

Minutes

15th Meeting of the Advisory Committee for Social Science (October 2025) Minutes

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1st October 2025 Minutes

Location: 64 Victoria Street, London, and remote via Microsoft Teams

Time: 10:00-16:30

Attendees: ACSS

- Julie Hill (JH), Chair
- Professor Julie Barnett (JB)
- Professor Eleonora Fichera (EF)
- Professor George Gaskell (GG)
- Professor Fiona Gillison (FG)
- Professor Charlotte Hardman (CH)
- Professor Spencer Henson (SH)

- Dr. Hannah Lambie-Mumford (HLM)
- Dr. Rounaq Nayak (RN)
- Dr. Raymond Obayi (RO)
- Dr Luca Panzone (LP)

Attendees: Food Standards Agency

- Michelle Patel (MPa), Deputy Director, Analysis
- Willem Roelofs (WR), Head of Analytics Unit
- Rebecca Gillespie (RG), ACSS Secretariat
- Kristina Diprose (KD), ACSS Secretariat
- Megan Potts (MPo), ACSS Secretariat
- Lucy Murray (LM), Principal Research Officer
- Robin Clifford (RC), Senior Statistical Officer
- Matt Jenkins (MJ), Statistics Adviser
- Elisabeth Watson (EW), SAC Admin Hub

- Darren Holland (DH), Lead Operational Research Advisor
- Sian Puttock (SP), Senior Operational Researcher
- Ely Mirzahosseinkhan (EM), Principal Research Officer
- Helen Heard (HH), Senior Research Officer
- Alice Wootton (AW), Senior Research Officer
- Elli Amanatidou (EA), Senior Risk Assessor
- Abrar Jaffer (AJ), Senior Policy Adviser, Foodborne Disease

Other Attendees

- Professor Steven Cummins (SC), Science Council
- Matt Ensor (ME), DEFRA Social Science Expert Group, Secretariat
- Jess Phoenix (JP), DEFRA, Social Science

Summary of the meeting:

The 15th Plenary meeting of the Advisory Committee for Social Science (ACSS) included updates from the ACSS Chair, Secretariat, Analytics Unit, Working Group leads, and Science Council. Key discussion topics included:

- Declining response rates in the Food & You 2 survey

- Opportunities for further analysis of Food & You 2 data
- External expertise mapping
- FSA's research priorities on foodborne disease

See Annex A for agenda and papers.

Summary of actions:

- **Action 15.1:** Secretariat to circulate links shared by MPa on UK-EU SPS negotiations.
- **Action 15.2:** Secretariat to test MS Teams SharePoint links for sharing Official documents.
- **Action 15.3:** Secretariat to poll members for availability for the 16th Plenary.
- **Action 15.4:** Secretariat to re-share the external expertise mapping list of organisations by topic and method (Annexes A and B) for ACSS review.
- **Action 15.5:** ACSS Members to review the external expertise mapping list and let the FSA know of any additional research groups or individuals to add.
- **Action 15.6:** MPo and AW to add “implementation science” to search terms for expertise mapping.

Minutes:

Welcome and introductions

- JH welcomed attendees and invited introductions.
- Members shared affiliations and research interests.
- GG mentioned he is chairing a Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) working party consumer interest group on precision briefing.
- SC introduced his role on Science Council and interest in co-benefits of nutrition and environmental standards.

Declaration of interests

- No new declarations beyond those already recorded.

Actions from the last meeting and Chairs update

- No actions were outstanding from the last plenary meeting.
- JH gave a brief update on ACSS membership and recruitment.
- JH gave an update on the joint systems meeting with Defra's Social Science Expert Group (SSEG) in May, highlighting key themes and takeaways from the output developed by SSEG and ACSS members. This led to:
 - Discussion and reflection on the takeaways around place-based approaches and policy-levers.

- The importance of aligning UK policies with international strategies and policies, and reflections on UK-EU Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) negotiations and cross-departmental alignment.
- RO highlighted differences in regulatory approaches internationally (e.g. orchestration vs classification).
- **Action 15.1:** Secretariat to circulate links shared by MPa on UK-EU SPS negotiations.
- [UK-EU Summit - Common Understanding](#)
- [British businesses cheer UK-EU deal to support food trade and profits](#)

Secretariat update (paper 15.1)

- RG provided an update on secretariat staffing changes. Thanks extended to Carol Scott, and welcome to new members.
- RG thanked ACSS members for ad hoc work to support Food Standards Agency (FSA) Social Science projects.
- RG provided an update on recent procurement process changes.
- RG provided an overview of updated guidance for Science Advisory Council (SAC) members for handling security marked documents, and plans to use MS Teams SharePoint for document sharing.
- RG also shared a forward look of upcoming meetings and activities for the next financial year.

- **Action 15.2:** Secretariat to test MS Teams SharePoint links for sharing Official documents.
- **Action 15.3:** Secretariat to poll members for availability for the 16th Plenary.

Analytics Unit update

- WR presented an update on recent changes to FSA board membership, as well as an overview of the [Annual Science Update](#) presented to the FSA Board in September 2025.

WR presented an update on Analytics Unit (AU) work since March 2025. This included:

- economic impact evidence for SPS negotiations
- work on regulatory compliance
- commissioned research on meat charging discount regime
- baseline data collection for evaluation of the provision of allergen information for non-prepacked food scheme
- the publication of [Our Food 2024](#).

WR provided an overview of planned projects and research activity for 2025/2026. For example, work on healthy food standards with Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Food Strategy monitoring to support Defra, streamlining Food Standards and Food Security reports, Innovation Hub research funded by Department for Science Innovation and Technology (DSIT), participating in UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) led Ultra-processed foods (UPF) public dialogue, and an AU hackathon to make better use of FSA Incidents Data.

- Discussion about to what extent the Healthy Food Standards and Food Strategy will overlap. They are led by different departments (DHSC and Defra) however the FSA is working closely with both departments.
- Question about opportunities for SACs to provide input into the Food Strategy and related areas. The joint food systems meeting with SSEG, the ACSS's recent work on UPFs, and their review of a draft specification for an evidence review of food system interventions were noted as examples of how they have shaped this work so far.
- Members asked for clarification on what the future approach to the Food Standards and Food Security report may look like, with MPa and WR explaining this is still under negotiation.
- CH flagged that [UKRI has recently funded six new projects focused on co-designing place-based interventions to address dietary inequalities](#), which are relevant to the FSA's recently commissioned evidence review.

Working group updates (paper 15.2)

- HLM gave an update on the **Assurance Working Group's** activities since March, including: considering two FSA social science projects through the Gateway process, and reviewing approaches to reaching vulnerable consumer groups in research. Going forward, the group will continue to review new projects via quarterly Gateway meetings, as well as support FSA activity on evidence translation and mapping institutions.
- JH noted the group's involvement in end-to-end quality assurance, from looking at procurement, tendering and framing of projects to evaluation.
- JH gave an update on the **Understanding Regulatory Change (URC) Working Group** including recent work to: i) support the commissioning of research around the FSAs meat charging scheme, ii) support the development of evaluation plans and fieldwork materials to explore the

impact of the FSAs Provision of Information guidance, iii) support work around using a systems approach to better understand the implementation of national level regulation. Activities to support items ii and iii will continue.

- SH gave an update on the **Economics Working Group** where members have finished supporting the Spending Review project, which included a Rapid Evidence Review and compilation of a Policy Impact Matrix. Members continue to attend quarterly review meetings to discuss substantive economics projects and are considering potential presentations for the Food Safety Regulatory Economics Working Group (FSREWG) 2026 conference.
- SH provided an update on the **Wider Consumer Interests (WCI) Working Group**, including the group's contribution to a UKRI public dialogue project on UPFs, review of a draft specification for a systematic evidence review of regulatory interventions to improve food systems outcomes for deprived communities, signposting to academic research on mis/disinformation and its impact on consumers, and continued support of the Food & You 2 and Consumer Insights Tracker surveys. The group's input into these surveys and wider consumers interests research projects will continue.

Break for lunch

Science Council Update

- SC gave an update on recent Science Council work including.
- A report published in November 2024 explored how wider interests beyond food safety could be incorporated into FSA risk assessments (see: [Working Group on Wider Impacts \(2024\) | Science Council](#)).
- Science Council hosted a scoping workshop in June 2025 focused on real world applications of artificial intelligence (AI) in food safety and assurance. They expect to publish a report in autumn 2025 (see [Science Council 2025 meetings | Science Council](#)).

- There was some discussion about the key themes highlighted in the AI workshop. Explainable AI and data transparency were noted as critical for trust and regulatory acceptance.
- Concerns raised included cybersecurity risks, potential inequalities for small businesses, ownership of AI, and potential governance challenges.
- There was a question about future Science Council work on food packaging. SC noted this was likely to focus on contamination risks.
- Ongoing Science Council interests include foodborne diseases and supporting the FSAs science assurance processes.

Food & You 2: Declining response rates and the impact on representation (paper 15.3)

- RC presented recent trends in response rates to the Food & You 2 survey, noting a steady decline since Wave 5 across all UK nations. While the demographic profile of respondents has remained broadly stable, concerns were raised about long-term representativeness and cost implications due to increased recruitment efforts.

Discussions focused on 3 questions:

How concerned should we be about the current downward trend in Food and You 2 response rates?

- GG, JB and EF noted this trend is consistent across government surveys and recommended engaging with the contractor and other Government departments to understand broader patterns.
- EF suggested further analysis at postcode level and by deprivation indices to identify regional or socioeconomic drivers.

- RO highlighted survey fatigue and public scepticism about the impact of their participation.

What additional measures, if any, could we put in place to mitigate the risk of further reductions to response rates and the potential reduction in the representativeness of the data?

- FG asked whether minimum sample sizes could be prioritised over response rates.
- Members discussed the effectiveness of incentives, with SH noting behavioural economics evidence that small incentives can sometimes reduce participation. FG referenced UKRI's £25/hour guidance for public involvement.
- Members also raised the importance of using versatile vouchers and considering unconditional incentives for higher-burden surveys.
- The FSA's Food & You 2 team (LM, RC, HH) noted a previous trial to test the incentive level, but also that with the rate of inflation, the incentive would have devalued in real terms since.
- SC suggested exploring alternative data collection methods, such as probability-based panels, and noted that postal-first approaches typically yield lower response rates.
- LP and SC recommended testing alternative messaging in invitation letters and considering the use of open vs. closed registers. LM noted that letters had previously been message tested, but a while ago, and this could be revisited.

If this downward trend continues, should we adjust how we present and interpret the survey results?

- There was limited discussion on how declining response rates might affect interpretation of results, but members agreed this should be monitored closely.

Food & You 2: Opportunities for further analysis and reporting (paper 15.4)

- LM presented proposals for more targeted analysis of Food & You 2 data, focusing on three priority areas: food safety, food hypersensitivities, and healthy and sustainable diets. The aim is to move beyond broad descriptive reporting to more insightful, topic-specific outputs from Wave 11 onwards.

Discussions focused on 2 questions:

What analytical techniques or methods could we use to deliver more meaningful insights from Food and You 2 on the three topics discussed in this paper (food safety, food hypersensitivities and healthy and sustainable diets)? Do you have any examples you can share where this type of analysis has been used?

- GG recommended latent class analysis to identify patterns among specific groups, such as older or food-insecure populations.
- RO and EF suggested advanced techniques including multilevel modelling, structural equation modelling, composition analysis, difference-in-difference analysis, and pseudo-panel approaches to track change over time.
- CH shared examples of existing academic PhD work with F&Y2 data, using logistic regression to examine food insecurity and sustainability concerns, and emphasised the importance of aligning with external research to avoid duplication.

Are you aware of any existing insights or data sources on these topics that could inform our analyses (e.g. potential drivers/barriers or moderators/mediators)?

- JB suggested exploring differences in consumer confidence and behaviour for specific allergens, if the sample size allows, building on previous FSA research.
- JB also suggested exploring whether there is any association between severity of allergy and perceived importance of Food Hygiene Rating when eating out, based on allergy charity feedback.
- JB suggested distinguishing takeaways in the analysis for food hypersensitivities if possible.
- LP stressed the importance of distinguishing between allergies and intolerances in analysis and public communication.
- FG proposed exploring modifiable behaviours and values related to environmental sustainability, and linking insights to obesity strategy.
- RO suggested combining with other datasets, e.g. on household purchasing, or Office for National Statistics (ONS) deprivation indices. LM confirmed that data linkage opportunities are being explored, particularly in Wales, and welcomed suggestions to engage with Administrative Data Research UK (ADR UK) and other initiatives.
- SC and CH recommended reviewing existing systematic evidence and pre-registering hypotheses to strengthen analytical rigour.
- Members encouraged the FSA to continue to engage with them and use their subject and methodological expertise as research questions are defined and analysis plans are developed.

External Expertise Mapping (paper 15.5)

- RG presented an overview of work carried out to map external research expertise in food policy topics and analytical methods.

Discussion focused on 2 questions:

Are there any organisations or research groups working in the areas identified as gaps (shown in table 1) that we have not identified?

- Members recommended exploring research organisations with transferable methods that may not be labelled as food policy research (e.g. health economics)
- Members also recommended including think tanks and professional associations
- Members suggested a variety of individuals and organisations to help fill gaps in current mapping, this included: University of Manchester (expertise in eye tracking methods and discrete choice experiments), Rebecca Nibb at Aston University, Christina Jones at University of Surrey, Cwbe at University of Bath (expertise in wastewater epidemiology).
- Clarifying “operational delivery” terminology. Exploring organisations with research expertise in implementation science, and logistics may help fill this gap.

An alphabetical list of organisations is shown in annex A (by topic) and annex B (by method). Are there any additional organisations with relevant expertise that we have not identified?

- RG drew members attention to the lists in Annexes A and B and suggested a follow up action for ACSS members to review and follow up with additional suggestions by email.
- There was some discussion about the possibility of expanding the mapping to include strategically important international research institutions. For example, research funded in the United States on the economics of foodborne diseases.

- **Action 15.4:** Secretariat to re-share the external expertise mapping list of organisations by topic and method (Annexes A and B) for ACSS review.
- **Action 15.5:** ACSS Members to review the external expertise mapping list and let the FSA know of any additional research groups or individuals to add.
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FSA Research and Evidence Priorities: Foodborne Disease

- DH presented recent work to help understand, firstly why reductions in Campylobacter levels in poultry have not led to a corresponding decrease in confirmed laboratory reports of Campylobacter and secondly why both confirmed laboratory reports of Campylobacter and non-typhoidal Salmonella increased in 2024. For the first question an expert elicitation exercise identified 25 hypotheses, with several relating to consumer behaviours.

Discussion highlights:

- SC noted increased chicken consumption among young people, particularly from independent outlets, and offered to share relevant data.
- JH and JB referenced Kitchen Life 2 findings and expressed disappointment that these insights hadn't been fully utilised. RC noted that this data is useful for a rich snapshot, but not for tracking change.
- FG and RO raised questions about the role of pets and raw pet food in transmission, with EA confirming that a microbiological risk assessment

(MRA) survey of raw pet food that includes campylobacter is underway but not yet published.

- SH shared updates on World Health Organisation's (WHO) forthcoming global FBD estimates, which may offer comparative insights.
- RG and DH discussed subgroup analysis, including age and ethnicity, and SC noted an inverse relationship between confirmed laboratory reports of Campylobacter and deprivation.
- GG and LP emphasised the challenge of quantifying behavioural risks and identifying overlooked consumer practices, such as reusable bag hygiene.
- RO cautioned against assuming chicken consumption is the sole driver of human cases of Campylobacter, suggesting a broader framing around hygiene and cross-contamination.

Member updates

- JH led a discussion on the current research projects/programmes ACSS members are involved in.
- GG is chairing a group exploring consumer issues as part of Defra's Working Party on Precision Breeding.
- SH highlighted work with WHO on global estimates for foodborne diseases (FERG), due to be published soon.
- EF and FG gave an update on their joint UKRI-funded project on commercial determinants of health at the local government level. The project aims to reduce health inequalities, improve population health, and build a collaborative network of academics, civil society groups, and local

authorities.

- RO noted work with the FSA social science and policy teams to apply a systems approach to better understand national level regulation.
- RN noted that they and RO will be delivering a research project commissioned by the FSA on the meat charging discount regime in abattoirs.
- JB is working with chemists around wastewater epidemiology, an area where there is currently limited social science research.
- JH updated on her work looking at the governance of circular economy, in her role at the Institution of Environmental Sciences (IES).
- SC updated on the SALIENT consortium trials (10 trials to improve food systems for healthy and sustainable diets), noting public engagement and reporting activities due to occur in March 2026.
- LP discussed research with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (Ofgem) focused on how consumers perceive price changes, and how people process conflicting information.

Reflections on ACSS plenary format and AOB

- MPa posed a question about the current remit of the ACSS, and the potential to provide expert advice to other professions within the FSA's AU, for example Operational Research and Statistics.
- JH highlighted that membership was refreshed in the last recruitment round to strengthen expertise in AU professions, and that there is potential to do

the same in the 26/27 recruitment campaign if considered necessary.

- JH thanked attendees and presenters for their contributions to the meeting and thanked the Secretariat for their thorough preparation.

Annex A - Papers and Agenda

Papers:

- 15.1: Secretariat update (item 4)
- 15.2: Working Group update (item 7)
- 15.3: Food and You 2: Declining response rates and the impact on representation (item 8)
- 15.4: Food and You 2: Opportunities for further analysis and reporting (item 9)
- 15.5: External Expertise Mapping (item 10)

Agenda:

10:00: Welcome and Coffee on arrival (30m)

10:30: Introductions (JH, 15m)

10.45: Declaration of interests (JH, 5m)

10.50: Actions from the last meeting and Chairs update (JH, 10m)

11:00: Secretariat update (RG, 10m, paper 15.1)

11.10: Analytics Unit update (WR/RG, 20m)

11:30: Working group updates (30m, paper 15.2)

- Assurance (HLM, 10m)
- Understanding Regulatory Change (JH, 10m)
- Economics (SH, 10m)
- Wider Consumer Interests (SH, 10m)

12:00: Lunch (30m)

12:30: Science Council Update (SC, 10m)

12.40: F&Y2: Declining response rates and the impact on representation (RC/MJ, 45m, paper 15.3)

13:25: F&Y2: Opportunities for further analysis and reporting (LM, 45m, paper 15.4)

14:10: External expertise mapping (RG, 45m, paper 15.5)

14:55: FSA research and evidence priorities: Foodborne disease (DH, 45m)

15:40: Member updates (JH, 25m)

16.05: Reflections on ACSS plenary format and AOB (JH, 25m)

16:30: Close