General

Paper 15.1 ACSS Secretariat Update (October 2025)

Summary

This paper is for information and provides an update to members on ACSS activity. Key meeting dates and topics of discussion for other FSA SACs are presented in Annex A.

Meeting actions from 14th ACSS plenary meeting

Action	Status
Action 14.1: Secretariat to share the most recent Food System Strategic Assessment and related board paper with members.	Completed, and ongoing (see point 2 for most recent relevant board paper)
Action 14.2: Secretariat to explore with Policy colleagues whether ACSS work on the role and measurement of public attitudes as a source of evidence for trade negotiations (e.g. via the Understanding Regulatory Change working group) is useful for informing current work.	Ongoing – we are continuing to discuss this with policy colleagues and intend to take a paper to the URC group at their next meeting.
Action 14.3: BG/KD to discuss the food hypersensitivity provision of information theory of change and evaluation with FSA Comms, to improve understanding of how the guidance will reach businesses and consumers.	Ongoing – we continue to work closely with comms on the provision of information evaluation. We are doing some interim qualitative research with businesses this year to test awareness of the guidance and will share insights with comms.
Action 14.4: Secretariat to circulate the slides from all presentations.	Completed

New members and 2025 recruitment

Since our last plenary meeting, we have welcomed 4 new members to the ACSS:

- **Prof Eleonora Fichera Bath, Professor of Applied Economics**
- **Dr Luca Panzone Newcastle, Reader in Environmental Economics**
- **Dr Rounaq Nayak UWE Bristol, Senior Lecturer Farming Systems**
- **Dr Raymond Obayi Manchester, Assistant Professor in Operations and Supply Chain Management.**

Given the decision to defer SAC recruitment, members due to come to the end of their terms of appointment during FY26/27 were offered 12 month extensions. We are grateful to members for accepting this extension. We will next run a recruitment campaign in Summer 2026. Until any members from that campaign are in post, we expect membership to remain unchanged.

Board membership

In August 2025 the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) announced six new appointments to the FSA Board. Clare Evans, Dr Susan Paterson, and Steve Ruddy will serve four-year terms, and Professor Sir Frank Atherton, Alison Austin and Louise Hoste and will serve three-year terms.

- Clare Evans has extensive experience within the food manufacturing sector, including over 26 years in Executive roles at Greencore Foods.
- Dr Sue Paterson is a distinguished RCVS and European Board-Certified Veterinary Dermatologist and the current President of the World Association for Veterinary Dermatology.
- Steve Ruddy Ruddy is a highly experienced local government leader who currently chairs the Chartered Trading Standards Institute.
- Professor Sir Frank Atherton has held senior public health leadership roles across England, Canada, and Wales over two decades, culminating in his service as Chief Medical Officer for Wales during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Alison Austin OBE combines public sector non-executive experience with independent sustainability consultancy, building on 25 years at Sainsbury's in consumer needs and sustainability.
- Louise Hoste is an experienced retail leader and non-executive director with over 35 years of experience across food, convenience, and general merchandise sectors.

All appointees commenced their positions on 1 August 2025, with the exception of Alison Austin, who will take up her role on 18 November 2025.

Annual Science update to the FSA Board

The FSA board is next due to meet on the 17th September. The annual science update will be presented at this meeting and is published here: Annual FSA Science Update|Food Standards Agency. The paper provides: 1. A review of progress made, and impact delivered, over the last year and 2. An overview of future strategic science priorities and the approach for delivering them across the next Spending Review (SR) period.

DEFRAs Social Science Expert Group (SSEG)

On the 13th May 2025 we held our first joint meeting with DEFRAs Social Science Expert Group. The meeting including presentations from ACSS members, FSA staff, DEFRA staff and the British Academy, and was focused on: “Food systems futures: System challenges, policy solutions and threats”. A summary note, outlining key themes and discussion points, is presented in Annex B.

Ad hoc requests

ACSS members have undertaken a number of ad hoc tasks to support the work of the Analytics team since the last plenary. Thank you to those members who have taken on these tasks, which has included peer review of a range of reports, such as the evaluation baseline report on the provision of allergen information for non-prepacked foods, and expert input into projects, such as the design of a consumer survey on cannibidiol (CBD).

Secretariat Staffing

Since the last plenary, we have said to goodbye to Carol Scott (who has left the FSA) and welcomed Elisabeth Watson as our new SAC admin support. We also welcomed Megan Potts to the secretariat team, whose role includes support to the Assurance and Understanding Regulatory Change (URC) Working Groups.

Government Security Classifications

Following recent changes to FSA security systems, guidance for SACs around handling security marked documents is currently being updated. This should be finalised by the plenary meeting and will be outlined during the secretariat update.

Forward Look

In the coming months, working groups will be undertaking a variety of tasks to support analytics at the FSA. As outlined in paper 15.2, this potentially includes: informing evaluation activity exploring impacts of the FSA's provision of allergen information best practice guidance, (Understanding Regulatory Change (URC) Working Group), supporting the mapping of key research groups/institutions working in areas of relevance to the FSA (Assurance Working Group), contributing to FSA engagement with the international Food Safety Regulatory Economics Working Group (FSREG) (Economics Working Group), and continued support around the development of our consumer surveys (Wider Consumer Interests (WCI) Working Group). Each group meets quarterly, as set out in table 1.

Table 1: ACSS Meetings over next 12 months

Meeting	Date(s)
URC Working Group	1st Dec, 2nd Mar, 1st Jun, 7th Sep
Assurance Working Group	4th Dec, 5th Mar, 4th Jun, 3rd Sep
• Gateway meetings	16th Oct, 15th Jan, 16th Apr, 16th July,
WCI Working Group	8th Dec, 23rd Mar, 22nd Jun, 28th Sep
Economics Working Group	1 st Dec, 2nd Mar, 1st Jun, 7th Sep
16th ACSS Plenary	April 2026 TBC

Annex A: SAC meetings and Key agenda items

Science Council

A **'Artificial Intelligence (AI) in food assurance' project workshop was held on 9 June 2025**: Science Council hosted an expert elicitation workshop with experts across a range of sectors including academia, the food manufacturing and AI industry to discuss the use of AI in food safety assurance. A report of this project will be published in Autumn 2025 and will highlight recommendations on the use of AI in food safety.

Next open meeting: September 2025

Advisory Committee on Novel foods and processes (ACNFP)

Last meeting, April 2025: A successful meeting was chaired by Camilla Alexander-White completing assessments of three more group A CBD assessments moving a step closer to completing the assessment of the applications in the service for the highly purified CBD novel foods.

A new dossier for a curcumin extract and Bambara, a traditional food from third countries were considered. The Committee also progressed the assessment of EPG a fat replacer which raises some new scientific questions. Members agreed in principle the output from the workshop held on allergenicity of new foods and a bumper annual report of the Committees work in the 2024-2025 financial year.

Next Meeting: April 2025

Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF)

Last meeting: 18th June 2025. Key discussion items included:

- Olivia Osbourne (FSA) gave an update on the COT workshop: Gut reactions, Xenobiotics and the Microbiome.
- Matthew Gilmour (Quadrum Institute) gave an update on Food Safety Research Network

Next meeting: 23rd October 2025

Advisory Committee on Animal Feeding stuffs (ACAF)

Last meeting: 24th July. Key discussion items included:

- Dossier for assessment RP2258 Availa CR 1000 – the application was reviewed, and the applicant will be asked to provide further information.
- Dossier for assessment RP1087 Creamino – members discussed the efficacy section, assessing the additive as a “other zootechnical”.

Next meeting: September 2025.

Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT)

Last meeting: 15th July 2025. Key discussion items included review of:

Committee Advice Document on the Authorisation of the extension of use of curcumin (E 100) to a new food category “egg analogues” (RP41).

First Draft statement of advice on

- The risk of T-2 and HT-2 mycotoxins in food,
- Citrinin in the maternal diet.
- on the risk to human health from consumption of bivalve molluscs (shellfish) harvested from UK waters associated with marine biotoxins.

Next Meeting: September 2025

Committee on Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COC)

Last meeting: July 2025 2024, Joint workshop with COM and COT, followed by regular COC meeting. Presentations from bibra, talc, and QSAR,

Next meeting(s): March 2025

The Committee on Mutagenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COM)

Last meeting: June 2025. Key discussion items included Genotoxicity of smoke flavours (reserved), presentation from NC3Rs, and update on OECD guidelines.

Next meeting: October 25

Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN)

Last meeting: June 2025. Key discussion items included Plant based drinks, maternal weight outcomes, and the National Diet and Nutrition Survey.

Next meeting: November 2025

Annex B: “Food systems futures: System challenges, policy solutions and threats”. Summary of key issues and themes that emerged during the 13th May 2025 meeting

Introduction

On 13 May 2025, Defra's Social Science Expert Group (SSEG) held a joint one-day meeting with the Food Standards Agency's (FSA's) Advisory Committee for Social Sciences (ACSS) and members of the British Academy's Public Policy Team. The purpose was to bring together experts on social science and food to coincide with Defra's high priority work on a new Food Strategy. The meeting emphasised food systems and place-sensitive policymaking, the latter being a concept that made strong connections across different parts of the meeting. Due to the cross-cutting nature of food and related systems, we took a collaborative approach to organising this meeting, inviting colleagues from across the social sciences to make an input. Over fifty people attended the meeting, either in person or online, including individuals from:

- Defra SSEG (members and secretariat)
- Defra Food Strategy Policy Team
- Defra Systems, Innovation and Futures Team (SIFT)
- Defra Economic Sub-group secretariat
- British Academy Public Policy Team
- FSA ACSS (members and secretariat)
- FSA Analysis and Policy Teams
- Department of Health analyst.

The agenda was designed to set the context of current food policy direction and ambition in Defra through the Food Strategy and to consider the nature and challenges of food systems and place-sensitive approaches to food policy. The meeting was conducted under Chatham House rules.

Agenda:

Agenda item	**Presenter**
Defra Food Strategy	Defra Food Strategy Policy Team
Overview of Applied Systems Research with a focus on Food Systems	Defra Systems, Innovation and Futures Team (SIFT)
Workshop: Place sensitivity – how could we apply it in the food policy context?	British Academy Public Policy Team
Using a Systems Approach to Better Understand Policy and Regulatory Changes: National Level Regulation	FSA/ACSS

Issues and themes

The food system

The complexity and interconnectedness of ‘the food system’ were acknowledged, and the challenges of drawing boundaries around the system discussed. Several participants emphasised that what makes the system complex is not just its many components but the fact that multiple systems, logics and interests overlap within it, and sometimes conflict. Further, systemic interconnections mean that interventions in one part of the system (such as regulation or procurement) can have effects elsewhere, often unpredictably.[i]

The need for more coherent cross-departmental working within government was recognised and surfaced frequently during discussion. Relevant departments include, for example, Health, Local Government, Transport, Treasury, and Work and Pensions).[ii] However, there was a shared sense that achieving genuine coherence remains a practical and cultural challenge rather than a purely operational one. Contributors argued that a coherent policy would demand more than ‘working together’; instead, meaningful progress would require alignment on the nature of ‘the food system’, policy objectives, language, metrics, and decision-making processes.

Significant aspects of food and related policies are devolved, though it is recognised that the systems of all four nations within the UK are connected and interdependent. While the Food Strategy needs to consider the food system of the UK as a whole, the priorities and policies being developed in the Strategy are for England only. Food systems also have important regional (e.g. European) and international dimensions.

Food production, biodiversity and climate change were seen as critical, interconnected components of the food system. System transformations that are compatible with the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, reduced greenhouse gas emissions, and improved carbon storage were considered to have substantial potential benefits in addition to improvements in human health.

The group discussed ambiguities around systemic approaches and the challenge of ‘changing the food system’. What would ‘system change’ look like and how would we know when it was happening? Would it entail, for example, facilitating a shift from a ‘junk food cycle’ to a ‘good food cycle’? Might it involve a more specific set of indicators? Such questions relate to a fundamental, recurrent issue: what is ‘good food’? This is not simply a matter of language and semantics but

rather a question of who sets the agenda for system transformation, on what basis and with what evidence.

Many contributors pointed to unresolved real-world tensions, for example over appropriate metrics, institutional ownership, and competing visions of a ‘good’ or ‘better’ food system. The significance of there being a range of different actors, with differential power, was widely acknowledged and, once again, it was stressed that resolving tensions between competing visions of a better system was not just a matter of design. A case was made for understanding, mapping and engaging with different actors and interests, in order to clarify how the food system is actually constituted and to identify effective strategies for transformation.

Questions were raised not only about what needs to change but also about the time horizon over which transformation could take place. Some contributors pointed to the difficulty of reconciling long-term change with short-term political or commercial incentives. In considering such questions, it is important to take account of the dynamic nature of the system: for example, it might well be changing currently as a result of past policies, and evolution is likely even without policy action. (In a sense, a ‘better food system’ is a moving target.) Attention was drawn to an extensive body of research on ‘sustainability transitions’, which offers empirical and theoretical insights into multi-actor, multi-level systemic change.[iii]

The importance of food cultures was emphasised, and the point made that the consumption side of the food system needs a place-sensitive focus (see section on Place-sensitivity below). Participants thought it unhelpful to focus on specific foods in abstraction from the wider context of dietary habits and eating practices. One example mentioned was that presenting fish and chips as ‘bad food’ would miss its cultural significance as a Friday night ritual and/or the fact that many people enjoy this meal only occasionally.

Levers /instruments

A range of policy instruments was discussed at the meeting, including:

- Regulation
- Information /persuasion (which research suggests are not notably successful in isolation[iv]).
- Fiscal measures (such as a ‘sugar tax’, for which there is some evidence of effectv). Public procurement (considered by the group to have significant potential).[vi,vii]

- Engagement of diverse publics and stakeholders in system change.

History suggests that a mix of policy instruments and approaches, provided that different components pull in the same direction, is likely to be most effective in bringing about change. It is also important to think about timing and sequencing. For example, the Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL, 'sugar tax') gained legitimacy in a context in which voluntary action (such as the Public Health Responsibility Deal) had failed to bring about meaningful change.

There was clear agreement in the meeting on the need to expand the focus from an emphasis on individual behaviour ('methodological individualism') to include the structures within which individual choices are made. Such structures include the wider environment, which might or might not encourage healthy and sustainable food options.[viii] An expansive view of the food system would require consideration of instruments such as planning and transport policies, which could help facilitate active travel and access to nutritious food.

Reflecting on the above points, participants agreed that there is a need to know more about what has worked well in different contexts and environments, and why.

Framing

The concept of framing is well developed in the social sciences, and it recurred in different contexts throughout the meeting. The framing of problems and potential policy solutions involves the construction of (often competing) narratives or 'storylines', influencing who gets involved in policy formation and which issues are deemed to be within scope. There is ample evidence that framing, and 'changing the frame', have been of considerable significance in the evolution of public policy.[ix]

Participants identified a number of ways in which framing is significant in the context of food policy. They considered how framings affect conceptualisations of 'the food system' itself, exploring, for example, whether thinking in terms of 'food as a market commodity', or 'food as a public good' (with links to health and well-being, and other areas of public policy), or even 'food as commons' would shape different policy approaches.[x] Similarly, framing affects the delineation of system boundaries, influencing who gets involved in strategic thinking and the extent of co-operation and co-ordination required among different departments.

Different framings of ‘food security’ were also identified. Often presented in terms of dependence on imports, security of supply, and the potential to increase (UK) self-sufficiency, food security can also be seen through the lens of lived experience, bringing into scope issues such as access to nutritious food (including affordability) and the need for food banks.[xi] In a related point, it was noted that health inequalities and food poverty are often framed as a matter of people being ‘disconnected’ from food, leading in turn to calls to provide knowledge and practical skills that would enable them to cook and eat well.[xii] It was suggested, however, that the effectiveness of such interventions warrants further scrutiny.

The group agreed that the framing of regulation also mattered, for example whether regulation is routinely referred to as a ‘burden’ or accepted as an essential component of a ‘good food system’ in a modern democracy. Further, it was observed that modernising regulatory systems, even when the genuine intent is to make more efficient and effective use of available technologies, might nevertheless be framed by some actors as ‘de-regulation’ (another example of the importance of language and narrative).

Finally, the underlying framework for decisions and choices (not always explicit) was also identified as making a difference – for example, whether the underpinning is one of preference Utilitarianism (reflected in an emphasis on costs and benefits) or one grounded in concepts of rights, needs and obligations.

Place sensitivity

There was great interest among those attending the meeting in the concept of place-sensitive policymaking, which provided a strong connection across the many issues discussed during the day. Participants saw place-sensitivity as a way of linking policy ambition to on-the-ground realities and it was suggested that the concept could provide a helpful, strategic orientation for future governance. Discussion highlighted the need for a deeper examination of the dynamics of place and place-sensitivity in relation to food systems and policies.

The British Academy’s ongoing work on place-sensitivity in the context of national systems challenges is highly relevant in this context.[xiii] In this work, the concept of place-sensitivity is not intended to replace or re-define the more familiar idea of certain policies and actions being ‘place-based’ but has a different focus. In a forthcoming report on this work, the BA defines place-sensitivity as:

‘Place-sensitivity is an approach to national and local policymaking that better aligns policy with the needs of people in places. It does this by drawing on four

features: different types of knowledge, the language and narratives of places, public participation and multi-level partnerships. … Combining these four features, government can make national policy that is more flexible to different needs and better embedded at a place level.’[xiv]

The view that the ‘consumption’ part of the food system, in particular, needed to be place sensitive was noted above. But production of food is also relevant in this context, for example in relation to allotments, community gardens, school projects, foraging groups and other initiatives.Echoing the centrality of public participation in place-sensitive policymaking, the wider point was frequently made that diverse publics and stakeholders need to be engaged in discussions of all aspects of the food system. Carefully planned and well-conducted engagement and participation were seen as key processes for realising meaningful transformation.[xv]

Important threads running through discussions during the day

- ‘Growth’ and ‘sustainable growth’ (contribution of food system)
- Knowledges about food
- Boundaries of the food system (and competing and alternative food systems)
- ‘Inherent change’ (cultural and social trends relating to food, innovation) and implications for policy
- Need to expand focus beyond individual behaviours to include wider structures • How food system transformation could be place-sensitive
- Regulation and ‘better regulation’ (lagging behind system change)
- Importance of framings of food, the food system, food security, food policy, and regulation.
- In parallel to place-sensitivity, time-sensitivity and food futures (together with theories and methods for bringing these ideas into discussion)
- Meaningful engagement of diverse publics and stakeholders.

Endnotes

[i]. Reflections included the observation that in food strategy design and implementation, complexity is not a neutral function of system configuration but is political, institutional, and situated, shaped by space/place, positionality, and the perspectives of different actors.

[ii]. Kelly Parsons identifies 16 government departments involved in some way in food policy in England, see: Who Makes Food Policy in England? A map of Government Actors and Activities.

iii. The Sustainability Transitions Research Network represents researchers working in this area. See here for a useful contemporary introduction (Geels et al. Advanced Introduction to Sustainability Transitions, Edward Elgar, 2024).

iv. One systematic review of drivers and barriers to adoption of sustainable healthy diets found that education and awareness raising are important but need to be accompanied by enabling factors such as easier and cheaper access to healthy foods and relevant government regulation. See Principato et al. (2025): https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1462901124003095

On provision of information, Rosenblatt et al (2018) found negative graphic warnings on unhealthy food to be more effective in driving healthier diets than negative text warnings or positive messages on healthier food: https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0195666317315957?via%3Dihub

v. Rogers et al (2024) found a reduction in free sugar consumption in both children and adults one year after the introduction of the UK Soft Drinks Industry Levy (SDIL, the 'sugar tax'): https://jech.bmj.com/content/jech/78/9/578.full.pdf
See also Institute for Government: https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/sugar-tax

vi. An ongoing project at Coventry University examines how to improve opportunities for food buyers in schools, hospitals, and other public sector organisations to include sustainable, locally sourced food in their menus. https://www.coventry.ac.uk/news/2024/coventry-universitys-research-aims-to-create-a-more-sustainable-uk-food-system-through-public-sector-food-procurement/

vii. A target in the Food Products (Market Regulation and Public Procurement) Bill, going through Parliament at the time of writing, seeks to ensure that at least 50 per cent of food supplied to the public sector is either produced by British farmers or certified to 'higher environmental standards' Food Products (Market Regulation and Public Procurement) Bill

viii. Interesting projects include the ERC-funded Sharecity's Sustainable Food Sharing workFood Sharing Futures - SHARECITY> and the EU 'Cultivate Project' Cultivate Project | An online platform to support food sharing>

ix. Frames can be tacit, emerging over time as policy deliberation and/or controversies develop, but can also be consciously constructed and deployed by

the actors involved, including the media. There is a large literature on the significance of framing in the policy process more generally. See, for example: British Academy (2024) Public Trust in Science-for-policymaking Public trust in science-for-policymaking | The British Academy>, esp. p.16; Hajer, M. (2003) 'A frame in the fields: policymaking and the reinvention of politics', in M. Hajer and H. Wagenaar (eds.) *Deliberative Policy Analysis: Understanding Governance in the Network Society, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 88–110; Schön, D. A. and Rein, M. (1994) Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies, New York: Basic Books; SAPEA (Science Advice for Policy by European Academies) (2019) Making sense of science for policy under conditions of complexity and uncertainty (https://sapea.info/topic/making-sense-of-science/); Owens, S. (2015) Knowledge, Policy, and Expertise: The UK Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution 1970–2011, Oxford: Oxford University*

x. Vivero-Pol, 2019: file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/613-Article%20Text-1471-1-10-20190405.pdf

xi. See, for example, UKRI-funded projects on food inequalities: https://www.ukri.org/news/projects-spanning-the-uk-to-tackle-food-inequality-unveiled/

See also Tak et al. (2023) on media framings of the previous UK food strategy. This study found that 'British media's alignment with free market economic thinking has implications for food systems reform, as it deters government from acting and relies on the invisible hand of the market to fix the system': https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/bfj-04-2023- 0338/full/pdf

xii. So, for example, we see calls for the school curriculum to cover 'where food comes from' and for community-based initiatives such as cookery classes.

xiii. In particular, the BA's projects Where We Live Now (complete) and Where We Live Next (ongoing), with their emphasis on place-sensitivity (presented and discussed in a special Workshop at the meeting): https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/where-we-live-next/ xiv British Academy (forthcoming)

xiv. British Academy (forthcoming) A Place Sensitive Approach for Environmental Sustainability. (Expected date of publication Autumn 2025.)

xv. See Defra Social Science Expert Group Review of Public Engagement (2022):

Review of public engagement - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)