

Consumer views of potential regulatory divergence in the meat sector: Regulatory divergence in practice

Participants wanted to be informed about the existence of regulatory divergence.

Generally, consumers believed they had the right to know about any changes in regulations and wanted the public to be made aware that regulatory divergence was taking place. This was linked to their feelings about the importance of consumer choice and being able to decide exactly what they purchased. Participants argued that if divergence were to proceed, consumers should have both awareness of what was changing and an active role in deciding what regulations are acceptable. They felt there was a risk that consumer trust in the FSA could decrease if the FSA was not transparent about any changes.

All the information the consumer has gives them the option to decide what's best for them. Not that we know a lot about the different regulations. You may have to look into that more but at least you have the information.

Northern Ireland, Neither Unionist or Nationalist

There was a recognition that most consumers are unaware of the Official Controls process or the detail of current food regulations, reflecting participants' own limited awareness before the discussion group. This led some participants from apathetic voting groups to argue that it would not be important to inform customers about any changes. These participants did not feel that their choice between two products produced to different regulations on sale together was important, as long as both products were considered safe.

If the change is small, I probably wouldn't even bother looking at it.

England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Neither Leave nor Remain

Participants suggested a communications campaign to tell the public about the changes.

Participants suggested the FSA should develop a communications campaign, mostly through television adverts, to inform consumers that a change to the way their food is regulated would be about to take place. Details of regulatory divergence would not be required, but the campaign could be designed simply to tell the public about the upcoming change.

There were also suggestions of a social media campaign designed for the same reason, not to provide in-depth information about the specifics of regulatory divergence, but to build awareness amongst consumers. It was noted that not everybody has social media, nor watches live television, so the awareness campaign would need to reach the widest audience by being launched across multiple channels. Participants felt these adverts, placed across a variety of media sources, could then signpost the most concerned consumers to the FSA website. There they would be able to read more detailed information about specific changes to regulations and what it would mean for them as a consumer.

This information should be made public, and people should be aware where it's coming from and what the standards are. It shouldn't be hidden but it should be out there for everyone to know.

England, Rural, Leave

Consumers were seen as responsible for researching the detail of how divergence affected specific products.

Once told about the changes, participants felt they would be personally responsible for understanding the effect of regulatory divergence and would have to research it themselves. Signposting to the FSA website would help to streamline this process for consumers. Participants wanted any divergence to be explained in basic terminology and expected the FSA to make any changes to regulations both visible and in the public domain.

It has to be clear on the pack what the regulations are. Then it's up to me to research what those differences might be. The only choice is to do research.

England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

Participants felt the level to which they would want to be informed about specific regulatory changes would depend on the extent of any difference. They felt that smaller changes to regulations that were mostly viewed as cosmetic would have little impact on purchasing habits. This meant participants did not always feel the need to be highly informed of these changes, for example a change in the temperature tools were washed at. As long as food remained safe to eat, groups agreed that their main concerns would be alleviated.

I think most people wouldn't care about small changes. Big changes, people do care about, but small things, I can't imagine how that would affect many people, to know about that.

Wales, Rural, Remain

When changes to regulations were seen as more significant, for example related to perceived changes to animal welfare standards, participants wanted more information to be available about what this would mean for consumers. Across the groups, if regulatory divergence led to a drop in standards, there was agreement that this would impact whether they would continue to buy meat. As such, participants wanted to be able to identify which products followed alternative regulations so they could make an informed decision. While they felt that information should be available on these changes, it should not be done in a way to overwhelm the public.

It's down to what's the change they're making. And if it does make a difference, what the difference would be compared to what it is now. If it's something big, then let us know why they're changing it as well.

Wales, Rural, Leave

Participants argued that packaging should be used to distinguish between products following different regulatory regimes.

Participants generally felt the clearest way to distinguish between products complying with different regulations would be noticeable differences in packaging and labelling. This was felt to be easy for consumers to understand when shopping. They argued it would not be necessary to display items in different sections of supermarkets, but a clear distinction between different products would be essential to keep consumers informed.

I would want some kind of packaging for [knowing the difference]. Whether it's a blue star for EU and a red one for UK, it gives the consumer an at-a-glance way to know what standard is being adhered to.

Northern Ireland, Neither Unionist or Nationalist

The most popular choice mentioned across groups was for a sticker system. This could be through a colour code or a flag system, using the EU or UK flags to highlight which regulatory regime is being followed. There were some concerns this could confuse consumers if meat produced in the UK could have an EU flag on the label as a result of following EU regulations. However, overall participants felt it was more important to be clear what regulations products were adhering to. This reflected the need to provide consumers with choice and help keep them informed of changes in policy.

I think if we can look at the product and see a logo telling us which regulations it's following and there's a breakdown that would give us the information we need to know.

England, Urban/Semi-Urban, Remain

Alternatively, participants described a 'traffic light system', which could inform customers of the level of change, reflecting their distinction between more cosmetic and significant differences. Participants imagined how smaller changes with a green light would symbolise changes of least concern whereas changes labelled as red would highlight to consumers that they may want to look into the regulations before choosing what to purchase. Participants mentioned they currently look for labels such as the Red Tractor symbol, and similar icons or clear systems would help them to make an informed decision on what to buy.

Maybe what they could do is say, 'Here is a red, amber, green scale'. Red is 'our change is going to be completely different' and a green one, something like 'we're going to wash our tools at a different temperature', and we find out about the red ones because it's a drastic change.

England, Rural, Remain

However, there was also a sense that current packaging already contains too much information for consumers to comprehend. Participants described how they are often only looking at the sell-by or best-before date, or the origin of meat, for example whether it is British. They argued that consumers are not always interested in reading detailed information when in a supermarket. Despite this, the consensus was that information should still be on packaging for people who would be interested in finding out more.

There is so much information on a packing, do you need anymore? Do you need another sticker saying it is from the EU or England? I think there is enough.

Wales, Urban/Semi-Urban, Leave

QR codes could provide a further level of detail for those most concerned.

Participants suggested a potential workaround to the extent of information on packaging would be to include a QR code on labels that links to the FSA or meat producers' website. This could provide more detailed information to the shopper about the specific regulations for that individual product. Participants felt that using QR codes would balance the requirements of those who just want to buy meat, regardless of the regulation, and those who wanted to be more informed.

If it had a QR code on each package and we had the regulations of each one and it came up with the comparison thing, that would be a good way.

England, Rural, Remain