

FSA and Official Controls: Overall views and understanding of the FSA

This leads on to an exploration of FBOs' understanding of what FSA does, and why. Finally the chapter draws out particular strengths of the FSA, as well as areas for improvement.

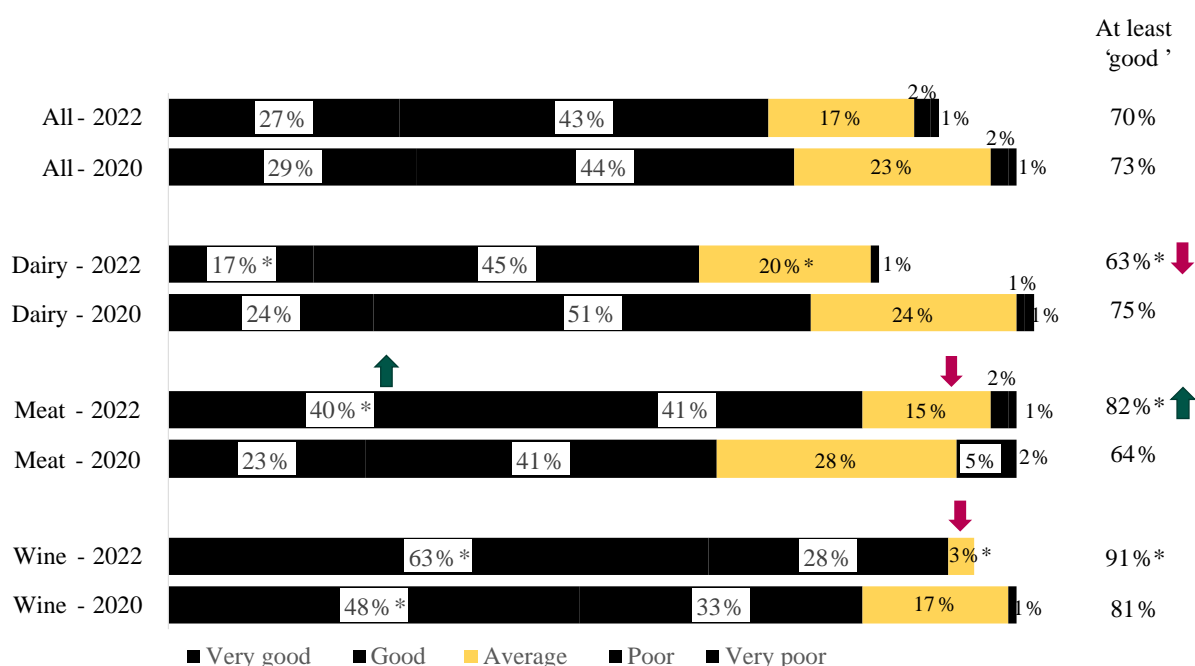
Overall views of the FSA

Overall, the majority of FBOs typically reported a positive experience with the FSA. Around seven in 10 (70%) said their overall experience with the FSA was good (27% reporting it was 'very' good), 17% found it average and only two per cent said that it was poor. Compared to 2020 the proportion of respondents who said their experience was good decreased by three percentage points, although this reduction was not statistically significant. It is also important to note that in 2022 respondents were allowed to answer 'Don't know' at this question, but this option was not provided in 2020. Just over one in ten (12%) gave this response.

As seen in Figure 4.1, FBOs in the wine sector were most likely to have a good experience when working with the FSA; 91% rated this experience at least 'good', compared to only 63% of FBOs in the dairy sector. In comparison to 2020, a higher percentage of FBOs in the wine sector found their experience with the FSA 'good' in 2022 (91% compared to 81% in 2020).

There were no significant differences by country with 70% of England and 66% of Wales FBOs reporting that their overall experience was good.

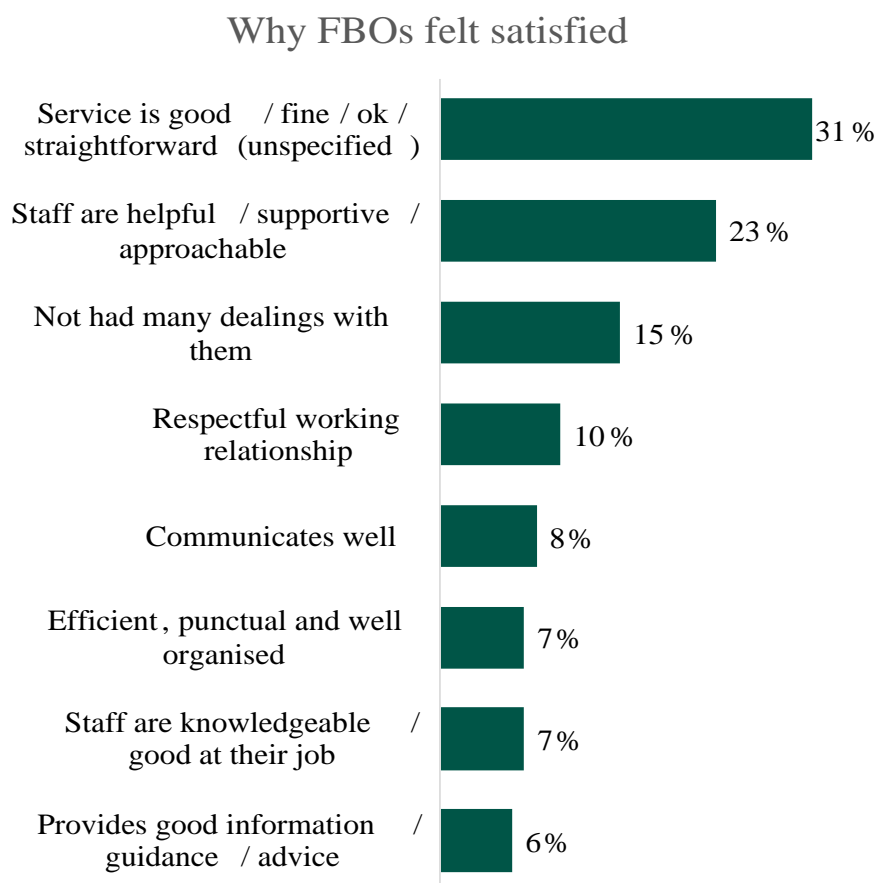
Figure 4.1 Overall experience of working with the FSA



A1. Overall experience of working with the FSA. Base: All businesses 2022 / 2020 (400 / 381); Dairy (264 / 200), Meat (99 / 93), Wine (32 / 87). * indicates a significant difference with other sectors. Don't know responses from 2022 have not been presented in the chart, but at an overall level were 12% (46).

When asked why they gave the response they did, the majority of FBOs reported that they felt the service they received was satisfactory, or that the staff were helpful and supportive (31% and 23% respectively). Negative responses underpinning a poor rating related to reasons such as the auditing not being consistent (5%) and feedback on reports being slow and unclear (4%), as shown in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2 Reasons behind FBOs' rating of their experience of the FSA



A2. Why did you give this response? Base: All businesses who were able to rate their experience of working with the FSA (354). Top 8 responses are shown.

Those in the dairy sector were more likely to say that the service was good compared to those in the meat sector (37% v 21% respectively). However, FBOs in the wine and meat sectors were more likely than those in the dairy sector to say that the 'staff were helpful and supportive' (50% and 33% respectively compared to 15% in dairy).

Negative responses underpinning a poor rating were explored in the depth interviews and related to reasons such as the auditing not being consistent (5%), feedback on reports being slow and unclear (4%), complicated processes (3%), information/ guidelines not being clear (3%) or helpful and poor communication (3%).

Six per cent of meat and dairy FBOs felt that auditing was inconsistent (auditing does not take place for wine FBOs). This was more prominent in the meat sector (14%) compared to dairy (2%)

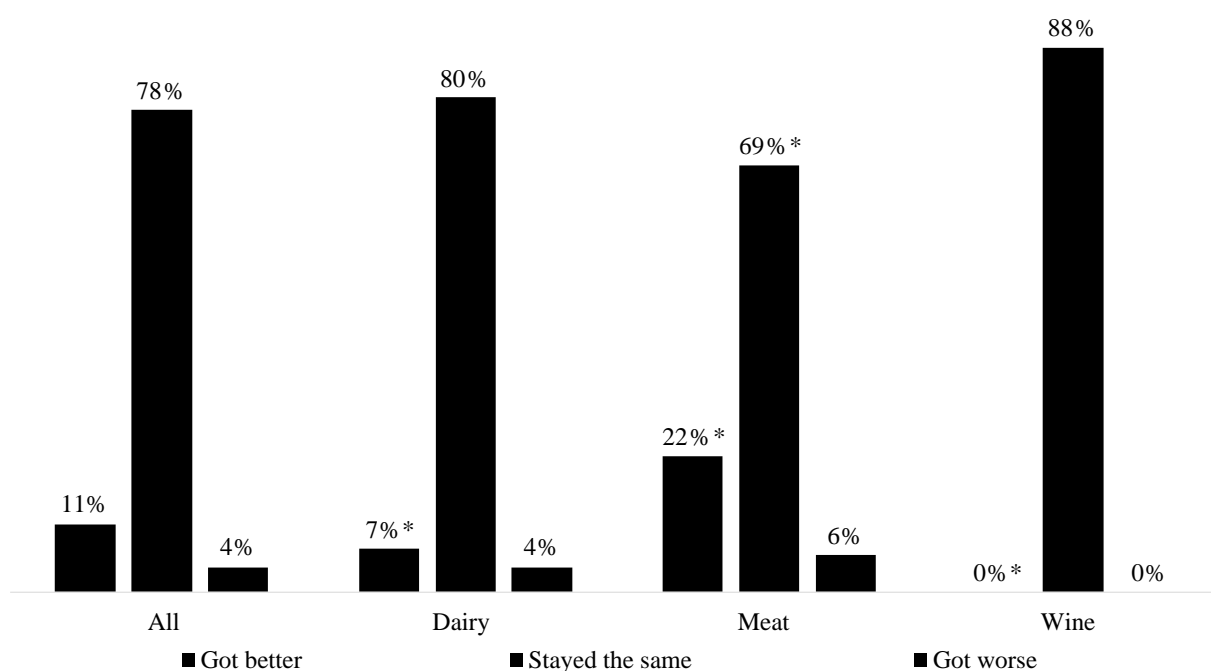
however auditing is more limited within the dairy sector. “I had an issue with some of my auditing, I had to set up validation for a process they had no guidelines for, it went on for 3 years and cost me so much money with testing. After those 3 years, the vet talked to her manager and said we didn’t need to do that, so after we had spent so much time and money after 3 years to be told we didn’t need to do that.” (Meat, Wales)

How views have changed of the FSA

Over the last two years, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the UK’s exit from the EU, to name a couple of events, have contributed to a quickly evolving landscape for FBOs.

FBOs were asked if and how their views of the FSA had changed over this period. Despite the changing contexts, the majority (78%) said their views had stayed the same, while 11% reported their views had improved. Only four per cent said their view had got worse. This question was also asked in 2020, where a slightly higher proportion reported an improved view of the FSA (20%), although the proportion stating it had stayed the same was about the same as in 2022 (75%). An earlier section of this chapter illustrated that in 2022 70% rated their experience of working with the FSA as ‘good’, while in 2020 this figure was 73%. This may be due to the introduction of ‘don’t know’ as an option in the 2022 survey, which 12% of FBOs selected.

Figure 4.3 How FBO views of the FSA have changes over the last two years



A3. How have your views of the FSA changed over the last 2 years? Base: All businesses (400); Dairy (264), Meat (99), Wine (32). Arrows indicate a significant difference from 2020. ‘**’ indicates a significant difference from all other sectors. Don’t know figures have not been presented in the chart

FBOs in the meat sector were the most likely to say their views had improved (22%); this compared to 0% in the wine sector. It is important to note, however, that FBOs in the wine sector were generally highly positive of the FSA, as shown earlier in this chapter (for example, 91% reported a good experience).

FBOs in Wales were slightly more likely to report that their views of the FSA had got worse over the period (8% compared with 3% in England). Further to this, those that had contact with the FSA in the last month were the most likely to say their views had improved (19%).

Understanding of the FSA's role and purpose

To gain an insight of the extent to which FBOs understand the FSA's role and purpose, they were presented with a series of statements to see how clear or unclear their understanding was of each. These covered:

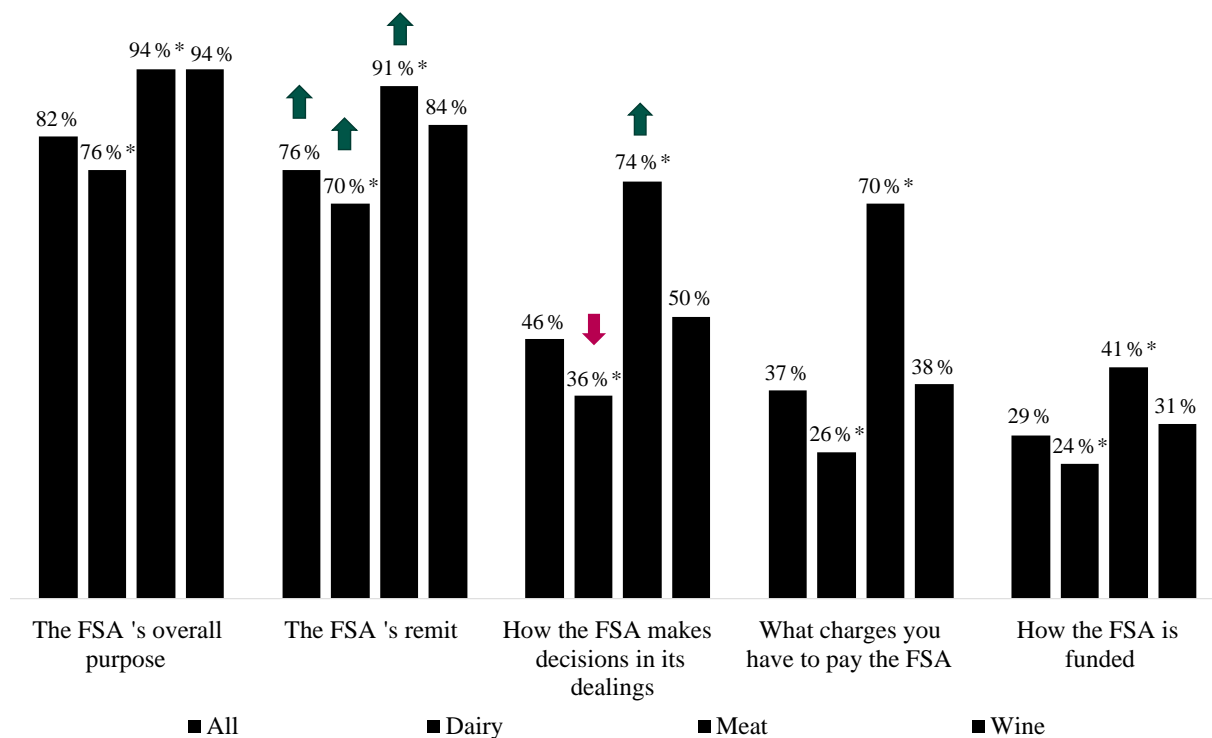
- the FSA's overall purpose (for example, why the FSA exists)
- the FSA's remit (for example, what the FSA does)
- how the FSA makes decisions in its dealings with FBOs
- what charges FBOs have to pay to the FSA
- how the FSA is funded

FBOs were asked to answer on a 5-point scale of 'very clear', 'clear', 'neither clear nor unclear', 'unclear' and very 'unclear'. For reporting purposes we have combined the first two codes in the scale.

FBOs reported that they were most clear on the FSA's overall purpose, as well as its remit (82% and 76% respectively). They were less clear on how the FSA is funded and what charges they must pay (29% and 37%). These trends have remained mostly consistent with figures from 2020, although the proportion understanding the FSA's remit has increased from 63% to 76%.

By sector FBOs in the meat sector were typically clearer on the FSA's role and purpose as seen in Figure 4.4. This may be because FBOs in the meat sector are the most likely to have had some form of contact with the FSA due to the MHIs and OV's having a permanent presence on site compared to other sectors (97% had at least some contact with the FSA in the last year compared to 78% of dairy).

Figure 4.4 Levels of clarity on the FSA's role and purpose



C1_X. How clear or unclear are you about the following... Base: All businesses (400); Dairy (264), Meat (99), Wine (32). Arrows indicate a significant difference from 2020. '**' indicates a significant difference from all other sectors.

It can also be seen across all the statements that if an FBO had a good experience with the FSA they were most likely to have a clear understanding of all the statements put to them. For example, there was a clearer understanding of the FSA's purpose (88%) and its remit (83%) among those that had a good experience with the FSA compared to those that rated their experience as poor (50% for both purpose and remit).

There was also an association between recent contact and clarity of the FSA role. FBOs who had contact with the FSA in the last month were clearer on the FSA's overall purpose and its remit (93% and 86% respectively) compared to those that had never had contact (67% and 62% respectively). There was very little difference by country.

What the FSA does well and what it can improve on

FBOs were asked to state one thing they thought the FSA did well when dealing with food businesses. The majority of the FBOs did not feel there was necessarily one thing that stood out and hence did not provide an answer. Among those that did provide a response (175 respondents), a range of answers was given. The four most common themes included:

- Staff are helpful / supportive / approachable
- Staff communicate well
- the FSA ensures FBOs maintain high standards to protect the public
- the FSA provides good information / guidance / advice

Staff being helpful and supportive typically related to their offering advice to FBOs on different policies and legislations. Good communication tended to relate to being clear on appointments and the timing of inspections (though as we show in Chapter 6 some felt there could be improvement here).

"FSA staff have been helpful with any questions I have, and the guidance they give to keep abreast of legislation is also very good." (Meat, England)

The FSA's role in conducting food safety checks through for example, inspections was felt to be important in maintaining high standards.

"I think [the FSA] does well at being clear about what standards are expected and enforcing those standards. I think it does a good job by making sure that the food is safe for the consumer." (Dairy, England)

"They keep the quality of food up I hope, we like to know what we're feeding the cattle." (Dairy, Wales)

Finally the FSA were seen to be providing good information and guidance to FBOs. Particularly notable was the support provided regarding the UK's exit from the EU, with FSA staff helping them on decisions on how to improve.

"Relating to Brexit - FSA did a pretty reasonable job of interpreting the politicians." (Wine, England)

"Any time I have a problem they advise me what to do. If they don't have an answer they check and do call me back with it and are very good at sending links to check things for myself." (Meat, England).

Food businesses were also asked to say one thing they think the FSA could improve on. While FBOs were typically relatively positive about their experience of working with the FSA they tended to have more to say on this aspect compared to what they felt was working well (although still half reported they did not know what the FSA could do to improve).

Most commonly, FBOs focused on the importance of improving communication. While this was cited as a strength by some, this is not consistent across all FBOs. Below we have picked out key areas for improvement, according to FBOs, and in order of commonality:

- improved communication
- more helpful and clear information / guidelines / advice
- a more rigorous but sensible and fair approach
- simplify processes / reduce bureaucracy
- greater consistency in auditing
- timely updates regarding changes / market specific issues
- a more respectful / collaborative approach
- greater awareness and understanding of operations / current market challenges

With regards to improved communication, FBOs felt that the FSA could use more platforms to reach out to them, such as via email and through Farmers Weekly communications. In particular they felt these would be suitable forums to publicise any regulatory changes. For example, a handful of FBOs recalled that they read Farmers Weekly and have not seen anything about the OTP within it. Along with this, they felt the FSA could be more responsive so that issues can be resolved more quickly. Tying into this FBOs also stated that the information that they do receive could be clearer and more helpful, given the complexity of some of the regulations and guidance. Indeed there was a suggestion that FBOs would benefit more from having an identified contact at the FSA to discuss regulation changes with, rather than just being directed to a website.

“They need to communicate more because I haven't heard of OTP and I read Farmers Weekly every week and haven't heard of it.” (Dairy, England)

“They need simpler guidance. The meat industry guidance was removed and put in archives on their website. Businesses like ours still rely on this to comply with the legislation and this is unfortunate that this has been removed. It would be great if this legislation information could come back to help us to comply with the regulations.” (Meat, England)

Some FBOs considered that the inspections and auditing process were not conducted in a fair manner. FBOs wanted the FSA to provide help on the things they had failed on so they could be resolved as quickly as possible. A handful found that the processes were too difficult and bureaucratic to follow, with all the processes and legislation needing to be simplified. They also found that there were differences in what the FSA might tell them to do and what other organisations like Red Tractor might say.

“I'd suggest probably to not enforce things before they've given us a chance to put things in place if need be. If something is wrong, we need time to put things in place which most meat companies do anyway. We need a bit more time.” (Meat, England)

“They can come in line with Red Tractor farm assurance because I had a visit from them and then the FSA and they were both saying different things. They don't talk the same language. The way things are going I won't be farming much longer. I don't need all the regulations. We get no thanks for it at all.” (Dairy, England)

Along with more simplified processes and a more consistent approach, FBOs mostly in the meat sector also stated there needed to be better consistency with auditing as it could vary depending on what staff member came to do the audit.

“There's no consistency at all, absolutely none. It's a different inspector each year and they all bring their different challenges, they concentrate on different parts. It needs to be standardised.”
(Meat, Wales)