

Background Quality Report for Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker Survey

Introduction

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) has conducted the Public Attitudes Tracker survey since 2001 to monitor key Agency issues. After a review in 2010, the Tracker was redeveloped in full and has run twice a year since then.

The questions cover a number of topics of interest for the Agency, including:

- concern about specific food safety issues,
- awareness of hygiene standards in eating establishments,
- awareness of the FSA and its responsibilities,
- and trust in the FSA.

Data is also collected on the demographic characteristics of the respondents.

Fieldwork for the Public Attitudes Tracker currently takes place in May and in November each year. Currently, a sample of about 2,000 adults in the UK is interviewed in each wave. The research is conducted through the TNS consumer omnibus survey. This uses face-to-face interviews and a random location sampling method.

From Wave 11 onward, the report will only present findings for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. As sample boosts are no longer undertaken in Scotland, the number of Scottish respondents is insufficient to draw accurate conclusions about Scottish respondents in general.

For each wave, Annex A of the report contains a technical summary of the survey. Annex B contains the questionnaire and Annex C explains the Occupational Groupings.

Relevance: The degree to which the statistical product meets user needs in both coverage and content

The Public Attitudes Tracker is primarily used by FSA Communications staff to monitor changes in consumer attitudes towards the FSA and food-related issues. It is used to

- Improve the FSA's knowledge and understanding of consumer attitudes in those areas for which it has responsibility
- Develop effective communication strategies
- Gauge public confidence and understanding of national food safety and standards arrangements

Furthermore, the FSA uses Tracker results as indicators of its performance, particularly the reported level of trust and awareness of the FSA.

No assessment of the identity of users outside the FSA has yet been carried out.
Little feedback has been received from external users on the report itself.

Description of the statistical outputs and variables

A suite of questions are added to the TNS face-to-face omnibus survey to measure the proportion of the adult UK population that:

- report concern in various food safety issues (spontaneous and prompted)
- report concern in wider food issues (spontaneous and prompted)
- report concern about food safety in UK restaurants, pubs, cafes and takeaways and in UK shops and supermarkets (spontaneous and prompted)
- are aware of Hygiene Standards
- use particular sources of information to judge the hygiene standards of places where food is eaten or bought
- are aware of the FSA and FSS in Scotland and of their specific responsibilities
- have trust in the FSA

The Public Attitudes Tracker report provides the current levels and trends in these proportions. It also describes some of the relationships between these measures and demographical variables.

The standard demographic information available from TNS's face-to-face omnibus surveys covers:

- Gender, Exact age, Marital status and Ethnicity (White; Minority Ethnic).
- NRS Social grade (A; B; C1; C2; D; E), Housing Tenure and Working status.
- Household size and presence of children in household and their ages.
- Whether the respondent was the main or joint main grocery shopper or not.
- Whether the respondent was the chief income earner or not.
- Internet access and availability of Cable/satellite TV platforms.
- ISBA ITV regions, Government Office Region and locality type (Rural; Urban).

Survey Definitions

Target population: Adults aged 16 years and over, resident in the UK.

Subject population: Adults aged 16 years and over, resident in properties listed in the Postcode Address File.

Dates of fieldwork: Early May and Early November each year.

Spatial units: UK Countries, Government Office Regions, TV regions.

Observation units: Individuals.

Sample size: A target is set of 2,000 respondents per report. (The TNS omnibus can survey up to 4,000 adults each week). To do so, clusters containing about 3,000 to 5,000 addresses in total will be selected. In practice, a sample of about 2,600 respondents is often achieved.

Accuracy and Reliability: the proximity between an estimate and the unknown true value

The survey methodology

The FSA Public Attitudes Tracker is a biannual repeated cross-sectional study. The data are collected through the TNS face-to-face consumer omnibus survey. The Omnibus survey selects respondents using multi-stage stratified random location sampling. The results are weighted, to match 2011 UK census data, for England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Sampling points are selected from a sampling frame developed by TNS. This uses the 2001 Census small area statistics and the Postcode Address File (PAF) to divide the UK into 630 geographical areas with similar populations.

The sampling points for each week are selected after stratification by Government Office Region and Social Grade. The number of sampling points will vary between 147 and 215 depending on the number of questions in the Omnibus survey. (For Wave 10 of the attitudes tracker, a total of 188 sample points were included.) Within each sampling point, fieldwork clusters of 200-250 addresses are selected with the aim to get 10 to 16 adult interviews from each cluster.

All interviews were conducted by the TNS field team and in accordance with strict quality control procedures. Assignments are conducted over two days of fieldwork and are carried out weekday 2pm-8pm and at the weekend. All interviewers must leave 3 doors between each successful interview. Quotas are set using gender, working status and the presence of children to ensure a balanced sample of adults. Any sample profile imbalances in age, gender, social grade and area were corrected at the analysis stage through weighting against the national distribution.

Coverage, contact and response error

The random-location sampling used by TNS aims to provide a representative sample of UK areas. Its accuracy depends on the Census small area statistics and the Postcode Address File (PAF) being sufficiently up-to-date. For instance, recently-built residential addresses would be omitted. This under-coverage could lead to a slightly unrepresentative sample of the population being selected.

Non-contact and refusal to participate may lead to biased results. This can occur if those that participate differ from the general population. For instance, unemployed people and mothers with young children might be more likely to be at home than full-time workers. TNS do not explicitly provide the contact and refusal rates. However, they aim for an overall response rate of about 5%.

In omnibus surveys using probability sampling, non-contact is minimised by making multiple attempts to contact each address. However, the TNS omnibus will instead select a nearby house. The use of quotas and weighting aims to correct any bias due to the survey design. However it is unlikely to completely eliminate it.

Measurement error

Measurement error occurs from failing to collect the correct information from respondents. Therefore the questions in the Tracker were designed to be well understood and answered consistently. In particular:

- The question about **awareness of the FSA** is embedded within a randomised list of other organisations. This is a common approach to reduce acquiescence bias when measuring awareness.
- Only respondents reporting awareness of the FSA are asked how much they **trust** the Agency. This improves the quality of the measure as those unaware of the FSA tend to not to report having trust or reply with a 'don't know'.
- Subjects are asked to provide their **food concerns** spontaneously, before being prompted with a list of possible issues. This allows for separate analysis of both "top of mind" issues and total awareness. (In the report, the cited awareness is the total of prompted and spontaneous responses unless otherwise stated.)

The full suite of questions added to the TNS underwent cognitive testing. This found the questions to provide broad but good measures of public concern over food safety issues, its awareness of and trust in the FSA.

Processing error

Processing error can include errors in sample allocation, data capture, coding, data loading and editing, and the production of the reported estimates. The TNS Omnibus uses Computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) to control the selection of addresses, and to administer the questionnaires and to transmit the results. This automation reduces the chance of interviewer error.

TNS's in-house, trained validators verify a minimum of 10% of the assignments. All aspects of the interview are checked and the interviewer is graded on a number of measures. Survey information for each interviewer is analysed by a specialist team of quality control experts. Data quality checks, as detailed in ISO20252/9001, are made on both tables and electronic output by data processing executives and researchers. They include checking that:

- coded variables have been mapped to the correct values.
- values for numerical questions are within expected ranges.
- values for 'other', 'don't know' and 'refused' categories are not too high.
- the distribution of responses at each question is in line with expectations and there are no anomalous results.

TNS are accredited to ISO 9001:2008 and ISO 20252:2006, the International Standard for market, opinion and social research. This verifies that they meet the set standards for quality assurance, project management, data collection, preparation and processing. However, TNS do not provide details of the proportion of values failing their checks or needing adjustment or imputation.

The effect of the sample design on the sampling error

The size of the sampling error is driven by the number of respondents in a sample. The Public Attitudes Tracker currently interviews over 2,000 respondents per wave. If the omnibus had used simple random sampling, then wave-on-wave changes would be accurate to within 3 percentage points (based on the width of a 95% confidence interval).

However, the TNS Omnibus survey instead uses a complex multi-stage sample design. Sampling geographical clusters of relatively homogenous individuals will tend to increase the standard error of any estimates. The overall precision will also be affected by the stratification and weighting used in the survey design.

Therefore, other organisations have used a "design factor" of 1.25 to 1.5 to inflate the standard errors drawn from the TNS Omnibus survey. This suggests that the wave-on-wave changes can be estimated to within 4 or 5 percentage points (based on the width of a 95% confidence interval). However, no such adjustments are currently made to the results in the Public Attitudes Tracker report.

Timeliness and Punctuality

The data from the TNS Omnibus are usually available to the FSA within two weeks. When the data collection takes place in May, the report should be published two months later in the following July. When the data collection takes place in November, production takes longer with publication in late January or early February. This is because of staff absences over Christmas, plus staff changes which often occur in the second half of the year.

The reports of the Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker have always been published on time. The exact release data within each month is announced within four to six weeks of publication.

Accessibility and Clarity

Accessibility is the ease with which users are able to access the data, and the availability of supporting information. All the Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker reports are published online as a .pdf file. The underlying data tables and earlier Tracker reports are available on request from ssru@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk. This is also the contact to discuss access to the original data in SPSS format.

Most of the supporting information to the survey results is contained in the Annexes to each report.

- Annex A explains how the data is collected by the TNS Omnibus.
- Annex B contains the suite of FSA questions added to the TNS Omnibus.
- Annex C explains the Occupational Groupings.

Coherence and Comparability

Coherence between the Public Attitudes Tracker and other sources

The FSA suite of questions added to the TNS omnibus was developed specifically for the Public Attitudes Tracker. They are not known to be used in any other context. However, some of the FSA's other surveys have collected similar information.

- The Consumer Attitudes Survey (CAS), which ran from 2001 to 2008, also contained questions about food concerns, trust and awareness of the FSA.
- Waves 3 to 8 of the Public Attitudes Tracker and the current Food and You survey both include questions about awareness of food hygiene schemes.

Comparability across the UK

Most questions in the Biannual Public Attitudes Tracker Survey are identically worded for all parts of the UK. However, since the establishment of Food Standards Scotland in April 2015, respondents in Scotland now answer questions referring to that body instead of the Food Standards Agency.

In each country of the UK, the awareness questions refer to a different list of organisations. This is because not all these organisations operate UK-wide. The inconsistency in question context could affect the comparability of the reported FSA awareness.

Furthermore, the responsibilities of the Food Standards Agency vary between the UK countries and have changed over time.

- On 1 September 2010, most aspects of food labelling policy in England were transferred from the FSA. It retained responsibility for food safety related labelling issues in England and all labelling and standards policy in Wales and Northern Ireland.
- On 1 October 2010. Nutrition policy, including nutrition labelling, in England and Wales was transferred from the Food Standards Agency. The FSA retained these responsibilities in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- On 1 April 2015, Food Standards Scotland took over from the FSA as the public body responsible for food safety, food standards, nutrition, food labelling meat inspection and meat hygiene controls in Scotland.

These differences between countries and over time are likely to affect public awareness of who has these responsibilities, and possibly the reported awareness of the FSA.

Furthermore, no sample boosts were undertaken in Scotland from Wave 11 onward. Although fieldwork still took place in Scotland, the number of respondents without the boosts is insufficient to make accurate inferences about Scottish respondents in

general. Consequently, the report now only presents findings for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. To enable consistent comparisons over time, the results for previous waves have been recalculated on a similar basis (i.e. removing Scottish responses). This means that the current report presents different figures than those published earlier.

Comparability over time before 2010

The current numbering of the Waves of the Tracker dates from November 2010, when it became biannual. However, the Tracker survey has been conducted since 2001. During this time, some changes in methodology and questionnaire content have occurred.

The frequency of fieldwork for the Tracker has also changed since 2001:

- April 2001-December 2001: research conducted quarterly.
- October 2001-September 2002: research conducted monthly.
- December 2002-March 2010: research conducted quarterly.
- November 2010 – to May 2015 (this report): research conducted biannually.

From April 2001 to June 2006, data was only collected from adults aged 16 and over in Great Britain. From September 2006 the sampling was extended to include Northern Ireland as well.

Changes in the survey questions over time since 2010

- Prior to November 2010, a separate question on confidence in the FSA was asked, using the wording from the earlier Consumer Attitudes Survey (CAS).
- Between September 2008 and March 2010, trust in the FSA was rated on a scale from 1 to 7. In Waves 1 (Nov 2010) and 2 (May 2011) of the redeveloped Tracker, it was asked to half of the respondents. The rest were asked a redeveloped question on a scale from 1 to 5. From Wave 3 onward, only the five-point question was used.
- Between Wave 3 and 8, there were questions to measure awareness of initiatives and schemes concerning the hygiene standards in food outlets (including FHRS and FHIS). In addition, respondents at Wave 5 were asked if they had seen a FHRS certificate/sticker (except those in Scotland who were asked about the FHIS certificate/sticker).
- Until Wave 5, the survey asked if respondents were willing to be re-contacted to answer follow up questions.
- At Wave 10, the response options 'Chemicals from the environment, such as lead, in food' and 'Food not being what the label says it is' were added to question 1A and 1B.
- In Wave 10, all references to 'the Food Standards Agency' or 'the FSA' in questions 4, 5 and 6 of the survey for Scottish respondents were replaced by 'Food Standards Scotland' or 'FSS'. This is because the Food Standards Scotland became the national body for food safety and nutrition matters in Scotland in April 2015.

Trade-offs between Output Quality Components

Non-response bias is likely to be lower in random probability omnibus surveys than in random location surveys. This is due to the extra effort to contact non-responders. However, this effort increases the cost and time required for the fieldwork several times over. Given the relatively limited use of the Tracker, finance constraints do not justify using a random probability survey. The random location approach should provide sufficient accuracy to track trends over time, particularly if the effect of non-response bias remains fairly constant.

As the TNS omnibus takes place every week, it would be possible to make more regular reports. Sampling more frequently would also increase the accuracy of estimates averaged over any six month period. However, the increase in cost makes this prohibitive.

Performance, Cost and Respondent Burden

The cost of commissioning the Public Attitudes tracker in 2015 was £17,800 + VAT for the core survey with an additional cost for the boost for Northern Ireland. An additional 15 days of FSA staff time is required to produce the two biannual reports. This includes the time required for to review the reports.

The burden on respondents is not large. The interview length of the whole TNS omnibus is limited to average 30 minutes or less to avoid respondent and interviewer fatigue. However, the FSA questions for the Public Attitudes tracker will only take up a small part of this time.

Confidentiality, Transparency and Security

During the collection process, TNS are responsible for ensuring that security and confidentiality is maintained on an ongoing basis. Their IT procedures comply with the requirements of the Data Protection Act 1998, the UK Statistics Code of Practice, and the code of conduct of the Market Research Society (MRS).

Addresses and other identifiers are removed before the results are sent to the FSA via secure file transfer. Consequently, the FSA only possess the Tracker data in anonymised form with insufficient information to identify individuals. Handling, storage and access to this data is in accordance with the Data Protection Act and Government security and confidentiality standards. Release of these statistics complies with the UK Statistics Authority Code of Practice.

The Tracker report is published with details of the methodology and footnotes beneath statistical tables alerting readers to potential issues. This quality report informs users of the method, production process and quality of the output. Any significant errors identified after publication would result in revisions along with explanations as to the cause of the revisions.

Annex: The FSA Suite of questions added to the Wave 10 Questionnaire

Q.1a What food issues, if any, are you concerned about? Which others? (Base: All adults UK) (**Spontaneous**)

Q.1b And which of these food issues are you concerned about, if any? Please select all that apply. Which others? (Base: All adults UK)

Q.1c And which of THESE food issues are you concerned about, if any? Please select all that apply. Which others? (Base: All adults UK)

Q.1d And, finally in this section, which of THESE food issues are you concerned about, if any? Please select all that apply. Which others? (Base: All adults UK)

Q.2a How concerned or unconcerned are you about the safety of ALL food that is sold in UK restaurants, pubs, cafes and takeaways? (Base: All adults UK) **5Lik**

Q.2b How concerned or unconcerned are you about the safety of ALL food that is sold in UK shops and supermarkets? (Base: All adults UK) **5Lik**

Q.3a When you buy food in shops or supermarkets, or eat at restaurants, cafes, pubs and takeaways, do you tend to be aware of the standards of hygiene of these places? (Base: All adults UK) **Always/sometimes/No**

Q.3b How do you know about the hygiene standards of the places you buy food from or eat out at? Please select all that apply. How else? (Base: All adults who are at all aware of the standards of hygiene when they buy food UK) **Multiple results**

Q.4 Which of the following, if any, have you heard of? Please select all that apply. Which others? (Base: All adults UK)

Q.5a And please can I check, which issues do you think the Food Standards Agency is responsible for? Which other issues? (Base: All adults aware of the Food Standards Agency UK) (**Spontaneous**)

Q.5b And which of these issues do you think the Food Standards Agency/Food Standards Scotland is responsible for? (Please select all that apply. Which others? Base: All adults aware of the Food Standards Agency in England, Wales and NI or Food Standards Scotland in Scotland)

Q.6a How much do you trust or distrust the Food Standards Agency/Food Standards Scotland to do its job? That is, trust it to make sure the food sold in shops and restaurants is safe, and to provide advice on food safety in the home. (Base: All adults aware of the Food Standards Agency in England, Wales and NI or Food Standards Scotland in Scotland)