

A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN FSA



Research Unit

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Summary

The Agency has a strong tradition of conducting research in the natural and physical sciences and in recent years we have been increasingly looking to the social sciences. This is because to meet our strategic aims we need to understand and influence behaviours - whether it is encouraging consumers to choose a healthy diet or ensuring those working in the catering industry follow food hygiene guidelines. To help us achieve this we need to strengthen our use of the social sciences.

This paper sets out a high level strategy for further developing and embedding social science within FSA. The paper begins by explaining how and why the FSA needs to strengthen its access to and use of the social sciences to better inform policy making.

“As an evidence based organisation, science is at the heart of everything we [FSA] do..... A rigorous assessment of the scientific evidence provides the best way of reaching sound, objective decisions which protect consumer interests”¹.

The paper then sets out a vision for social science research and identifies five elements for achieving this vision:

- Research planning and prioritisation
- Professional standards
- Use of social science research
- Communications
- Resources, processes and structures

An assessment of social science against the five elements is provided as well as a view on some of the key things that we need to do to take social science forward in FSA. The paper concludes that putting social science firmly on the Agency’s map will take time but with the help of the Social Science Research Unit (SSRU), Social Science Research Committee (SSRC) and commitment from other stakeholders, the Agency is in a strong position to endorse and start to implement a social science strategy.

This paper is being presented and discussed at the first meeting of the SSRC on 23rd July 2008. The next step would be for the SSRC to endorse the strategy and support the SSRU to develop a detailed action and delivery plan setting out short, medium and longer term goals and identifying key influencers and stakeholders.

1. Introduction

The social sciences have an increasingly important role to play in helping the Agency consider challenging and complex issues. The Agency has a strong history of using the natural and physical sciences to underpin policy-making and in recent years we have begun to widen our evidence base by drawing on economics, statistics and operational research. We have also been drawing on other social science disciplines and now have the benefit of a dedicated social science research unit and an expert advisory committee focusing on the social sciences.

Many aspects of the Agency’s work, particularly with regard to dietary health, depend on societal factors. Increasing our access to the social sciences will enhance our

¹ Annual Report of the Chief Scientist 2006/07

evidence base and help us to develop, implement and assess the social impact of our advice and policies.

What is social science research?

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)² has a broad definition of social science *“In its broadest sense, social science is the study of society and the manner in which people behave and impact on the world around them”*. Social science is important to the FSA as influencing and changing behaviour is a key policy goal that cuts across a number of our strategic aims. Understanding both the natural and the social sciences is therefore crucial in helping the Agency meet these aims.

Social science includes many different disciplines that concentrate on particular aspects of society or human nature, for example sociology, psychology, anthropology, geography and economics³. Each of these subjects uses a range of approaches such as surveys, qualitative research, analysis of administrative and statistical data, case studies and randomised controlled trials to measure, describe, explain and predict social and economic change.

Government recognises four analytical professions and treats social science research as distinct from economics and statistics and operational research⁴. Social science research in government encompasses policy evaluation, survey research (sometimes called polling or consumer research) and qualitative research, and uses statistical and other rigorous techniques to analyse data.

This strategy document uses the term social science research and considers it separately (unless otherwise stated) from economics and statistics, both of which are already established within FSA.

2. Why Social Science in FSA?

Since the Agency was set up in 2000 we and external commentators have acknowledged that social science is an important part of the evidence base to inform FSA's challenges. Understanding people's attitudes and behaviours is crucial in helping us with a number of policy issues such as what the public need to make informed choices about the foods they eat.

The Agency has a good track record in using the natural sciences and statistics, and over the last seven years we have increasingly used economics and operational research to underpin policy-making. In drawing up both the Strategic Plan 2005-2010 and Science Strategy 2005-2010 it became clear that we need to draw on a broader range of social sciences to develop further our commitment to evidence based policy development.

Over the years some parts of the Agency have recognised the need for social science and have started to understand the social science dimensions of their policy areas. There are some very good examples where policy teams have commissioned consumer research to explore attitudes and consumption of particular nutrients

² The ESRC is one of seven research councils in the UK www.esrc.ac.uk

³ The ESRC recognises eighteen subjects

⁴ Government Social Research service (GSR) www.gsr.gov.uk; Government Economics Service (GES) www.ges.gov.uk and Government Statistics Service (GSS) www.gss.gov.uk; Government Operational Research Service (GORS) www.gors.gov.uk. There are also government psychologists.

and/or have tried to evaluate the effect of their information/guidance materials and other policy initiatives.

However, we have tended to consider the need for social science research separately to that of other scientific requirements and, as a result, social science research is not always carried out as part of an integrated evidence based approach.

Actions to date

In response to the need to strengthen the Agency's use of the social sciences, we have established a dedicated Social Science Research Unit (SSRU), with the initial appointment of a Head of Social Science Research (July 2007) and a commitment to setting up a new Scientific Advisory Committee to focus on social science. The appointments of the chair and members of the new Social Science Research Committee (SSRC) were completed in April 2008 together with an announcement of the first meeting of the SSRC taking place on 23rd July 2008.

3. Vision for Social Science Research in FSA

The FSA vision for social science research is one where it is recognised, valued and taken into account in decision making in the same way as is research from the physical and natural sciences; where the Agency fully utilises the best available thinking and evidence from the social sciences to inform the development, delivery and evaluation of policy and where social science research has the resources and processes to support the provision of objective, reliable, relevant and timely evidence to support policy and decision making.

To do this effectively the Agency needs:

- A strategic and co-ordinated approach to research planning and prioritisation across science and social science disciplines to ensure that the FSA Board, Executive Management Team and wider FSA have the research information they need to inform current policy thinking and meet delivery needs, as well as anticipate future policy needs
- A reputation (internally and externally) for social science research that is of a high technical standard, draws on the most appropriate and up to date techniques and which is commissioned, conducted, analysed and disseminated in accordance with accepted professional and ethical standards for social science research
- A social science research programme which addresses the strategic priorities of the Agency, complements the programmes of external funders, including other government departments, and is accessible to potential users within and beyond FSA
- A robust and accessible social science evidence base to support FSA policy which is regularly reviewed and updated
- Access to expertise in other analytical professions in FSA; other government departments; wider research community, including both academic and commercial researchers to maximise use of its combined resources and skills
- An evidence-savvy policy community, which makes full use of social science research and 'owns', understands and uses the evidence base supporting and challenging their work area
- Strengthened synergies between natural science and social science research so that the FSA gains the maximum benefit from the combined insights they can provide

- A social science research function which is resourced, positioned and organised in a way that most effectively supports policy, strategy and delivery in FSA. It should also employ joined up methods which facilitate cross and inter-disciplinary working across analytical and Agency boundaries

4. Key Elements for Developing Social Science Research in FSA

The key elements for developing and embedding social science in FSA are:

a) Research planning and prioritisation

Social science research activity in FSA needs to be underpinned by a research planning process which:

- Is coordinated within the Agency in conjunction with wider scientific requirements to ensure that the current information needs of the Agency in developing, delivering and reviewing policy are met as well as future needs being anticipated
- Is properly linked with the FSA Strategic and Group Plans as well as the Science Strategy so that social science information needs are incorporated into the Agency's strategic planning processes
- Identifies gaps and avoids duplication
- Ensures social science research input effectively complements that of other analytical and scientific professions
- Helps eliminate the barriers to joint funding
- Facilitates a coordinated approach between government and other funders of research

b) Professional standards

FSA social science research must be robust, respected, ethical and relevant. The Agency must:

- Commission, conduct, analyse, disseminate and archive research in accordance with accepted professional and ethical standards
- Ensure it is up to date with the latest thinking in social science and social research methods and analysis and use these skills to play an active role in policy analysis, in a way that is responsive to the needs of Agency colleagues
- Understand the combined contribution of the analytical disciplines (social research, statistics, economics, operational research, natural and physical sciences) and promote multi-disciplinary approaches to research and analysis
- Ensure social scientists in the Agency have sound awareness of the policy context in which they work and have strong influencing and communication skills so that they can play a full and effective role in the policy process
- Ensure that FSA's social science research is carried out or supported by social scientists who have been recruited in accordance with or embody the professional standards of GSR - the professional body of the Government Social Research service

c) Use of research

The Agency should provide relevant, accessible and timely social science evidence to help inform decisions on policy and delivery by:

- Ensuring that within the Agency there is high level commitment to an evidence informed approach that includes social science
- Ensuring staff have awareness of the available social science evidence and know how to take proper account of it alongside other types of evidence; ensuring social science evidence is encapsulated in the Professional Skills for Government 'use of evidence and analysis' competency
- Making research findings accessible and relevant to the issues which prompted the conduct of the research
- Treating the collection of research as a continuous and collaborative activity so that a cumulative evidence-base can be generated over time
- Presenting and storing research findings in such a way as to be readily accessible and understandable to research users

d) Communications

The Agency's social science must have a high profile and a positive image with key stakeholders within and outside government and the integrity of the Agency's social science should be valued and respected. The Agency should:

- Communicate effectively internally so that all Agency staff understand the role of social science; are aware of relevant social science outputs and work in a 'joined-up' way, sharing information and operating as an effective professional group
- Identify, develop and maintain good links with other government researchers and the wider academic and commercial research community so it contributes both to wider-thinking and makes effective use of all relevant research knowledge

e) Resources, processes and structures

The Agency should ensure that social science is resourced, organised and managed in the most efficient and effective way to ensure a full and joined-up contribution to the work of the Agency and meeting its strategic aims. The Agency should:

Staff

- Attract social scientists from diverse social science backgrounds who demonstrate the level and range of skills, motivation and potential to make an effective contribution to the Agency
- Recruit ensuring relevant and rigorous selection methods are applied to ensure consistently professional high standards, which are clear to staff and supported by development opportunities
- Be committed to bringing on talent through effective career management and continuous professional development

Budgets

- Ensure that there are sufficient funds to address the data collection and analysis to meet FSA's identified social science information needs, which have been prioritised alongside other evidence requirements
- Ensure that there are sufficient funds to support the recruitment and development of staff who can support the development and delivery of social science

The Agency also needs to ensure that systems are in place to enable the Agency's social science research requirements to be identified, carried out and disseminated in a strategic and joined up way

5. How to Embed Social Science Research in FSA

The ingredients for developing and embedding social science in FSA are contingent on an Agency culture where social science is seen as policy relevant; is understood, respected, and trusted and where there is senior commitment to resourcing and promoting it over the long term.

The Agency is well placed to fine tune and implement a strategy for the social sciences with the support of its new Social Science Research Unit and Social Science Research Committee. Other key players will be the:

Internal stakeholders

- FSA Board
- Executive Management Board and Senior Leadership Team
- Chief Scientist and Chief Scientist's Team
- Policy Heads of Division
- Agency economist, statistician and operational researcher Heads of Professions

External stakeholders

- Social Science Research Committee (SSRC)
- Other Scientific Advisory Committees, particularly the General Advisory Committee on Science (GACS)
- Advisory Committee on Consumer Engagement (ACCE)
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)
- Government Social Research service (GSR) and Chief Government Social Scientist
- Opposite numbers in research and analysis professions in Other Government Departments
- Key experts in wider research and academic community

6. Initial Assessment of Social Science in the Agency and Recommendations of Next Steps

Social science as a coordinated and integrated activity is relatively new for the FSA so we inevitably have a long journey ahead to fully embed social science across the Agency. However, social science research is not entirely new in the FSA. Parts of the Agency have already recognised the need for social science and have responded in different ways. Some policy teams have developed projects within their science research programmes; commissioned ad hoc consumer research to explore attitudes; and organised expert seminars to find out how the social sciences can

contribute to their areas. For instance, there are good examples of FSA social science research such as our dietary survey work which is high quality and well reputed.

When looking at how social science currently fares against the five elements outlined in section four there are already things that the Agency does well with regard to its science research that are a good foundation for developing social science research. On the other hand there are other areas that need changing or starting from scratch. Table 1 (below) and the following discussion summarise these, provides some recommendations and set out actions since July 2007. Further details are provided in Annex 1.

Table 1: Initial assessment of social science against the five strategic elements

Strategic element	Good foundations	Changes needed
Research planning and prioritisation	For science research there are established research programmes with systems for identifying and reviewing research requirements on a regular basis; a research prioritisation tool was recently piloted to help policy directorates identify what new research to fund	Review and adapt existing programmes and systems so that social science research requirements are considered alongside science research; assess appropriateness of prioritisation tool for social science research and agree role of SSRC, GACS and ACCE
Professional standards	There are a range of protocols that support the development of rigorous scientific evidence; half the FSA are scientists and are supported by the Chief Scientist as Head of Profession. The Head of Social Science Research was recruited from GSR and is Head of Profession for FSA social scientists	Need to consider whether the existing science governance protocols are suitable for social science and what changes need to be made to ensure the GSR code can be implemented in FSA
Use of research	There are a number of ways in which the Agency ensures its scientific research is used e.g. research seminars, workshops, peer review, annual research report. Most Agency research is summarised on the website but there is no central list of reports and not all reports are PDF downloadable	Need to develop mechanisms so that social science research is routinely communicated and authenticated in the same way as science research. Need to consider ways for the public to easily locate FSA research and consider introducing a FSA research report series
Communications	The FSA is a science based organisation so science is integral to the culture of the organisation. The Agency has several ways in which we share scientific information internally and we have established and strong links with the external scientific community	Need to develop a range of methods to help explain social science; develop mechanisms so that social science evidence is disseminated; find ways to join up social science with other analytical and scientific professions within FSA, OGDs and wider social science community
Resources, processes and structures	Reflect the current emphasis on scientific evidence	Needs to be reviewed frequently to ensure that sufficient staffing levels, budgets and internal systems are in place to support social science as a coordinated and integrated activity

Research Planning and Prioritisation

The Agency has a strong culture of research planning and prioritisation but, in comparison to other government departments, we carry out this function in an unusually decentralised way with over forty specialised areas of scientific enquiry (Annex 2). This sometimes works against joined up thinking and risks duplication and overlooking of potential synergies and efficiencies across programmes. While the Agency pays careful attention to the ways in which it develops and carries out science research this is not always the case with research which is conducted outside of the research programmes. The risk of this approach is poor quality research that is not strategic and does not provide value for money.

Recommendations

1. The research planning and prioritisation process needs to be reviewed to consider how best social science requirements can be identified prioritised and commissioned across the Agency's business
2. Develop a cross cutting social science research programme
3. Assess appropriateness of research prioritisation tool for social science research
4. Agree role of SSRC, GACS and ACCE in social science research planning and prioritisation

Actions to date

- SSRU sighted on all research programme projects and a system for flagging social science research initiated
- Set up a Social Science Research Programme for cross cutting projects carried out by SSRU and for recording and monitoring ad hoc social science research
- SSRU scoped and successfully bid for a set of cross-cutting projects to be commissioned during 2008-09 (Annex 4)
- SSRU central point for commissioning all ad hoc social science research

Professional standards

The Agency has several protocols (Annex 3) that form a governance framework for our scientific research programmes e.g. Science Checklist. The Agency includes social science within its definition of science so social science can potentially draw on and benefit from our existing governance framework but it will need to recognise the special circumstances of social science research. Typically, only research carried out within one of the science research programmes is currently assessed against the governance framework. This means that ad hoc social science research is not necessarily routinely checked against any professional standards within FSA.

The Head of Social Science Research was recruited from the Government Social Research service and acts as Head of Profession for FSA's social science researchers.

Recommendations

5. Review the science research governance protocols and determine whether they are transferable to social science research
6. Cross check current protocols against the GSR Code (Annex 5) to ensure that the Agency's social science research can be fully compliant

Actions to date

- GSRU reissued the GSR Code in May 2008
- Head of Profession carried out an assessment of GSR membership against membership criteria

Use of social science research

While there are a number of ways in which the Agency encourages the use of science research there are important improvements that need to be made to ensure that all research outputs can be easily found on our website. Our social science research to date has not been used to the same extent as our science research.

Recommendations

7. Develop mechanisms so that social science research is routinely communicated and authenticated in the same way as science research
8. Consider ways of storing FSA research and introducing a research report series

Actions to date

- The Agency is investigating making full reports and supporting data available through 'open access' digital publishing in an on-line repository
- SSRU is attempting to bring together consumer research reports into one place and signposting links to other social science based reports that are stored in other parts of the Agency's website
- FSA website contains dedicated social science section

Communications

There is quite a lot of work to do in the area of communications to ensure that the social science is understood within the Agency and is integrated with other analytical and scientific professions. We also need to develop and maintain good links with other government research and the wider academic and commercial research community.

Recommendations

9. Consider ways to support the wider FSA in understanding the role of social science and help it to make full use of the social sciences and adequately take evidence from the social sciences into account alongside other evidence
10. Develop mechanisms so that social science evidence is disseminated effectively within and beyond the FSA
11. Find ways to join up social science with other analytical and scientific professions within FSA, OGDs and wider social science and commercial research communities

Actions to date

- SSRU drawing on links with the wider GSR community and central professional unit based at HMT
- SSRU initiated links with the ESRC which has led to some early collaborative opportunities

Resources, processes and structures

Positive developments have already taken place with regard to resources, processes and structures. It is important that these are maintained – this is the start of a journey for the Agency so further investment in resources and adapting and introducing processes and new structures will be required from time to time.

Recommendations

12. Resources, processes and structures need to be reviewed frequently to ensure that sufficient staffing levels, budgets and internal systems are in place to support social science as a coordinated and integrated activity within FSA

Actions to date

Covered above

7. Opportunities and Challenges to Moving Forward

In many ways this is a good time to develop social science in the Agency. Firstly, the FSA is in the midst of its first change programme (Tomorrow's Agency) so doing new things and in different ways is inherent in the change programme. We are also about to start the process of developing our strategic plan 2010-2015. Furthermore developing social science chimes with current and emerging evidence needs and responds to evidence gaps that have previously been cited within and beyond the Agency. The current scientific review of the Agency's work may also make recommendations for embracing social science in the future.

New systems for budget prioritisation, research approval and procurement of research services are timely for helping to integrate and embed social science within the Agency. The establishment of the Social Science Research Committee (SSRC) and General Advisory Committee on Science (GACS) are significant enhancements to the Agency's independent advisory armoury and are well placed to identify what needs to be done (SSRC) and how it needs to be done (GACS).

Against this backdrop further changes will be needed to support the development and strengthening of social science in FSA. The development of a delivery plan to accompany this high level social science strategy will help scope out the detail of what needs to be done and by whom.

The key challenges will be financial constraints (which are facing government as a whole); lack of cultural understanding about what it takes to fully invest in and utilise social science evidence and the need for the Unit and Committee's advice to be clearly communicated and acted upon.

8. Timeline

Once the strategy has been discussed and agreed by the SSRC the Social Science Research Unit needs to turn the strategy and recommendations into a detailed action plan and to identify what needs to be delivered in the short, medium and long term and by whom. It proposes to ask the SSRC to help support the Unit in taking the strategy forward.

9. Conclusion

The Agency has made a positive start to strengthening its access to the social sciences. The in-house team has made some sound beginnings by linking up with Other Government Departments and the GSR network and scoping some initial collaborative working with the ESRC for example. Putting social science firmly on the Agency's map will take time but with the efforts of the Social Science Research Unit, Social Science Research Committee and commitment from other stakeholders, the Agency is in a strong position to continue its implementation and integration of social science.

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