

Paper 5.3

Quality Assurance Working Group - Update (June 2019)

Summary

This paper provides an update on progress for the Working Group Quality Assurance. It summarises background, key activities and future action. As per action 4.11 from the last ACSS meeting, this paper also reviews the working group against the initial aims. This paper is for information and discussion.

Background

1. At the ACSS meeting in April 2019¹ members discussed how they might provide assurance to the FSA Board on the quality, value and impact of social science² in the FSA. This follows the 2017 Review of Social Science³ which noted that the Advisory Committee should be “an expert departmental committee that focuses on strategic advice and challenge which will help the FSA to apply the latest social science insights effectively to deliver its strategic objectives and understand their impact”.
2. This also follows the September 2018 Governance Review Paper⁴ which stated, “*The Board will also require assurance about the quality, value and impact of the science we commission and rely upon... Some of the assurance will also come from our Chief Scientific Adviser, the Science Council, and our scientific advisory committees (SACs)*”. The Risk Analysis Paper⁵ presented to the Board in March 2019 further highlighted the role of the FSA’s Scientific Advisory Committees in assisting the Chief Scientific Advisor to provide assurance to the Board on the FSA’s risk analysis process.
3. The outcome of this discussion was the establishment of the ACSS Assurance Working Group, which met for the first time in June 2019. The group has met virtually 4 times (June, July and September 2019 and April 2020) and in person at two workshops (November 2019 and February 2020) the next scheduled workshop will be held virtually on 30th June 2020.

¹ <https://acss.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/minutesapril.pdf>

² For the purposes of this work social science will be restricted to the work of the Social Science Team which includes behavioural science but not economics (although this discipline is technically defined as a social science). If specific assurance work is required for economics, this could be done through the establishment of an Economics Working Group. Currently, the two newly established Working Groups on EU Exit and Food Technologies will cover a substantial amount of economic work.

³ <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/socialsciencerevrep150817.pdf>

⁴ https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-18-09-08-governance-report_0.pdf

⁵ <https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-19-03-08-risk-analysis-assurance-final.pdf>

Members

4. The Working Group is comprised of the following members:

- Dr Hannah Lambie-Mumford (Chair)
- Ms Julie Hill (Deputy Chair)
- Professor Julie Barnett
- Professor Susan Michie

Working Group

5. The Terms of Reference agreed for the Working Group in June 2019 are as follows:

- i. Develop a method for evaluating:
 - a. processes by which social science projects are developed, prioritised and commissioned
 - b. how social science projects are quality assured
 - c. when and how social science evidence is used appropriately in FSA decision-making
 - d. the implementation of social science evidence
 - e. Social Science capability and networks (sufficiency, appropriateness and effectiveness).

This work will include reviewing assurance criteria used by other organisations.

- ii. Oversee the evaluation of (ia-e) above. To include
 - a. reviewing plans and documents, starting from the 2017 Review of Social Science and FSA response⁶;
 - b. interviewing key stakeholders;
 - c. tracing selected projects from inception to delivery (the package of behaviour change projects were identified as key candidates).
- iii. Provide advice and recommendations relating to
 - a. how FSA practices relating to each of (ia-e) above might be enhanced to ensure best practice and
 - b. identification of the parameters by which they might best be presented in the annual report to the FSA Board

⁶ <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/research-projects/review-of-social-science>

Key activities to date

The Assurance working group has now undertaken three stages of work:

- 1. Set out the terms of reference and established the group's method of approaching quality assurance which was presented to the FSA board (April-September 2019)**
- 2. Scoped out the core processes and policies surrounding social science research, procurement and implementation (September-December 2019 and reported to ACSS in December 2019) which included:**
 - Looking at how social science priorities are developed at the FSA;
 - Understanding the processes surrounding the commissioning of social science research
 - Understanding existing quality assurance processes during research projects and surrounding outputs
 - Understanding how social science research is used, the social science capacity at the FSA and existing networks.
 - Examining how these processes worked in practice in relation to case study projects (at the November 2019 workshop)
- 3. More detailed work focused on consolidating assurance work across the FSA, research project evaluation and impact, and quality assurance in research procurement (January – February 2020) this involved:**
 - Paul Turner from the Science Council attended the February 2020 working group workshop to discuss links between the assurance work happening in the Science Council and ACSS. The ACSS working group is covering new ground so will carry on its planned activity, linking to the Science Council's activity regularly with the aim of a joint piece of assurance work rolling out in 2021.
 - New processes of research evaluation and impact capture were developed, revised in line with working group comments and rolled out by the social science team.
 - Discussion around the existing procurement system: the working group has noted that the system is not fit for the purpose of procuring excellent social science research. Whilst changes to this system are outside the remit of the working group, the group are taking forward actions to inform the improvement of existing quality assurance processes within this procurement structure (see below).

Future Activities

1. Project evaluation and impact

The social science team have designed processes for capturing impact and for project evaluation which are now being trialled. Both processes will be discussed at the next working group meeting in June.

2. Research quality checklist

In order to help the Social Science team evaluate studies and develop studies to ensure high quality the working group are developing a research quality checklist, building on existing criteria.

3. Social Science Research Programme

The current research programme will be reviewed at the next working group meeting, in line with the current FSA ARI (areas of research interest).

4. Skills assessment

Papers on skill capacity will be reviewed at the next working group meeting.

The next Working Group meeting will be held on the 30th June.

Assessment against aims

1. The working group has now established a good understanding of the relevant processes and operating context for social science work in the FSA and has been able to identify areas where the working group can have the most impact including around the assessment of research tenders and quality assurance during research, research evaluation and capturing the impact of research projects.
2. Processes around research priority setting and strategy development have been set out to the group by the FSA team, as has the progress made since the 2017 review.
3. Processes around research project evaluation and impact are currently being rolled out.
4. Working group members are now working with the social science team, designing (and reviewing) further guidance and process that will make an important contribution to ensuring quality social science research in the FSA, including tender review processes and social science capacity.

Hannah Lambie-Mumford, ACSS Assurance Working Group Chair

Michelle Patel, Rebecca Gillespie, FSA