

*A Raw Deal*: UNISON’s survey report of meat hygiene inspectors 2018

**Introduction**

Hygiene and safety in the meat industry is increasingly under scrutiny, with a number of high profile failures, such as last year’s food safety scare at the Russell Hume meat company, shaking consumer confidence.

Earlier this year, UNISON undertook a survey of its members working as meat hygiene inspectors for the Food Standards Agency (FSA) to identify key issues and concerns in the industry. The FSA covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This survey predominantly relates to England and Wales.

The survey results revealed that the health of consumers could be put at risk, as the FSA attempts to cut back on meat inspectors and allow the industry to regulate itself. The problem of meat contamination was highlighted by the survey, and failure to follow up on safety breaches.

The survey also uncovered a culture of bullying in the meat industry with a number of meat inspectors facing harassment and intimidation in the course of their jobs.

**Survey findings**

UNISON undertook a survey of FSA staff members in January 2018. The vast majority of respondents were meat hygiene inspectors (95%). The survey received more than 110 responses (accounting for 26% of the directly employed meat inspectors workforce).

**Contaminated meat**

Meat hygiene inspectors are mostly employed independently of slaughterhouses. They examine every carcass to ensure that meat contaminated (either by faeces or disease) is not passed through the slaughterhouse and sold to the consumer. However, the FSA plans to cut back on inspectors and allow the meat industry to do its own safety control.

Nearly every meat hygiene inspector surveyed (98%) believed that the meat industry couldn’t be trusted to ensure no faecal contamination was present on the carcass before it was sold on to the consumer.

In addition, 96% of respondents thought that staff employed directly by the meat industry in slaughterhouses couldn’t be trusted to recognise and remove diseased sections of meat. Examples of diseased meat are abscesses, parasitic cysts, pneumonia, pleurisy and septicaemia being present in the carcass. Unless it was identified and properly dealt with, the meat containing these conditions would be passed as fit for human consumption.

More than nine in ten (91%) of respondents thought that the slaughterhouse employees responsible for monitoring meat quality did not accurately record what they witnessed on the slaughter line – as they are not independent of the business – with only 1% believing that they did. This increases the likelihood that contaminated meat is entering the food chain.

The implications for people eating contaminated and diseased meat are alarming. It could cause food poisoning or result in bacterial infections, such as E.coli. For those with impaired or weak immune systems, such as the very young and the elderly, food poisoning and infections could have a much more serious effect, such as a longer-lasting illness or even death in the most extreme cases.

**FSA shortcomings**

The survey revealed major concerns about the FSA’s procedures and practices. The vast majority of respondents (86%) said they did not believe that the FSA was truly independent of the meat industry. This perception was further illustrated with less than a quarter of respondents (24%) saying that the FSA or management encouraged them to report breaches of legislation.

Equally worrying was that almost half of the respondents (49%) were not at all confident that the FSA would properly follow up any reported breach of the hygiene regulations, even if it seriously compromised consumer protection.

In terms of staffing levels, almost half the inspectors (46%) believed there to be an insufficient number of FSA employees at slaughterhouses to carry out effective meat inspections.

**Bullying**

The survey of inspectors also paints a picture of endemic workplace bullying in the meat industry. Two-thirds (66%) of respondents said they had witnessed, or been subjected to, bullying and/or harassment in the past year.

The main source of bullying or harassment was identified by 57% of respondents as plant owners or plant workers, followed by FSA line managers (40%). The persistent nature of the bullying was highlighted, with 26% of respondents reporting that it happened on a daily basis, 24% said it occurred weekly, and 30% said the frequency was monthly.

The most commonly cited form of bullying was “intimidation” (61%), followed by “abuse” (41%) and “excessive criticism” (41%). Seven in ten (72%) attributed the bullying to “poor management”, while 56% thought it happened because perpetrators in the meat industry believed that the FSA wouldn’t do anything about it.

The FSA’s failure to respond to the culture of bullying was further illustrated by the fact that 71% of respondents were “not very confident” or “not at all confident” that the FSA would deal fairly with a complaint about bullying. In addition, 74% of respondents thought that the FSA had failed to act to reduce bullying and harassment over the past year.

**Conclusion**

UNISON’s survey provides a bleak insight into the difficult conditions under which meat inspectors operate. It reveals a catalogue of failings by the FSA in terms of its procedures and practices, plus a woeful lack of regard for its own staff. The culture of bullying is shown to be widespread, and largely ignored by the FSA.

The meat industry itself needs to be properly monitored. Attempts to self-regulate and bypass inspectors is likely to lead to an increase in the number of incidences of faecal contamination, or diseased meat getting into the food chain. There must be a permanent independent inspection presence in every slaughterhouse, to prevent a culture of complacency in food hygiene.

Unfortunately, the health risks for consumers, from unhygienic meat, are expected to rise, as slaughterhouses do more of their own inspections and the FSA fails to properly regulate the industry. Only by employing additional meat hygiene inspectors can this be avoided.