

The evidence set out in this report demonstrates the challenges of using consumer trust as an organisational metric. As discussed, there is much that regulators and other government organisations can do to build and maintain trust. However, the complex drivers of trust mean there is also no simple set of actions or tools organisations can use that will guarantee high levels of trust. Broader contextual factors will have an important role in driving consumer trust.

## Choices and priorities around trust

During the internal workshops, Ipsos UK suggested some choices around trust for regulators like the FSA to help frame discussions and considerations around trust. The choices reflect the evidence gathered from the literature and depth interviews. They were intended to be a starting point for considering the role consumer trust should play in organisational strategy and communications.

The choices set out below are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and the right approach may also change over time depending on the changing context for a regulator. It is also worth noting that different regulators have different remits and strategic priorities. In practice this shapes the relative importance of measures of consumer trust and broader consumer sentiment.

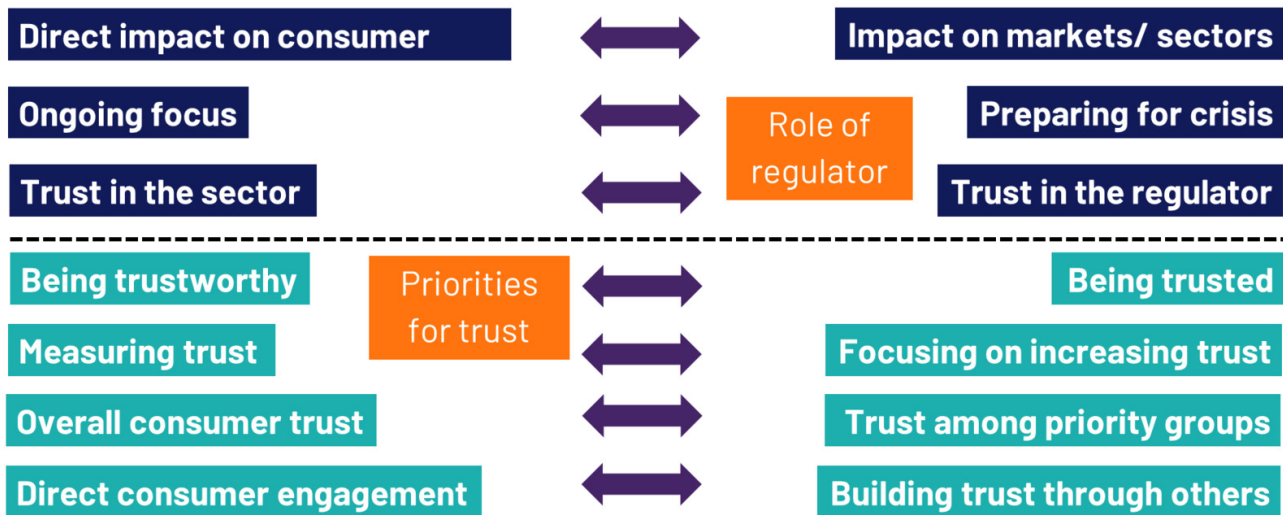


Figure 1.5. Choices and priorities around trust (slide taken from internal workshops)

## Consumers trusting a regulator versus consumers being positive about a regulated market or sector

Some regulators see it as important to develop a direct relationship of trust with consumers, while others may not see this as crucial for their work. For example, consumer trust in the regulator may be important for a range of reasons, such as the regulator needing to demonstrate its legitimacy as it deals with stakeholders. Alternatively, a regulator might decide to prioritise other metrics related to the performance of their sector from a consumer perspective (e.g. customer satisfaction, consumer detriment) and not on trust in them as a regulator.



## **Direct consumer engagement versus building trust through others**

Regulators may decide that engaging with consumers directly is important to deliver their remit, or may choose to work through industry, government or other stakeholders to build trust more broadly. Using existing trusted relationships between consumers and other actors can be an effective way to maintain and build trust further.

## **Consumer trust as an ongoing focus versus prioritising consumer trust in a crisis**

Where trust in a regulator is less important day-to-day, it may be more useful to focus on ensuring their organisation or its messages will be listened to by consumers when communications or guidance is needed urgently. For example, a regulator might see it as appropriate to work with government departments or agencies that are more familiar to the public to support effective crisis communications.

## **Being trustworthy versus being trusted**

The evidence shows that the link between consumer trust and the performance of regulators is not clear. This means organisations could rely on high levels of consumer trust, even where that trust might be misplaced. Regulators might decide to prioritise metrics that give confidence that their organisation is trustworthy and performing well, instead of focusing on consumer trust.

## **Measuring trust versus taking steps to increase trust**

A regulator may decide that understanding the level of consumer trust in their organisation is important context for their work, but that increasing trust is not a strategic priority to deliver their remit.

## **Improving trust overall versus building trust among priority groups**

It may be more important for a regulator to understand key demographic, attitudinal or behavioural groups where trust is low or distrust is high, and taking action to understand and tackle this. This is particularly important if issues of trust are linked with problems the regulator wants to address, such as greater likelihood to undertake risky behaviours or not listen to advice in a crisis.

## Trust in a crisis response

The relationship between crisis response and trust is not a straightforward one, and the impact may depend on information received by consumers, and communication from the media, regulators or industry (ICF Consulting Ltd., 2018). As the evidence set out earlier in this report shows, there are many factors that shape trust over the short and long term. This makes it challenging to respond to a crisis in trust.

However, the way regulators and other government agencies respond to crisis is critical in maintaining public trust. There are different models for crisis response, including the Government's Crisis Communications Planning Guide operating model. This operating model is summarised into three key objectives (Government Communication Service, 2022):

1. Verify information, issue holding line and mobilise your team within the first hour.
2. Confirm team roles and keep the public and other stakeholders informed within the first day.
3. Keep coordinated, reassure and rebuild within the first week.

The Krebs framework can help organisations structure their communications effectively, by informing the public what is known, what is unknown, what the organisation is doing, what they should do, and when they will hear more (Government Communication Service, 2022).

The FSA also developed their own Risk Communication Toolkit (FSA, 2020), which provides a framework for effectively communicating food risk to consumers. Based on a review of current evidence and best practices in risk communication theory, the purpose of the toolkit is to enable people to make informed decisions to protect their health and wellbeing by aligning public and expert perceptions of risks.

The toolkit outlines seven key principles for risk communication:

1. Consider the context and existing beliefs/narratives of the target audience
2. Have a clear purpose and desired outcome
3. Control the messaging through testing, sequencing and timing
4. Be transparent about the evidence behind decisions and acknowledge uncertainties

5. Present the risk clearly using quantitative data, qualitative descriptions, framing and visuals as appropriate
6. Deliver the message through suitable channels and messengers for the audience
7. Evaluate the effectiveness and identify lessons learned

These principles aim to make communications planning more rigorous and consistent, and to support science and policy teams in communicating effectively. While not prescriptive, it provides a practical checklist to ensure the key principles are followed.

## Conclusion

This report has explored the complex landscape of consumer trust in the food system, seeking to apply evidence and summarise learnings in a way that is relevant for the FSA and other regulators. The evidence suggests that consumer trust is influenced by many factors, some of which are outside of organisational control, including perceptions of honesty, competence, and benevolence, as well as broader societal and sectoral trends as well as media narratives. Organisations like the FSA face choices about consumer trust, and these should be considered carefully to ensure trust plays the right role in organisational strategy, communications and in measuring performance.

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# Supplementary Materials

## Appendix A - Appendix B

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