

ACSS Knowledge Sharing and Network Event - 23 May 2023

Introduction

The Advisory Committee for Social Science (ACSS) is an independent expert committee of the Food Standards Agency. It provides expert strategic advice to the FSA on its use of the social sciences to deliver the FSA's objectives, including new and emerging methods, processes and systems to interrogate data. Its purpose is to help FSA utilise these sciences and approaches to shape and deliver its strategic objectives and understand its impact.

In May 2023 the ACSS held a knowledge sharing and networking event to utilise the research networks of ACSS members with the aim of strengthening the current and future work of the FSA's Analytic Unit (across professions) and maximising the impact of the Units research and analysis. The objectives of the event were as follows:

1. To collect experts' views on current and future research projects and topics being undertaken by the FSA
2. To strengthen awareness, increase impact, and advance engagement of the FSA's Analytics Unit's work with external stakeholders
3. To boost interest in applications for the ACSS for the next recruitment campaign in August 2024
4. To improve analytics representation on the Register of Specialists (RoS) with new contacts relevant to the Analytics Unit's workstreams

In order to achieve objectives 1 and 2, the event was centred around presentations outlining key FSA research projects. After each presentation attendees were posed project specific questions to be considered during table discussions. A closing session outlined ways of engaging more generally with FSA science (e.g. through RoS membership or subscribing to the FSA Science Newsletter), in order to achieve objectives 3 and 4.

The event had over 50 attendees from a range of academic institutions, analytical professions, and NGO organisations who have expertise relevant to the FSA's remit (each ACSS member was asked to invite two guests matching this criteria). Represented institutions included:

- Quadram
- WRAP
- University of Oxford
- London School of Economics
- University of Manchester
- University of Sheffield
- DEFRA's Social Science Expert Group
- FSA Science Council

This notes primarily outlines key themes and recommendations arising from table discussions, and follow up activity to explore the success of the event in terms of the 4 objectives.

Themes from table discussions:

Session 1. Monitoring Consumer Interests

Presentation 1: Food and You 2: FSA's Flagship Biannual Consumer Survey

Presentation summary

This presentation outlined Food and You 2, the FSA's flagship consumer survey, conducted biannually with a nationally representative sample of around 6,000 adults living in private households across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The survey measures people's self-reported knowledge, attitudes, and behaviour relating to food safety and other food related behaviours (such as food shopping, food concerns, eating out/takeaways, and food allergies and intolerances). The data is used internally by the FSA in a variety of ways, including informing policy initiatives, communication campaigns and risk and impact assessments. Whilst the FSA engages in a number of activities to promote awareness and external use of the data (e.g. through social media channels, academic conference presentations), they are keen to maximise engagement with this source. As such, attendees were asked to consider:

How can we increase impact and knowledge exchange of this source outside of the FSA?

Key themes from table discussions

Two key recommendations and themes emerged from discussions in response to the above question:

1. Increasing visibility and accessibility through dissemination

Attendees acknowledged and appreciated the rich nature and wealth of data generated from Food and You 2, and felt it would be beneficial for the FSA to communicate key findings in an easily accessible and digestible way. Suggestions centred on producing topic based 'snapshots' or 'headlines' of the findings and targeting dissemination amongst stakeholders known to have an interest in that area. Suggestions of how to disseminate the data to different audiences included running online webinars of the key findings of Food and You 2; producing blog-type posts about specific aspects of the findings that may be of interest to particular stakeholders and experts; and creating video tutorials about the data to inform stakeholders of ways in which the data can be utilised or analysed further.

To increase visibility and accessibility of Food and You 2 data within the academic research community, it was suggested that outputs could be publicised and disseminated via JISC mailing lists, which are a main method of communication for academic networks. There are a range of different mailing lists across different disciplines that could generate interest and engagement into Food and You 2 data and FSA's work more broadly. There were also several examples raised of academic grants or placements that could focus specifically on secondary analysis of this data, e.g., internship schemes, the ESRC impact acceleration award, and doctoral training pathways. To support this, attendees felt a mapping exercise, outlining what has already been done with FY2 data and where the gaps lie, would be useful in identifying topics/analysis with the highest potential impact. Attendees felt that communicating the potential policy impact of findings, was key in achieving increased academic engagement.

2. Increasing engagement through early stakeholder engagement

Attendees felt that involving external stakeholders early in the research process to inform priority setting, question design and topics would increase engagement with FY2. Given the range of stakeholders, attendees felt such engagement would help FY2 meet the variety of different needs and interests in the data, increasing

impact and engagement.

The value of local level analysis was also mentioned by many attendees, however this level of granularity is not possible with FY2 data.

Presentation 2: FSA's Monthly Consumer Insights Tracker

Presentation summary

This presentation focused on FSA's Consumer Insights Tracker, a monthly survey conducted online with around 2,000 adults in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The Consumer Insights Tracker informs the [Wider Consumer Interests \(WCI\)](#) research programme.' The main aim of the Tracker is to provide up-to-date data to colleagues and senior leaders across the agency about a range of key FSA interest areas, however the tracker also provides valuable trend data to other governmental departments and non-governmental organisations. Current topics covered in the Tracker include food insecurity (including food affordability), food availability, consumer concerns in relation to food, and monitoring confidence in the food supply chain and FSA as a regulator.

The presentation referred to a recent review of the tracker by ACSS members (carried out by the Wider Consumer Interests Working Group, and since published on the [ACSS website](#)), to assess the need for the research, the ability of the research to meet these needs and to ensure the quality of the tracker going forward. Attendees were posed 2 questions to consider:

1. How can we best anticipate key consumer issues/concerns to explore with the tracker?
2. An alternative methodology would be for the tracker to adopt an 'always on'[\[1\]](#) approach. What are your thoughts/experiences on this approach?

Key themes from table discussion

A number of themes arose around how best to identify relevant issues to include in the Tracker. The importance of fieldwork dates was stressed, and it was felt that this could greatly impact purchasing behaviours and food choices, depending on consumer circumstances. For example, for those on monthly budgets, collecting data towards the end of the month could skew responses.

Attendees felt that key findings from FY2 could be used to inform the topics asked about in the Tracker, and that social media analysis may be a useful means to

identify key consumer concerns at that time point (although it was acknowledged that some groups would be underrepresented in such analysis). There was also discussion around the benefits of consulting with external stakeholders in consumer-facing roles (such as foodbanks, money advice services, local authorities, and third-sector organisations such as Age UK) who may have a good understanding of current consumer concerns.

Attendees felt that an 'always on' approach could have a number of benefits and allow the impact of key events or news stories to be captured. This would improve data granularity and avoid relying on consumer recall when asking about events or behaviours that may have happened prior to fieldwork. Conversely, attendees noted that due to the relatively small sample size of the Tracker, the daily sample sizes of the 'always on' approach would potentially be too small to provide a 'big picture' or accurate representation of consumer behaviour at population level. It was also acknowledged that the 'always on' methodology would require longevity from a resourcing point of view, where capacity and funding would need to be taken into account.

Session 2: Understanding Consumer Views

Presentation 3: Consumer views of genetic technologies (precision breeding)

Presentation Summary

This presentation described part of the FSA's research into consumer attitudes on gene editing and precision breeding. The most recent research, launched in August 2022, aimed to understand consumer perceptions of precision breeding. Phase 1 of which was an online quantitative survey (with 4,177 consumers across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland), to explore consumer perceptions of precision breeding, current levels of consumer awareness, and appetite for information on precision breeding. Phase 2 engaged with consumers (across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland) via qualitative workshops to improve understanding into the factors underpinning consumers' perceptions of precision breeding, and to explore consumers' information needs, and their views of the FSA's proposed regulatory approach. Attendees were asked to consider the following questions:

1. What other novel foods may be on the horizon that the FSA could be exploring consumer views of?

2. What ongoing/emerging research is there around consumer views of novel foods (such as CBD, precision bred food, lab-grown/cultured meat)?

Key themes from table discussions

Novel foods are any food that was not used for human consumption to a significant degree within the United Kingdom (UK) or the European Union (EU) before 15 May 1997. This means that the foods don't have a 'history of consumption'.

Table discussions highlighted the following novel foods and related ongoing/emerging research that may be on the horizon and of interest to the FSA:

- Wellbeing products such as new supplements, particularly around products related to the microbiome
- Potential social media food trends and consumer attitudes towards this
- Upcycled food (the recycling of food waste products back into the food system)
- Alternative proteins (e.g., pea protein, insects for human consumption), academic research into consumer views of these alternative proteins
- Range of vertically farmed food
- Cultural products that may become more prevalent in line with increased immigration

Overall, discussions indicated a sense of uncertainty around precision breeding, particularly around the potentially contested terminology of gene technology, precision breeding, and gene editing.

Presentation 4: UK consumer and stakeholder perceptions of urban-grown food: understanding barriers to acceptance

Presentation summary

This presentation outlined work to understand consumer and stakeholder perceptions of urban-grown food in the UK, defined in the presentation as fruit and vegetables grown in urban areas (e.g. roof gardens, urban allotments, high-tech hydroponic farms). A rapid evidence review of 35 studies exploring consumer perceptions of urban grown-food revealed consumer perception to be mixed, with barriers including unfamiliarity, perceptions of 'unnaturalness' and concerns around safety and contamination. A survey of 988 UK consumers demonstrated a low-preference for urban-grown food, and similar barriers to

acceptance. Work with stakeholders (predominately through workshops or interviews), revealed an overall lack of familiarity and understanding of urban-grown food and the health and sustainability benefits related to this.

The presentation concluded that preferences for urban-grown food in the UK appear to be low, and both consumers and stakeholders may need assurances of safety, quality, reliability, and price before accepting urban-grown food.

Attendees were asked to consider the following question: What are the potential opportunities to address barriers to acceptance of urban-grown food?

Key themes from table discussions

Two key themes arose from discussions:

1. Terminology

The term 'urban grown food' was felt to be confusing and potentially misleading, given the potential rural settings for much 'urban grown food'. The term 'urban' was thought to have potential negative connotations around pollution and contamination, and whilst locally grown food is likely to be more accepted by consumers, it may not accurately reflect the origin.

Given the range of methods and settings under the urban grown food umbrella, attendees felt it was more helpful to develop a range of terms reflecting this diversity. Suggestions included: community grown, indoor production, rooftop production, vertical growing, and cooperatives. More broadly, discussions touched on the need to enable consumers to understand the complexities of the food system, and that a term such as 'urban-grown food' could have the opposite effect.

2. Establishing unique 'selling point' of urban-grown foods

Attendees felt that communicating the key benefits of urban grown foods would help address barriers to acceptance. Benefits outside of sustainability and affordability were discussed, in terms of local allotments and community gardens and positive impacts for those involved in urban food production. Particularly in urban areas, finding a way to combine the sustainability benefits of urban-grown food with wider social and health benefits, and communicating these visibly, could increase willingness and acceptance from both stakeholders and consumers. Related to this, attendees felt that it is important to consider that different groups of consumers may be more accepting of urban-grown foods than

others. Identifying varying needs and expectations from the outset and targeting specific interventions could help to address the unfamiliarity issue.

Session 3: Identifying and exploring the impact of food safety risks

Presentation 5: Valuing the societal impact of food safety hazards

Presentation summary

This presentation detailed the societal impact that food safety hazards (e.g., microbiological contamination, food allergens, and food crime) can have. The full social cost of food safety hazards extends far beyond the financial consequences of treating the illness and potential productivity losses. As per the HM Treasury Green Book (Economic appraisal and evaluation in central government), wider social and environmental impacts must also be brought into any cost/benefit assessment as far as possible, and so this is a key work area for the FSA economics team. The presentation outlined three of the economic valuation models used by the FSA: 1) Foodborne Disease (FBD) Cost of Illness Model, 2) Food Hypersensitivity (FHS) Cost of Illness Model and, 3) Cost of Food Crime (CoFC).

These economic valuation models allow the FSA to better:

- Allocate resources to control and mitigate against food safety risks
- Develop new food safety standards/regulations
- Monitor and evaluate food safety measures
- Assess the cost-effectiveness of interventions
- Complete Impact Assessments/Spending Reviews

Attendees were asked to consider the following question: How could we go about effectively measuring the impacts of FSA policy/interventions on food safety hazards?

Key themes from table discussions

Two key themes arose from discussions:

1. Timing

Attendees stressed the significance of 'when' to conduct evaluation, and the importance of considering evaluation early in the policy process. Pre-intervention measures were seen as key, as well as clear thinking around the aims of an intervention, potential impacts and impacted groups. Conversely, it was felt that there is often a lot of time and resource spent on developing such assumptions pre-intervention, but less effort in assessing these after the policy change has been introduced.

2. Mixed methods and scale of measurement

Attendees felt that a mixed-methods approach would be beneficial when measuring the impact of FSA policy and interventions on food safety hazards, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. This would help to create a fuller image and narrative around the exact impacts that policy and interventions are having on consumers and their associated food safety hazards. For example, it was suggested that behavioural trials could take place at all stages of the intervention (pre-, during, and post-) to build a more accurate narrative.

It was also noted that the scale of such measurement and evaluation is crucial. Average estimates at country-level may be unhelpful when there are large inequalities of food safety hazards across different demographics and areas. Local comparisons of the effectiveness of the policy or intervention may be more useful. Attendees felt there may also be benefits to collaboration with other agencies, institutions, or local authorities, to get a fuller view of potential impacts (including how these may differ by locality).

Presentation 6: Emerging findings from FSA's 23/24 Strategic Assessment

Presentation summary

This presentation outlined the FSA's 2023/2024 Strategic Assessment, which aims to provide an overview of the issues likely to affect the wider food system and the FSA's remit over the next 10 years. Produced every 2 years, it draws on an expert elicitation exercise and evidence review to support strategic decision-making and anticipatory policy-design in the agency.

The 2023/2024 Strategic Assessment notes that longer term predictions have been made more difficult by current challenges to the UK food system, including the Ukraine war, UK economic conditions, and climate change, resulting in increased household insecurity, increased risks of supply chain volatility,

increased volatility of consumer decision making, and reduced investment in technology innovation. The presentation outlined the key drivers of food system change, including UK economic condition; consumer attitudes; commercial drivers; technology innovation; climate change/environmental factors; and Brexit and regulatory change. These drivers include both opportunities and risks for the UK food system.

Attendees were asked to consider the following question: What do you see as the most important risks and opportunities to the food system in the next 5 to 10 years?

Key themes from table discussion

Attendees were provided with a range of opportunities and risks that FSA has identified in relation to six key drivers of food system change that are shown in Table 1 below, alongside key points from attendees by driver.

Overall, attendees felt that it was key to recognise the interconnected nature of the global food system when forecasting potential opportunities and risks. Opportunities and risks to the UK – and global – food system are not independent drivers but are interlinked and overlapping, and this holistic view allows for recognition of the complexities of the food system. It was recognised that the interlinkages of these issues are a challenge for Government as they cut across several departments and responsibilities with different remits.

Table 1: Risks and opportunities to the food system as perceived by attendees

Drivers and associated opportunities
and risks identified by strategic
assessment

Key points from attendees:

Opportunities

- Possibility of universal free school meals within next 5-10 years

UK economic condition

- Household food insecurity (HHFI)
- Labour shortages in the food system
- Supply chain volatility and disruption

Risks

- Impact of increasing polarisation and growing economic inequalities on HHFI
- As food costs often the most flexible budget of a household, HHFI can increase even if the price of food itself is not.
- Electoral politics can impact levels of food security and food affordability across areas and households depending on policy priorities.
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Consumer attitudes

- Aspirations of consumers to want to buy more ethically sourced, sustainable, healthier food
- Risks of ultra-processed foods

- Increased volatility of consumer decision-making will present both risks and opportunities to the UK food system

Commercial drivers

- Decreased investment in technology innovation

- Lobbying from the food industry around regulatory frameworks, subsidies, nutrition regulations, funding, taxation, etc. may present risks and opportunities

Opportunities

Technology innovation

- Improved agricultural production technologies
- Digital technologies, AI, and robotics
- Alternative protein sources
- Novel food processing technologies
- Gene editing/precision breeding technologies
- Insects in food and feed
- Improved packaging/alternatives to single-use plastic

- The growth of alternative food systems and potential for these to align with consumers interests (if affordable)
- Alternative proteins an opportunity to remove carbon intensive processes from the food system
- Behaviours that consumers are undertaking for sustainability reasons may have unanticipated risks
- Regulation of growing use of Artificial Intelligence

Risks

- Affordability of technological innovation may act as a barrier

Climate change

- Increased animal and plant pests

Opportunities

- Impacts of climate change leading to food scarcity and water scarcity
- Risk of unknown pathogens
- Biodiversity loss and change (e.g., invasive species)
- Increasing fuel costs in move towards Net-Zero, assessing impact of this on food costs and subsequent HHFI
- Crop failure, leading to increased prices and potentially fraudulent behaviour

Risks

- Opportunity to grow food ('warmer' crops) in UK that has not previously been possible

Brexit

- Enforcement issues at the border linked to new import controls
- New trade agreements and their potential impact on the UK food system
- Regulatory divergence

Opportunities

- Regulatory flexibility
- Increased support for local food production
- Flexibility around trade agreements outside of EU

Risks

- Decreased investment in technology (as noted above)
- Labour and skill shortages
- Increase in price of food

[\[1\]](#) An 'always on' methodology in this case would mean that the collection of the 2,040 responses to the CIT would be spread across the month, as opposed to in a couple of days.