

Consumer views of potential regulatory divergence in the meat sector: Executive Summary

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About this research

- The FSA commissioned Ipsos UK to conduct qualitative research with the public to help them capture consumer views towards possible divergence.
- This report summarises the findings from qualitative research conducted with 76 participants from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, who took part in 14 online focus groups between the 19th of July and the 9th of August 2022. Each focus group lasted two hours.
- Our methodology was designed to capture public views towards the high-level proposals of regulatory divergence, highlighting areas of support and concern.

Understanding of the FSA

- Consumer awareness of the FSA was generally high, with participants recognising the FSA's role in ensuring food is safe to eat and hygiene standards are maintained, as well as mentions of animal welfare.
- There was less familiarity with precisely how regulations were enforced. For example, there were questions about how the FSA interacts with other government agencies and local authorities.
- There was also low awareness around the FSA's connection to healthy and sustainable food.
- Participants were supportive of this new role despite it seeming distinct and separate from the FSA's remit to ensure the safety and quality of food.
- Participants had not considered the scale of the Official Controls process and were surprised at the overall scale of the meat industry in the UK. The continuous presence of Official Veterinarians and Meat Hygiene Inspectors was reassuring and led to some initial resistance towards any potential changes that regulatory divergence might bring.
- It was argued that the FSA should tell the public more about their role and responsibilities and the extent of current regulations.

Views towards the concept of regulatory divergence

- Participants initially struggled to understand the need for regulatory divergence and what form it could take. This was especially true when it came to food safety. Participants tended to assume that food would either be 'safe' or 'not safe'.
- Trust in the FSA was very high and was reflected by participants' beliefs that food would continue to be safe regardless of the regulatory framework in place.
- Despite spontaneous resistance, there was greater support for divergence if it avoided complications for businesses or helped to reduce administration or save costs.
- Generally, participants did not believe that regulatory divergence would have a significant impact on them as individuals. There was indifference towards two products appearing for sale that followed two sets of regulations. Concerns arose when participants felt the impact of divergence could lead to negative changes in the quality of meat products.
- Attitudes towards regulatory divergence were influenced by three key factors:
 - The scale of the change and whether it was perceived as significant or more 'cosmetic'.
 - Significant changes included those which could have a detrimental impact on animal welfare.
 - Perceptions of whether an erosion of standards could increase the risks of food becoming unsafe.
 - The perceived motivations behind divergence including if changes were being driven purely by a desire to reduce costs.
- Participants did not understand why there would be a need or desire for regulations to be different between the UK nations and argued that having a consistent regulatory regime would be less confusing for consumers, food businesses and for the FSA itself.

Regulatory divergence in practice

- Consumers believed they had the right to know about any changes in regulations and wanted the public to be made aware that regulatory divergence was taking place, for example, through a communications campaign.
- Once informed, participants felt individuals were personally responsible for understanding the effect of divergence and how this could impact them on a daily basis.
- There was less demand for information about specific details of regulatory changes, but signposting to the FSA website could help to streamline this process for consumers who wanted to know more without putting too much information on labels.
- Changing packaging to distinguish between products was felt to be an easy way for consumers to understand regulatory differences when shopping. This could include: sticker systems, traffic light systems, or QR codes that would be able to provide further detail if required. Clear packaging was seen as important to help consumers make an informed choice about what to buy.
- Where changes were perceived as leading to a reduction in standards, participants felt more strongly about the need to be informed. They felt that any divergence that led to a reduction in standards could lead to lower levels of overall trust in the FSA.

How to read this report

This report provides a summary of the insights from the Food Standards Agency's (FSA's) Consumer Panels conducted during July and August 2022. Our findings have been organised in the following structure:

- In Chapter 1 we summarise the background and methodology of the study.
- In Chapter 2 we present participants' understanding of the FSA across the food journey and their role as regulators. We also summarise participants' reflections on the current Official Controls process.

- In Chapter 3 we detail participants' views towards the concept of regulatory divergence, including potential benefits and risks to consumers and businesses. We also detail their specific concerns related to food safety and animal welfare, as well as views on regulatory divergence between the EU and UK and between nations within the UK.
- Finally, in Chapter 4 we summarise participants' attitudes towards potential regulatory divergence in practice, detailing how consumers should be informed, the importance of consumer choice and views on packaging and labelling.

Note on the language used throughout the report

Throughout this report we have referred to “participants” as the individuals that have taken part in our research. We have also used several abbreviations reflecting the topic of discussion:

- AI – Artificial Intelligence
- Defra – Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- EU – European Union
- FSA – The Food Standards Agency
- MHI – Meat Hygiene Inspector
- OV – Official Veterinarian

Anonymised verbatim quotes have been used to help illustrate key findings, but these quotes do not necessarily summarise the views of all participants that we spoke to.

Limitations to the research

While every attempt has been made to recruit a varied sample of participants and design a robust methodology, possible limitations to the research include:

- **The research topic.** Talking about food regulation, including the processes involved in the meat industry, is not something participants would normally discuss. The focus groups explored complex regulatory structures and exposed participants to new information they were not aware of. To support meaningful discussions, participants were presented with simplified versions of the Official Controls process, and stimulus materials designed to provide them with the information they needed to engage in the topic. They were given the opportunity to ask questions. However, it is possible that participants' attitudes reflect misunderstandings about the processes involved and it is important to note that participants are not experts in food regulations. For example, participants often focused on quality standards rather than food safety regulations.
- **Generalisability.** The findings summarised reflect the self-reported views shared by the participants. Qualitative research is designed to be exploratory and provide insight into people's perceptions, feelings and behaviours. The findings are therefore not intended to be representative of the views of all people who may share similar characteristics.