

FSA and Official Controls: Conclusions

This report details the second wave of research commissioned by the FSA on FBOs' perceptions of the FSA, Official Controls and more recently the impact of the COVID-19 period of restrictions and the UK's exit from the EU. This report also explores FBOs' familiarity with the OTP. Our conclusions are structured around the three research objectives of relevance to this study.

The views that FBOs have of the FSA and Official Controls

In the main FBOs, especially those in the meat and wine sectors, have a very positive experience of the FSA. Key factors influencing both positive and negative attitudes towards the FSA typically related to staff communication and support, as well as the approach to inspections and other visits. For example, those who felt positive about the FSA typically reflected that staff were helpful and supportive and that the FSA ensured high standards were maintained regarding food safety. However, those with a more negative outlook tended to feel that FSA communication could be improved, that the approach to inspections needed to be clearer and fairer, and that processes could be simplified.

In further interpreting the views that FBOs have of FSA it helps to consider their own understanding of what the FSA does. While these are self-reported figures, the majority of FBOs reported they understood both the FSA's overall purpose (i.e. why they exist), and their remit (i.e. what they do). There was less clarity with respect to how the FSA makes decisions in its dealings, and regarding financial concerns. Increasing the transparency of these elements might contribute to a more positive assessment of the FSA among FBOs, as they can better understand the rationale behind for example, approach to inspections, varied communication etc.

Communication with the sector varied quite substantially; some FBOs had communicated with the FSA within a week of the survey, others reported they had never had communication with them. The difference by sector is particularly noticeable, however, with FBOs in the meat sector appearing to have much more frequent communication with the FSA than FBOs in other sectors (this finding is expected as the FSA have more regular contact with stakeholders and FBOs within the meat sector than wine and dairy). Linked, FBOs in the meat sector tended to be more satisfied with the communication they received, while those in the dairy were typically less satisfied.

Linked to the aforementioned complexity of the regulatory processes, six in 10 FBOs reported they found it easy to comply with FSA guidelines, with one in 10 reporting difficulties. This to some extent justified part of the rationale for the OTP. At the stage the research was conducted, however, the majority of FBOs have not heard of the OTP.

How have views have changed over time

On the whole, the views of FBOs have stayed relatively consistent over the last two years, despite the upheaval caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, among other things. Key changes as set out below typically related to a positive shift in the views of FBOs within the meat sector:

- around one in ten (11%) reported that their views of the FSA have improved in the last two years, while four per cent reported they had got worse
- there has been a considerable increase in the proportion of FBOs in the meat sector who in 2022 reported a positive experience of working with the FSA (rising from 64% in 2020 to 82% in 2022)
- perhaps underpinning this overall increase in positivity within the meat sector, satisfaction among three activities increased, namely re-approval following a change of activities (from 72% to 96%), enforcement of FSA regulations (57% to 83%), and health and safety advice (61% to 83%)
- the proportion of FBOs who considered themselves to be clear on the FSA's remit increased from 63% in 2020 to 76% in 2022
- the proportion of FBOs reporting they have had face-to-face meetings with the FSA has increased from 59% to 67%, while the proportion receiving letters has reduced from 53% to 44%.

The impact of societal events on FBOs views of the FSA

Despite the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, both economically as well as the restrictions brought in as a response, the majority of FBOs reported that it had no impact on their ability to comply with FSA regulations (although the impact appeared more severe for those in the meat sector). FBOs mostly said that they did not require support from the FSA during the period of restrictions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a consequence this did not have an impact on their views of the FSA.

Although the questions are not directly comparable in the survey, FBOs were more likely to say they felt the UK's exit from the EU had impacted their business. While some of these impacts were positive, the majority cited resulting issues relating to recruitment challenges, increased paperwork, issues relating to customs and increased costs. Despite reporting negative experiences as a result of these events, many FBOs did not feel this impacted their views on the FSA because they did not consider it to be the FSA's remit or responsibility to respond to the changes.