

GENERAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE

Inter-sessional paper for comment

GACS INT 7

October 2011

FSA policy on underpinning data: principles and key elements

Issue

In October 2010, the General Advisory Committee on Science (GACS) recommended that the FSA should develop an explicit policy on the release of underpinning research data (as one of the recommendations arising from GACS' consideration of the FSA-funded review of nutrients in organic and non-organic foods).

This paper sets out the proposed key principles and features of the policy. The FSA would like to agree and make these public, while wider discussion continues on some detailed points of implementation.

The Committee is asked to

Comment on the proposed principles and key features of the policy

Please send any comments to the Secretariat by 19 October 2011.

Origins of paper

FSA response to GACS recommendation from GACS.

Contacts

Dr Esther Heller

020 7276 8756

Chief Scientist Team

Esther.heller@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk

Dr Patrick Miller

020 7276 8277

GACS Secretariat

patrick.miller@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk

DRAFT AGENCY POLICY ON THE RELEASE OF UNDERPINNING DATA ARISING FROM SCIENCE- AND EVIDENCE- GATHERING PROJECTS

Background

1. In October 2010, the General Advisory Committee on Science (GACS) recommended that the FSA should develop an explicit policy on the release of underpinning research data.¹
2. At the same time, the Government's Transparency Agenda is encouraging more open access to data held by Government bodies, to enable people to find and re-use data in innovative ways. Departments, public research funders and researchers are considering how this should apply to underpinning data from science- and evidence-gathering projects.
3. The Agency is already committed to openness and transparency and the Agency's science- and evidence- gathering project reports are freely available on our open access repository Foodbase. Final Agency project reports are saved in PDF format on Foodbase, which allows for transparency, but is not a good format to allow secondary use of data. For some areas of the Agency's research, underpinning data are not included in final reports, or stored separately on Foodbase, and are not freely accessible or easily located for re-use. Some large data sets are stored on external data archives or repositories, which do allow for access and use.

Aims

4. The Agency's aim is to set out the principles and a consistent approach for the release of underpinning scientific data, subject to legal constraints, that meet both the GACS' recommendation and the aims of the Transparency Agenda. This will provide three important benefits:
 - Transparency: others can see the results generated by our programmes, which are funded by public money
 - Scrutiny: the evidence and analysis that inform our policies are open to others to check and challenge
 - Improving the wider evidence base: by making data available in usable format, we will allow others to build further on the work we have done and get added value from the work

¹ This was one of the recommendations arising from GACS' consideration of the FSA-funded review of nutrients in organic and non-organic foods.

Proposed approach

5. The FSA proposes a two-stage approach:
 - to establish now the key principles for release of underpinning data that will be applied to all new science- and evidence-gathering projects.
 - to develop and finalise the detailed application of this policy in light of the discussions across government and the scientific community, on the detail and practicalities associated with making data freely accessible.
6. This will allow us to ensuring our approach is consistent with that across Government and other funders, as far as possible, and to explore opportunities to develop common approaches or tools.

The Agency's key principles for new science- and evidence-gathering projects

- Data should be made freely available in an accessible format, as fully and as promptly as the circumstances of each case allows.
- Consideration should be given to data management at an early stage, as new contracts are being negotiated. Resource implications for the Agency and our contractors should be considered at an early stage of project planning.
- Underpinning data are to be made available through mechanisms which afford the widest availability for generating added value and which enable re-use.
- Where possible underpinning data should be included in the final project report, so that readers who wish to understand the data but not necessarily use it further can do so from this source. Where data are included in the final report in PDF format, they should also be published separately in file(s) and format(s) that are readable for further analyses of the data or further research. Large data sets can be provided separately in an annexe to the report, again in file(s) and format(s) that are readable for further analyses of the data or further research, and published where possible alongside the final report on Foodbase.
- Sometimes it will be more appropriate to deposit underpinning data in an existing database, archive, repository or other community resource, or for data to be saved in a specialist proprietary format. In these cases, it will be indicated on Foodbase when the project report is published, how the data can be accessed or who to contact for further advice on how to access the data.
- There will be some circumstances where release of data may need to be restricted for reasons of commercial and/or personal sensitivities, or where data may need to be anonymised so that individuals, organisations or businesses cannot be identified, even if data are pieced together. Some datasets may be too large or complicated to be stored in a format or in a programme which Foodbase could support and it may be acceptable to use a commercial data storage centre.