

Potential Divergence of Food Safety Regulations Within the UK: Chapter 2 The FSA, the four-nation working approach and devolution

In this chapter we briefly set out participants' understanding of the FSA, their role as a regulator and their approach to four-nation working within the context of devolution. This formed part of initial deliberations, as a way to build understanding of food regulations to enable participants to have an informed discussion about regulatory divergence.

Key findings

Participants assumed that a food standards body existed, even in cases where they could not cite the name of the FSA. Awareness of FSS was not widespread. Participants across the groups were surprised to find out that food regulations could be devolved across the UK, stemming from a belief that food safety is absolute and unlikely to require national variation.

Once provided with detail on the FSA's role and responsibilities, participants felt reassured that food is made safe to eat by an independent agency. They were less familiar with the FSA's role to make food healthier and more sustainable as set out in the [2022-2027 strategy](#). However, generally this was well received.

Participants found the FSA's approach to four-nation working uncontroversial and felt it was sensible to try and align food standards across the UK where possible.

There were mixed levels of awareness of the FSA, although their role in food safety was often assumed

Although participants in some groups had heard of the FSA and could name different roles and responsibilities held by the organisation, this was not always the case, with familiarity levels varying across the research. Even where participants did not know the exact name and role of the FSA, they assumed that such a body existed. There were some misconceptions that the FSA is a government department, or a part of local government, which participants related to the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme. In contrast, participants from across England, Wales and Northern Ireland were generally not aware that there were two food safety agencies in the UK (FSA and FSS).

Participants tended to refer most commonly to the FSA's role in carrying out checks on quality, safety and hygiene of food and food preparation areas. They sometimes referred to inspectors carrying out this role through spot checks and routine inspections. Other responsibilities mentioned included: labelling of ingredients and allergens, checking animal welfare and on-farm practices, and ensuring the traceability of food (especially meat, assumed to have a higher degree of checks) back to farms. Less commonly, participants felt that the FSA had a role in setting food regulations as well as enforcing them.

"I think of them as a regulatory body setting out regulations and requirements for the production of food in all areas." - England, Rural, Neutral view towards EU exit

Once given more information about the FSA's role, participants were generally unsurprised and somewhat reassured that there is a body in charge of making sure food is safe to eat and is what it says it is.

The approach to align food standards across the UK was well received, with divergence in food policy seen as confusing for consumers and businesses

Although there were differing attitudes towards devolution overall, participants were surprised that food regulation could differ across nations. This stemmed from a belief that food safety is absolute and therefore would be agreed upon despite geographical and political differences, with little need for national variation. As a result, devolution on food policy was seen as confusing, even for those who recognised potential benefits of wider policy devolution.

"Given that everyone is aiming for the same thing, safe food, it comes down to a level of safety. No one is going to introduce a regulation that isn't safe. If it's safe, why complicate it?" - Northern Ireland, Negative view towards EU exit

As a result of the view that food safety is universal, participants widely found the concept of four-nation working and the general approach to align food standards across the UK as uncontroversial and sensible. In this way, consumers agreed with the current FSA and FSS approach towards aligning policy across the four nations. However, there were questions about the extent to which alignment was possible within the currently devolved system. For example, in one Welsh group a recent news story on regulating the use of CCTV in Welsh slaughterhouses (to which Welsh slaughterhouses were opposed) provoked questions about how easily the FSA could align food regulations across nations in practice. There were concerns, discussed in more detail in Chapter 3, that it might be more difficult and costly for nations to align if further divergence took place.