



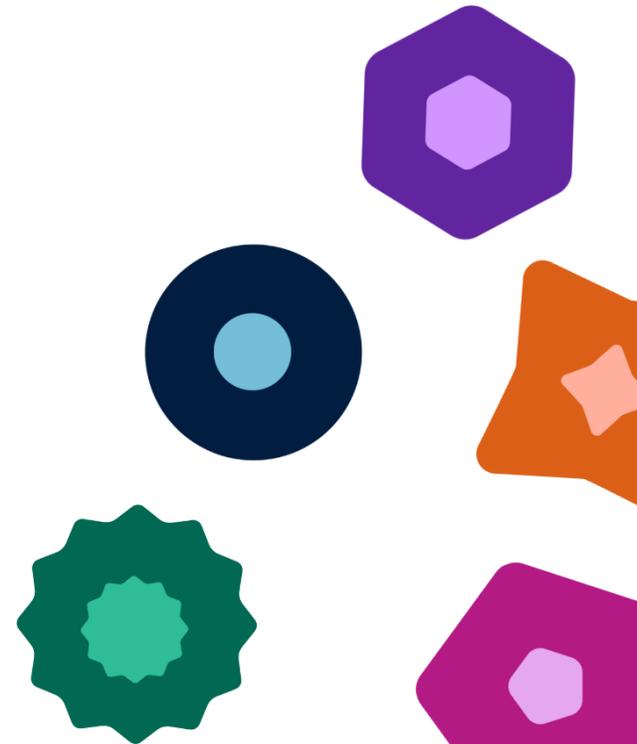
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OFFICIAL

Food Standards Agency

Board Effectiveness Review – FINAL Report

February 26



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Introduction

Background and context

The Food Standards Agency (“FSA”) was established in 2000, in line with the Food Standards Act 1999, and is one of 20 Arms-Length Bodies categorised as non-ministerial departments by the Government. Its main objectives in law are to protect public health from risks arising from the consumption of food and to protect the interests of consumers in relation to food.

The FSA has a Board, set out in statute, that ‘is collectively responsible for all of the Agency’s activities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.’ As at January 2026, the Board is formed of 11 members including the Chair, Deputy Chair and one member for each of Wales and Northern Ireland. Six of the members have joined since summer 2025, with the Chair’s term due to conclude on 31 December 2027.

The Board is supported by the executive management team (“EMT”), led by the Chief Executive who is the FSA’s Accounting Officer, and the FSA Board Secretariat.

There are two key Board committees, the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee and the Business Committee, each chaired by a Board member. There are also the Food Advisory Committees for Wales and Northern Ireland, chaired by the Board members for those nations.

Formal Board meetings are held in public and livestreamed. Board briefing sessions and Committee meetings are held in private.

Scope and review approach

GIAA were commissioned by the FSA to undertake an evaluation of the Board using a Key Lines of Enquiry (“KLoE”) approach, covering:

- Leadership and culture (KLoE 1);
- Board composition (KLoE 2);
- Board decision making (KLoE 3);
- Board committees (KLoE 4);
- Risk management (KLoE 5); and
- Partnership working/stakeholder engagement (KLoE 6).

Our work was undertaken through a combination of interviews with and surveys of Board members and key stakeholders; observation of Board and committee meetings; and a review of Board and committee papers.

Our approach allowed us to form views and recommendations regarding the effectiveness of the Board.

Full details of our scope are set out in Annex 1.

Findings

The evidence we have gathered during this review points to a very positive set of conclusions about FSA Board effectiveness. We suggest that our findings are seen in that context and used to help in Board discussion about future development.

KLoE 1 - Leadership and culture

There is a very positive view of Board leadership and culture, particularly the emphasis on openness and transparency. The Chair is well respected, encouraging contribution and constructive challenge from other Board members, while providing clear direction.

The FSA's unusual Board construct, with a fully non-executive Board and significant time commitment from the Chair, means there is the potential for blurring of the Chair and EMT's roles. At present this risk is generally well managed but should remain under consideration. In particular, with the increasing workload of the FSA, for example through the EU reset, and the Chair's current term due to finish in December 2027, some form of codification around Board/Chair and EMT responsibilities may be helpful.

KLoE 2 – Board composition

The mix of skills and experience on the Board, partly as a result of the recent recruitment process, has been welcomed. While the new Board is still in a period of formation, contribution and additional capacity from the new members is seen as positive.

It is widely acknowledged, however, that while the Board has diverse skills and experience, it is not demographically diverse. In particular, there is a lack of ethnic, age and, potentially, disability diversity. This risks that the Board does not benefit from the distinctive perspectives on food regulation

that under-represented groups may bring. For example, varying cultural or religious approaches to food; the impact of technology on food, particularly for the young; or how regulation affects those with certain disabilities. Given the public nature of the Board, the lack of diversity may also lead to disengagement from those in attendance in public or online if they feel they are not represented.

Thought should be given as to how the Board can be developed in this area and how more diverse views could be brought into the Board, taking into account lessons from previous attempts to address the issue. This may be part of a wider consideration of how the consumer voice feeds into Board discussion and decisions.

KLoE 3 – Board decision making

Board decisions are evidence based and clear, with strong secretarial support provided. There was general positivity around Board and committee papers, with those who have been at the FSA longer noting the transition there has been in Board paper quality. Further consideration may be helpful around the clarity of what the Board is being asked for when presented with a paper, allowing members to better focus their comments and questions.

The ability to make informed decisions is supported by the engagement of members outside of the formal meetings. The weekly update emails and Keeping in Touch sessions are highly valued by members, as are the briefing sessions preceding the Board meetings. These sessions, and other forms of non-public Board interaction, should be kept under review to ensure they are providing the greatest value to members through covering topics in a way that is not possible in a public meeting.

Findings

KLoE 4 – Board committees

Both the ARAC and Business Committee appear to be well chaired, reflecting the openness and constructive challenge of the main Board.

The purpose of the ARAC is well understood across the organisation, however its agenda is significant in volume for what historically has been a relatively short meeting. This risks that some items may not get the scrutiny they require. Recent developments as a result of the previous ARAC effectiveness review, providing more flexibility in ARAC timings, is therefore positive and evidence of a desire to improve arrangements.

For some interviewees, particularly those who do not attend, the purpose of the Business Committee is less clear. Those who have been involved at the FSA for a longer time noted that there has been an improvement in the BC. Those with an operational background or responsibility tended to be very positive. We suggest that a clarification of the purpose of the BC; the expectations of BC attendees; and its interaction with the Board would be helpful.

KLoE 5 – Risk management

Risk in relation to food regulation is at the centre of the Board's work, with members saying that they understand key risks and FSA risk appetite. Board discussions also consider risks within items presented.

Separately, a lot of work is done by the EMT and their teams on the risk management process, to identify, monitor and address risks. This is brought together at an annual Board session where strategic and corporate risks and risk appetite are discussed.

There is a disconnect, however, within the approach to risk management. The risks considered within Board discussions primarily focus on food system risk, rather than corporate risks. While corporate risks should not dominate discussions, if they are not considered there is a potential that Board decisions impact their ability to be mitigated.

A way to address this disconnect may be for Board report covering papers to have a section on relevant risks, including how the risk is affected as a result of the issue or decisions that may be made.

KLoE 6 - Partnership working/stakeholder engagement

The FSA has strong links to partners and stakeholders operationally and through relationships that the Chair and Board members hold individually. It was noted that the Chair and Chief Executive work hard in effectively engaging political representatives. The work with the Welsh and Northern Irish devolved administrations was also highlighted as being positive.

An area for continued consideration is how best to engage partners as a Board as well as individually. In particular, it may be beneficial to develop the work being done to engage with Food Standards Scotland at a whole Board level, building on the planned upcoming Board to Board session. This may help to reduce frustration felt by consumers and industry around a perceived lack of join up between the FSA and FSS.

It will also be valuable to finalise the framework agreement with DHSC as sponsoring department. This may become increasingly important as the FSA's role evolves, particularly in relation to the EU reset, and longer term as a change of chair occurs.

Recommendations

	Recommendation
1	Keep under review the role and responsibilities of the Board (particularly the Chair) compared to the EMT and ensure expectations are clear whenever there are changes of personnel.
2	Undertake an analysis of the potential impacts of the lack of ethnic, age and, if relevant, disability diversity on the Board, how those gaps can be addressed and linked risks mitigated. This may include revisiting co-opting suitable individuals onto the Board.
3	Refresh Board report cover sheets to provide greater clarity around what is being requested of the Board and the impact on key risks, including any corporate risks, the issue being considered may have.
4	Undertake an exercise to evaluate and define how best to use the range of opportunities the Board has to interact, particularly in light of the new responsibilities the FSA is taking on.
5	Clarify the purpose of the Business Committee; the expectations of BC attendees; and its interaction with the Board.
6	Continue with, and seek to increase, combined Board level stakeholder and partnership relationships, particularly with FSS.
7	Continue with efforts to finalise the framework agreement with DHSC.
8	Formalise an approach to Board development that will allow the FSA Board to evolve to the changing role the FSA may have over the coming years. This should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Working with DHSC to clearly identify the background, skills and experience future Board members will need; and• Development sessions with current Board members to address where there are key gaps including consumer voice, digital, HR and the food service sector.

Annex 1 – Scope of review

We evaluated the Board in line with the key principles of Board effectiveness outlined in the code and guidance using a Key Lines of Enquiry (“KLoE”) approach, covering:

Key Line of Enquiry	Description
Leadership and culture	Addressing whether the Chair and Board lead the organisation in an open, transparent, impactful and effective way, including learning from past successes and failures.
Board composition	Addressing whether the Board has the right mix of skills and experience, with clear roles & responsibilities and succession plans in place.
Board decision making	Addressing whether the Board makes appropriate decisions, with relevant, timely information and support that contributes to effective discussions.
Board committees	Addressing whether the appropriate committees are in place to support the Board, with clear delegations and information flows.
Risk management	Addressing whether the Board has clear risk management processes in place, with risk considered within decision making.
Partnership working/stakeholder engagement	Addressing whether the Board is effectively engaging and working with key partners and stakeholders.

The review was undertaken through a combination of:

- Interviews with Board members and standing Board attendees;
- Observation of
 - 25/11/25 ARAC meeting
 - 01/12/25 Business Committee meeting
 - 09 and 10/12/25 Board meeting
- Review of Board and key committee papers;
- Surveys of Board members and standing Board attendees; and
- Interviews with key stakeholders.

The information gathered was used to assess the Board’s performance against each KLoE, with detailed findings prepared for each KLoE. Throughout the review discussed emerging findings with the sponsor to ensure their accuracy and relevance. Following the completion of fieldwork we will present to the Board a summary of our findings and resulting recommendations.

Our review is advisory in nature, as such, we have not provided an overall opinion or assurance rating in relation to the Board’s effectiveness.



Government Internal Audit Agency

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