

# COVID-19 Food for thought: A 'deep dive' into transmission risk and mitigation practices with food sector experts

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## Aims and Objectives

This research sought to understand the transmission of the COVID-19 virus in the food and drink processing (FDP) industry as part of the COVID-19 at Work Study. The research relates to qualitative interviews with FDP industry experts exploring: risk factors, mitigation measures, barriers and opportunities to prevent transmission and the impact of COVID-19 on the FDP industry.

## Methods

21 semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted remotely with UK based stakeholders across the FDP industry, including experts within Government Agencies (N=7), federations and trade associations (N=5), unions (N=4) and academics (N=5). Interviews were conducted between August and November 2021. Written transcripts were analysed thematically to find prominent themes across and between stakeholder groups.

## Findings

### Risk factors

- **Poor social distancing** – non operational areas, small factories not having space
- **Size and age of buildings**
- **Temperature/humidity**
- **Loud noise from machinery** causing people to shout and move closer together.
- **Poor ventilation** – risk of contamination in certain facilities, poor ventilation systems
- **Shared accommodation**
- **Shared transport** to/from the workplace

**Cautious not to attribute isolated risk factors** for transmission of COVID-19.

Difficulty comparing food processing with wider industries due to **variation across the different FDP sub-sectors**.

**Meat processing facilities, agricultural production & sandwich-making** were identified as high-risk sub-sectors.

### Mitigation

- **Testing** – workplace testing, home and work-based LFT's.
- **Self-isolation** of staff
- **Use of PPE** (masks)
- **Vaccination**
- **Social distancing** – Marshals/spotters
- **Enhanced cleaning/hand hygiene**
- **Good mechanical ventilation**
- **Limiting staff contact** (e.g. cohorting, shift rotation, product changes).
- **Site-specific risk assessments**, considered too generic or overly focused on specific measures by some.

**Important to implement a variety of mitigation measures** (rather than focusing or prioritising one).

**Emphasis on existing mitigation measures varied** across different stakeholder groups. **or focused too much on specific mitigation measures.**

### Outbreaks

**Means of identifying a COVID-19 outbreak varied between and within stakeholder groups**, including notification from the FDP business, contact with public health bodies, import bans introduced from other countries and Federation member surveys.

Large **outbreaks were reported** within meat/poultry facilities, agricultural food picking/production and sandwich making.

Some respondents expressed:

- **Workplace outbreaks mirrored wider community rates** whilst others reflected the **significance of outbreaks within the FDPI** when community rates were reportedly low.
- **Distrust in the accuracy of reported COVID-19 cases and outbreaks.**
- Sites with **inadequate sick pay** experienced more outbreaks.

### Other notable info


**Good levels of compliance** perceived with COVID-19 measures across the FDPI. Challenges to securing industry compliance included:

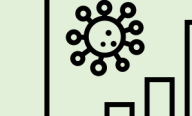
- **Frequent changes in Government guidelines.**
- **Lack of sick pay** in support of self-isolation


Challenges for the FDP industry:

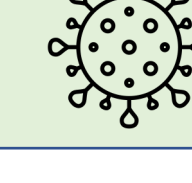
- **Fast pace of changing guidance**
- Balancing **competing priorities** (Brexit, changes in supply and demand, interwoven supply chain)
- **Workforce related challenges** included labour shortages, self-isolation/sickness absence, worker exhaustion.
- **Financial challenges** included costs associated with the implementation of COVID-19 control measures and staff sick pay.

### Findings from government agency respondents


"...you know, the number of people, the proximity and duration so regardless of setting, if you have a lot of people in a small space for a long period of time, the risk is increased." 

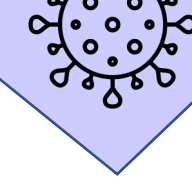
"there may be a little bit of transmission in food processing plants, but you know we're on 40,000 cases a day, most of that is not taking place inside the workplace, you know it's outside" 


"I think testing really does make a difference. I think daily contact testing in particular makes a difference. That's what all the policy holders have been saying." 

"...we had the self-isolating support payment come in eventually, but for a long time people had to choose, and still do in some cases, choose between feeding their family or keeping their colleagues safe. And that's not a situation anyone should be in." 


### Findings from Federation respondents:

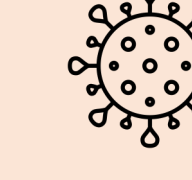
"I think there were challenges around travelling to work because there are rural areas. Because car sharing wasn't encouraged, I mean that was quite a difficult one for some companies, and there wasn't public transport. So how else do people get to work?" 

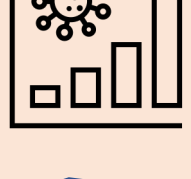
"Some companies have done better than others in terms of recovery, [...] ultimately it will no doubt settle, but it it's actually quite difficult to judge overall, because you've also got the impact of Brexit." 

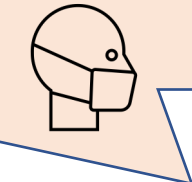
"I'm not so sure that the masks were as effective as we thought [...] you know you're not filtering air with it or anything like that [...] and I think you know the people that think they're indestructible because they have got a mask on, they can go anywhere and do anything..." 

### Findings from Union respondents


"Some of these slaughter houses are not in the city centre, they are out in the middle of nowhere, so buses would take people to the slaughter house at 5:00 AM in the morning. And of course, they will be full of people" 

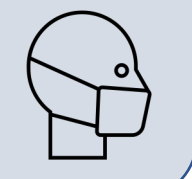
"keeping up with the changing nature of it [government guidelines] was a nightmare for everybody." 

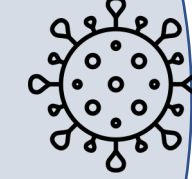
"Everywhere that didn't offer company sick pay had outbreaks" 

"Some people wanted visors and we negotiated for the PPE, but it wasn't really that important because at the end of the day it was more to do with social distancing and the risk assessment." 

### Findings from Academic respondents

"The particular environments in food factories makes it the highest risk because it's got the perfect combination of low temperature, low humidity and poor ventilation, coupled with the fact you've got high aerosol and particle generation. So that combination makes it the highest risk area..." 

"Ventilation is very important when you're dealing with a hazard which is airborne" 

"The main risk is actually outside the control area, so you know people having a cup of tea, having a hug, sharing cars home, that's where transmission happens, less so in that controlled environment." 

### Looking ahead to the future....

- **Concerns for future variants of COVID-19 and further lockdowns** relative to potential impact on production, demand and staffing within the FDPI
- **Some COVID-19 measures were expected to be retained** within the FDPI (e.g. face masks, social distancing, temperature checks, Perspex screens, cross-skilling)
- **Continued provision of financial support during sickness absence** was considered important to avoid people attending work when unwell.
- **Keeping or enabling good ventilation** was considered important to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and other viruses.
- **Knowledge gaps** included: understanding ventilation relative to viral transmission, further understanding of transmission routes & knowledge of the symptoms of COVID.