

## Gough Square Chambers: Food Law Column

**Ian Thomas** and **Stuart Jessop** are specialist food law barristers at Gough Square Chambers and editors of the Food Law Column. Together with contributions from other members of chambers, they provide expert commentary and analysis on topical developments and key issues in the field of food regulation and policy.

In the second March 2026 edition of the column, **Ian Thomas** briefly reviews the activities of the National Food Crime Unit and shows that it can be friends to legitimate businesses but foes to criminals who threaten the safety of the food supply chain.



### **The National Food Crime Unit: Can It Be Friend and Foe?**

By **Ian Thomas**, Gough Square Chambers

The NFCU operates a dedicated law enforcement function within the Food Standards Agency (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and works closely with the Scottish Food Crime and Incidents Team.

Formed in 2015 in the wake of the Horsemeat scandal, the NFCU was granted extended investigation powers in 2025 in The Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 (Application to Food Crime Officers) Regulations 2025 (S.I. 2025 No. 300). As time is often of the essence during investigations, these powers enable the NFCU to respond quickly to developing situations for the better protection of consumers.

In November 2025, the NFCU presented a report to the FSA setting out its 'activities and achievements' during the previous year and looking ahead to its plans for 2026. [National Food Crime Unit – Annual Update | Food Standards Agency](#)

Of note is the list of strategic priority areas for tackling food crime:

- Misrepresentation of lamb, beef, poultry and dairy with regards to origin.
- Misrepresentation of lamb, beef and poultry with regards to status (including stolen livestock or

meat considered unfit for the food chain).

- Adulteration and substitution of lamb, beef, poultry and dairy products.
- Waste diversion including Animal By-Product (ABP) handling within red meat, poultry, dairy and feed supply chains.
- Specific supply chains presenting high levels of authenticity risk to the UK.

A recent example of the NFCU's investigative work is the imposition of a 2-and-a-half-year prison sentence on an individual who had pleaded guilty to handling stolen goods (poultry) worth more than £500,000.00. (Bolton Crown Court, 27 January 2026).

The defendant had operated a food cold-storage company, and the case involved the impersonation of legitimate food businesses to secure food deliveries from overseas. [FSA's NFCU urges vigilance against food fraud, as man jailed after investigation into over half a million pound turkey and chicken theft. | Food Standards Agency](#)

That investigation highlighted the importance of having a multi-agency capability to combat food crime as was seen by the close collaboration

between the NFCU, Greater Manchester Police and Wigan Council.

Following the conclusion of that case, the NFCU reminded us that it does more than catch criminals. It also helps businesses avoid being victims of crime by using publications such as the 'Food fraud resilience self-assessment tool' which is designed to help legitimate businesses develop a counter-fraud strategy. [Food fraud resilience self-assessment tool | Food Standards Agency](#)

This is a helpful online resource providing advice and guidance that reflects the answers to a series of questions about risk awareness and the businesses' approach to food fraud. Used correctly, the tool will certainly give the business 'food for thought' but of course it is only of any real benefit if all identified risks are fully addressed.

Protection against threats arising from fraud and economic criminality should be as important as safety and hygiene and having a robust withdrawal and recall policy, and they must all be reviewed regularly and stress tested.

To facilitate this, the fraud resilience tool links to the CIEH's publication 'Counter fraud good practice for food and drink businesses Improve fraud resilience and reduce the financial cost of fraud'. [Counter-fraud-good-practice-for-food-and-drink-businesses.pdf](#)

Although that document is now quite old, its messages remain valid. For example, it points out the importance of having a business-specific counter-fraud policy, while noting that fraudulent activity can happen anywhere along the supply chain and therefore suppliers must have their own protective measures in place.

To guide it through the coming year, the NFCU has identified four key focus areas:

- Continue advancing our investigations toward successful criminal prosecutions by fully utilising

our new investigatory powers, while actively monitoring how these powers are applied and assessing their effectiveness and benefits.

- Continue developing and enhancing our Prevention capabilities to improve resilience against food crime; while ensuring we sustain a strong deterrent and maintain a hostile environment for those who commit food crime.
- Enhance collaboration with Defra to support their efforts in mitigating the risks posed by illegal meat imports into the UK, with a focus on safeguarding biosecurity and protecting public health.
- Actively pursue opportunities to collaborate with international partners, in line with the FSA international strategy, by sharing knowledge and best practice to address emerging threats and common risk areas.

Reflecting that last point and recognising that food crime has no respect for country borders, the NFCU operates as part of Global Alliance which is an international coalition working to prevent, detect and disrupt food crime. This helps early identification of threats to UK consumers.

To conclude, the NFCU plays an important role in dealing with food criminality, while helping businesses identify and rectify potential weaknesses which may make them vulnerable to that criminal behaviour. To that extent, it is both friend and foe.

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Ian is a specialist regulatory barrister. He is highly regarded for his work in food and consumer products regulation, including labelling claims (for example nutrition, health and environmental), safety and recalls. Ian is also experienced in health and safety law, inquests and public inquiries.

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