

Consumer views of potential regulatory divergence in the meat sector: Understanding of the FSA

Participants had a general awareness of the FSA but queried more specific aspects of their work.

Across discussions, consumer awareness of the FSA was generally high, with most participants aware of the FSA as a government organisation and demonstrating an overall understanding of its remit. There was a recognition of the FSA's role in ensuring food is safe to eat and hygiene standards are maintained, as well as mentions of animal welfare. Participants believed the FSA checked processes throughout the production, distribution, and sale of food, although there was not often a clear understanding of this journey.

I imagine they are present from the beginning to the packaging and sale of food, to the end of the line, the cooking and distribution of it.

Northern Ireland, Unionist

There was a widespread belief that FSA standards and regulations are enforced at any location that prepares and sells food. For example, through routine testing, inspections, hygiene ratings and labelling such as best before dates on packaging. Participants also suggested the FSA would play a role in ensuring animals were treated and slaughtered humanely. For one participant, knowledge of this was aided by a connection to someone who worked in the industry. Another participant felt the FSA's work was particularly important for religious groups, who needed to trust that how their food is produced adheres to their beliefs.

[It's important for] different religious groups who don't eat for example pork or different animals, to [not] end up having something that isn't what they thought it was.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Neither Leave nor Remain

There was greater confusion about how the FSA enforced regulations.

Participants questioned how the FSA interacted with other government agencies and local authorities in applying regulations in practice. There was uncertainty about the FSA's role in hygiene ratings and how this interacted with council responsibilities. Participants were also unsure whether the FSA could apply penalties as part of their work and how much power they had over enforcement. There was some concern the FSA would not be able to inspect the number of businesses involved in producing food.

I'm not sure how much power they have, how physically they get involved in making things happen. My understanding is that they're not really enforcers.
Rural, leave

In some cases, participants discussed the FSA's responsibilities for communication. There was a suggestion that the FSA was responsible for communicating any changes to legislation. One participant queried whether the UK leaving the EU would have an impact on the FSA's remit.

I'm intrigued now post-Brexit who they are answerable to. Who's policing them? We never seem to get any public debate on their rules and what's permitted. It concerns me that we don't seem to have a public debate about it really.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

There was less awareness of the FSA's connection to healthy and sustainable food.

Participants were not surprised by the description of the FSA as "an independent government department working to protect public health and committed to protecting consumers by ensuring food is safe and is what it says it is". This matched participants' expectations, with a suggestion that the FSA's role was often taken for granted. Participants felt this demonstrated an inherent trust around the governance of food production within the UK.

We probably take it for granted and assume it's going on in the background but haven't given it a lot of thought.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Neither Leave nor Remain

In contrast, participants were less aware of the FSA's involvement in ensuring food is healthy and sustainable for the future, a new pillar of the [FSA's 2022-2027 Strategy](#). Participants noted they thought the FSA's focus was around ensuring the safety and quality of food, with standardised procedures to inspect this. In contrast, sustainability seemed distinct from this remit, although participants were supportive of this new role.

I'm impressed that they are here to make sure [food is] healthy and more sustainable. It's nice [the FSA] doesn't just stop to check the food is of high quality.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Leave

Participants from Northern Ireland questioned why Scotland is not covered under the FSA's remit. Questions were also raised about the crossover between the FSA and other government bodies like Defra, specifically in relation to goals around sustainability. These discussions were not seen as widely in the English and Welsh groups.

There was an acceptance that meat and vegetables would be regulated differently.

Participants believed that meat would be more closely monitored for diseases, and vegetables for pesticides, with a greater focus on the storage and transportation of meat given concerns about cross contamination. This resulted in a view that meat needed to be more stringently regulated compared to vegetables. This was due to the health risks being higher if something were to go wrong.

Probably the meat industry is the place it needs to have the highest standard as we need to make sure the things we are eating aren't contaminated like mad cow disease. I suppose the [FSA] should be looking into that.
Wales, Urban/Semi-Urban, Leave

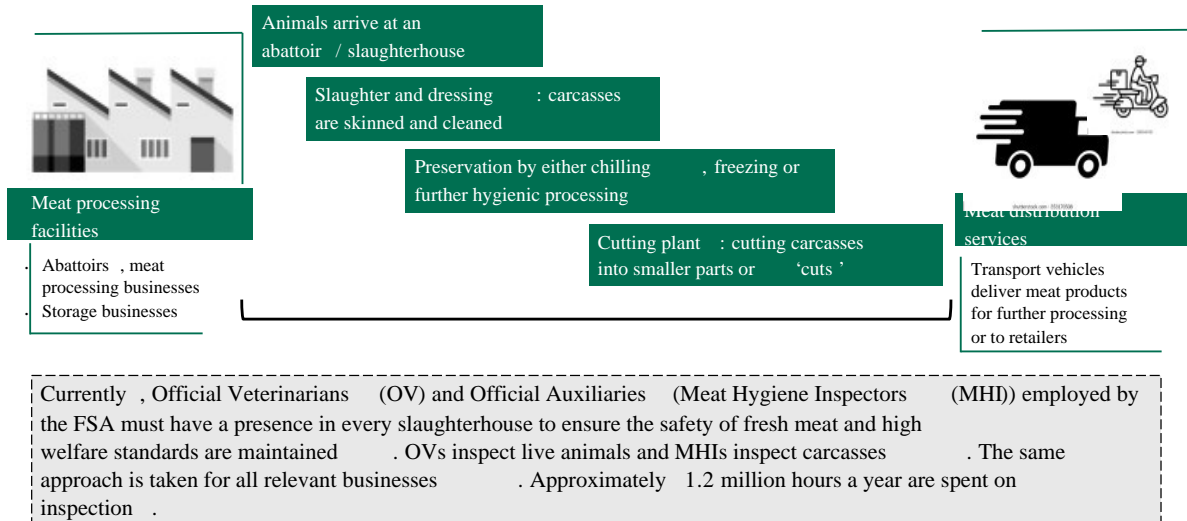
Participants had not considered the scale of the Official Controls process.

Figure 1: Stimulus shown to participants introducing the Official Controls process

The current official controls process



Every year, 2.6 million cattle, 10 million pigs, 14 million sheep and lambs and 950 million birds are slaughtered in the UK.



Participants had not thought about the extent to which the FSA is actively involved in the Official Controls process. Although some of the information presented felt unfamiliar, there was a recognition that the procedures sounded appropriate and to be expected. However, participants were surprised at the sheer scale of the meat industry in the UK, both in terms of the number of animals slaughtered and the hours spent on inspection each year.

950 million birds, oh my gosh. I didn't know that much about it. I knew there was a standard and I trust in it to be done. For me, it's just seeing the meat in its packet at the shops.

England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

The continuous presence of Official Veterinarians was reassuring.

Participants were largely unaware of the continuous presence of Official Veterinarians (OVs) and Meat Hygiene Inspectors (MHIs) at abattoirs, suggesting they believed businesses would be spot-checked by the FSA instead. This provided participants with reassurance that inspections were more stringent than previously believed. They supported the presence of OVs and MHIs to ensure consistency in the processes being followed and that standards would not fall at any time.

It's quite reassuring that I know what I'm feeding my kids is good quality.

England, Rural, Remain

In some cases, participants argued that the FSA should tell the public more about their role and responsibilities across the Official Controls process. They suggested the FSA's work appeared broad and detailed, but that participants had very little understanding of the extent of the regulations in place.

I think what they are doing is quite important, so I think it should be more advertised. It seems they are doing a good job and they are doing this much and spending so long, and we don't know anything about it.

Wales, Urban/Semi-Urban, Leave

There was resistance to changes to the Official Controls.

As a result of learning the processes in place for regulating meat were higher than expected, participants felt something could be lost when suggestions were made about future changes. This

may reflect an anchoring bias, where the first information one learns about a subject is then used as a strong 'anchor' for subsequent decision making, even when new information is introduced. [\(footnote 1\)](#) In some cases, participants acknowledged this. They suggested other consumers would be in the position they were before taking part in the focus group, and so changes made to regulations may be less concerning to the general public.

1. Furnham, A., and Chu Boo, H. (2011) A literature review of the anchoring effect, *The Journal of Socio-Economics*, Vol 40, pp. 35-42