

12th meeting of the Advisory Committee for Social Science (February 2024) Minutes.

Twelfth Meeting of the Advisory Committee for Social Science

27 February 2024 Minutes

Location: Clive House, London, and Remote via Microsoft Teams

Time: 10:00 - 16:30

Attendees: ACSS

- Ms Julie Hill, (JH), Chair
- Professor Julie Barnett (JB), Deputy Chair
- Professor Charlotte Hardman (CH)
- Professor Spencer Henson
- Professor George Gaskell
- Professor Dan Rigby (DR)
- Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford (HLM)
- Professor Fiona Gillison
- Professor Seda Erdem

Attendees: Food Standards Agency

- Rebecca Gillespie (RG)
- Laura Gent (LG)
- Rebecca Wood (RW)
- Charlotte Parnell (CP)
- Helen Heard (HH)
- Joanna Disson (JD)
- Laura Broomfield (LB)
- Lucy King (LK)
- Willem Roelofs (WR)
- Michelle Patel (MP)

- Eirini Petratos (EP)
- Thomas Mills (TM)
- Thomas Turner (TT)
- Nicholas Daniel (ND)
- Tom Barker (TB)
- Thomas Hulme (TH)
- Freya Sharpe (FS)
- Sophie Watson (SW)
- Ely Mirzahosseinkhan (EM)
- Greg Wasinski (GW)
- Beth Armstrong (BA)

Other Attendees

- John O'Brien (JO), Chair, Science Council

Apologies

- Dr Naomi Maynard (NM)

Agenda - See Annex A

Summary of the meeting:

The 12th Open Meeting of the Advisory Committee for Social Science (ACSS) included updates from: the Secretariat, ACSS Chair, Working Group Chairs, the Chair of the Science Council, and Heads of Analytics Unit and Social Science. Substantive discussion items included: increasing academic engagement with key FSA evidence sources, horizon scanning to feed into the FSA strategic assessment, and research questions around consumer attitudes and practises around UPFs. See Annex A for Agenda

Summary of actions:

ACTION 12.1: Secretariat to ensure the status of previous actions are captured in the secretariat update paper.

Welcome and introductions

JH welcomed everyone to the 12th ACSS meeting and noted that the meeting is being recorded.

Declarations of interest

None declared.

Actions from the last meeting and Chair's update

None outstanding. The Chair requested that going forward, the secretariat reported the status of previous actions in the secretariat update paper. Actions for the 11th plenary meeting are presented in Annex B.

ACTION 12.1: Secretariat to ensure the status of previous actions are captured in the secretariat update paper.

JH provided an update on plans for a joint meeting with Defra SSEG (Social Science Expert Group). JH advised that JB had deputised for her at the recent SAC Chairs meeting to give an update on the work of ACSS and to get an overview of work undertaken by other Scientific Advisory Committees. JH advised that the minutes can be made available on requests if anyone is interested in reviewing these with a view to understanding what goes on in our other committees.

Secretariat update

RG discussed staffing changes now that both Abbie and Kerry have left. She welcomed Becky Wood and Laura Gent to the team. Becky will support with the Assurance Working Group and the Understanding Regulatory Change Working Group and Laura will support the Wider Consumer Interest Working Group.

SAC recruitment will start in the summer and we'll be aiming to improve ACSS representation across the devolved administrations as well as looking to address any skills gap. Five members will come to the end of the appointment terms later this year and we are exploring options to extend these. RG thanked those who commented on the Annual Report which will be published on the website in March.

Science Council Update

JO advised he was delighted to be recently appointed as Chair of SC for the next 3 years. JO advised that following the tailored review the SC have modified and

updated their Terms of Reference, so the committee is more agile and more focused. Following on from this there are two workshops planned for 15 March and 22 April both in London. JO advised he was happy to also welcome four new members to the Science Council and that from the tailored review it was recommended to recruit an Economist and a Sustainability expert which they have now done. JO went on to explain in more detail regarding the forthcoming workshop on 15 March which is centred around the methodology to define fifty unanswered questions in the areas of relevance to the mission of the Food Standards Agency which will encompass food safety, consumer interests and food that is healthier and more sustainable. JO then gave some background into the 22 April meeting – Wider Consumer Impacts project in which the workshop will look at 3 case studies – Aspartame, Nitrate and Nitrite and seaweed and seaweed consumption.

Analytics Unit Update

JD discussed the context of the work of AU, in terms of reduced budget for 24/25 due to ongoing inflationary pressures and ongoing headcount issues. Key priorities for FSA science were outlined:

- Improving our evidence around food borne disease.
- Transforming our science capabilities to support regulatory reforms.
- Sustaining and building our national surveillance and science capabilities
- Improving our understanding of consumer interests in the food system

JD advised the unit have been exploring where efficiencies can be found regarding Consumer Tracker and Food and You 2, and have slowed down research around the Cost Of Illness and reduced spend on the foresight programme. JD advised the unit are seeking to maximise the impact and reach of their research.

Maximising engagement with FSA Social Research using Food & You 2 as a Case study.

LK provided an update on F&Y2 advising that so far, they have published six waves of the F&Y2 survey, their focus is on maximising use and impact of the tool, and they have developed a 3-year plan setting out their future ambitions. CP provided further information on their vision which is for F&Y2 to be widely known and the data widely used within the FSA, across government , academia and

third sector, helping to shape UK food policy. CP advised ways to achieve this would be to increase awareness and use amongst the academic community, raise the profile of F&Y2 by way of early promotion, F&Y2 Working Group, tailored briefings to policy teams and reduce duplication between FSA surveys.

Members felt that the academic engagement strategy was thorough. Discussion points included the benefit of monitoring outputs using FY2 data (to prevent duplication and allow impact to be better considered) and the creation of an informal group / online community, with the FSA acting as a convener, to discuss and support secondary analysis of FY2 data. GG offered to support the FY2 team with their activity around academic engagement.

Working Group Updates

JB gave an update on the Kitchen Life 2 (KL2) Working Group (Paper 12.4), which is now concluding with the end of the KL2 project. The paper focused on reflections on the Working Group activities from both members and FSA leads. The group was felt to have achieved its aims well and provided valuable input on the project. A number of recommendations were made for future Working Groups of this nature, including having a single point of contact within the Working Group.

SH updated members on recent activity of the Economics Working Group (paper 12.5) which includes work to support the Analytics Unit in the 2024/2025 spending review.

SH updated members on the Wider Consumer Interests Working Group (paper 12.6), which has been invited to produce an evidence summary to support FSA evidence around consumer knowledge and information needs surrounding Ultra Processed Foods (UPF).

HLM gave an update on the work of the Assurance Working Group (Paper 12.7).

JH updated members on the newest working group Understanding Regulatory Change (Paper 12.8) which is currently reviewing an evidence summary on consumer views around regulatory change to inform the Regulated Products Reform Programme.

FSA Food System Strategic Assessment

GW outlined the Horizon Scanning process at the FSA, and provided an overview of the FSA Strategic Assessment. Members discussed the benefit of considering the impacts of pressure on the health service (for instance, to deal with a serious outbreak of food borne disease); and trust in institutions more broadly, and how that might impact the FSA.

Ultra Processed Food

FS and TB provided some background on Ultra Processed Food (Paper 12.10) and the FSAs interest and remit. The FSA is looking to increase awareness of consumer understanding and information needs around UPF's to support agency activity in this area. To support this the Wider Consumer Interests Working Group has been invited to conduct an evidence review to explore how well this research aim can be met with existing evidence. Members were asked to discuss 8 initial research questions in terms of their ability to inform the research aims.

Members were asked to consider the merit of 2 research questions under the theme of consumer understanding and awareness:

1. What do consumers understand by the concept of UPF?

Members felt much of the evidence in this space may be anecdotal, and there are likely to be negative connotations with the terms (ultra and processed). FSA colleagues stressed the importance of understanding consumer knowledge to inform communications and other consumer facing activity.

2. Do consumers understand the current classifications of processed foods?

Members discussed whether consumers are exposed to the NOVA classifications and therefore whether they can be expected to have knowledge of them.

Members also noted the wide range of food in the UPF category (the 4th Nova classification) and that many are low in fat/sugar and likely to be understood as healthy. Consumers are therefore likely to be surprised at their classification as an UPF and perhaps confused as to how best to make healthy choices.

FSA colleagues advised that the NOVA classifications are primarily used in research, and that there is evidence that some groups of consumers are more aware of the classifications than others (i.e. health conscious and/or highly educated consumers).

Members felt that fully understanding the answers to questions 1 and 2 were critical in answering the remaining questions around consumer concerns and

information needs. An additional question exploring sub group differences in terms of consumer understanding and awareness was therefore proposed, alongside a question exploring how consumers might categorise food within the UPF category.

Members were asked to consider the merit of 4 research questions under the theme of *consumer concerns and behaviours*:

3. What concerns do consumers have about the nutritional, health, and other implications of UPF? How do these concerns differ over different categories of UPF's?
4. How do these concerns impact consumer behaviour with respect to UPF?
5. What are the key drivers and/or influencing factors of consumer concerns of UPF's?
6. Is there a relationship between UPF's and household food insecurity, and if so, what is the relationship?

Members felt that it would be more beneficial to use the terms 'beliefs' over 'concerns', and also to explore the drivers of UPF consumption (e.g. cost, awareness, palatability, convenience) and how this might impact on different groups of consumers (i.e. GF, Vegan etc), not just those experiencing food insecurity.

Members were asked to consider the merit of 2 research questions under the theme of *consumer information needs*

7. What are the information needs of consumers in the context of uncertainty over the nutritional and health impacts of UPF and what is the role of risk communication?
8. How can the FSA best support consumers with respect to their concerns and related behaviours when it comes to UPF's?

Members discussed the difficulties communicating with consumers on this complex and uncertain topic, but recognised the FSA's need to do so and how answers to these questions could valuably inform messaging.

SH summarised the discussion points and outlined the next steps. SH will meet with FSA research colleagues to refine the research questions, drawing on this discussion. Final research questions will be circulated amongst working group

members and SH will seek volunteers to support the production of the evidence summary. The work will be discussed at the next WCI working group meeting on the 27th of March.

AOB

None raised.

Close

JH thanked everyone for their attendance. The group will meet face to face for the next plenary in Summer 2024.

Annex A: Agenda of the 12th ACSS Plenary meeting

- Welcome and introductions
- Declaration of interests
- Actions from the last meeting and Chairs update
- Secretariat update
- Science Council Update
- Analytics Unit update
- Maximising engagement with FSA Social Research, using Food and You 2 as a case study.
- Working group updates
- FSA Food System Strategic Assessment
- UPFs Research Question Workshop
- AOB
- Close