

Paper 7.3

Assurance Working Group - Update (June 2021)

Summary

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

Background

1. The ACSS assurance working group was set up in 2019 following discussions around the 2017 Review of Social Science¹ and the September 2018 Governance Review Paper² 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)”*.
2. The aim of the group is to explore how best to facilitate assurance of the quality, value and impact of social science³ in the FSA.
3. The Assurance Working Group has meet quarterly since its inception (supplemented by additional ad hoc task focused meetings).

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

Terms of reference

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

¹<https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/socialsciencerevrep150817.pdf>

² https://www.food.gov.uk/sites/default/files/media/document/fsa-18-09-08-governance-report_0.pdf

³ 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.

- 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 response⁴;
 - 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

Key activities to date

6. The Assurance working group has now undertaken 3 areas of work:

- I. Scoping of core processes and policies surrounding social science research, procurement and implementation (September-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)
- II. 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. The Science Council and ACSS secretariats will cover this work in their regular catch ups to ensure there is no duplication and opportunities for collaboration are identified.

⁴ <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/research-projects/review-of-social-science>

- 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).
- III. Production of a guiding principles note, to inform the FSAs approach to the assessment of other legitimate factors in the risk analysis process⁵ (November 2020 – March 2021). This work was commissioned by the FSA Chief Scientific Advisor (Robin May) and aimed to:
- set out how evidence on other legitimate factors should be assured; and
 - establish mechanisms for ensuring that FSA's analytical consideration of other legitimate factors within the risk analysis process is guided by the most appropriate high-quality evidence.

A meeting was held between the working group members and relevant Science Council members to discuss how this work related to the Science Council review on the [Critical Appraisal of Third-Party Evidence](#). The meeting concluded that the two pieces of work complemented each other well. The guiding principles note was subsequently provided to policy for use in their risk analysis guidance.

Current activities:

7. The working group is meeting on the 21st July to discuss future activity. This will build on previous work undertaken by the working group to exploring the possibility of developing a toolkit to support and enable researchers in commissioning science, particularly when under time pressure.

Hannah Lambie-Mumford, ACSS Assurance Working Group Chair

Michelle Patel, Rebecca Gillespie, FSA

⁵ As set out in the [FSA Board meeting in March 2019](#)