

About Family Food

Last updated: December 2014

This note expands on the information contained in the main Family Food report to give more detail about how the survey is designed and has evolved since the 1940s.

Background

The figures in Family Food are sourced from The Living Costs and Food Survey run by the Office for National Statistics. One element of the survey - The Family Food Module collects detailed quantity and expenditure information on food and drinks household purchases and itemised lists of food and drink eating out purchases for use by Defra.

The Office for National Statistics has overall project management and financial responsibility for the survey while Defra sponsors the specialist food data.

Definitions

Items of food and drink are defined as either household or eating out. 'Household' covers all food that is brought into the household. 'Eating out' covers all food that never enters the household.

History

Data on purchases and expenditure have been collected by various surveys since 1940. The National Food Survey was established in July 1940 to provide an assessment of the effectiveness of the national food policy at the time. The original survey was largely restricted to urban working class households and measured purchases of food for household stocks. In 1950 the survey was extended to a national sample representing as far as possible a complete cross section of the Great British population.

In 2001 the National Food Survey (NFS) was merged with the Family Expenditure Survey (FES) to form the Expenditure and Food Survey (EFS). The Expenditure and Food Survey was an extended Family Expenditure Survey, extended to incorporate the National Food Survey requirement. This extension is now known as the Family Food Module.

In 2008 the Expenditure and Food Survey was renamed as the Living Costs and Food Survey when it became part of the Integrated Household Survey.

Table 1 sets out the surveys involved in data collection throughout the decades and how these have evolved. Specific points covered in the the table:

- from 1992 onwards confectionery, alcoholic drinks and soft drinks brought home are included in household food.

- in 1996 the survey was extended to include Northern Ireland.
- reliable estimates of food and drink eaten out started in 2001-02 when the National Food Survey (NFS) was replaced by the Expenditure and Food Survey (EFS). Less reliable estimates of food and drink eaten out are available from the National Food Survey back to 1994.

Table 1: Key dates in the evolution of data collection

National Food Survey			Family Food Module		
1940 to 2000			Expenditure and Food Survey	Living Costs and Food Survey	
			2001 to 2007	2008 onwards	
1992	1994	1996	2001-2002	2006	2008
Confectionery, alcoholic drinks and soft drinks brought home added to the survey	Eating out added to the survey	Northern Ireland added to the survey	NFS and FES merged into one survey the EFS	Survey moved to calendar year	Part of the Integrated Household Survey

Main strengths of the Family Food Module

The Family Food Module provides:

- long terms trends with much data going back to 1974 and some data going back as far as 1940,
- household food purchases recorded with minimal under-reporting since they are based on information on attached till receipts (see Sampling methods paper),
- an annual sample size sufficient to allow analysis by Government Office Region and demographic characteristics,
- trends in eating out, defined as food and drink not brought into the household.

Also data in Family Food conforms fully to [National Statistics standards](#)

Data collection

The survey is a voluntary sample survey of private households. The basic unit is the household. The survey is continuous, interviews being spread evenly over the year to ensure that seasonal effects are covered. Each report details the number of people and households that completed a diary during the reporting year.

Each individual aged 16 and over in the household is asked to keep diary records of daily expenditure for two weeks. Information about regular expenditure, such as rent and mortgage payments, is obtained from a household interview along with retrospective information on certain large, infrequent expenditures such as those on vehicles. Simplified diaries are kept by children aged between 7 and 15.

Using trend data from 1974 onwards

National level estimates from the National Food Survey from 1974 to 2000 have been adjusted by aligning estimates for the year 2000 with corresponding estimates from the Family Expenditure Survey. Whilst estimates of household consumption from the National Food Survey have been adjusted, a break in the series in 2001-02 remains and should be borne in mind when interpreting reported changes between the years up to 2000 and the years 2001-02 and beyond. National level estimates in the accompanying datasets go back to 1974 and use these adjusted estimates.

The National Food Survey was run on a calendar year basis until it terminated in 2000. Its replacement, The Expenditure and Food Survey, was run on a financial year basis (1st April to 31st March) from 2001 until 2006 when it converted to a calendar year basis. As a consequence there is a three month gap in 2001 and a three month overlap in 2006.

See the method paper '[Adjustments to NFS](#)'.

Food and drink recording

The 'household' category covers all food that is brought into the household. 'Eating out' covers all food that never enters the household such as: restaurant meals, school meals and snacks bought and eaten away from home. Diary entries relating to food and drink are coded into roughly 500 different categories of food and drink covering household purchases (about 250) and eating out purchases (about 250).

Although the diaries are expenditure based, quantities are recorded where possible for household purchases of food and drink. Where expenditure is recorded for meals eaten out, the diary keeper records an itemised list of the meal components. Where quantities are not recorded on the diary they are estimated using standard portions sizes.

Using the two week diaries the survey records:

Household	Weight/volume and amount paid for all food and drink brought home, including free and home grown food.
Takeaway	An itemised list of takeaway items brought home with amount paid but not weight. Defra use standard portion sizes to obtain quantity estimates.
Eating out	An itemised list of all eating out food and drink purchases including, where possible, a breakdown of meals into meal components. Expenditure is recorded against each item in the list apart from meal components, in which case the whole meal expenditure is recorded. Defra uses standard portion sizes to estimate quantities

Using the survey interview the survey records:

Demographics	Questions in the interview to establish demographic characteristics of the household and the household members.
Free meals	The number of free meals eaten out in the last week for each person in the household. Defra uses averages of standard portion sizes of meal components to estimate the average composition of free meals eaten out.

Method paper '[Free food and unspecified meals](#)' explains how unspecified meals and free food are estimated.

Demographic characteristics of the household

The survey collects a range of standard demographic information that can be applied to the household. This includes ethnic origin, income, region, age, socio-economic status, type of employment. The datasets contain this information to download:

The survey uses the concept of the Household Reference Person (HRP) to categorise households according to personal demographic characteristics. From 2001-02 the concept of (HRP) was adopted on all Government-sponsored surveys replacing the concept of head of household. The HRP is the person who:

- owns the household accommodation, or
- is legally responsible for the rent of the accommodation, or
- has the household accommodation by virtue of their employment or personal relationship to the owner who is not a member of the household.

If more than one person meets these criteria the HRP will be the one with the higher income. If the incomes are the same then the eldest is chosen.

Household level estimation

The data collected in the survey covers food purchases not food consumption. The amount of purchases can vary substantially depending on the amount of shopping taking place in the surveyed period. It is assumed that by averaging over a large number of households the amount of food purchased in the surveyed period is a good approximation to the amount of food consumed.

Although the estimates in Family Food reports are presented as averages per person it is not known who in the household consumed what and no attempt is made to show estimates of food consumption by different age and gender groups. It is possible however, using relatively few assumptions, to use statistical techniques to make estimates of average consumption by age and gender from the survey data. An analysis by age and gender groups for 1974 to 1998 was reported in "National Food Survey 1998", Section 5. The report is available in pdf format from the [National Archives](#) website.

Other method notes

Defra have published method notes on the following aspects of the survey:

- Sampling
- Trends and ticks
- Estimation of free food and unspecified meals
- Reference nutrient intakes
- Adjustments to NFS and spreadsheet of Adjustment factors to NFS

They are available [here](#).