

Paper 4.6

Risk Communication Working Group Update

Summary

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

Background

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

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

Working Group

To this end, the ACSS were asked to help ensure that the best possible evidence base supports the development of a risk communication framework for the FSA. This includes:

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, and
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.

To support and shape the successful delivery of this work, at the first ACSS meeting¹ a working group (WG) was established to help assure best practice and outcomes.

The risk communication WG is comprised of the following members:

Members

- Chair – Prof. Julie Barnett

¹ <https://acss.food.gov.uk/acss-meetings/acss-meeting-15-may-2018>

- Julie Hill
- Prof. George Gaskell
- John McTernan
- Dr Seda Erdem
- Prof. Spencer Henson
- Prof. Dan Rigby

FSA

- Steven Pollock
- Michelle Patel
- Sarah Kovacs

Key activities

The Working Group has advised on the specification, commissioning and reporting of a review of the current state-of-play of available risk communication guidance that is potentially applicable to food, the current academic literature on risk communication and the extent to which current guidance reflects existing academic literature.

The study has assessed the structure of risk communication guidance documents as well as the approach and level of detail provided on appropriate messaging and framing, channels for communication and how to approach different types of risk and audiences. Academic literature on risk communication has been reviewed and the state of evidence on different aspects of risk perception and communication has been summarised.

The study has brought these two literatures together and identified where evidence is strongest, where there are still gaps and the extent to which risk communication guidance reflects the available academic evidence on risk communication.

Future action

The review report has been reviewed by the Working Group and will be published in due course. The FSA would like to consult the Working Group as it begins qualitative research with consumers, journalists and communications practitioners to develop a practical risk communications toolkit for the FSA which reflects the latest thinking.

Discussion

This paper is for information and general discussion.

Professor Julie Barnett, ACSS WG Chair
Michelle Patel, FSA