

Consumer views of potential regulatory divergence in the meat sector: Views towards the concept of regulatory divergence

Participants initially struggled to understand the need for regulatory divergence and what form it could take.

Figure 2: Stimulus material used in the groups to describe regulatory divergence.

After being presented with a description of what regulatory divergence is, participants understood the options being considered by the FSA. However, they were cautious about revealing any strong opinions without first understanding why regulatory divergence might be desirable and what the impact could look like in practice. They felt their views would depend on what differing regulations meant for processes or behaviours in the meat industry, and for them as consumers.

Especially when it came to food safety, participants tended to see standards as either 'safe' or 'not safe'. This meant they did not understand why there were differences between the way products were regulated in different countries in general. This reflected participants' limited understanding of risk-based assessments and their trust in the FSA that UK food would continue to be safe to eat regardless of the regulatory framework.

It isn't an opinion, these are facts. You have to keep meat at a certain temperature, you have to feed sheep in a certain way and cut it in that way. These aren't people's opinions... these are scientific facts... I don't get it.

Political attitudes shaped perceptions, although both Leave and Remain groups were initially resistant to divergence.

In the Remain voting groups, as well as the Northern Irish groups across voting tendencies, [\(footnote 1\)](#) there was a strong belief that consumers trust current regulations developed by the UK and other member states whilst in the EU. Participants questioned why the FSA would change the UK's approach to regulation if the rules were fit for purpose and were felt to suit the landscape of producers supplying meat both within and beyond the UK. This meant they were reluctant to accept regulatory divergence, preferring the UK continued to align with EU regulation. There was limited understanding that divergence would also occur through the EU making changes which were not applied to the UK regime.

It seems complex for complexity's sake. I understand we are diverging from the EU but wouldn't it make sense to align with the EU? Then, nobody has to worry if one of the two different regulation layouts is more stringent than the other. If it's good enough for the EU, it's good enough for the UK.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

The idea that businesses might be able to choose between EU and UK regulations strengthened the view of participants in some Remain voting groups that regulatory divergence was essentially redundant. These participants found it difficult to understand why the UK would decide to implement different regulations if it did not believe all businesses should follow these rules. As such, they argued the UK should instead continue to follow EU regulations, avoiding the need for divergence.

I think it undermines the point of having divergence if you can pick.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

Participants in Leave voting groups in England often argued that if food was to be sold in the UK it should be produced to UK standards. As such, they did not feel that businesses should be able to choose between different sets of regulations. These participants felt that divergence meant regulations could be better targeted to UK needs, although no specific examples of this were given. They also argued that the UK could be more responsive to new scientific research because of no longer having to go through EU processes for changes to be made. However, Leave voting groups in Wales were less concerned about the need for regulations to be set by the UK.

If it's in the UK, you need to adhere to these regulations.
England, Rural, Leave

There was greater support if divergence avoided complication for businesses.

Although there was spontaneous resistance to the concept of regulatory divergence, on further discussion participants could see some benefits. They tended to feel that having two sets of accepted regulations in the UK was preferable to businesses maintaining two production lines, if producing food for both UK and EU markets. Participants felt that two production lines would add complexity and cost for businesses, which would make food prices more expensive. They felt a potential benefit of regulatory divergence would be reduced administration or saved costs for food producers, in particular farmers, emphasising the need for savings to be passed down to consumers.

Personally, if there was enough of those criteria where the safety is still met, like the 72 and 82 degrees, and those costs that could be saved by the farm or abattoir, and then also some of that could be passed to us that would be even better so we can

afford the food.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

Participants did not believe regulatory divergence would have a significant impact on them as individuals.

There was a degree of indifference towards products following two sets of regulations being available in UK shops. Participants did not believe this would have a significant impact on them as individuals as they expected there to be few differences between the two regulations and assumed both would ensure food safety.

As long as it's safe to eat, and the regulation aren't going to make a big difference, I don't see it being a big problem, as long as it's clearly marked, UK or EU. If I wanted to feed my kids a chicken breast that is EU or UK, it's down to me to make that decision. They're both safe to eat but there will be slight changes. As long as they're clearly identified, it's not a problem.
England, Rural, Remain

Participants' views on regulatory divergence were more strongly negative if changes to regulations were seen as significant, or if they felt it would lead to reduced standards. Participants tended to conceptualise regulatory divergence as resulting in either better or worse standards. The idea that changes to regulation might be considered different rather than necessarily higher or lower was difficult for most participants to grasp. Those who did accept this, were content with a difference as long as they were informed. This meant that, in general, participants felt consumers might not care or notice if changes in regulations led to overall improvements. However, consumers would likely be more concerned if changes led to reductions in standards.

Views were influenced by perceptions of the scale of the change and the risk of a reduction in standards.

Participants distinguished between changes that might seem more 'cosmetic' and those which could have a greater impact on consumers. However, they struggled to articulate with certainty what was a big or a small change, reflecting their limited understanding of the Official Controls process.

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England, Rural, Remain

When introduced to specific examples, participants often argued that lower water temperatures for washing tools was a small change compared to trained plant staff or AI replacing the inspection role of OVs in abattoirs. This reflected whether they felt the change could have a detrimental impact on food safety or animal welfare. For example, participants trusted that a water temperature change would not make a difference to the safety of the meat being prepared, as there was scientific evidence to prove the food would still be safe. In contrast, participants did not trust that changing the way animal welfare was monitored would leave animals unaffected.

Participants did not distinguish between changes to standards and changes to the way standards were enforced or monitored. In the example of trained plant staff or AI replacing OVs in abattoirs, there was repeated criticism that this would lead to an erosion of standards, without high-skilled external and independent monitoring. This was despite reminders that the standard itself had not changed.

We don't know enough about it, and although it says the animal welfare standards would remain unchanged, I don't know. Something of me doesn't trust that.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

Participants who accepted safety as a spectrum (rather than a binary 'safe' or 'not safe'), framed their views in terms of risk. For example, one participant spoke about the need for a 'benchmark' referring to the lowest standard to ensure food would be safe. Participants generally wanted there to be some distance between this lowest safe standard and where the regulations were set. They feared that regulatory divergence was an ongoing process, which could result in a gradual lowering of standards. This was because they were concerned that reducing costs would be prioritised against safety.

I wouldn't want them to cut costs and cut corners and think, 'We'll try [water temperature] at 64 [degrees].'
Northern Ireland, Nationalist

There were concerns about changes that were motivated by cost savings alone.

Participants were sceptical about the motivations for regulatory divergence and felt more strongly negative if changes were being driven to save costs for businesses. They expressed concerns about changing regulations to reduce costs, especially where they felt these outweighed other priorities such as animal welfare. There was an assumption that the UK would be more likely to change regulations to decrease rather than increase costs for businesses, as this was an argument made by those campaigning for EU Exit. Participants felt that making changes on this basis would result in decreasing public trust in food safety. Similarly, there were also concerns that changes were being made for political reasons to visibly enact EU Exit, rather than to support UK businesses or consumers.

You trust the regulation for a reason, they are doing things for the right reason. But if it's about cost, then the trust has been eroded and changes need to be for the benefit of the consumers.
England, Rural, Leave

In contrast, participants were more supportive of measures seen as motivated by sustainability concerns, for example reducing water temperatures for washing tools. They recognised the potential reduction in energy usage and costs, highlighting how this could support the UK's Net Zero commitment and reduce financial burdens on businesses.

It sounds like there isn't a negative for going to 72 [degrees – water temperature]. It's equivalent in health, saving energy, potentially making the meat cheaper and it's more sustainable. There's no negatives.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

Participants worried about the impact of regulatory divergence on the quality of meat products.

A key concern focused on the perception that the quality of food products could decrease, where quality also related to animal welfare. This reflected participants' views that regulatory divergence would be focused on cost-cutting. It was less common for participants to mention concerns about a reduction in food safety standards, as there was an assumption the FSA would continue to ensure food was safe to eat.

If you could choose to comply with UK or EU, you'll probably go with the one that is less regulatory and cheaper to implement. Which is not necessarily of higher standards. So, you might be getting food that's not of the right standard, and you

wouldn't know, unless it's highlighted.
Northern Ireland, Neither Unionist nor Nationalist

Although, the possibility of the UK increasing quality standards compared to the EU was mentioned, this was not a view commonly held by participants who tended to be sceptical about the UK implementing regulations that raised standards. In some cases, participants felt divergence could lead to an increase in consumers buying British meat, as long as there were not large differences in price as a result.

"The benefit has to come from more quality standards, more premium meat, but I doubt that would ever happen."
England, Rural, Leave

Participants wanted regulations to be the same across the four nations of the UK.

Participants did not understand why there would be a need or desire for regulations to be different between the UK nations. They argued that having a consistent regulatory regime would be less confusing and reduce complexity for food businesses and the FSA. Participants found it difficult to understand why different regulations would be needed, given food safety affects consumers equally across each of the four nations.

If the FSA is set up to protect public health, why would it be different in different regions? Would public health not be the same in all regions?
Northern Ireland, Neither Unionist nor Nationalist

Very few participants were aware of current differences between nations, although variation in the regulation of Genetic Modification (GM) in food was raised in one group. There was little specific mention of the Northern Ireland protocol or further devolution in Wales. Although, those in Northern Ireland sometimes raised concerns about the competitiveness of Northern Irish producers when exporting to the rest of the UK and concerns about food price rises for Northern Irish consumers.

Participants felt that having different regulations between nations would be difficult in practice because of the porosity of national borders and high levels of trade across them. They were concerned about this leading to an unfair playing field between the different nations, with some getting a competitive advantage, if regulations in one nation were less costly to adhere to. There was also concern that differences would come down to cost, rather than the context of each of the nations, and that this could erode food standards.

I do think it could be potentially dangerous, [each nation] having different rules. I think it's going to be down to costing and what's going to be cheaper instead of what's best for the consumer.
England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

In contrast, it was felt that regulatory divergence within the UK opened the possibility of a more localised food system, which was seen as a potential benefit. Participants described shorter food chains, more shops selling local produce, and greater control and supervision over where food has come from. One participant also felt that Northern Ireland needed different regulations due to the unique position they are in related to the EU.

There were no clear differences in views across groups in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Participants across the UK identified potential benefits and downsides of regulatory divergence for businesses, consumers and the FSA. They also described the potential implications for

animals and the natural environment, seeing this as an area where the UK could develop regulations that reflected the context and priorities of the country.

Table 2: Summary table of potential benefits and downsides identified by participants.

Affected group	Potential benefits	Potential downsides
Businesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potential for savings in cost and administration if UK regulations are less costly or stringent to adhere to • regulations could be more tailored to the UK context and needs of UK businesses • choice for businesses to follow regulations that reflect their needs and export markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • increased complexity • Northern Irish producers could become less competitive if UK regulations are less costly or stringent to adhere to, but this is not implemented in Northern Ireland • competitive disadvantages for businesses in some nations if regulatory divergence occurs between UK nations
Consumers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potential for cheaper food prices if savings are passed onto consumers • potential for UK regulations to improve standards in food processing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • complexity when shopping if two sets of regulations accepted • potential for higher food prices. This was attributed to increased complexity and the cost of implementing any change for producers (for example, new labelling systems), or if regulations were made more stringent and required investment in processes • potential risk to public health and safety if regulations on food safety and animal welfare were relaxed

Affected group	Potential benefits	Potential downsides
<p>Animals and the natural environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potential for the UK to be more responsive to new science and research in setting regulations, including towards sustainability goals • potential for UK regulations to improve how animals are looked after • potential for a more localised food system or reduced food miles, with more locally produced food being consumed locally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • potential for a reduction in animal welfare standards which was seen as unacceptable

1. Northern Irish groups were not split by Leave/Remain vote but by Unionist/Nationalist voting tendency. All Northern Irish groups felt negatively towards the idea of regulatory divergence from the EU.