

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

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Introduction

Food Safety Schemes (FSSs) are essential to the food and drink industry, 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 FSSs¹. Compliance with a privately operated FSSs is often a prerequisite to supply².

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/TA³.

Aim

The aim of the study was to evaluate FSSs available to FDMPBs in Wales and to identify the barriers that exists 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. (SREC 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/mentors ($n=9$).
- 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

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Results

Evaluation of FSSs available to FDMPBs in Wales:



Figure 1 Food safety schemes reviewed

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 GFSI.
- 47% operate the scheme worldwide.
- 90% are privately operated.
- Inspection fees range between £550 (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

"There are barriers to achieving accreditation and there are barriers to maintaining. Achieving you've got your initial set up costs your resources, human and financial. For maintaining, I can put the procedures in and train them and do it. It's separate things."

Figure 2 Quote from participant 44 – Owner of a FDMPB without FSSC/TA



Figure 3 Word cloud indicating word frequency when discussing barriers to obtaining and maintaining FSSC/TA

a) Time, cost and resources

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).

"I can put it down to two things, time and money. Running the business takes up a lot of my time, the time that's left goes towards my accreditation, I can't afford to get a technical person."

(Participant 43, FDMPB without FSSC/TA)

"It's the money and the resource, for smaller companies it's the people to input the standard."

(Participant 66, Retail representative).

"To achieve certain accreditations, there are certain requirements. The BRC standard for a high-risk factory, if you do not have positive air flow or a metal detector, both of which are very expensive, you cannot get your accreditation."

(Participant 01, FSS Auditor)

Figure 4 Participant quotes relating to time, cost and resource barriers

b) Knowledge and skills

Numerous FDMPBs indicated problems in recruiting skilled and experienced 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).

"We don't have a technical manager. So to get BRC, we would need a technical manager, unless we could 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 37, operations manager FDMPBs without FSSC/TA).

"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 put 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."

(Participant 02, FSS auditor/mentor).

Figure 5 Participant quotes relating to knowledge and skill barriers



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 FSSs 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.

"There's so many different accreditations, that you don't know them all."

(Participant 64, Food inspector).

"So maybe one of the barriers is knowing which standard is appropriate for your business."

(Participant 29, owner FDMPB with FSSC/TA).

"The fact that there are multiple standards out there, and always there's one that isn't recognised and different customers want different standards."

(Participant 59, NGO stakeholder).

Figure 6 Participant quotes relating to communication and access to information barriers

Conclusions

- Cumulatively, completion of the research has identified the potential barriers that exist for FDMPBs in Wales to obtain and/or maintain FSSC/TA relate 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.