



FOOD SAFE, FOOD WISE: WHY FOOD AUDITS ARE GOOD FOR BUSINESS

STS FOOD SAFETY 2019

Part of the **ELAS** group of companies





Introduction

Food businesses can take any number of forms, but one factor they all have in common is the strict hygiene and safety standards they are required to meet. From the hygiene of the staff that prepare and serve food to the way in which it is stored, there are all too many opportunities to fall foul of the law. This is where food audits can prove invaluable.

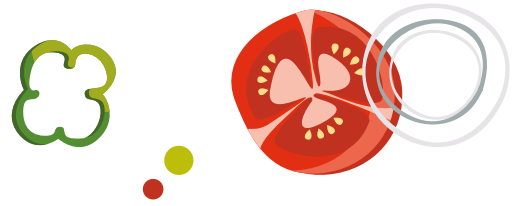
In this white paper, *Food safe, Food wise: Why food audits are good for business*, we'll take a closer look at the issues surrounding food safety and how an audit can make a tangible difference. After all, meeting the required standards could save your business time, money and protect its reputation.

Waiting for a routine visit from a food inspector will often be too little, too late!

Food audits enable you to take proactive steps towards compliance, putting your business in the best possible position to meet its legal obligations.

Food businesses are an essential part of the UK economy, with official figures showing they accounted for 12% of the total employment rate in the first quarter of 2018. It's therefore essential to keep these companies active, not only for the sake of the entire food supply chain, but also the economy as a whole.

What is a food audit?



Food audits are crucial to ensuring food safety standards are met and maintained. Whether you are running a new or more established business, there is plenty to be learnt from an audit.

An audit will be arranged at management level and involves an auditor visiting your business to carry out a thorough assessment of food safety standards. They are independent, objective and provide a fresh pair of eyes from a qualified and experienced safety auditor. The aim is to provide a measure of whether safety standards are being met, before identifying areas for improvement.

It's important not to view food audits as another regulatory burden. They are not a legal requirement, but could be the difference between meeting your obligations and following incorrect procedures that ultimately lead to your business being shut down.

One of the options available to you is an unannounced food audit, as this will provide the most accurate insight into your operations. An auditor will visit your business and, as the name suggests, your members of staff won't be informed beforehand.

There's no hard and fast rule as to how often you should carry out a food audit. However, experts advise that a quarterly or bi-annual assessment will be most effective; this makes it easier to see how well you have implemented the auditor's recommendations, and whether they are having the intended effect.

Committing to regular, rolling audits can also be a demonstration of how important food safety is to your management team.

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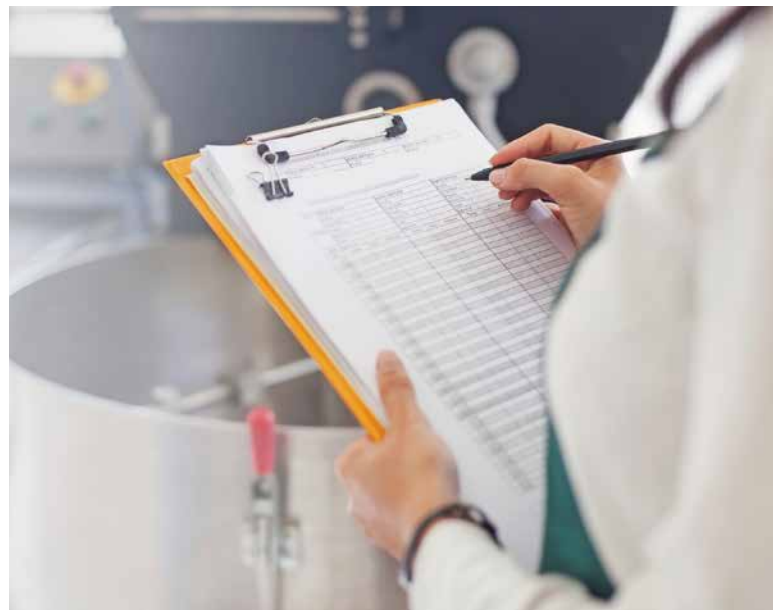
The role of a food auditor



Your food audit experience is designed to be a positive one. The auditor is not just there to find fault in your operations but offer advice and guidance on how to improve.

There are some key characteristics that you should look for in a food auditor:

- 1 Experienced:** Many auditors will have previously been in other food-based or environmental health roles, giving them a clear idea of what it takes to be compliant
- 2 Thorough:** Whether the auditor is analysing your entire Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) plan or just a small section, it's important they are comprehensive in their assessment
- 3 Clear:** The issues identified through a food audit need to be relayed in a clear and concise manner so business owners understand what is expected of them
- 4 Approachable:** Many questions are likely to arise throughout the food audit, an approachable auditor ensures clients get the most out of the visit
- 5 Motivational:** A food audit will identify a number of areas of improvement for a food business; delivering this advice while still keeping morale high can be a challenge



Food safety: Is it really that important?



Now you know what a food audit entails, your thoughts may have turned to the importance of food safety and whether the steps you are currently taking are sufficient.

The simple answer is that, yes, food safety is critical for any business in the sector. It's a topic that is never far from the headlines, not least because when companies don't meet the required standards, the results can be fatal.

Managing Allergens

Only a matter of months ago, the owners of a Lancashire takeaway were jailed for manslaughter when 15-year-old Megan Lee died after eating a meal containing peanuts. The premises was found to have no systems or standards in place for controlling allergens.

As this case illustrates, safety isn't something any business can afford to overlook. The Food Standards Agency estimates that as many as two million people in the UK are living with a diagnosed food allergy, each of which will require protocol to be followed to keep certain ingredients out of - and away from - food. Failure to follow the required standards can have disastrous effects which could be avoided through a food audit.

Food Poisoning

Food safety is critical at every stage of the supply chain. It's not just manufacturing businesses that need to be aware of their obligations, but also those involved in the final preparation, storage and serving of food.

Food poisoning is all too easy to contract if proper safety standards aren't followed at any point in the chain. If customers are found to have contracted food poisoning as a result of any of the below, there's potential for hefty fines and bad publicity.

According to the NHS, the most common causes of food poisoning in the UK are:

- Food that hasn't been cooked or reheated properly
- Incorrect storage, such as food not being frozen or chilled
- Leaving food out for too long at the incorrect temperature
- Handling by someone who is ill or who hasn't washed their hands thoroughly
- Food that's eaten after its use-by date

Take the example of a Birmingham restaurant, which in 2018, was fined £50,000 in addition to other costs for serving meals on unhygienic wooden boards. This led to 14 customers falling ill. Kitchen staff were also found to be over-reliant on disposable gloves during food preparation rather than following hand-washing procedures.

In severe cases, the courts may decide to close down a premises in light of poor food safety. None of these outcomes are desirable for a food business. An auditor will be able to identify these issues at an early stage, before they have potential to create problems.

What else will I get out of a food audit?



This isn't all you can expect to achieve as a result of a food audit. If you are in senior management, a food audit can be an effective means of identifying and strengthening weak areas of your operation. Audit scores and statistics can be benchmarked and monitored over time, providing an accurate measure of how your business is performing.

Food safety audits can also help your organisation prepare for your compulsory inspection by identifying non-conformances in advance - and making sure they are addressed before the inspectors arrive.

There can be a long time between routine inspections, so regular external auditing helps maintain safety culture and verifies that your operation is capable of producing safe food.

Food Hygiene Ratings

There is also a strong link between audits and high Food Hygiene Ratings. The rating scheme runs in partnership with local authorities throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland and provides a snapshot of food safety standards at the time of inspection.

The areas under inspection are:

- Food handling
- Food storage
- Food preparation
- Cleanliness
- Structural condition
- Management of food safety



Businesses are assigned a rating between 0 and 5, with the higher the number, the better the standard of food hygiene.

One of the main motivating factors here is that the public can access Food Hygiene Ratings online. Although mandatory in Northern Ireland and Wales, businesses in England are not currently legally required to display their rating sticker, although there are plans to introduce a law to require this.

A poor Food Hygiene Rating often results in negative publicity, which can be difficult to overcome. Food audits can therefore be a great complementary tool to the scheme, giving you control over when auditors visit and making sure you are ready for the next time a spot inspection takes place.

An auditor will look closely at all the areas listed above - and more - giving you plenty of action points to work on moving forward.



Positive Food Safety Culture

Food safety is undoubtedly a serious issue, which is why managers should be making every effort to make sure it is embedded into their workplace culture.

One way to achieve this is through effective communication. Promoting an open culture will encourage staff to voice their concerns if they feel protocol isn't being followed properly.

Senior management can use audits to recognise and reward high standards. The experience is designed to be just as effective at praising staff as it is at identifying shortcomings. Creating some healthy competition between teams could be just what your business needs to take food safety to the next level, and an audit could be the most effective way of kick-starting this trend.

Of course, an audit is as much a learning exercise for management as it is for the staff on the ground. Effective food safety training is important to ensure the risks are fully understood and good practices developed over time.

Those in a management or supervisory role could benefit from attending an 'Effective Auditing and Inspection Skills' course. This covers how to get the most out of food safety auditing, whether they are completing internal audits or dealing with an external auditor and the outcomes of their inspection.

Training can also be advantageous for staff members. Level 2 food safety training is important for team members who handle high risk food unsupervised, while Level 3 is recommended for those in supervisory roles and Level 4 for Catering Managers/Head Chefs.

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What happens during a food audit?



Once you've decided that a food audit is the best way to ensure compliance, you'll probably be asking yourself exactly what you should expect from the visit.

In most cases, the auditor will take a look at your HACCP plan. This mandatory document should outline how you are managing biological, chemical, physical and allergenic food safety hazards within your business.

A good food safety audit must closely inspect every aspect of the operation, from delivery right through to service. This involves observing the 'four Ps':

- 1 People:** Are your staff following correct protocol? Are they maintaining hygiene standards at every stage of food production?
- 2 Premises:** Do your premises have suitable conditions for the food you are working with? Is cleanliness maintained throughout the day?
- 3 Products:** Are food items being handled properly? Is this the case throughout the supply chain?
- 4 Processes:** What processes do you use at your premises to prepare foods safely? Are staff following the instructions properly?

The auditor will then prioritise the issues they identify into those which are critical (high risk to food safety or legal contraventions) and non-critical (deviations from company policy of best practice).

At the end of their visit, the auditor will offer their initial thoughts and impressions, which will generally involve a meeting with senior management. They will then produce a more thorough report with a series of action points for your business to follow up on. The report will include an action plan for rectifying the problems.



Common Issues

There are some food safety issues that auditors encounter time and time again.

Some of the most common are:

- High risk, ready-to-eat food being stored under ineffective temperature control. This increases the risk of bacterial multiplication, spore germination and the formation of toxins
- Food being past its expiry date
- Ready-to-eat food being prepared or stored in conditions that put it at risk of cross-contamination from harmful bacteria
- Poor cleaning standards
- Bad personal hygiene practices and ineffective hand washing by staff members
- Evidence of pest infestation
- Accumulation of waste
- The absence or falsification of HACCP records
- Ineffective management of allergens
- Absence of food safety training for team members
- Poor structural or equipment condition causing a food safety risk

Any one of these lapses in food safety can be disastrous for a business. A combination of several is likely to be difficult to come back from.

The Next Steps

Safety is far from optional for any food business. With public health so closely entwined with the sector, keeping up with - and exceeding - the required standards is the only way forward.

Even the slightest lapse can create lasting damage for a business, its customers and not to mention its reputation.

A food audit is designed to offer an independent and objective fresh pair of eyes from an experienced professional. They will not only assess whether safety standards are being met, but also offer improvements to ensure future compliance.

STS are considered as one of the UK's leading food safety consultancies. Our experience includes running projects on behalf of the Food Standards Agency, as well as establishing a code of practice for food supply into the NHS.

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Who we work with

Our award-winning auditors and trainers have worked with companies large and small to improve food safety and offer practical solutions to achieve the best results.

We provide food audits for some of the UK's most high-profile food brands as well as a wealth of small businesses, restaurants and takeaways, including:

- Krispy Kreme
- Frimley Health NHS Foundation Trust
- Center Parcs
- The Royal British Legion
- MOD Pizza
- National Trust
- Pho
- Rossopomodoro
- London School of Economics

We are passionate about helping food businesses, regardless of whether you're running a multi-site restaurant, market stall or a pop-up venture.

To discuss arranging a food audit for your business, give us a call on **0845 862 8030**

We'd be more than happy to discuss the next steps!



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