Consumer views of potential regulatory divergence in the meat sector: Introduction

Background

The FSA is committed to protecting consumers and ensuring food is safe and is what it says it is. In the meat sector, food businesses are responsible for making sure food is safe and meets required standards, and the role of the FSA is to provide assurance and support to make sure those standards are met through the delivery of Official Controls, ensuring consumer protection and food safety remain a top priority.

The FSA commissioned Ipsos UK to conduct qualitative research to explore and capture consumer views on the impact of potential divergence of a new model in England and Wales from the inherited EU regulation. The findings of this research will be used to feed into a paper produced for the FSA Board and Business Committee. The main objectives of this research were to:

- Uncover whether consumers have any concerns about regulatory divergence or recognise any potential threats to food safety and/or animal welfare.
- Discover potential benefits or opportunities in implementing regulatory divergence.
- Understand the extent to which consumers are concerned about products meeting different productions standards being available for sale under regulatory divergence.
- Establish what assurances or limits would be required for regulatory divergence to be acceptable to consumers.

Methodology

Our approach involved a series of fourteen online focus groups conducted between the 19th of July and the 9th of August, each lasting two hours. Focus groups were used rather than workshops because of the associated benefits of bringing together more homogenous groups for discussion given the potential sensitivities of the topic. The first two focus groups acted as a pilot to allow for refinement and development of the discussion guide structure and stimulus materials, based on participants' responses during these initial sessions.

Sample

We recruited 84 members of the public from England, Wales and Northern Ireland, with a total of 76 participants attending the focus groups. Table 1 provides further details about the sessions. More information on the final sample breakdown is provided Appendix 1.

Table 1: Focus group schedule and total number of participants

Date	Region	Area lived in	EU Referendum Vote/Political Leaning	Total no. of participants
19 July 2022	England	Rural	Leave	6
19 July 2022	England	Rural	Leave	6
21 July 2022	England	Urban/Semi-Urban	Remain	6

Date	Region	Area lived in	EU Referendum Vote/Political Leaning	Total no. of participants
21 July 2022	England	Urban/Semi-Urban	Remain	6
25 July 2022	England	Rural	Remain	6
25 July 2022	England	Urban/Semi-Urban	Neither Leave nor Remain	5
26 July 2022	England	Urban/Semi-Urban	Leave	6
26 July 2022	Wales	Urban/Semi-Urban	Remain	5
27 July 2022	Wales	Urban/Semi-Urban	Leave	4
27 July 2022	Wales	Rural	Leave	5
28 July 2022	Northern Ireland	N/A	Unionist	5
28 July 2022	Northern Ireland	N/A	Nationalist	5
01 August 2022	Northern Ireland	N/A	Neither Union or Nationalist	6
08 August 2022	Wales	Rural	Remain	5

Quotas were set on region of the UK. For those in England and Wales, there were quotas on the type of area lived in, how the participant voted in the EU referendum and on how positive or negative they feel towards the Brexit transition now. In Northern Ireland, groups were split by political affiliation as attitudes to Brexit are closely aligned with whether participants identify as Nationalist or Unionist. There were additional quotas on age, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic group, and number of children in the household. There were a mix of regular meat eaters, occasional buyers and vegetarians.

Session design

The first half of the focus groups explored awareness of the FSA and their role as a regulator. Participants discussed their current meat purchasing habits, after which we discussed the food journey and the current Official Controls process. We then introduced the concept of regulatory divergence and shared a definition of what regulatory divergence might look like in the UK.

The second half of the group discussions explored a number of possible examples of what future regulatory divergence could look like in practice. The first example discussed differently regulated products appearing together for sale; the second example described a change in water temperature used to disinfect meat handling tools and the third example described the potential greater use of AI or plant staff monitoring animal welfare instead of Official Veterinarians (OVs). Presenting the examples to each group allowed participants to explore the potential benefits and challenges of regulatory divergence within specific hypothetical scenarios. The sessions concluded with participants voicing their priorities and final reflections for the FSA.

Our proposed methodology reflected the low levels of consumer awareness about the Official Controls process and food regulation in general. Discussions focused on the meat industry as the largest sector covered by the FSA's Official Controls. The design was aimed at capturing public views towards the high-level proposals of regulatory divergence, highlighting areas of support and concern.