Identifying the Barriers to Achieving Food-Safety Scheme Compliance and Technical Accreditation in the Welsh Food and Drink Sector

Ellen W. Evans, Leanne Ellis, Helen Taylor and Jessica Lacey
ZERO2FIVE Food Industry Centre, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom.

*Corresponding author: elevans@cardiffmet.ac.uk

Introduction

Food Safety Schemes (FSSs) are essential to the food and drink industry, as they provide the framework for compliance to assist food and drink manufacturing and processing businesses (FDMPBs) in the production of safe and legal food, and facilitate growth and entry to the market place.

Over recent years, UK FDMPBs have moved away from generic ISO certified FSSs towards bespoke 3rd party accredited FSS standards, specifically developed to closely match the requirements of the industry and rationalise retailer-specific FSSs. Compliance with a privately operated FSSs is often a prerequisite to supply.

The Welsh Government has identified that to enable growth of the food and drink sector in Wales there is a need to support FDMPBs to obtain and maintain food safety scheme compliance/technical accreditation (FSSC/TA).

Research has determined that only 30% of FDMPBs in Wales have FSSC/TA, such as British Retail Consortium (BRC) (24%) or Safe and Local Supplier Approval (SALSA) (16%). Consequently, there is a need to obtain an in-depth understanding of barriers that exist to micro and small FDMPBs in Wales from selecting, implementing, obtaining and maintaining FSSC/TA.

Aim

The aim of the study was to evaluate FSSs available to FDMPBs in Wales and to identify the barriers that exist for Welsh FDMPBs to select, implement, obtain and maintain FSSC/TA.

Methods

A mixed methods research approach facilitated completion of the study. Ethical approval was granted from Cardiff Met. (SRC reference: 7720).

A review identified available FSSs (n=30) and evaluated publically accessible information.

A series of focus groups were conducted with:
- Stakeholders (Government, Non-Governmental organisations (NGOs), procurement services, food inspectors, environmental health officers and scheme owners) (n=19).
- FSS auditors/members (n=9).
- Welsh FDMPBs with FSSC/TA (n=20).
- Welsh FDMPBs without FSSC/TA (n=17).

In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with representatives of major UK retailers (n=3).

Acknowledgement

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References


Results

Evaluation of FSSs available to FDMPBs in Wales:

The research identified and reviewed 30 FSSs currently implemented in the UK (see Figure 1), findings indicate that:
- 93% are specifically for manufacturers and processors.
- 23% publish associated scheme fees on website.
- 33% have a searchable directory of approved members.
- 24% were benchmarked against GSFI.
- 47% operate the scheme worldwide.
- 90% are privately operated.
- Inspection fees range between £500 (SALSA) to £4,000 (Gluten free audit). Whereas the Food Standards Agency’s Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (mandatory for all Welsh FDMPBs) is free.
- Only one restricts membership based on company size (SALSA standard tailored for 50 employees).

Identification of barriers to Welsh FDMPBs obtaining and maintaining FSSC/TA:

Focus group and interview participants perceived differences between the barriers faced by FDMPBs to achieve compliance and the barriers faced to maintain FSSC/TA (See Figure 2). However, content analysis determined that all perceived barriers related to:
- a) time, cost and resources
- b) knowledge and skills
- c) communication and access to information

All focus groups identified ‘time’ as a potential barrier. The design, implementation, verification and review of food safety management systems (FSMS) were described as ‘time consuming’. Activities to ensure FSSC/TA (daily checks/documentation) can slow down production.

‘Money’ was a significant barrier. It was indicated that significant investment is required in people, processes, products, equipment and the manufacturing environment to achieve/maintain FSSC/TA (see Figure 4).

(a) Time, cost and resources

“I can put it down to two things, time and money. Running the business takes up a lot of my time, the time left goes towards my accreditation, I can’t afford to get a technical person.” (Participant 54, NGO representative)

“To achieve certain accreditations, there are certain requirements. The BRC standard for a hygiene factor, if you do not have positive air flow or a metal detector, both of which are very expensive, you cannot get your accreditation.” (Participant 26, NGO representative)

b) Knowledge and skills

Numerous FDMPBs indicated problems in recruiting experienced and skilled staff. Potential candidates often lack the knowledge and skills required to operate effectively in the sector, leading to increased costs in training/education. A shortage of technical graduates and how the image of the food industry should be more desirable for school leavers was a major discussion point (see Figure 5).

“I don’t have the technical support to get me up to speed and find an alternative way of resourcing that sort of technical help, the overhead of forty thousand pound for a small firm is a very big cost.” (Participant 59, NGO stakeholder)

“We’ve not got enough people coming through the right sort of courses to take the right sort of jobs to enable them to actually get these schemes in place.” (Participant 05, FSS auditor)

“The food industry on the whole has got a shortage of qualified technical staff, there is a general shortage.” (Written interview, Participant 07, NGO representative)

(c) Communication and access to information

Participants believed there to be too many FSSs available and FDMPBs find it difficult to select and work towards suitable FSS due to the lack of information and visibility from FSS owners.

Customers often require FDMPBs to meet multiple FSSs, which complicate obligations to compliance as FSS standards can vary and require different documentation to evidence the same action or activity. Consequently, to enable FSMS to satisfy multiple FSS requirements consolidation of FSSs was desirable (see Figure 6). Some believed that in smaller production sites, the relevance of some standards had not been considered by FSS owners.

Conclusions

- Cumulatively, completion of the research has identified the potential barriers that exist for FDMPBs in Wales to obtain and/or maintain FSSC/TA relating to: a) the time, cost and resources required to develop FSMS, b) the limited availability of skilled staff that are knowledgeable and technically experienced, and, c) the lack of visibility and information available from FSS owners.
- Consequently, there is a need for further research to utilise the findings of this research to explore and inform the development of support mechanisms to increase FSSC/TA uptake and accelerate food sector growth in line with Welsh Government aspirations.