

**Minutes of the Food Standards Agency (FSA) Board's discussion of the Report of the Triennial Review of the FSA's six Scientific Advisory Committees held by teleconference on 9 February 2016 09:00-09:20**

Attendees:

Tim Bennett (Chair)  
Heather Hancock (Deputy Chair)  
Jim Smart (Board member)  
Paul Wiles (Board member)  
Jeff Halliwell (Board member)  
Professor Guy Poppy (FSA Chief Scientific Adviser)  
Steve Wearne (FSA Director of Policy)  
Penny Bramwell (FSA Director of Science, Evidence and Research)  
Susan Pryde (Lead Reviewer of FSA Review of SACs)

Apologies:

Etta Campbell (Board member)  
Heather Peck (Board member)  
Ram Gidoomal (Board member)

1. The Chair said this was the Board's opportunity to make any comments on the Report of the Triennial Review of the FSA's six Scientific Advisory Committees (SACs) before the Report was sent to the Cabinet Office Minister.
2. One Board member said now that he had had time to read the Report he was of the opinion that it was a well-argued paper and he had no major or structural issues with it.
3. A Board member said he was supportive of the Report; it was well-thought out and logical. He asked two clarification questions: What was the difference in status between an Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body (ANDPB) and a Departmental Expert Committee? And how would replacing the General Advisory Council on Science (GACS) with a Science Council make a difference?
4. Regarding the second question, Professor Poppy said when GACS had originally been established the FSA Chief Scientist had reported to GACS which performed more of an internal challenge function than an outward-focused horizon scanning role. However the change in science governance in the FSA with the introduction of an external Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) to perform the role of commissioning science led to an awkward situation vis a vis GACS. The change to a Science Council would be in keeping with other Government Departments who had moved to smaller and sleeker expert

Committees which acted as a critical friend with a core role of horizon scanning and less of a governance role. The Science Council would be able to assist the CSA to raise concerns with the Chief Executive or the Board Chair if the CSA felt that Ministers were not taking scientific advice into account in their decision making.

5. Regarding the first question, Professor Poppy said an Expert Committee did not require Ministerial involvement in appointing members and the Committee's work plan could be tailored to more closely address key areas of interest to the FSA. Other bodies involved in risk assessment of data would remain as ANDBPs so as to retain their arms-length status and distance from Ministerial interference.
6. In response to a question, Professor Poppy said we would not know whether we had enough of the right people available to populate the Committee until we set about doing it. The roles on offer would have to have a clear function and we would have to be able to demonstrate how the advice offered to the FSA had been acted upon. A Board member had suggested approaching the National Academy of Medicine and the Royal Society to ask if they wanted to recommend a member to the Science Council; this would canvass interest in the FSA and secure support from powerful networks of experts.
7. The Board said they really liked the idea of working with such bodies and inviting suggestions from them; though we would have to be clear that we were not offering them a position to fill with a dedicated representative.
8. The Chair said the Triennial Review process was led by Cabinet Office in order to address the issue of vested interests in committees in larger Government Departments. The FSA had conducted a thorough Review and handled the process correctly to the benefit of consumers. He felt the changes would improve the pace with which the Board was provided by advice and provide the Board with the right advice in line with the FSA's strategic priorities.
9. Professor Poppy said the FSA had to become a more intelligent customer of the SACs by asking them the right questions at the right time and getting them to risk assess a range of scenarios which would provide the Board with more information and options to consider.
10. The Chair agreed with the suggestion that the Chair of the relevant SAC should be invited to the initial Board discussion on an issue to get a better understanding of what the Board was looking for from the SAC.

11. In conclusion the Chair said that the Board supported the recommendations in the Report and that they would improve the Board's decision making link to scientific evidence.

**From:** Wiles, Paul  
**Sent:** Tuesday, May 17, 2016 06:29 PM GMT Standard Time  
**To:** Hancock, Heather  
**Subject:** Science review

Heather, first a repeat of my apologies for not being at the Board.

I promised you a brief note on the science advisory committees review.

A number of different objections have been raised.

First, there have been some complaints about the review process. The process used was that laid down by the Cabinet Office for all such reviews across government and involved the Chairs of the present committees. It was a matter for them whether they discussed it with their committees.

Second, it has been asserted that nothing has changed since the last review that endorsed the present structure. This is simply not true a lot has changed since then. Two changes are particularly important.

The FSA has carried out a very thorough review of future challenges and opportunities to the food supply in the UK, has consulted widely, and produced a new FSA strategy. Alongside this we also produced a new science strategy to provide the the evidence base required in future. It was also necessary to assess how far the FSA's structures, including the way it commissioned and received scientific and technical advice was was best suited to support the new strategies. The review did this for scientific advice and made proposals for some changes to the existing arrangements but these were largely a matter of fine tuning recognising the continuing importance of much of the advice the FSA has received in the past.

The FSA has also adopted the common practice elsewhere in government of appointing a Chief Scientific Advisor. When Professor Sir David King was the Government Chief Scientific Advisor he sought to spread this practice beyond the few departments who then had CSAs. The important change this represents is that CSAs are not civil servants but seconded scientists appointed for a period after which they will return to their university. This is to guarantee their future careers outside government and so ensure their independence. CSAs have direct access to Ministers, or in the case of the FSA the Board. The CSA is always present at Board meetings so the Board has his advice on any evidential matters relating to its decisions. This means that the advice from the FSA's scientific advisory committees now has a more direct route into decision making, through the CSA, and the

opportunity to raise concerns in the same way. This has strengthened and underwritten the centrality of evidence in the FSA's decision making.

Concerns have been expressed that the review has downgraded social science advice. This is not true and delivery of the new strategy will be very depended on social science. The present Chair of the Social Science Advisory Committee and I have often discussed our concerns that the quality of social science evidence available to the Board has not always been of good enough quality (e.g. in terms of sampling method or size) or not always asked appropriately theoretically informed questions. Furthermore, the new strategy will depend on a wider range of social science skill sets for its delivery, whether that be the analytics of 'big data' or economic analysis of the global food supply chain. The review proposed that there should be a scientific advisory committee that could ensure the quality of future social science and focus on the issues that were needed to deliver the new strategy. Far from demoting social science the proposals seeks to ensure the strong social science advice that the FSA will require in the future and that it is focused on the most important issues. Personally, I would not have signed up to anything that demoted social science advice or its centrality to future delivery.

Concern has been expressed about the new science council. Again this is a model that is used elsewhere in government in combination with a CSA. The purpose is twofold. First, to offer more general advice about the FSA's use of science and evidence and to flag any unrecognised risks or opportunities. Second, if the FSA were ever to forget that its legitimacy depends on science-based decision making to ring the alarm bell. To carry out these functions the council needs to be made up of a small number of eminent and very experienced scientists of total independence who will be publicly listened to. Hence the suggestion that the learned societies should be asked for suggested members. We recognise the scientific eminence of GACS but this is a different role and introduces a new element of reinforcement to the FSA's future commitment to science-based decision making.

The different models for the future committees is explained in the report and I can't see why this is such an issue. Neither model is any more independent or more likely to appoint the best scientists. There is no more prestige attached to one model rather than the other. One difference is that the Ministerial model is significantly slower. What matters is that we get good scientists and their advice is available at the point of decision.

## **Triennial Review Consultation with SAC Chairs**

**07/01/2016**

Executive summary and draft recommendations shared with Chairs and Secretariats, and via Secretariats to members (sent to GACS members on 08/01/2016). This included a forward timeline of the process for further comment and agreement of the report.

Series of one-to-one meetings between Guy Poppy and Chairs of reviewed committees:

**08/01/2016** Meeting with the Chair of GACS: Colin Blakemore

**11/01/2016** Meeting with the Chair of ACMSF: Sarah O'Brien

**13/01/2016** Meeting with the Chair of SSRC: Peter Jackson

**13/01/2016** Meeting with the Chair of ACAF Ian Brown

**14/01/2016** Meeting with the Chair of ACNFP: Peter Gregory

**15/01/2016** Meeting with the Chair of COT: Alan Boobis

**18/01/2016** Draft of the full report shared with GACS (and the other SACs)

**19/01/2016** Teleconference with SAC Chairs:

Peter Jackson (Chair SSRC)

Sarah O'Brien (Chair ACMSF)

Ian Brown (Chair ACAF)

Alan Boobis (Chair COT)

Guy Poppy (FSA)

Penny Bramwell (FSA)

Patrick Miller (FSA)

Susan Pryde (FSS)

Helen Atkinson (FSA)

David Self (FSA)