BRITISH SOCIAL ATTITUDES 33

Food

Views on the food supply chain

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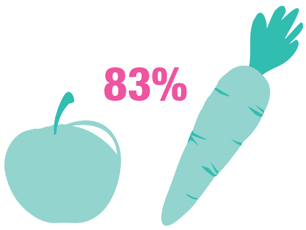
Food

Views on the food supply chain

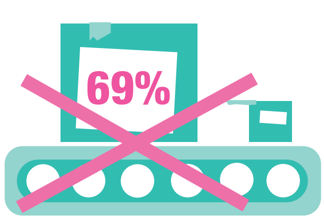
This chapter explores how far factors relating to the food supply chain matter to people when buying food and how far people trust the various actors and processes involved. It considers how united the public is in its views on these matters and which subgroups express distinct views.

What matters when buying food

When choosing what food to buy, people are most likely to say that healthiness matters to them and are less likely to rate concerns around the food supply chain as important.



83% say it matters a great deal or quite a lot that the food is healthy



69% say it matters that the food has not gone through a lot of processing

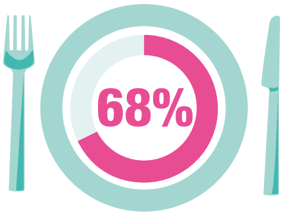
58% say it matters farmers are paid a fair price

- Women and older people are more likely to say issues relating to the food supply chain matter to them.

Trust in actors and processes

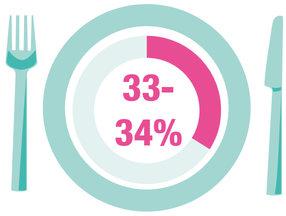
There is greater trust in food produced in Britain compared to imported food, while levels of trust in different organisations varies.

- 58% are very or quite sure that food that comes from Britain is prepared to the highest quality standards, compared with 23% who say this about food from abroad.
- 68% trust food inspectors and 58% trust farmers a great deal or quite a lot to make sure food is safe to eat. Only one third trust supermarkets, food manufacturers and the government to do this.



Trust food inspectors

Trust farmers

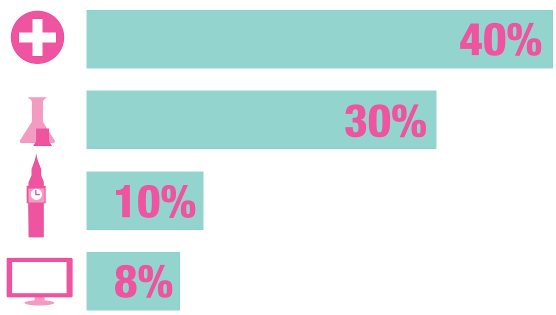


Trust supermarkets, manufacturers & government

Trust in the event of a food scare

Health professionals are most likely to be trusted to tell the truth in the event of a food scare.

- 40% say they would trust health professionals the most to tell the truth while 30% would trust scientists the most.
- 10% would trust the government the most and 8% would trust the media the most.



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Introduction

The growing complexity of international food supply chains has given rise to a new generation of risks and concerns in relation to food. These include longstanding food safety issues relating to biological and chemical contamination. In addition, in 2013, adulteration and food fraud re-emerged as a major issue with the horsemeat scandal. The extensive media coverage of this scandal revealed not only widespread fraud, but also the hitherto under-appreciated complexity of the UK meat supply chain and the extent of meat imports. Climate change poses yet another set of new challenges to the UK food system and the ability to ensure a safe, sustainable and equitable food supply in the face of widening inequalities and growing levels of food poverty. In light of these diverse problems, food and national food security should now have a high policy priority.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) recently launched their Food Futures project specifically to address these issues. The project places a heavy emphasis on understanding and addressing the concerns of consumers (FSA, 2016). Previous work on the 'food scares' of the 1990s has shown that understanding and engaging with public perceptions and concerns is vital, not only for the development of effective risk communication strategies, but also for the effective assessment and governance of risks in the food chain (Dora, 2006; WHO, 2007). But what factors do people think are important when buying food, what are their concerns about the ways food is produced, and does everyone want the same thing? It is often stated that consumers are anxious about food and it has been speculated that our increasingly complex food supply system has fostered food fears that focus on the safety, rather than the availability, of food (Lawrence, 2013). The assumption here is that people feel disconnected and that the food(s) arriving on our plates from sometimes very long and convoluted chains of production, processing and retailing are seen as lacking authenticity and other desired qualities, such as healthiness, and may be unsafe. Small-scale qualitative studies have shown that some people do feel a sense of "disconnection" with the food system and actively seek to engage with small-scale and local food networks, such as farmers markets and box schemes (Maye et al, 2007; Kneafsey et al, 2008). It has also been argued that the complexity not only of food supply chains, but also of contemporary society more widely, creates distrust (Almas, 1999) and that this, along with changes in the regulatory system and food scares, such as BSE, has altered who we trust and why (Wales et al., 2006).

The recent background research for the FSA Food Futures project explored consumer concerns and priorities. It identified a number of competing concerns: convenience versus connection; price versus quality; information versus transparency; power and trust versus empowerment. So, for instance, while convenience was valued by most participants, it was also seen as decreasing any connection with the food that we eat. However, the extent to which these views prevail throughout the UK and how they may or may not vary remains unknown. In his comprehensive background literature review to the Food Futures Project, Darnton emphasises that we should think and speak of "publics" rather than a "public" (Darnton, 2016). That is, we need to recognise and understand variations in the perceptions, priorities, concerns and practices across different subgroups of the UK population. This chapter addresses these issues, namely the factors that matter to people when buying food, how these may vary across the population, and the processes, people and organisations that are trusted in the food supply chain.

The questions reported in this chapter were designed and fielded on the 2015 British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. They were informed by earlier qualitative workshops carried out throughout the UK and form part of a project for the Global Food Security programme (www.foodsecurity.ac.uk/programme/index.html).

Buying food: how important is the food supply chain?

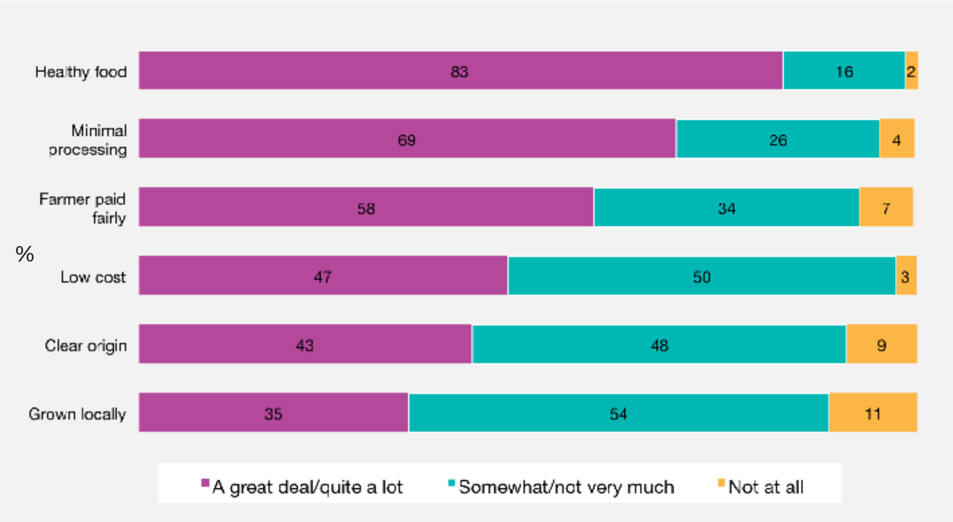
Consumer choices when buying food reveal a range of 'trade-offs' that people negotiate when making food purchases, involving factors such as, cost, quality, value, taste and time constraints. So do consumers think about the food supply chain when purchasing food? We asked respondents to say how much a range of issues surrounding the food supply chain matter to them when buying food, along with two other factors that we anticipated would be important (cost and healthiness) using the following question (summarised labels in brackets):

> *When choosing what food or groceries to buy, how much, if at all, do the following things matter to you…*
>
> *… that it is clear where all the ingredients have come from? [Clear origin]*
>
> *… the food was grown locally? [Grown locally]*
>
> *… the farmer or grower has been paid a fair price? [Farmer paid fairly]*
>
> *… the food is healthy? [Healthy food]*
>
> *… the cost is low? [Low cost]*
>
> *… the food has not gone through a lot of different stages of processing before you buy it? [Minimal processing]*
>
> *[A great deal, quite a lot, somewhat, not very much, not at all]*

That food has not gone through a lot of processing matters a great deal or quite a lot to a substantial majority of people – around 7 in 10.

Figure 1 shows that, for most people, it matters “a great deal” or “quite a lot” that the food they buy is healthy (83%). That food has not gone through a lot of processing matters a great deal or quite a lot to a substantial majority of people – around 7 in 10. This may suggest people think that unprocessed food is healthier, rather than they are thinking specifically about complex food chains. Almost 6 in 10 say it matters a great deal or quite a lot that farmers are paid a fair price. Just under half say that it matters that the cost of their food is low. What emerges as less important than other issues listed is that there is clarity around where ingredients come from or that food is grown locally – 43% and 35% say that these considerations matter a great deal or quite a lot to them when buying food.

Figure 1 Importance of considerations when buying food



Unweighted base: 3223

Who is more likely to think the food supply chain is important?

As noted in the Introduction, the evidence base on food and eating shows that there is considerable variation between different subgroups in the UK population. Perceptions and practices around household food security, vegetarianism, healthy eating and food technologies have all been shown to vary by key demographic characteristics such as sex, age, ethnicity and income. We would therefore expect to see variation in the importance people attribute to issues to do with the food supply chain when buying food, particularly as these are likely to be influenced by views on other aspects of food.

Indeed, as shown in Table 1, some differences do emerge in who is more likely to say that issues relating to the food supply chain matter to them when buying food. The extent to which food supply issues matter varies by age: the general pattern is that older age groups are more likely to say each factor matter a great deal or quite a lot to them when buying food. In terms of sex, women are more likely to say factors relating to the food supply chain matter a great deal or quite a lot, compared with men. For example, 73% of women say that it matters a great deal or quite a lot that food has not gone through a lot of different stages of processing before you buy it, compared with 64% of men. Previous research has suggested that women put greater store on the 'naturalness' of food (Darnton, 2016) but our findings may also reflect the role of women in being responsible for the preparation of food for others (e.g. young children or elderly parents). There is a less clear pattern for groups defined by ethnicity and there are no differences by income group in relation to any of the factors asked about.

73% of women say that it matters a great deal or quite a lot that food has not gone through a lot of different stages of processing before you buy it, compared with 64% of men.

We also examined whether the importance of issues relating to the food supply chain when buying food varied between those living in urban and rural areas. People living in rural areas are generally more likely to say food supply issues matter a great deal or quite a lot, compared with those living in urban areas – a distinction which might support the idea that people in urban areas feel less connected to the food supply chain.

The qualitative work which we used to inform our question design showed that the degree of concern about the food supply chain depends on whether people habitually eat processed foods - the view being that processed food chains are more complex. To explore this in relation to whether people think factors relating to the food supply chain are important to them when buying food, we analysed their responses against answers to a question asking them how often, if at all, they eat ready meals.

Those who say they ever eat ready meals are less likely to report that issues surrounding the food chain matter to them a great deal or quite a lot when buying food, compared with those who never eat ready meals. Specifically, 67% of those who ever eat ready meals say that it matters a great deal or quite a lot that food has not gone through a lot of different processing, compared with 75% of those who never eat ready meals.

Table 1 Importance of issues relating to the food supply chain when buying food, by demographic characteristics

	Clear origin	Grown locally	Farmer paid fairly	Minimal processing	*Unweighted base*
	% saying matters 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot'				
Age	%	%	%	%	
18-24	31	16	33	60	*217*
25-59	42	30	55	69	*1864*
60+	48	51	75	71	*1137*
Sex	%	%	%	%	
Men	40	32	57	64	*1397*
Women	45	37	59	73	*1826*
Ethnicity	%	%	%	%	
White	41	36	61	69	*2875*
Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)	52	28	43	67	*344*
Rural	%	%	%	%	
Urban	43	33	57	68	*2563*
Rural	42	42	65	73	*660*
Ever eats ready meals	%	%	%	%	
Yes	41	33	57	67	*2340*
No	48	40	62	75	*879*
All	43	35	58	69	*3223*

The previous section showed that, when it comes to considerations when buying food, healthiness is rated as important by most people (83%). Table 2 shows that women are slightly more likely than men to say it matters to them that food is healthy and that the proportion who say this matters to them when buying food increases with age. A higher proportion of those living in rural areas say it matters a great deal or quite a lot that food is healthy compared, with those in urban areas. Those who eat ready meals are less likely to say that it matters to them that food is heathy than those who do not do this.

Those in the lower income quartiles are more likely to say that food being of low cost is important to them when buying food.

Where the cost of food is concerned, those in the lower income quartiles are more likely to say that food being of low cost is important to them when buying food. This is also true of people from a Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) group, and of those who live in urban areas. Compared to the supporters of most other political parties, Conservative supporters are less likely to say it matters to them that the cost of food is low – a difference likely to result from the fact that they tend to have higher household incomes than supporters of other political parties.

Table 2 Importance of healthiness and cost when buying food, by demographic characteristics

	Healthy food	Low cost	*Unweighted base*
	% saying matters 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot'		
Age	%	%	
18-24	69	56	***217***
25-59	82	48	***1864***
60+	89	42	***1137***
Sex	%	%	
Men	79	46	***1397***
Women	86	48	***1826***
Ethnicity	%	%	
White	83	45	***344***
Black and Minority Ethnic (BME)	82	61	***217***
Rural	%	%	
Urban	82	49	***2563***
Rural	86	40	***660***
Party identification	%	%	
Conservative	88	37	***1046***
Labour	82	53	***932***
Liberal Democrat	87	34	***162***
UKIP	79	57	***180***
Green Party	[85]	[42]	***93***
Other party	76	55	***136***
None	72	56	***491***
Income (household)	%	%	
Quartile 1 - lowest	80	59	***728***
Quartile 2	82	53	***598***
Quartile 3	82	43	***606***
Quartile 4 - highest	88	36	***744***
Not stated	82	50	***342***
Ever eats ready meals	%	%	
Yes	81	48	***2340***
No	86	47	***879***
All	83	47	***3223***

Trust in processes and organisations

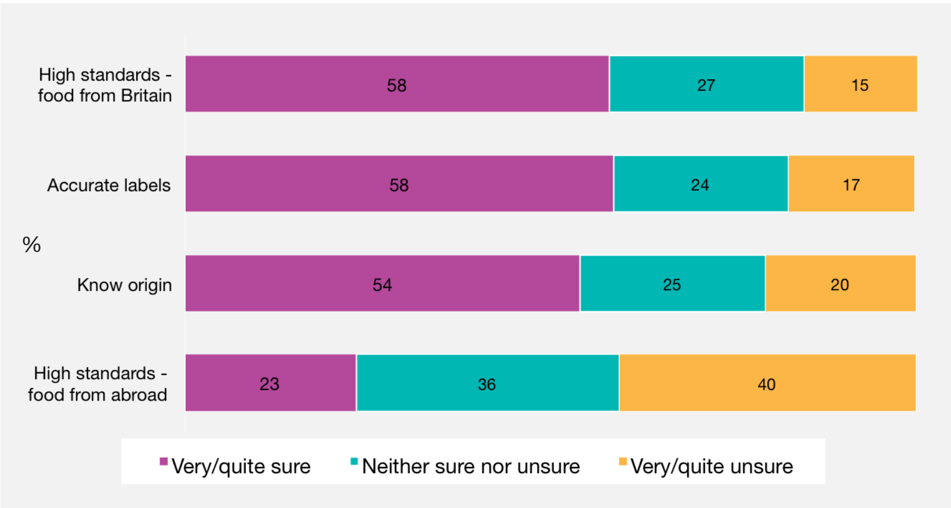
Buying food is a routine, everyday activity; trust is essential to enable consumers to do this satisfactorily (Kjaernes, 2013). There is a need for trust in actors at all stages of the food supply chain, that they adhere to a certain level of standards, and that this is appropriately regulated; as yet we know little about levels of consumer trust or distrust in different parts of the food supply chain. Using the following question, we therefore asked how certain people are around knowledge of provenance (place of origin), information and quality standards, when buying food (summarised labels are in brackets):

> *In general, if you were buying food and groceries in Britain, how sure or unsure would you be…*
>
> *… that the labels on the food are accurate? [Accurate labels]*
>
> *… that you know where the food has come from? [Know origin]*
>
> *… that the food that comes from Britain has been prepared to the highest quality standards? [High standards – food from Britain]*
>
> *… that the food that comes from abroad has been prepared to the highest quality standards? [High standards – food from abroad]*
>
> *[Very sure, quite sure, neither sure nor unsure, quite unsure, very unsure]*

More than half feel very or quite sure that the labels on food are accurate (58%) and that they know where food comes from (54%).

Figure 2 shows that more than half feel very or quite sure that the labels on food are accurate (58%) and that they know where food comes from (54%). Around half also feel sure that food that comes from Britain is prepared to the highest quality standards, while about a quarter feel sure the same can be said for food from abroad.

Figure 2 Levels of certainty about information and quality standards when buying food in Britain



Unweighted base: 3223

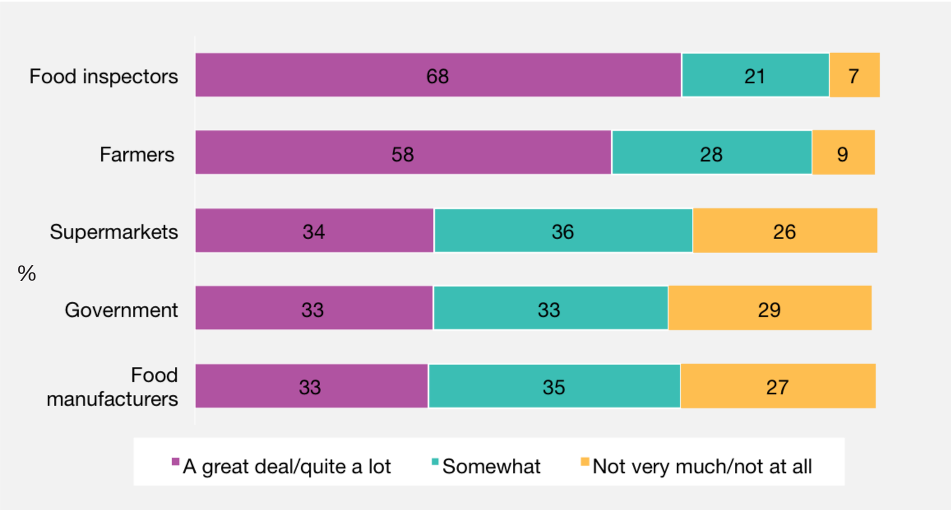
We also asked respondents how much they trust different organisations to ensure that food is 'safe to eat', using the following question:

> *How much, if at all, do you trust the following organisations and people to make sure that the food you buy is safe to eat?*
>
> *Supermarkets*
>
> *Food manufacturers*
>
> *Farmers*
>
> *Government*
>
> *Food inspectors*
>
> *[A great deal, quite a lot, somewhat, not very much, not at all]*

There are lower levels of trust in supermarkets, food manufacturers and the government.

Figure 3 shows that a majority (68%) trust food inspectors a great deal or quite a lot to make sure the food they buy is safe to eat and 58% trust farmers to do this. There are lower levels of trust in supermarkets, food manufacturers and the government with between 26-29% saying that they do not trust each of these named actors very much or at all. This pattern suggests that who people trust for the management of food supply chains is often underpinned by who they view as having the public's interests at heart and, conversely, who is more motivated primarily by profit. As before, trust in institutions, actors and processes is vital for the negotiation of everyday life and as a means to manage uncertainty (Giddens, 1990), but for something or somebody to be considered trustworthy certain criteria have to be met (Freudenburg, 1993).

Figure 3 Trust in actors in the food chain



Unweighted base: 2716

Who do people trust in a scare?

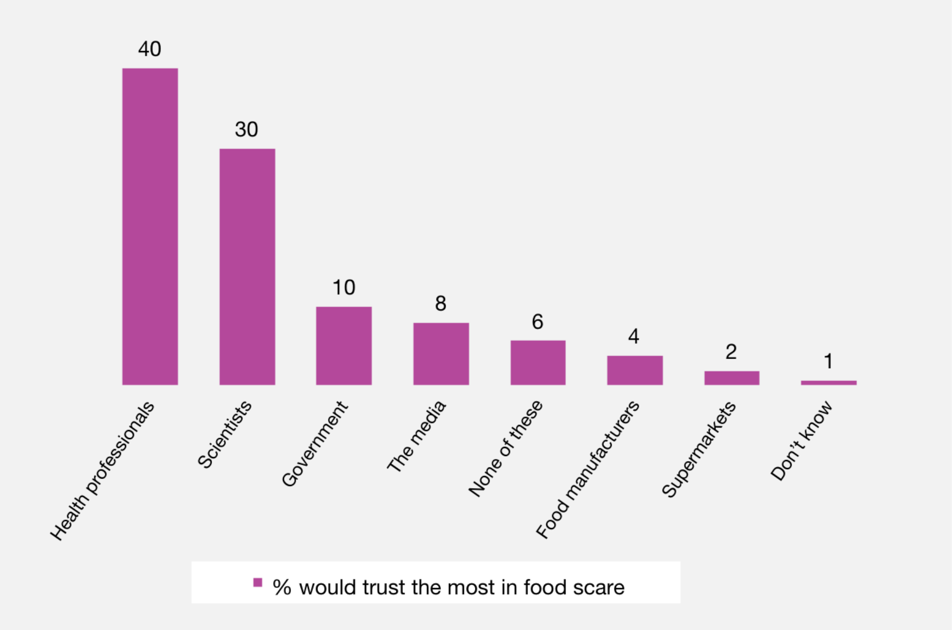
We have seen in the previous section that in a 'steady state' - that is in the absence of a food scare - around a third of people trust the government, supermarkets and food manufacturers to make sure food is safe to eat. But who do people trust in the event of a food scare? The European Commission's Eurobarometer 2010 found that respondents in the UK were most likely to have confidence in health professionals in the event of serious food risk. Levels of confidence in the government, supermarkets and food manufacturers were much lower than for health professionals. This Eurobarometer survey was carried out in 2010, before the most recent headline food scare - the horsemeat scandal in 2013. As part of the 2015 BSA survey we provided respondents with a list of organisations and asked them to select the one they would trust the most to tell the truth in the event of a food scare:

> ***Say there was a food scare in Britain. Which, if any, of those listed on this card would you most trust to tell the truth about the situation?***
>
> *The media*
>
> *Government*
>
> *Scientists*
>
> *Health professionals*
>
> *Supermarkets*
>
> *Food manufacturers*

As shown in Figure 4, health professionals and scientists are most likely to be trusted the most (40% and 30% respectively). Only 10% would trust the government the most to tell the truth about the situation and 8% said they would trust the media the most. Food manufacturers and supermarkets were the least likely to be identified as the organisations which people would trust the most, in the event of a food scare – 4% and 2% respectively selected each of these organisations. Around 1 in 20 said they would not trust any of the organisations listed.

Food manufacturers and supermarkets were the least likely to be identified as the organisations which people would trust the most, in the event of a food scare.

Figure 4 Organisations people would trust the most to tell the truth in the event of a food scare



Unweighted base: 3223

Does trust in organisations link to trust in processes?

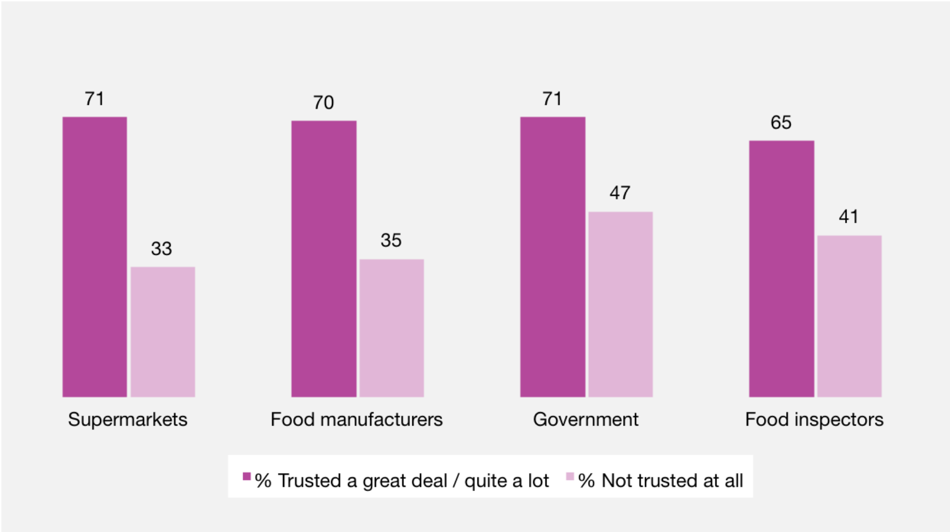
As noted previously, trust is essential for the negotiation of everyday decisions regarding food, but consumers place different levels of trust in different steps and actors in the supply chain (De Krom and Mol, 2010). In this final section, we examine how far trust in actors in the food supply chain is linked with trust in steps and processes. That is, are the people who trust in certain organisations to ensure their food is safe to eat more likely to be confident in the provenance, information and quality standards of their food? Although we cannot examine causal pathways, we can look at whether any associations exist between the public's trust in people and their trust in processes in the food supply chain.

Those who trust certain organisations involved in the food supply chain a great deal or quite a lot to make sure that food is safe to eat are more likely to feel sure that food from Britain is prepared to the highest quality standards.

Figure 5 shows that those who trust certain organisations involved in the food supply chain a great deal or quite a lot to make sure that food is safe to eat are more likely to feel sure that food from Britain is prepared to the highest quality standards, compared with those who don't trust them. However, caution needs to be applied to the finding relating to food inspectors, given the low number of respondents who state "not all all", while there are insufficient numbers who select this response in relation to farmers to facilitate this analysis.

Those who trust specific organisations are also more likely to feel sure that labels on food are accurate, and that they know where food comes from (see Appendix Table A.1 for further details).

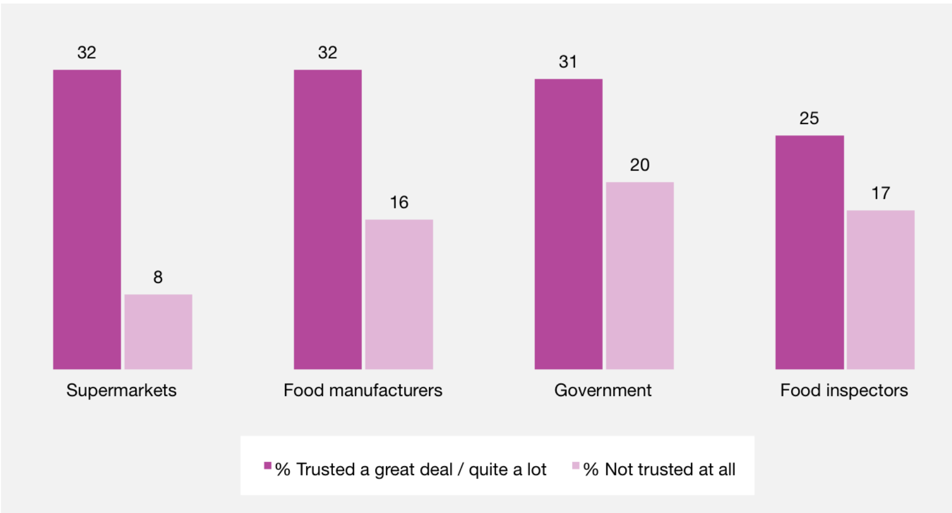
Figure 5 Trust in different organisations that the food you buy is safe to eat, by level of certainty that food from Britain is prepared to the highest standards



Bases for Figure 5 can be found in the appendix to this chapter

When it comes to being sure that food from abroad is prepared to the highest quality standards, as shown in Figure 6, the difference in proportions between those who trust organisations and those who do not is less distinct. This may be because respondents assume that the organisaitons asked about have lower levels of involvement in ensuring the safety of food that comes from abroad. Once again, caution needs to be applied to the finding relating to trust in food inspectors, due to the low number of respondents who selected "not at all" in response to this question.

Figure 6 Trust in different organisations that food you buy is safe to eat, by level of certainty that food from outside of Britain is prepared to the highest standards



Bases for Figure 6 can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Conclusion

The factors that matter to people when buying food and their levels of trust in the food supply chain in the UK are variable and nuanced, confirming that we should not assume a homogeneity in the public's attitudes in relation to food.

The factors that matter to people when buying food and their levels of trust in the food supply chain in the UK are variable and nuanced, confirming that we should not assume a homogeneity in the public's attitudes in relation to food. Overall substantial proportions say that different issues, both relating to the food supply chain and in terms of cost and healthiness, matter to them – in particular that food is healthy and has not gone through a lot of processing. These views are differentiated by sex and age, with women and older people being more likely to say that issues relating to the food supply chain matter to them. There are also other interesting patterns in responses. Those who say they ever eat ready meals are less concerned either that food be grown locally or about the number of stages of processing. The cost of food is a concern for many people, but a greater proportion are concerned about the price paid to farmers (over half say that this matters a great deal or quite a lot). There is also a small proportion of respondents who report that these issues do not matter to them at all.

In terms of trust, more people have high levels of confidence in food produced in Britain compared with imported food. Farmers and food inspectors are widely trusted, but levels of trust in government, supermarkets and manufacturers are low. A similar pattern is seen for who would be trusted the most to tell the truth in the event of a food scare: health professionals are most likely to be trusted the most

followed by scientists, with smaller proportions selecting the government or the media as the organisations they would trust the most . Wales et al. (2006) identified a shift in who was trusted and why after BSE and that this shift was accompanied by changes in the food supply chain and the institutional governance of food risks.

There is an association between trust in the main actors and confidence in the food supply chain.

There is an association between trust in the main actors and confidence in the food supply chain. However, trusting organisations involved does not seem to improve confidence around imported food to the same extent, highlighting again that this seems to be a concern for people.

Overall these findings confirm Darnton's conclusions that public concerns regarding the food supply chain are not homogenous across the population (Darnton, 2016). Thus while there are some in the population who are quite concerned about the food supply chain and correspondingly value short and less complex supply chains with clarity about sourcing and ingredients, there is a smaller proportion who report no particular concerns about safety or provenance. For others, trust in a particular actor in the food chain appears to offer confidence and thus may act as a 'short cut' to choosing food that is safe and reliable.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Trust in organisations that food you buy is safe to eat, by trust in steps and processes in food supply chain

		Supermarkets			Food manufacturers			Farmers	
		Trust a great deal / quite a lot	Do not trust at all		Trust a great deal / quite a lot	Do not trust at all		Trust a great deal / quite a lot	Do not trust at all
Very/quite sure that labels on the food are accurate	%	73	37	%	73	38	%	65	[29]
Very/quite sure that know where the food has come from	%	64	34	%	64	30	%	61	[25]
Unweighted base		*896*	*148*		*877*	*164*		*1588*	*48*

		Government			Food inspectors	
		Trust a great deal / quite a lot	Do not trust at all		Trust a great deal / quite a lot	Do not trust at all
Very/quite sure that labels on the food are accurate	%	71	46	%	65	[40]
Very/quite sure that know where the food has come from	%	64	40	%	60	[28]
Unweighted base		*893*	*247*		*1829*	*60*

Bases for Figures 5 and 6 are as follows:

Table A.2 Level of trust in organisations and confidence when buying food

	Supermarkets		Food manufacturers		Farmers	
	Trust a great deal	Do not trust at all	Trust a great deal	Do not trust at all	Trust a great deal	Do not trust at all
Unweighted base	*896*	*148*	*877*	*164*	*1588*	*48*

	Government		Food inspectors	
	Trust a great deal	Do not trust at all	Trust a great deal	Do not trust at all
Unweighted base	*893*	*247*	*1829*	*60*