

FSA and Official Controls: executive summary

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Introduction and Method

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is an independent Government body, established in 2000 to protect public health and consumer interests in relation to food.

The FSA is the Central Competent Authority (CCA) responsible for the delivery of official food and feed controls in England, Northern Ireland and Wales.. In Northern Ireland, officials from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) carry out meat hygiene official controls in approved establishments on behalf of the FSA.

Food Business Operators (FBOs) in the dairy, meat and wine sectors have a direct relationship with the Food Standards Agency (FSA) via its Official Controls, including inspections, enforcement, advice and guidance.

The FSA and local authorities work together deliver shellfish controls. The FSA is responsible for conducting sanitary surveys and awarding the classification status of production and relaying areas. Some FBOs in the shellfish sector have a direct relationship with the FSA in relation to its functions however local authorities are the primary point of contact for the majority.

This research study – collecting the views of FBOs themselves – was intended to support the rollout of the OTP programme, and the implementation of Official Controls. The study entailed a quantitative survey of 400 FBOs based in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, followed by in-depth interviews with 60 FBOs. Fieldwork took place between June and August 2022.

Questionnaire coverage included FBOs' experience of working with the FSA, their understanding of what the FSA does, the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the UK's exit from the European Union (EU), and their familiarity with the OTP.

The methodology adopted a similar approach to the first wave of the research, conducted in 2020, to enable time series analysis. However, this 2022 wave of the research has expanded to include the views of FBOs in Northern Ireland and those in the shellfish sector.

Overall views of the FSA

Overall, the majority of FBOs reported a positive experience with the FSA, with seven in 10 asserting that they had a good experience of the FSA (70%, including 27% reporting it was 'very good'). Only two per cent reported a poor experience. This represented little change from 2020. Indeed when asked directly how their views had changed over the last two years the majority (78%) stated they had stayed the same; 11% reported an improvement, and four per cent reported they had got worse.

By sector, FBOs in the wine sector were most positive about their experience (91% rating this as good), while those in the meat sector also typically had a positive experience (82%). This is a significant increase from 2020 82% in 2022 increasing from 64% in 2020). FBOs in the dairy sector were typically less positive (63%), however still only two per cent reported a negative experience. FBOs gave a range of reasons for their rating.

Positive views were often underpinned by the support and communication they received from FSA staff. Negative views covered a range of factors, including auditing not being consistent, and staff being slow or unclear in the feedback and reports.

To gain insight into the extent to which FBOs understand the FSA's role and purpose, they were presented with a series of statements to see how clear or unclear their understanding was of each. FBOs typically reported that they understood the FSA's overall purpose, as well as its remit (82% and 76% respectively said that they felt 'clear' or 'very clear' on these aspects). The proportion clear on the FSA's remit increased from 63% in 2020 to 76% in 2022. However they had less clarity regarding how the FSA makes decisions in its dealings with FBOs (46%), the charges they have to pay to the FSA (37%), and how the FSA is funded (29%). Typically FBOs in the meat sector felt they had a better understanding of all these aspects than those in dairy and wine. This might be related to these FBOs having a greater amount of contact with the FSA due to FSA staff being based on site.

Communication with the FSA

There was considerable variation in both the frequency and type of communication FBOs had with the FSA. While two-fifths (41%) of FBOs reported that they had last had contact with the FSA in the last six months, a similar proportion (43%) cited it had been at least six months since their last contact. By sector, communication with the meat sector appeared far more common than with other sectors as expected due to FSA staff being based on site at meat FBOs. There were no differences by country. Face-to-face meetings were typically the most frequent type of communication (67% cited this), while letters (44%), phone calls (41%) and direct emails (39%) were all relatively common.

The majority (75%) of FBOs were satisfied with the FSA's communication (although only 18% reported that they were 'very' satisfied). Satisfaction was much higher among FBOs in the meat sector (83%) than in the dairy sector (72%), while satisfaction among the wine sector (81%) was more consistent with the overall figure. Reasons for dissatisfaction included a concern that the FSA was not sufficiently proactive in sharing information on key changes to guidelines or legislative changes and that there were often delays responding to queries. This was further borne out in the survey; when asked what types of messages would be most valuable, the most common response was communications relating to changes in regulations (83% cited this).

There were no differences between the 2022 and 2020 findings.

Satisfaction with FSA activities

FBOs were asked about their satisfaction across specific FSA activities, including inspections, unannounced visits, and enforcement of FSA regulations. By sector (excluding those with no

experience of the activities):

- FBOs in the dairy sector were most satisfied with inspections (86% satisfied) and the FSA team (83%). Satisfaction was lowest regarding re-approval following a change of activities (66%), although only 17% had actually had experience of this. There was no change in satisfaction levels since 2020.
- FBOs in the meat sector were highly satisfied across nearly all activities. In contrast with the dairy sector, satisfaction was highest in re-approval following a change of activities (96%). At least 8 in 10 FBOs were satisfied with all remaining activities, with the exception of exports to new markets (59% satisfied), although only 24% reported experiencing this activity). Notably, satisfaction levels had increased across three activities since 2020.
- the vast majority of FBOs in the wine sector were satisfied with the FSA activities. Across the four activities surveyed, at least 79% reported that they were satisfied with each, with the FSA wine inspections team returning the highest satisfaction levels (100%).

Typically, FBOs reported that these activities occurred as expected, hence the relatively high satisfaction levels. Causes of dissatisfaction were quite varied; no one factor was most prevalent. However, concerns included a lack of communication and structure regarding unannounced visits, a lack of skills among some assessors, and a lack of consistency in how Official Vets interpret compliance.

Ease of complying with FSA guidelines

Around six in ten (62%) FBOs reported that they found it easy to comply with FSA guidelines, with little difference by subgroups of interest. This represented no change from 2020.

The most common reason for difficulty complying with the FSA guidance related to the clarity of the guidance (44% of those who found it difficult cited this challenge), followed by complicated processes (29%), and increasing burdens on staff time (24%). The qualitative strand also uncovered issues relating to confusion between different standards and how the FSA 'fit in', the inconsistency of the FSA's inspectors, and the costs of compliance.

FSA's response to COVID-19

The majority (72%) of FBOs reported that the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic had no impact on their ability to comply with FSA regulations. Indeed a sizeable group of FBOs in the qualitative interviews reported that the pandemic had actually contributed to growth and new opportunities, with one wine FBO opening a shop so they could cater to the growth in demand from the public.

Just under one in five (18%) FBOs reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on their ability to comply with FSA regulations, with four per cent stating that it had made compliance a lot more difficult for them. The impact appeared most severe in the meat sector where 9% reported the pandemic had made it a lot more difficult, and 19% slightly more difficult to comply.

Among those who felt that it was easier or more difficult to comply with regulations due to the pandemic, three in 10 (30%) reported that the FSA supported their organisation during the restrictions at least to some extent, while a further 54% reported that they did not require any support.

The pandemic does not appear to have had an impact on most FBOs' views of the FSA (82% of those who found compliance easier or more difficult reported that their view of the FSA had not changed as a result). This might be in part because FBOs tended not to expect the FSA to provide pandemic-related support.

FSA's response to the EU exit and other events

FBOs' were asked about their experience with the FSA during the UK's exit from the EU, how well they felt supported during this time and whether their views of the FSA have changed as a result.

The majority of FBOs (70%) felt the UK's exit from the EU had some level of impact on their business. There was some variation by sector, with wine businesses most likely to report an impact (88%), compared to 78% in the meat sector and 64% in dairy. On the whole, businesses typically felt negatively affected by the UK's exit from the EU, although there were a handful of positive reflections. Negative themes included issues with recruitment, increased paperwork, issues relating to customs and increased costs.

Of those who said that leaving the EU had at least some impact, just over half (53%) said their business did not require any support during this time. One in five FBOs (21%) said they felt supported by the FSA to at least some extent, while a quarter (24%) did not feel supported. FBOs in the meat sector were much more likely to feel supported at least to some extent compared to the dairy sector (31% compared to 13%).

The vast majority (83%) of FBOs who were impacted to at least some extent by the EU exit (positively or negatively) said their views of the FSA had not changed. Only six per cent of FBOs' views improved and eight per cent got worse.

While FBOs were asked whether they had been impacted by any other events, outside of the EU Exit and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, nearly all said they had not.

Awareness and views of the Operational Transformation Programme

Only a minority (22%) of FBOs had heard of the Operational Transformation Programme, with awareness much higher in the meat sector (37% compared with 17% in dairy), and in England (24% compared with 14% in Wales). While it was difficult for most FBOs to express an opinion on the OTP, given the lack of awareness, there was a mixture of caution and optimism. While some felt it might make for a more efficient, targeted approach to regulations and compliance, others were concerned it could lead to more work for them. Additionally a few expressed that they would have welcomed consultation on the changes (although one was held in the meat sector in 2021: [Consultation on Early Proposals for a Future Delivery Model for FSA-Delivered Official Controls in the Meat Sector](#)).

Since the research was conducted, the FSA has now brought all regulatory transformation activity and thinking into one place. The FSA has transitioned the resource and consideration of work for longer-term reform/legislative planning to sit under its Achieving Business Compliance programme. Work relating to improvements within the existing regulatory framework will now come under a new Operational Modernisation programme in Operations. More information on the OTP changes can be found in the [FSA Board meeting papers for December 2022](#).

Key findings by sector

Dairy

While the majority (63%) of the sector was positive about their experience working with the FSA, this was much lower than other sectors. The frequency and breadth of communication within the sector was typically lower than seen elsewhere, and they were also least likely to be satisfied with this communication. Satisfaction with specific FSA activities was generally high, and around six in

ten (61%) reported it was easy to comply with FSA guidelines.

Around 20% were affected by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and, while 64% were impacted by the UK's exit from the EU, this was lower than in other sectors. Awareness of the OTP was very low.

Meat

Generally the sector was very positive about their experience of working with the FSA: 82% rated the experience good, an increase from 64% in 2020. They have a positive experience when communicating with the FSA, both in terms of frequency of contact, and satisfaction. Satisfaction with specific FSA activities was also very high, and has increased across a few activities. Around two-thirds (64%) reported it was easy to comply with FSA guidelines, although a minority (5%) reported it was very difficult.

They were typically more likely than other sectors to have encountered challenges as a result of the pandemic, while over three-quarters (78%) reported that they had experienced an impact to their business as a result of the UK's exit from the EU. While awareness of the OTP was low, it was much higher than in other sectors.

Wine

With a relatively low base size (32) it is difficult to draw out robust conclusions from the research. Typically these businesses were very satisfied with the engagement they had with the FSA, and 75% reported they found it easy to comply with FSA guidelines, although the frequency of communication was relatively mixed. The UK's exit from the EU in particular appeared to impact the sector.

Conclusions

Typically, FBOs had a positive attitude towards the FSA. They were generally satisfied with their experience of working with the FSA, content with communications they received and the majority found the guidelines easy to comply with. FBOs in the meat sector in particular were highly positive of their experience. However, there were some negative thoughts reported, with a view among some that the FSA could be more responsive and clearer in its communications, that the approach to inspections needed to be clearer and fairer, and that processes could be simplified.

The most substantial changes in views since 2020 occurred in the meat sector, where overall views of the FSA have improved considerably : (82% rated their experience good, an increase from 64% in 2020), along with satisfaction across a number of specific activities. Views of the FSA have stayed broadly consistent since 2020 in the wine and dairy sectors.

Despite the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, 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). While some businesses have encountered challenges as a result of the UK's exit from the EU, this does not appear to have affected their views of the FSA.