

ACSS 2023 Annual Report.

Report by Julie Hill, ACSS Chair.

This paper summarises the activities of the Advisory Committee for Social Science (ACSS) in 2023.

Introduction

The ACSS is an independent expert committee of the FSA comprising of an independent Chair and 10 expert members^[1]. The Committee was appointed in 2018 and has just completed its fifth year.

The role of the ACSS is to provide 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 the social sciences and these emerging approaches to shape and deliver its strategic objectives and understand its impact.

The majority of work in the ACSS is delivered through Working Groups, although members often undertake additional activities, providing expert input on specific pieces of work.

SAC Review

In 2023 the Science Council and ACSS were subject to an independent deep review, as per Cabinet Office guidance. The outcomes of the review were published on the 8th June ([Independent Report and Recommendations](#)) alongside the [FSA Response](#). The review made the following recommendations for the ACSS :

1. FSA officials more clearly articulate where the ACSS can best help support the Agency's work.

FSA response: We agree that there could be better sharing of knowledge across the FSA to increase awareness of the purpose of the SC and ASCC and support both groups in setting the direction of their work. Therefore, we commit to build

on the work we already do to further raise the awareness of the potential roles they could play to support teams across the FSA.

Secretariat activity: We have engaged with senior leaders in the FSA to identify 2024 ACSS activity which will support the agency in strategic areas.

2. ACSS members are paid a flat honorarium, rather than payment by the hour, with the Chair receiving a higher fee.

FSA response: We recognise the potential advantages of a fixed honorarium although also note that this may, in some situations, be restrictive. We are therefore investigating several alternative scenarios for SAC remuneration with a view to simplifying this process and better aligning it with remuneration practices in other departmental SACs.

3. We found that the ACSS played an important role in supporting social science evidence commissioning and interpretation at the FSA and recommend it continues doing this good job in much of its present form.

4. The way the SC and ACSS together provide social science expertise and support to the FSA is reviewed again once our recommendations[\[2\]](#), if implemented, have had time to settle in.

5. During future recruitment that the ASCC retains its economic analytical function and supports the FSA in expanding capacity in this area.

FSA response to iii-v: In the next review cycle, the FSA commits to reviewing the distribution of social science expertise and the interaction of the SC and ACSS with regards to social sciences at the FSA.

Knowledge and Network Sharing (KSN) Event

The ACSS held its first KSN event on the 22nd May 2023, with over 50 attendees, representing a variety of different 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). The day was led by Julie Hill, and following an opening session featuring the Director of FSA Science (Julie Pierce) and the FSAs Chief Scientific Advisor (Professor Robin May), FSA analysts presented substantive work from across the analytics unit and posed key questions to guide table discussions.

The day had 4 main aims:

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

The first 2 objectives were primarily met through the presentations and focused table discussions, with methods of increasing engagement and impact a key theme of posed discussion questions. Key discussion points have been shared with FSA presenters and project leads, and published on the [ACSS website](#). Secretariat are following up with project leads to establish the utility of these discussion points, and whether they have informed practical steps to increase engagement and impact.

All post-event survey respondents reported that their knowledge and awareness of the FSA's Analytics Unit had improved as a result of the event. In addition, all (non-FSA/ACSS) respondents reported being interested in working more closely with the FSA and the majority reported that they had signed up to the FSA Science newsletter.

3. To boost interest in applications to SACs for the next recruitment campaign

Half of (non-FSA/ACSS) post-event survey respondents reported being interested in applying to join a SAC, ACSS or other. The ACSS secretariat will reach out to interested individuals and all eligible event attendees during the next recruitment campaign.

4. To improve analytics representation on the Register of Specialists (RoS) with new contacts relevant to the Analytics Unit's workstreams

All non-FSA/ACSS survey respondents reported interest in joining the RoS. Interested individuals were subsequently linked up with the FSA RoS team.

ACSS Working Group Activity

The ACSS currently have 4 working groups, and a fifth group which finished in 2023 (see Annex C for Working Groups completed in previous years). The aims of each group, work completed in 2023, ongoing work and 2024 planned activity are detailed below.

Assurance Working Group (initiated August 2019)

Main aim: To provide assurance to the FSA Board on the quality, value and impact of social science in the FSA.

In 2023 the group:

- Delivered the final quality assurance checklist/toolkit to support the commissioning of high-quality research across FSA sciences. This was [published](#) early in 2024 and has been shared with the government social research network.
- Supported the development of a peer review matrix for use in the social science team.
- Fed into the development of a new reporting structure for methodology sections of research outputs.
- Considered 6 projects through the Gateway Process (Annex A)

In 2024 the group will:

- Continue reviewing new projects via the Gateway Process (ongoing, since 2022)
- Support the FSA social science team review approaches to:
 - reaching vulnerable consumer groups in research
 - engagement with academic community.

Additionally, in previous years, the group has:

- Improved how we measure the impact of our research (2020), guiding the development of a process which was successfully rolled out across the social science team and has been further being developed by the FSA science Strategy team to develop a cross Science Evidence and Research Division approach.
- Produced a guiding principles note (2021) to inform how other legitimate factors are considered in the risk management process (commissioned by the CSA), which is included in the FSA Risk Analysis Playbook.
- Informed the commissioning and development of a quality assurance checklist/toolkit 'good science' quality assurance checklist/toolkit (2022)
- Considered 13 projects through the Gateway Process (2022)

Wider Consumer Interest Working Group (initiated December 2021)

Main aim: To provide impartial, ad-hoc advice, peer review the research and support broadening the scope of evidence gathering to include the wider interest

of consumers and to help provide timely, relevant robust evidence to join up food policy.

In 2023 the group:

- Completed an external review of the Consumer Insight Tracker (CIT), published on the [ACSS website](#).
- Contributed to the research specification and tender documents to appoint a new contractor for the CIT.

In 2024 the group will:

- Continue providing ad hoc support to the Wider Consumer Interests research programme, including peer reviewing research materials and final outputs, and reviewing and providing advice on research specifications (ongoing since 2022).
- Continue to contribute to regular steering group meetings to inform topics asked about on CIT, ensuring the current wider interests of consumer are captured (ongoing since 2023).
- Support FSA consumer research around perceptions and understanding of ultra processed foods (Feb 2024 onwards).
- Contribute social science expertise to the Science Council 'wider impacts group' (April 2024 onwards)

Additionally, in previous years, the group has:

- Advised on the direction of work for the WCI Research Programme by providing a steer on evidence gaps that the FSA may want to address, in line with FSA Strategy and Board discussions around Household Food Insecurity (2022).

Economics Working Group (initiated December 2021)

Main aim: To provide advice and guidance on economic analysis and guidance activities taking place under the management of the Analytics Unit. Specifically:

- review the portfolio of current and planned work, identifying areas/topics where the working group can usefully add value/contribute;
- consider what work has already been undertaken in the field of economic research pertaining to relevant areas of food safety policy and identify evidence gaps that can be addressed by further economic research;

- provide input to appraisal panels/steering groups for specific projects or initiatives to ensure projects use appropriate economic techniques and analyse wherever applicable, before they are commissioned;
- feed into relevant briefings, business cases (economic case), evaluations, risk assessments and impact assessments (where appropriate and time permits).

And: Support the economic team to keep abreast of economic research activity and developments. Specifically helping to identify:

- external project(s) and/or programme(s) which may provide evidence in support of the Agency's strategic objectives;
- developments in empirical analysis approaches and analytical methods, including techniques that are being seen in other areas but have not yet been applied to food safety;
- relevant developments in food system economics.

In 2024 the group will:

- Deliver work around the 2024/25 Spending Review, to address evidence gaps where the FSA are unable to quantify the impact of policy interventions and activities, ensuring the SR25 business case is underpinned by robust economic evidence and analysis.
- Attend quarterly review meetings to discuss updates on substantive economics projects (ongoing, since 2022).

In previous years, the group has:

- reviewed the 22/23 Economics Project Portfolio (2022),
- scoped up how best members can support FSA work to develop a strong business case for the 2024/25 Spending Review (2023)

Understanding Regulatory change (initiated January 2024)

Main aim: Support FSA research exploring how potential changes to food regulations may be perceived by, and impact upon, consumers and wider stakeholders.

In 2024 the group will support FSA research around consumers view of regulated products reform by:

- Carrying out a review of the proposed research questions (completed Jan 24)

- Support a rapid evidence assessment exploring how well the research questions are answered in existing research, identifying key evidence gaps and making recommendations for future research (Mar 24).
- Reviewing public consultation questions (TBC)
- Support design of, and peer review outputs from, any commissioned primary research (April 24 and on).

Kitchen Life 2 (initiated December 2020, COMPLETED in 2023)

Main aim: to provide assurance, steering and peer review of Kitchen Life 2 – an innovative multi-method project which explored kitchen behaviours in domestic and commercial kitchens in as close to real-life settings as possible.

Since its inception, the group has:

- Facilitated the appointment of a suitable contractor (2021), contributing to tender documentation, and participating in the subsequent evaluation panel.
- Contributed to Kitchen Life 2 behavioural workshop (November 2022) in which kitchen behaviours were discussed alongside FSA staff and external experts.
- Assured outputs and programme development (2020-2022), contributing to evidence reviews, programme scope, and key design decisions has provided expert assurance on this work, facilitating useful and relevant findings for the FSA.

Ad Hoc work

ACSS members have undertaken 11 pieces of ad hoc work (ie outside of the working group model) in 2023 (see Annex B). This has ranged from reviewing outputs from the social science team, to feeding into horizon scanning exercises.

Conclusion

The ACSS continues to provide valuable support to social sciences in the FSA and has undertaken work in many strategically important areas. Members have provided independent expert guidance on specific research projects, informed the development of internal assurance processes and helped the FSA boost its networks in the wider social science research community.

Annex A: Projects considered via the Gateway Process

Table A1: ACSS Gateway projects 2023 (where RQS are multiple general aim is shown)

Mode	Date	Project
		<p>School Food Standards Pilot: Feasibility Study Phase 2 Reflections</p> <p>Aim: To understand the experiences of Food Safety Officers (FSOs) and Local Authorities (LAs) during phase 2 of the feasibility stage of the pilot.</p>
Quarterly Gateway	27 th July	<p>Methods: Qual (focus groups or interviews) or quant (online survey) dependent on budget.</p> <p>Outcome: A survey approach, utilising open ended questions, was recommended and taken forward with FSOs in house. (Additional funding was subsequently secured to conduct qualitative research with LAs and FSOs.</p>
		<p>Making Food Better - Northern Ireland Food Manufacturers and reformulation</p> <p>Aim: To measure success of the Making Food Better (MFB) programme in Northern Ireland (NI) by understanding food manufacturers' attitudes, engagement and challenges towards healthier food reformulation.</p>
Quarterly Gateway	27 th July	<p>Methods: Qual Interviews with manufacturers</p> <p>Outcome: Following gateway recommendations, research questions were reworded to better reflect the different barriers experienced and a case study approach was carefully considered in the brief and contractor response.</p>

Improving FBO written and verbal communication for in-person ordering of non-packed food.

By 10th
correspondence Oct

RQ: How can FBOs improve the design and delivery of their communications on allergy information to consumers to ensure that they are effective and meet the needs of consumers?

Methods: Mixed - using a co-creation/iterative approach

Outcome: Following gateway recommendations research questions were clarified.

Health and Social Care Vending Guidance Evaluation.

By 10th
correspondence Oct

Aim: To provide a robust evaluation of the implementation and compliance of nutritional guidance in vending machines across the five Health and Social Care (HSC) trusts in Northern Ireland.

Methods: Quantitative analysis of sales data, and physical 'audit' of machines.

Outcome: Following Gateway comments, further consideration was given to contingency planning ~ (in terms of data availability) and the contractor was asked to propose alternative approaches

Understanding NI consumer priorities and behaviours in relation to food hygiene ratings in an online food ordering environment

Quarterly Gateway	19th Oct	<p>Aim: To explore consumer information priorities when shopping for food online and to explore where food hygiene ratings rank in those priorities</p> <p>Methods: Depth interviews exploring user journeys</p> <p>Outcome: A bigger sample and experimental methodology was recommended however this could not be taken forward due to time/budget constraints. The aim and research questions were subsequently rewritten to reflect ACSS feedback on what could be achieved with the proposed methodology</p>
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Stakeholder Research

By correspondence	8th Dec	<p>Aim: To build understanding of how stakeholders across England, Wales and Northern Ireland perceive the FSA</p> <p>Method: In-depth qualitative telephone/video interviews.</p> <p>Outcome: Following Gateway comments research questions were reworded and comparability to previous research in 2021 was considered</p>
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Annex B: 2023 Ad Hoc Requests

Table B1: ACSS Ad hoc requests received in 2023

Date	Requestor	Task
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Jan 23	Social Science	Peer review Precision Breeding report
Feb 23	Social Science	Peer review prepackaged for direct sale PPDS Evaluation report
Mar 23	Social Science	Peer review Food &You 2 Wave 5 report
June 2023	Social Science	Peer review Behavioural Science Framework paper
July 2023	Social Science	Peer review Food &You 2 Wave 6 report
July 2023	Analytics unit	Review of School Food Standards Survey
Oct 23	Strategic insights	Contribute to FSA horizon scanning assessment
Ongoing (from Mar 23)	Analytics unit	Peer review Food &You 2 outputs (Waves 5 and 6, and the Trends Report)
Ongoing (from Jun 23)	Analytics unit	Peer review School Food Standards Pilot outputs

Ongoing (from Oct 23)	Social Science	Expert participant and advisor in project exploring small and medium food businesses' written and verbal communication on allergens in out-of-home settings
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Annex C: Completed ACSS Working Groups

1. Climate Change and Consumer Behaviour (initiated December 2020). Main aim: To map emerging and potential consumer behaviour trends onto the FSA's objectives in order to inform FSA policy in the coming years. The Working Group developed and commissioned an expert elicitation workshop, which ran in May 21. This exercise gathered expert opinions on trends (observed or considered possible) that may impact food safety, food authenticity and/or regulation. A second event was to help key FSA policy officials in FSA to consider. The final report 'The impact of climate change on consumer food behaviours: Identification of potential trends and impacts' is published [here](#).
2. Risk communications (initiated August 2019). Main aim: To ensure that the best possible evidence base supports the development of a risk communication framework for the FSA. The Working Group undertook a number of activities leading to the publication of the [FSA risk communication tool kit](#), supporting science, policy and strategy teams to communicate effectively, and facilitating better risk communications planning.
3. EU Exit (initiated April 2019). Main aim: To provide expert advice to support the identification of potential economic changes that would impact food businesses and consumer interests in relation to food. The Working Group worked with economists to explore the evidence, increasing the FSA's understanding of the likely impacts on industry and consumers, and informing approaches as to how the FSA can mitigate expected risks.
4. Food and You 2 (initiated September 2018). Main aim: To review the approach and methodology for the flagship Food and You survey and formulate actionable recommendations to improve methodology and maximise impact. Proposals in the subsequent [recommendations paper](#) have since been implemented, with Food and You 2 now taking a modular push-to web methodology, increasing the scope of the survey and frequency of outputs, producing more timely and relevant evidence on consumer attitudes and behaviours.

5. Applications of behavioural science (initiated June 2018). Main aim: to help assure best practice and outcomes in the application of behavioural science to the upcoming work of the FSA's engagement with consumers to ensure food is safe and is what it says it is and regulators of food businesses who are responsible for complying with food safety regulation. This group was set up to review the progress the FSA Social Science team had made within the behavioural science remit and scope out new work in line with emerging priorities.

[1] ACSS member profiles can be found on the [ACSS member page](#)

[2] The review also recommended that membership of the Science Council is expanded to include social scientists.