

FSA Chief Executive's speech to the Association of Independent Meat Suppliers (AIMS)

FSA Chief Executive Katie Pettifer addressed the AIMS conference on Friday 25 April 2025 for a discussion on a range of issues facing the meat industry, including future regulation, new technology and the modernisation of meat controls.

Good morning, it's a pleasure to be here with you today.

This is my first opportunity to speak at the AIMS conference, and it feels like a really important time to be doing so. So, thank you for inviting me.

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.

I know that I don't need to tell this audience how important the meat industry is to the UK economy and to UK consumers. But I'm going to start by saying that anyway. Because today I want to talk about how we work together, and I think it's worth starting with a reminder of what we're all trying to achieve.

As you well know, the meat industry is worth over £10 billion to the economy. The quality of British meat is recognised around the world, with exports worth around £2 billion and animal welfare standards that we are rightly proud of. Around 88% of people include meat in their diets and its significance, for many of those people, goes far beyond nutrition. For many families, including my own, coming together over a roast dinner is a strong and cherished ritual.

The businesses you represent form a vital part of our nation's food supply chain. With the economic challenges being felt across the food system and the dramatic news around international trade that we've seen play out in recent weeks, it feels more important than ever that we work together to support the British meat industry with efficient regulation and keep the public protected.

The relationship between the FSA and the meat industry has had its ups and downs, as has the relationship between FSA and AIMS. Not surprising, perhaps, when you think about how closely we have to work together.

Our staff and our contractors literally work side-by-side with your staff on the line, every day. You pay for their time, or some of it – we'll get to that later – and their decisions have significant consequences for your businesses.

It's not just close in practical terms. Our histories are intertwined. The FSA is 25 years old this month, and any one of my FSA colleagues could tell you what a pivotal role the meat industry has played in our history over that time. We exist because of the BSE crisis. We have new powers to

tackle food crime because of the horsemeat scandal.

We are very acutely aware of the toll those events, and others too, took on the industry, as well as on consumers. I, like every other FSA Chief Executive I suspect, will tell you that the greatest fear, the thing that keeps you awake at night, is a big food incident which makes people sick, perhaps even kills them, and damages public confidence in UK food, particularly when it comes to meat. Only by working together that we can prevent this from happening.

Why am I taking so much time labouring this point? Because I want to be really clear that ultimately our objective is the same. To make sure people have food they can trust... meat they can trust.

If our high standards in the UK slip, or if people don't trust in our food, that's disastrous for the industry and for our economy.

Providing safe and trusted food is very much a joint endeavour. I know many meat businesses go to great lengths to make sure the food you sell is safe and is what it says it is.

The part the FSA plays is important too – activities like checking animals for signs of disease before and after slaughter, ensuring animal welfare standards are being upheld, signing off certificates for export,

I'm not going to apologise for doing all we can in that work to keep standards high, and to maintain the trust of the public, and our trading partners.

But we should always be looking for ways to do this job better at the FSA – to keep strong protection for consumers and to improve the regulatory services we provide to businesses. I know AIMS have plenty of suggestions on how we should do that. We may not always agree, and we may not be able to do everything you want, but we need to keep that dialogue going.

Future of meat regulation

So, what does good regulation look like for the meat industry in the future?

I'll give you my take on that question now, and hopefully you can share yours in the Q&A.

I think we need a system of regulation which is both effective and efficient, that delivers for consumers, while supporting business to do the right thing. That means:

- having a workforce with the right skills
- maximising use of technology and data
- supporting businesses to sell and export widely
- ensuring costs for businesses are fair and proportionate
- creating a level playing field for businesses who are doing the right thing, by tackling those who aren't
- above all, of course, it needs to make sure food is safe and uphold confidence in British meat.

I'd like to tell you a bit about what we're doing in each of these areas.

New technology and modernisation

Let's start with new technology. It's one of the biggest challenges and opportunities we face as a regulator. There are new technologies being developed all the time which can help businesses to make their production more efficient, and, indeed, safer. I've seen some of them in action when

I've been out visiting businesses. And there's huge potential to use data, and AI tools, to support food safety as part of this.

So, we need to ensure that the way we regulate keeps pace with the technology being deployed in plants, and to look for ways to use technology ourselves to help us in our regulation.

In the FSA we're pressing ahead with our modernisation programme to improve the way we operate across meat plants.

We're developing an online self-service portal that will give meat businesses real-time access to their own plant-specific contravention data. This is currently in early testing, but our vision is for this portal to become a comprehensive platform where you can access all relevant information, from invoicing to approvals, in one place.

We've conducted a successful trial on the collection and communication of inspection results demonstrating that post-mortem data can be transferred directly from business systems to the FSA without manual intervention. The technology works, but we recognise that successful implementation depends on business buy-in and investment. We want to work with you on making this practical and beneficial.

New technology has also made remote auditing a reality in meat plants. This reduces processing times and allows for quicker, evidence-based decision making, saving time for both our teams and yours. We're also actively exploring options for using artificial intelligence in audit processes, which has the potential to make them faster and more objective.

We also want to work with industry as businesses introduce more of their own new technology, including AI, into abattoirs and cutting plants. We don't see ourselves as leading or directing how you implement technology in your processes—that's your domain—but we do want to be at the table to understand the implications for regulation.

We've already been collaborating on several initiatives, including work with AIMS on contamination scanners that can identify faecal contamination invisible to the human eye. These technologies have the real potential to improve food safety standards and boost efficiency.

As we look ahead, it's clear that AI, robotics and similar technologies can enhance the job we do in keeping food safe, and it's not hard to imagine a future in which they might eventually reduce the need for physical inspection presence in abattoirs. But we're not there yet, and right now the law does not allow it.

Earlier this month I spent several days sharing experiences of innovation with lots of other food regulators internationally, in the EU and further afield. There were plenty of exciting ideas. We heard about pilots happening around the world, but everyone asked the same questions – how good does the technology have to be for people to trust it, and what needs to happen for trading partners to accept it?

We have a really important part to play in designing the future together. I know some businesses want us to go faster on this. But it's not in the industry's interests for the UK to move alone on it. Most meat businesses want to export at least some of their products, so we need to work closely with the Government and with the EU and other international trading partners.

International trade

That takes me on to the question of how regulation supports international trade.

As the food safety regulator, we don't set international trade policy, but we do play a really important role in advising and informing the UK Government, so they can protect the interests of

UK consumers in negotiations and understand the implications for UK businesses.

For example, we'll be providing that type of expert advice to the government to inform negotiations for a new agreement with the European Union on Sanitary and Phytosanitary – or SPS - controls.

A closer, more cooperative relationship with the EU, that upholds both parties' high food safety standards is firmly in our mutual interest. I think the meat sector stands to gain significantly from reduced friction in trade, while keeping standards high.

To be clear, our job at the FSA is to protect public health and protect the interests of consumers. It'll be for ministers in Defra and other parts of the Government to decide what they want out of an agreement overall. But we will be advising on the public health implications, which means looking at how different arrangements might affect food safety controls, standards verification, supply chain transparency, and ultimately consumer confidence.

We recognise the critical importance of maintaining an effective dialogue with the meat industry throughout this process, so I'd be interested to know what you think. I'd like to know:

- what trade barriers you're facing at the moment
- where you see opportunities for streamlining processes without compromising standards
- and how an SPS Agreement could best support your businesses?

Workforce pressures

I also talked about the importance of a skilled workforce. Every year meat hygiene inspectors and official vets inspect around a billion animals, conduct more than 800 unannounced inspections in FSA-approved cutting plants, and 300 animal welfare assurance visits in FSA-approved abattoirs.

We've done a lot of hard work on recruitment to boost the numbers of meat inspectors coming in, and we run regular campaigns twice a year. We recruited 24 qualified and trainee MHIs last year, an 80% success rate against advertised positions and up from 65% the previous year.

But, as with other regulatory professions we rely on, like environmental health, there's more to do. Overall, we need to raise the profile of important roles like this. I think this an area in which we have common cause with many businesses, who are trying to do more to attract people into the food industry, and we're keen to work together on this.

Pressure on vet numbers has been a significant challenge too in recent years. With too few domestically trained vets going into public health veterinary medicine in the UK, we have to rely heavily on overseas vets. New post-Brexit visa and enhanced language entry requirements for EU vets made the UK a less attractive option for them, and we feared being left without enough vets to deliver official controls.

I'm very pleased to be able to say that no business has been stopped from operating due to a lack of vets. A few years ago, that was a real fear for us. Thanks to our overseas vets, we're stable in terms of numbers in abattoirs for now, but there definitely remains a need to improve the domestic pipeline of vets. And, as you'll be well aware, the cost of overseas vets has increased due to visa rule changes.

Charging update

That brings me to the point about fair and proportionate costs for businesses. This is probably the biggest point of contention between us and the industry at the moment.

The costs of delivering regulation are, unfortunately, going up – in part due to those visa rule changes, but also wider cost inflation. This means there has been a significant increase in inspection charges for 2025/26. This is despite the FSA securing £14.9 million from the Treasury to fund a discount that was the same in cash terms as in the previous year.

We shared the details about the 2025/26 changes with representative bodies, including AIMS, in February prior to their publication, and before information went out to operators later that month. You will be aware that AIMS has launched legal action against the FSA, so I am not going to comment any further on this year's charges.

However, I do want to talk about charges for regulation more generally, and the work we have underway to evaluate the discount we currently offer.

It's normal in many parts of the economy for the industry to bear the costs of regulation, not the taxpayer. Meat regulation is no different, and that's reflected in the legislation we operate under. However, for many years, we have offered a discount to the industry, which is weighted to provide the greatest proportion of support to the smallest businesses. So, in recent years more than a quarter of the cost of meat regulation has actually been borne by the taxpayer, with the smallest businesses eligible for a discount of up to 90% on their charges.

I know there's been a lot of concern about the fact that we're carrying out an evaluation of the discount. I want to be very clear why we're doing it.

The Treasury rules say that when you're charging for a service, you should usually recover the costs in full. Where this doesn't happen, ministers must agree the justification. So, with the current discount scheme in its tenth financial year of operation, a new set of ministers and a zero-based Spending Review requiring the FSA to justify all its funding to the Treasury, we need to look at this again.

Our aim is to be able to provide quality, evidenced, advice to the FSA Board – and to ministers, who will ultimately make the decision. This is where your input is essential.

We do understand the pressures facing meat businesses and we're trying to approach this process with transparency and a genuine commitment to understanding your perspective. Our evaluation began with our Call for Evidence last Autumn, and we're grateful to AIMS and its members for the responses they sent us. A paper then went to our board in December 2024 where they directed us to continue engagement.

And that's exactly what we have done, with face-to-face engagement sessions in Belfast, Cardiff and London to explore the objective and purpose of the discount. In all these sessions, the engagement was extremely positive, and I'll take this opportunity to thank AIMS for their participation in the London session.

The insights gathered from these sessions are helping to shape our thinking. If any operators here can provide evidence about what the discount means to your business, I strongly encourage you to share this with us - and the email address is: meatchargingpolicy@food.gov.uk and my colleague James Cooper, who is leading this work, is here today.

Our next step is to prepare a paper for the FSA Board's public meeting on 18 June which will be available on our website in early June, and we also hope to publish a Summary of Responses to the Call for Evidence in advance of that.

We want to keep talking to business and organisations to understand your perspectives. We know that the rising costs of operations have affected you all, so any decisions on the discount need to be made with a full appreciation of their impact.

And I want to emphasise that no decisions have yet been taken. We've seen letters to MPs and ministers saying the FSA is proposing to stop the discount – but we haven't made any proposals yet.

Because we hold our board meetings in public, you may have heard the discussions so far, and you may have heard individual board members express various views. But we're an evidence-based organisation. We'll put formal advice to our board and then ministers based on the evidence we gather. Ultimately ministers will need to decide on the nature and purpose of any future support for the sector, alongside all the other decisions they're taking about public finances overall.

Obviously, the discount is only one aspect of the charging regime. More generally, if we're charging you for regulation, you have a right to expect us to deliver it in the most efficient and effective way. And that takes me back to the importance of the modernisation work I spoke about earlier. All these things are connected, and we need to work on them together.

Tackling food crime

Finally, I said regulation needs to provide a level playing field for businesses who are doing the right thing. That means identifying and tackling those businesses who aren't. This is particularly important in the work we've been doing with the meat industry to tackle food crime.

When criminals target our food supply chains, they don't just break the law – they undermine trust in British food and put legitimate businesses like yours at risk. We had a stark reminder of that a couple of years ago when a meat fraud case we were working on hit the headlines, and within days my predecessor was on national radio being asked if it was safe to eat British meat.

A more volatile world is only making us more vulnerable to food crime. We're seeing this in geopolitical events that threaten complex global supply chains, economic challenges are putting pressure on margins, and extreme weather events are affecting production and distribution.

This is why we're strengthening the FSA's National Food Crime Unit, which investigates and prevent serious fraud within our food supply chains. We recently secured prison sentences for three individuals who conspired to commit fraud relating to poultry – a scheme that caused losses of over £318,000.

In another case, our multi-agency investigation led to fines of more than £50,000 for a defendant who falsified salmonella testing certificates – meaning potentially unsafe birds were entering the food chain.

This year the NFCU get new powers to apply for warrants and seize evidence themselves, having previously had to rely on the police to do it. So, they can do this work even more effectively within the UK and with international partners. Every time we remove a dishonest operator from the market, we're helping to level the playing field for businesses who are doing the right thing.

But we can't do that alone - we need your expertise, your vigilance, and your cooperation. I'm keen to hear your thoughts today on how we might work more effectively together.

Conclusion - strengthening our partnership

If you take one message from what I've said today, I hope it is that we want to work together, because we have the same objective: to maintain high standards, make sure people have meat they can trust.

I began by talking about how the history of the FSA and the meat industry are intertwined, and how our staff work side by side. Because we work so closely together, we need to evolve together too.

This is particularly important in the current economic climate. There's been a lot of talk over the past few months about economic growth, and how regulation can support it. For me this is obvious. The very best way in which we can support growth in the meat sector is by doing our job well – helping to keep standards high across the industry, protect responsible businesses and maintain public trust in British meat.

We can, and will, work with you on continuing to find more efficient and effective ways to do that job, using technology and data, and keeping costs to business as low as we can. But we should also remember that the costs of a major food safety or food fraud incident would be much, much higher.

So, let's keep working together to make sure that doesn't happen.

Going forward, we're working with AIMS and other trade bodies to try and strengthen our engagement even more. I'm happy to pick up on this in our discussion in a moment, and to hear any questions and thoughts on what I've covered today, including your thoughts on any specific trade barriers you're facing and the impact of workforce challenges across the food system.

I'm optimistic about what we can achieve together. By embracing modernisation, harnessing new technologies, and strengthening our partnership, we can ensure that the UK meat industry remains world-class.

Thank you for your attention today. I look forward to our continued collaboration and would be happy to take your questions.