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Sharp glass in soup and live insects found crawling through cooked rice were among the horrors highlighted to Ireland's food safety watchdog by consumers last year.

The Food Safety Authority of Ireland also said it had received complaints about live mice in cafes, an absence of personal hygiene among staff in restaurants, the smell of sewage in food premises as well as an absence of hot water for hand washing.

A total of 2,772 consumer complaints were handled by the authority advice line last year. Of these grievances 34 per cent related to unfit food and 30 per cent to poor hygiene standards.

Complaints actually fell from the 3,460 recorded in 2019. The authority, however, stressed that the reduction had more to do with the impact of Covid-19 – during which many food businesses closed for long periods throughout the year – than any improvement in industry standards.

Along with the glass in soup and insects in rice, there were reports of snails in spinach and frozen mixed fruits as well as small pieces of stone, hair, moths and rodent droppings discovered in food.

The bulk of complaints were about food contamination and hygiene standards. But there were also 100 complaints about incorrect information on food labelling, 78 on the non-display of allergen information on packaging and 34 on advertising

Although registered grievances made by the general public fell as a result of Covid-19 there was a simultaneous surge in queries and complaints from people and businesses directly related to the disease, while Brexit also featured.

Brexit data

There were 720 Covid-19 related queries and 569 Brexit related queries from food businesses. In response detailed Brexit information for food businesses trading with the UK and advice on considerations when reopening a food business following Covid-19 restrictions were added to the authority's website.

“During the Covid-19 pandemic, our advice line has been a valuable resource for consumers who continued to contact us with complaints about food safety and hygiene in food businesses even with the Level 5 restrictions which resulted in the temporary closures of many food businesses,” said authority chief executive Pamela Byrne.

Dr Byrne added that the “consistently high number of complaints” shows consumers are “continuing to grow increasingly aware of their right to safe food, and also the food safety and hygiene standards which should be in place across all food businesses”.