

Paper 5.4

Risk Communications Working Group - Update (June 2020)

Summary

This paper provides an update on progress for the Working Group *Risk Communications*. It summarises background, key activities and future action. This paper is for information and discussion.

1. Summary

This paper updates the ACSS on the work to develop a risk communications toolkit for the FSA

2. Introduction

2.1 It is often the role of Government bodies to communicate to influence behaviour or empower choice through communicating the evidence base and its assessment of the risk associated with particular choices.

2.2 However, to be scientifically defensible means speaking with a degree of honest uncertainty; difficult within a political and media environment that lends itself to misinterpretation and reductionism. Added to this, food is something that people are personally highly invested in; there is little that is closer to home.

2.3 Once the UK leaves the EU and responsibility for risk assessment devolves to the FSA/FSS, it will be more important than ever to have a robust framework for the communication of food risk.

2.4 The development of an evidence-based framework for how the FSA communicates risk was one of the keystones of the new Risk Analysis approach [agreed by the FSA Board](#) in December 2018.

2.5 The objectives of the Risk Communications Working Group are:

1. a gap analysis of the Science Council principles, and advice on how best to turn them into a workable framework,
2. academic support on a review of the existing risk communication frameworks in order to learn from an analysis of their evolution, how they have been used (or not), by whom and for what purpose,

3. advice on a draft risk communications framework. This includes establishing how we can maximise its usefulness and usability, identifying the questions and checks required to communicate risk in the best way in a range of situations and ascertaining the organisational practices required to do so.

3. Progress

- 3.1 The founding principles behind our work are the Science Council's [Principles for Communicating Risk and Uncertainty](#) published in July 2018. The ACSS Working Group on Risk Communications, which includes several experts in risk communication [reviewed the principles in detail](#) in October 2018.
- 3.2 This advice informed the 'minimum viable product' guidance on risk communication which was developed in-house to be ready for the UK to leave the EU in March 2019 and reviewed by the ACSS Working Group for Risk Communications.
- 3.3 Since then, Communications Directorate and Social Science have been working together deepen our understanding and develop the principles which will inform a practical toolkit which will be useful to our communication professionals, building on both sets of recommendations through primary and secondary research (as advised by the ACSS Working Group for Risk Communication).
- 3.4 There have been multiple elements to this project, including:
 - Desk research to review the academic literature and the latest practice, including current and past government frameworks relevant to communicating risk
 - Testing and validation of findings and recommendations from the literature review with intermediaries (e.g. journalists and bloggers) and communications practitioners from similar organisations
 - Primary research with consumers to develop and test risk perceptions, channel, format, messenger and messaging frameworks
 - Testing of the recommendations with the end users – communications practitioners in the FSA, including exploring how this might best integrated into the organisational practices of the FSA

- 3.5 The [literature review](#) was reviewed by the ACSS Working Group on Risk Communications and is now published.
- 3.6 The findings from the primary research are attached at Annex A and are also being presented to the Science Council this month.

4. Next steps

- 4.1 With a good grounding in the evidence base, Communications Directorate, the Social Science team and our research partners are now in a position to use these principles to co-create a practical toolkit which will include:
- a handbook, with worked examples and case studies and a top-level explanation of each concept,
 - a checklist/ aide memoire
 - some refresher training for communications practitioners
- 4.2 This will be used:
- as a training tool,
 - in ongoing professional development
 - for induction of new starters
 - to aid conversations with risk assessment and risk management colleagues when developing communication strategies

We believe that the Risk Communications Working Group has met the first two of its objectives, and will be asked to advise on the toolkit and plans for implementation in due course to meet the third.

Julie Barnett, Chair, ACSS Risk Communications Working Group
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