

FSA and Official Controls: FSA's response to COVID 19

No time series analysis is possible as the 2020 survey occurred in February and March 2020, before the restrictions were implemented in the UK.

Impact COVID-19 had on FBOs' ability to comply with regulations

Overall, the majority of FBOs (72%) said that COVID-19 had no impact on their ability to comply with FSA regulations. However, as shown in Figure 8.1, just under one in five (18%) reported that it made it more difficult to comply with regulations (4% citing it had become 'a lot more' difficult). Very few (7%) FBOs said COVID-19 made their ability to comply with food regulations easier.

FBOs in the meat sector were more likely compared to those in the dairy and wine sector to say they found it more difficult (28%, compared to 14% in dairy and 13% in wine). FBOs in the meat sector were also more likely to say they found it 'a lot more difficult' (9%, compared to 2% in dairy and 3% in wine). There were few differences by country or other sub groups of interest.

Figure 8.1 Impact COVID-19 had on FBOs' ability to comply with FSA regulation

E1. How has Covid-19 affected your organisation's ability to comply with food standards regulations? Would you say it has made things...? Base: All businesses (400); Dairy (264), Meat (99), Wine (32). '*' indicates a significant difference from all other sectors. Don't know figures have not been presented in the chart.

How COVID-19 affected FBOs

The qualitative interviews enabled FBOs to express in more detail how their organisation was impacted by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Most typically FBOs focussed on the impact of the pandemic more broadly, as opposed to their impact on their ability to comply with FSA regulation.

FBOs in the dairy sector cited either not being impacted by the pandemic, or in some instances being impacted positively. Although there was mention of additional protocols put in place such as 'social distancing' and other logistics, the negative impact of such changes were namely that is slowed down processes. For example, for milking they could only have one person in the building whereas normally they would have two.

"Am I complaining? No. I think we got away quite lucky, compared to a lot of industries. At least we could keep going." (Dairy, England)

Some mentioned the positive impact of the COVID-19 restriction period on their business. For example, for businesses who processed mozzarella cheese and the increase in take away pizza consumption saw an uplift in their sales. Other producers mentioned their sales tripling because people were at home more.

FBOs in the meat sector had more mixed experiences. Some FBOs mentioned almost shutting down because their meat supplied a lot of fast food outlets that closed during restriction time. Others however mentioned little to not impact on their businesses.

"I think because we are a food industry we kept working the whole time of COVID, so as far as working it didn't have an impact on us; we came to work every day." (Meat, England)

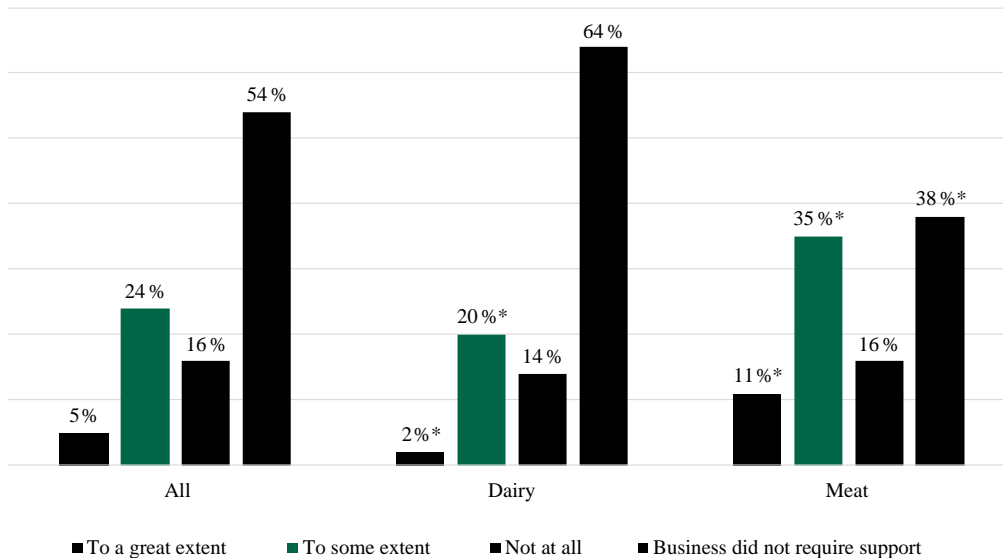
FBOs in the wine sector noted a strong impact on business to business sales because pubs and restaurants had closed down. Some noticed a positive impact on their retail and supermarket sales as a result. One FBO even opened a shop as a result so they could sell directly to the general public.

Extent to which FBOs felt supported during COVID-19

FBOs who found it either easier or more difficult to comply with regulations during the pandemic were asked how well supported by the FSA they felt during this period. Three in ten (30%) reported feeling supported to at least some extent during the pandemic. The majority of these FBOs said they felt supported to some extent (24%) rather than to a great extent (5%). Just over half of FBOs said they did not require any COVID-19 support from the FSA (54%) and only 16% said they did not feel supported at all.

As shown in Figure 8.2, FBOs in the dairy sector were more likely than those in the meat sector to not need any support (64% compared to 38%). That said, FBOs in the meat sector were more likely than those in dairy to say they felt supported to at least some extent (46% compared to 21%).

Figure 8.2 Extent to which FBOs felt supported during the COVID-19 pandemic



E2. To what extent do you feel that the FSA supported your organisation during the restrictions brought in as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic? All businesses who found compliance easier or more difficult (98); Dairy (56), Meat (37). Base: If easier or difficult to comply with regulations. Overall: 98; Dairy: 56; Meat: 37. ** indicates significant difference from all in 2022 ****** indicates a significant difference from all other sectors. Wine is not included due to the small sample size (4).

FBOs who said they felt unsupported during the pandemic were then asked why they felt unsupported during this time. Low base sizes mean findings here should only be taken indicatively. The most common responses included an absence of timely/ helpful guidance (5 out of 16 FBOs) and receiving either little or no communications (5 out of 16 FBOs). Another 5 out of 16 did not realise there was any support available. This perhaps suggests that support during the COVID-19 restriction period could have been improved through better communications.

In the qualitative interviews many mentioned they did not receive any support or communications from the FSA, but also that they did not need any. One FBO in the dairy sector mentioned they conducted an inspection via remote camera and the farm had to submit paperwork for evidence of compliance, but that it did not make a difference, just that they used more technology than they would normally.

"[The pandemic] literally had no impact. Our milk got picked up every day, our cattle went to the market, we don't have employees ... we're not reliant on anyone else for anything." (Dairy, England)

Although many mentioned experiencing issues during the period of restrictions in the wine sector, they often mentioned not having many interactions with the FSA during this time also. They did not receive much help or communications, but also questioned whether it was the FSAs remit to do this.

Impact of COVID-19 on FBOs' views of the FSA

FBOs who found it either easier or more difficult to comply with regulations during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic were also asked how the FSA's response to COVID-19 impacted their views of the FSA, if at all. The vast majority (82%) said the FSA's response in this context had not changed their views of the FSA. This is due in part to the high proportion of FBOs that did not require support from the FSA (63% of FBOs whose views had not changed did not require COVID-19 support from the FSA). Similar proportions said their views either improved (10%) or got worse (8%).

FBOs in the meat sector (who were more likely to need support during the COVID-19 pandemic), were also more likely compared to those in the dairy sector to say their views of the FSA had improved (19% compared to 5%). There were few differences by country or other sub groups of interest.

FBOs who said their views of the FSA either improved or got worse over COVID-19 were then asked why their views changed. Low base sizes mean findings here should only be taken indicatively. The main factor influencing more positive views of the FSA related to the helpfulness of staff. Those whose views had deteriorated most commonly cited slow communication, or a lack of engagement.