

## **A practical risk communication framework for the FSA**

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### **Summary**

This paper is for information and discussion. It sets out the background and some of the questions that we are currently asking ourselves. The Committee is invited to discuss options to best support and inform FSA's future work.

### **Background**

It is often the role of Government bodies to communicate to influence behaviour or empower choice through communicating the evidence base and assessment of risk of certain choices. However, to be scientifically defensible we must speak in relative terms and with a degree of honest uncertainty; difficult within a political and media environment that lends itself to misinterpretation and reductionism.

Added to this, talking about people's food tends to elicit highly emotional responses. There is little that is closer to home.

### **Current activity**

How to communicate food risk most effectively is a question currently being considered by the Science Council. Once they have given their recommendations, we anticipate an emerging workstream for social scientists and communicators in the FSA.

### **Future direction**

Prompted by the recommendations of the Science Council, we plan to bring together interdisciplinary academic thinking and the insights of practitioners to develop a synthesis that will be useful for policy and communications colleagues alike. We wish to develop a practical framework and a set of hypotheses which I would then be able to test through the FSA's social research programme, influencing the design and delivery of policy interventions through close working with colleagues in the FSA and elsewhere in Government.

### **Discussion**

The FSA is keen to engage the ACSS in its ongoing programme of work to help assure best practice and outcomes. To do so, would like to set up a Committee working group to provide advice as we develop our framework. Advice may be in the form of short ad hoc reports and/ or as 'critical friends', which will be agreed as work gets underway. The roles of automatic vs reflective thinking, the way that science and statistics are presented, trust in the messenger and the role played by the media (including social media) are often acknowledged by the body of academic work on risk communication. There will be perspectives too from the field of ethics and the philosophy of science among other disciplines. There are also insights to gain from the practical application of strategic communications practice in commercial disciplines like journalism and advertising.

**The Committee is invited to discuss:**

- Who are the key stakeholder groups to whom we should be communicating?
- What approaches should we draw on, and what can we learn from insights from across various fields and disciplines to inform a practical framework for communicating scientific evidence to the public?
- What are the common principles of successful, and unsuccessful attempts to communicate evidence on risk in food?
- What are the most effective ways of presenting scientific evidence to maximize public understanding and change behaviour for food-related risks?
- What can we learn from behavioural science about communicating information to complement other interventions to change behaviour such as legislation?
- When does the risk to public safety and welfare justify an approach to risk management that goes beyond informing and empowering choice, even if this might be less publicly or politically acceptable? Are there principles that can be applied?

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