

FSA and Official Controls: Background

The Food Standards Agency: role, remit, and responsibilities

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

This research aims to support the FSA with its aim to 'make it easy for businesses to maintain food safety and standards' through gaining a greater understanding of the food businesses the FSA regulates.

The FSA is the Central Competent Authority (CCA) responsible for the delivery of official food and feed controls in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The FSA is responsible for the enforcement of wine regulations in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England and Wales the FSA is responsible for the delivery of dairy hygiene controls and official controls in approved meat premises, including meat hygiene requirements and regulations on the welfare of animals at slaughter.

Meat Hygiene Inspectors (MHIs) and Official Veterinarians (OVs) conduct hygiene checks, post mortem inspection, capture condition data and collect samples from approved producers of meat (including slaughterhouses and cutting plants) during operational hours subject to business requirement. Official Veterinarians conduct checks on animal products and provide assurance with regulatory compliance of animal welfare. 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.

Routine inspections for registered milk production premises are conducted either every 6 months, every 2 years or every 10 years. The routine inspection frequency for registered milk production premises depends on a number of factors including the type of product produced and the species producing the milk. In the wine sector, the FSA carry out a programme of inspections, using risk analysis to deliver a targeted and cost-effective service.

The FSA and local authorities 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 as a CCA however local authorities are the primary point of contact for the majority.

The approach to regulation in the meat, wine and dairy sectors was, until recently being modernised as part of the FSA's Operational Transformation Programme (OTP).

Since the research was conducted, the FSA has now brought all regulatory transformation activity and thinking into place. The FSA has transitioned the resource and consideration of work for the longer-term reform/legislative planning to sit under the 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.

Research background and aims

In 2020, the FSA piloted a mixed method, qualitative and quantitative research project to better understand the views that FBOs in England and Wales had of the FSA and Official Controls ([FSA and Official Controls: Research with food business operators](#)). This research explored several areas including overall views of the FSA, FBOs' understanding of the FSA's role and purpose, what FBOs value about the FSA and criticisms, FBOs experience of certain FSA processes, ease of compliance with FSA guidelines and requirements and their satisfaction with FSA communications.

With two years having passed since that original research, the FSA wanted to revisit these concerns and explore whether there had been any changes in the views of FBOs. As well as tracking any changes in the topics above, the FSA also wanted to understand how changes they are making to Official Controls are being received by FBOs.

Lastly, since the 2020 wave, two key societal events have happened which could have impacted how FBOs view the FSA. First was the transition period for the UK leaving the EU, which ended on the 31st of December 2020. Second was the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the nationwide restrictions imposed as a result. The FSA wanted to understand FBOs' experience of these events and how these might have changed views of the FSA.

It was in this context that four research objectives were formulated. The aims of the research were to:

1. Understand the views that FBOs have of the FSA and Official Controls;
2. Understand if and why these views change over time;
3. Gain insight and understand the impact of societal events, including COVID-19 and the EU exit, on FBOs views of the FSA;
4. Ensure that comparable research can be conducted in 2024 and 2026, to understand and monitor the effects of FSA initiatives, particularly those introduced as part of the OTP, on FBOs views.