

FSA Chief Executive's speech to the Westminster Food and Nutrition Forum

FSA Chief Executive Katie Pettifer addressed the Westminster Food and Nutrition Forum on Thursday 6 March 2025, for a discussion on the next steps for food regulation and standards in the UK.

Speech as follows:

Good morning everyone,

It's great to be with you today.

For those who don't know me, I'm the Chief Executive of the FSA. I've been doing this job for about six months now, after nearly four years as our Director of Strategy and Regulatory Compliance. I've been a civil servant for over twenty years, with a brief stint outside the civil service at Ofcom, another regulator, before I joined the FSA.

For anyone who doesn't know the FSA well, we are the food safety and standards regulator – our job, set out in law, is to protect public health and to protect the interests of consumers in relation to food. So first and foremost we're here to keep people safe, but when we do that job well, we also support the food industry and we protect our economy too.

We regulate a domestic food market worth £240 billion, and having strong, effective and reliable regulation helps that industry to keep growing and gives the public – and our trading partners – confidence in UK food.

I think I've started pretty much every speech in the last four years by saying that it's been a challenging and volatile time for the food system. Unfortunately, I think that's the new normal for us.

The complexity of the modern food system has been starkly highlighted by recent global events. The COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have demonstrated just how interconnected our food supply chains are. Even small problems can have a really big reach – for example, late last year we dealt with an incident involving the contamination of mustard products with peanuts. We're still investigating the cause - it looks to have involved one company in India who supplied one firm in the UK, but the scale of subsequent distribution meant that for some time we had to advise everyone with a peanut allergy to avoid all products containing mustard while we investigated, and we subsequently issued food alerts for nearly 50 products.

That was just one incident. Unfortunately, with geopolitics and climate change, we need to be prepared for much more disruption in the food system. Events happening halfway across the world can impact British households in a heartbeat.

The Evolving Food Landscape

Meanwhile at home, the food industry is undergoing a remarkable transformation. Digital technology has revolutionised how people buy food, with online platforms and new business models. Traditional brick-and-mortar establishments are no longer the only way that consumers get their food.

When our current regulatory framework was established, the idea of ordering a weekly shop from a mobile phone would have seemed like science fiction. It's absolutely normal today. The world is changing faster than our regulatory frameworks naturally evolve, and we need to change too.

There are some fantastic opportunities here. Big food businesses today have access to vast amounts of data and their influence on consumers and supply chains is huge - 95% of our food shopping is done for example with just ten large supermarket chains. The data these businesses collect includes real time data on food hygiene and standards across their premises and their supply chains. This presents a real opportunity for regulators. If we can harness it properly, there's huge potential for us to improve the way we regulate – and do a better job at protecting consumers in the future.

Meeting the Innovation Challenge

The pace of innovation in the food sector is also accelerating, there's innovation food products, food packaging and animal feed. From vertical farms to cell-cultivated products, we're seeing advances that could help address global challenges like sustainability and food security. These innovations also represent significant opportunities for the UK economy, bringing jobs, investment, and strengthening our position as a global science leader.

But we must ensure our regulatory framework keeps pace. Our job at the FSA is to make sure food is safe, and we should never compromise on that, but we need to do it in a way that's streamlined and effective. Authorisation processes should be a way of supporting products safely to market, not a bottleneck for new ideas.

The Challenge of Trust in a Changing World

In this era of rapid innovation and instant information sharing, a significant challenge we face is maintaining public trust. Let me share a recent example that illustrates this point.

You may have been aware of a food scare around milk that happened last year. Misinformation about a feed additive called Bovaer, which has been developed to reduce methane emissions from dairy cows, spread quickly online with various conspiracy theories suggesting it was a danger to consumers.

The science however is clear: milk from cows given Bovaer is completely safe to drink, and meat from these animals is also safe – the additive itself is metabolised by the cows and doesn't pass into their products. It's gone through our rigorous safety assessment process, and those of many other countries.

New products like this could be the kind of innovation the food industry needs to help reduce the environmental impact of food production and tackle the risks from climate change. But misinformation about food can spread rapidly across social media, coupled with a distrust of the 'new' it can undermine public confidence in these new developments. This demonstrates a crucial point: as food production becomes more technologically advanced, our role in communicating risk and science becomes increasingly vital.

Building a Collaborative Future

Those are some of the challenges and context we are looking at when we are thinking about the future of the regulatory system, but the future of food safety and standards doesn't rest solely with the FSA – it's a shared responsibility. In fact, there are three lines of defence in the food system that keep us protected. Food businesses are the first – and by far the biggest – line of defence, they ensure that their food is safe and authentic as is required by law. The majority of the half a million registered food businesses in the UK take this responsibility very seriously.

The second line of defence is the network of around 350 local authorities that enforce food safety and standards and inspect most of the food businesses in their communities.

The third line of defence, providing the backstop, is the FSA. We oversee the delivery of food controls by Local Authorities, inspect over a billion animals for slaughter each year, we monitor levels of foodborne disease and take action to keep them low, and we respond to more than 2000 food incidents annually, managing those with our partners across the food system. And our National Food Crime Unit works with local authorities and businesses to tackle food fraud across the system.

These protections have served us well, and we can be very proud of the standards of UK food, but given the challenges presented by such a fast-evolving food system, and an unpredictable world, we need to forge even stronger partnerships across the food system, from producers to retailers, from local authorities to technology providers, to keep making these protections work in the future.

New Approaches to Regulation

So, I've gone through the challenges and opportunities. Now I'm going to talk about how we're evolving the way we regulate to meet them.

Let's start with that second line of defence I mentioned. There are about 1800 people in local authorities who check most of those 500,000 businesses are doing the right thing. Their job is getting harder. The number of businesses is growing – 90,000 new businesses were registered last financial year. Meanwhile, the number of staff in those local authorities has steadily declined. The number of trading standards officers in food teams has almost halved since 2012, and environmental health officers have reduced by about 15%, and there are not enough people coming into those professions for the future.

Food hygiene and standards inspections are critically important in keeping our food safe and authentic, and protecting public trust in food – including through our widely recognised Food Hygiene Rating Scheme. They're also hugely valuable source of advice for many small businesses. If we're not investing in them, we are not investing in the capability of businesses and that safety infrastructure.

The current system was designed for the high street of the 1990s. It doesn't fully capitalise on the sources of data that are available now, or reflect the diversity of the sector today.

Against this backdrop, we've made a whole set of changes to help local authorities do their job more efficiently and effectively.

We are rolling out a new model for food standards regulation which significantly changes the way that local authorities consider levels of risk, and makes greater use of intelligence to drive activity. This more targeted approach means food standards teams will be spending their time in the right places, with more intensive intervention for less compliant businesses and less frequent controls for those who are doing the right thing. We've piloted it, we know it works and it will be in place this year.

Now we also have launched a consultation on an updated, risk-based approach for carrying out the initial food hygiene controls at new businesses.

Meanwhile, we're helping to tackle those workforce challenges by recognising new qualifications and working with local authorities to extend the role of Regulatory Support Officers. We've been supporting local authorities to make the best use of the staff resources and encouraged innovation including the use of remote assessments at lower risk premises.

These changes are important, but we don't think they're enough to make sure the system is sustainable in the future. We need to go further.

Local authorities often suggest to us that they should be able to recover the cost of regulation from businesses, in the same way they do in many other sectors, including through models like licensing schemes. We've started to explore this with them in more detail and will be taking a paper to our Board this month on it. You'll be able to see the paper and the Board meeting itself on our website. If the Board agrees, we will broaden those discussions to include food businesses and explore the idea further. This is a thorny issue, we don't want to be putting more financial pressure on business at the moment, but it's one which we cannot shy away from given the pressure on taxpayers' money.

Finally, we're testing out new approaches to regulating that might work for the future, picking up on some of the opportunities I mentioned earlier. I know that later you will be discussing the trial we did on National Level Regulation, so I will give you a quick overview here.

This was a trial we did with five big retailers. In our current system, each of their thousands of stores is inspected separately by the relevant local authorities. In our trial, we looked at the business-level data they hold and tested whether we could analyse this data and assess the systems they have in place overall as a business, as an alternative way to make sure they're meeting food hygiene standards.

The independent evaluation of the trial concluded that this approach was potentially viable, and that by using technology to combine data with boots-on-the-ground validation checks, we were able to pick up many of the same issues that came through in store inspections.

We're currently do a lot of work with stakeholders to explore this in more detail, working with a senior stakeholder group to look at options for using that kind of business insight in a way that adds value in the current regulatory model.

To be clear, we're not talking about self-regulation. It's smarter, more data-informed regulation. We think there are benefits for everyone in this.

As I mentioned earlier, there's also a huge amount of innovation underway in the development of new food and feed products. Since the UK left the EU, we run the pre-market authorisation process for these products, making sure they are safe before they are sold. We have some legislation in front of Parliament at the moment which can make the process for these authorisations faster and more efficient, while maintaining our unwavering commitment to food safety.

We're also creating an application process for Precision Bred Organisms in food, under the new Precision Breeding Act. This is another technology that has the potential to unlock solutions to some of the most pressing challenges to the food chain, by developing crops that are more nutritious and more resilient to pests or even climate change. As always, our role in this is to ensure these products are safe and to reassure consumers that they are.

The regulatory environment for new technologies can make a really big difference in encouraging innovation and investment in new technologies here – that doesn't mean we make it easier to get

approvals, but it does mean we should make the process clear, easy to navigate, and no longer than it needs to be.

Let me give you an example of how we're trying to do that on a particular type of technology.

Last year, the Government's Engineering Biology Sandbox Fund awarded us £1.6 million to run a programme designed to make sure cell-cultivated food products – sometimes known as 'lab-grown products' - are safe for consumers to eat before they're approved for sale.

These new foods are made without using traditional farming methods like rearing livestock or growing plants and grains. Instead, cells from plants or animals are grown in a controlled environment to make a food product.

Because CCPs are new to the UK and very complex, none are currently approved for human consumption here. So, we need to learn more about them to make sure they're safe to eat. This work is a good example of where we're working in step with industry and innovation to make sure we don't slow down the entry of new products but also making sure we've got a really good, clear, shared understanding of what safety means.

Call to Action

As I conclude, I want to emphasise that the changes I've outlined today represent not just challenges, but opportunities. Opportunities to build a more resilient, innovative, and safer food system for the UK.

But we can only seize these opportunities by working together. Policy makers, food businesses and local authorities all have a crucial role to play in shaping this future.

At the FSA we see ourselves as a convenor and collaborator in this process. We'll continue modernising our systems, embracing innovation, and above all maintaining the high standards that have made Britain's food system one of the most trusted in the world.

We need a food system that's not just fit for today, but ready for tomorrow's challenges. A system that promotes innovation while protecting consumers. A system that maintains the highest standards and in doing so supports business growth.

Thank you for your attention and I am very happy to take any questions