

Potential Divergence of Food Safety Regulations Within the UK: How to read this report

This report provides a summary of the insights from deliberative workshops commissioned by the FSA to explore consumer views of regulatory divergence, held during January and February 2023. 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 briefly set out participants' understanding of the FSA, their role as a regulator and approach to four-nation working within the context of devolution
- in Chapter 3 we detail participants' views towards the context for change, the concept of regulatory divergence, including potential benefits and risks to consumers and businesses
- in Chapter 4 we summarise participants' attitudes towards potential regulatory divergence in practice for different product types and regulatory activities. We also explore some of the key factors and trade-offs influencing consumer views
- finally, in Chapter 5 we give an overview of the findings, including how the FSA should approach regulatory divergence in the future and inform consumers about any potential changes

Throughout, we have referenced to a series of hypothetical scenarios which were discussed by participants during the workshops. These are available in full in the appendix.

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 also reference “groups” for breakout groups which were pre-organised to ensure that each group had participants with similar views towards the UK’s exit from the EU. We have used several abbreviations reflecting the topic of discussion:

- Defra – Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- DHSC – Department of Health and Social Care
- EFSA – The European Food Safety Authority
- EU – European Union
- FSA – The Food Standards Agency
- FSS – Food Standards Scotland
- NIP – Northern Ireland Protocol (note research was conducted prior to agreement of the Windsor Framework)
- UKIM – United Kingdom Internal Market

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 specific details such as onward processing, is not something participants would normally discuss. The workshops explored complex regulatory structures and exposed participants to new information. To support meaningful discussions, participants were presented with stimulus materials designed to provide them with the information they needed to engage in the topic. They were given the opportunity to ask questions and an FSA observer was available to answer these during plenary discussions. 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 regulation.

Generalisability. The findings summarised reflect the self-reported views shared by participants. Qualitative research is designed to be exploratory and provide insight into people's perceptions, feelings, and behaviours at a specific point in time. The findings are therefore not intended to be representative of the views of all people who may share similar characteristics. This research aimed to test the generalisability of previous findings using specific product types and changes to different kinds of regulated activities. Previous research focused on regulatory divergence within the meat industry and impacts on the official controls process. This research used hypothetical scenarios to try and draw out factors of key importance and we have included findings from previous research in this report to provide a comparison to the insights here.