

Potential Divergence of Food Safety Regulations Within the UK: Conclusions

Overall attitudes towards regulatory divergence

Food safety was widely assumed to be absolute and something that should not vary across UK nations. As such, the FSA's approach to four-nation working and aligning food policy across the UK where possible was well received.

As a result of the view that the four-nation working approach is positive for UK businesses and consumers, regulatory divergence between the four UK nations was seen as less acceptable than diverging from inherited EU regulations. Initial attitudes towards regulatory divergence from the EU were influenced by participants' views towards the UK's exit. Those positive about the Leave vote were more open to the idea of reduced and simplified bureaucracy, potentially lower costs and reducing food waste, whereas those negative about the UK's decision thought it would lead to increased costs for consumers and confusion.

Overall, participants were searching for simplicity. For any regulatory changes recommended by the FSA, consumers believed they had the right to know about these changes and hoped the FSA was open and transparent about how they arrived at that recommendation.

Factors influencing the acceptability of regulatory divergence

As in previous research, participants were less likely to accept regulatory divergence between nations if this was seen as drastic and large in scale. It was felt that these changes would lead to more concerns about food safety, greater complexity and higher business costs, which would likely then be passed onto the customer. Smaller changes that might increase consumer choice, decrease costs for businesses and consumers where possible, improve sustainability and always keep food safe, were potentially acceptable.

Generalising findings from previous research, participants were more open to regulatory divergence when changes were not considered high risk. They felt that if food safety was questioned, then trust in the FSA could easily erode. Perceived higher risk changes included regulatory divergence related to:

- meat and fish products, which were perceived as higher risk food items.
- changes to the contents of food, rather than the way the food was processed.
- changes to packaging where this involved adding chemicals to food, as opposed to adaptations to packaging which would not affect the contents of food.

As long as food remained safe to eat, the cost implications of regulatory divergence was the main factor influencing consumer views. There was greater support for divergence if it led to reduced prices. Only in some instances would consumers be willing to pay more, for example for meat produced to a higher standard of regulation. Adding to business complexity was seen as a measure which would increase costs for both businesses and consumers and lead to a rejection of any new regulations.

Communicating regulatory divergence to consumers

Increased consumer choice resulting from regulatory divergence was viewed positively but would require clear information so consumers could understand the reasons why products were being sold at different prices and potentially to two different sets of regulations.

Information should be simple and concise, but not necessarily include the detailed regulatory differences between two products appearing for sale together. However, the FSA should make this information available publicly in the event that consumers wished to know more. In particular, participants felt it was more important for information to be provided for higher risk products or more significant changes resulting from regulatory divergence. In these cases, they wanted risk analyses to be easily and publicly available so that they could make an informed choice on whether to purchase products, as well as clear information related to the content of products.