

Food Safety Compliance Strategy – Maximising Impact by Understanding the Food Business Context



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Introduction

Food safety is an issue that affects everyone. Local governments in all States are co-regulators of food safety and are responsible for inspecting most food businesses. Current food safety compliance inspection programs are resource intensive and local governments face ongoing challenges associated with increasing workloads and limited resources. Whilst regulation and enforcement will remain important in food safety, there is a need to develop complementary mechanisms for sustained improvement in food safety practices.

The Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) in partnership with Queensland University of Technology (QUT), Logan City Council (LCC), Redland City Council (RCC), Sunshine Coast Council (SCC), Ipswich City Council (ICC) and Environmental Health Australia (Queensland) Inc. are undertaking research that explores the current attitudes and beliefs concerning food safety within a diverse set of food business contexts. Understanding how food business operators think about food safety enables the identification of opportunities to trigger voluntary change of behaviour. Whilst compliance will remain an important aspect of food safety management, other more collaborative approaches to working with the food industry may in the long run be more effective and efficient in improving food safety practices. This industry research will be used to develop a food safety strategy template that can be customised by local governments to suit their context. The template development will assist local governments to deliver a holistic food safety strategy. This approach is more likely to meet Council, community and industry expectations in the future. The template may also result in greater consistency between local governments, which would support resource sharing and increase efficiency.

Research Questions

- How is food safety thought about by food business operators and their employees?
- How could this 'insider' knowledge be better harnessed to improve food safety?
- What would it take to improve food safety practices apart from regulation and compliance?
- How might local government bring together 'bottom-up' understanding of food business operations with 'top-down' regulation into a practical template for food safety improvement?

Research

Action Research methodology has been selected as it focuses on addressing a specific problem by changing the status quo through examining potential solutions to identify which may work best (Merriam 2009; Patton 2002; Rubin & Rubin 2005). Action research also emphasises collaboration and empowerment (Liamputtong & Ezzy 2005; McNiff & Whitehead 2011).

The research activities include:

- **Literature review:** The brief literature review will consider existing food safety strategies and programs in Queensland local governments and literature relevant to the research questions. It will explore the history and potential future of food safety compliance in Australia, with an emphasis on the implications for local government.
- **Risk assessment:** Quantitative data from food-borne illness outbreak investigations and local government food business inspection results will be used in a risk assessment of common non-compliances. The risk assessment process will be consistent with the Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) The analysis of food-related health risks and World Health Organisation (WHO) documents regarding food safety risk assessment. The results of the risk assessment will inform the focus of the industry research, e.g. the interview questions will focus on the highest risk issues.
- **In-depth interviews:** Business operators and food handlers will be engaged through semi-structured in-depth interviews focused on understanding their current attitudes and beliefs regarding food safety. The focus of this research is to better understand the context of food business operators who find it difficult to meet food safety standards and to identify strategies which could establish a more collaborative foundation for behaviour change beyond 'compliance only' strategies. Therefore participants will be selected from businesses in which one or more non-compliance related to food safety (i.e. not including administrative or minor structural non-compliances) was noted during their last Council inspection. Non-compliant businesses also pose a higher risk to Councils and the community, and require more resources to regulate.
- **Focus groups:** Focus groups will be conducted with young people who are or have recently been employed within the food industry with the view to better understand their experience as workers in the food industry. Focus group discussions will explore the food safety knowledge, attitudes, practices and culture in which they participated. Young food handlers often work during evenings and on weekends, i.e. times that Council Environmental Health Officers generally do not conduct inspections. It is also known that young people's knowledge of food safety may be limited (Byrd-Bredbenner et.al., 2007) and that limited training, stress and fatigue within the food services industry may add to food safety concerns. Young food handlers are often employed on a casual basis and therefore are vulnerable in terms of their employment. Consequently engaging them independent of their employer in focus groups is ethically appropriate.

- **Strategy development:** The research will be used to identify a range of approaches that can be used to systematically treat food safety risks and to develop a food safety strategy template that can be customised by local governments.

Timeframe

The research commenced in late 2012 and is scheduled to be completed in July 2013.

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