

## Progress and future direction of social science in the FSA

Report by Michelle Patel

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### Summary

1. The Board is asked to:
  - **note** the work done so far to implement the 2017 Review of Social Science and
  - **discuss and endorse** the priorities for the social science function over the coming year, including priorities for the Advisory Committee for Social Science and the planned review of Food and You.

### Introduction

2. The Social Science team in the FSA is part of Analytics Unit within Science, Evidence and Research Division. It provides provide research advice, design and management to inform the development, implementation, review and evaluation of government policy.
3. Social science is the study of society and how people behave and influence the world around us. The Food Standards Act sets out our remit to look out for the interests of consumers in the food system, and it is our role to ensure that through various mechanisms we are consistently developing our understanding of what these are and what they may be in the future.
4. Moreover, to deliver effective policy outcomes, we need an approach that takes account of the whole person, social context, and wider aspects such as education, employment, social norms, and the built and online environment, drawing on multiple behavioural and social sciences, including psychology, behavioural economics, sociology and anthropology.
5. As a regulator, we also need an approach which allow an excellent understanding of how people (not just consumers and businesses but all those involved in the food chain – including vets and environmental health officers for example) are likely to behave to properly understand risks and influence that behaviour.
6. It is becoming clear that these approaches represent the direction of travel for a more comprehensive understanding of risk and how to manage it. Last year the OECD published [a report including over 100 case studies](#) from across the world

where Governments have used behavioural approaches to effect change in a large variety of contexts and groups. In September 2018, PHE published [their strategy for behavioural and social science in public health](#), which is the first of its kind. In it, they state that ‘the behavioural and social sciences are the future of public health’.

## Discussion

### Reviewing our social science function

7. Following a review of our social science activity last year, the planned changes are now well into implementation. We said we would:
  - increase the social science capacity within the Agency itself;
  - clarify what social science expertise FSA needs in-house and what type of expertise it can bring in externally;
  - ensure that there is more senior support for social science; and
  - increase the understanding of how social science can help FSA deliver its objectives;
  
8. Internal and external capacity and capability.
  - The review identified behaviour change and risk communications as two areas where we might improve our capability.
  - In January 2018 we brought the insight team from Communications into the Social Science team in Analytics, bringing new skills and leadership as well as consolidating two teams with similar work.
  - We’re developing a clear and practical framework for risk communications in the FSA based on best practice and overseen by Science Council and the new Advisory Committee.
  - We have recruited a behaviour science expert who is a highly regarded academic in her field. We are the first in Government to establish an in-house Research hub of academics working on departmental projects.
  - We have engaged with over a hundred colleagues on the main priorities for the agency through a series of workshops to help integrate behaviour change thinking into the organisation
  
9. Support for social science.
  - The Board has set out its high ambition for social sciences and has said that they want social science evidence to be visible across all our decisions.

- That the new risk analysis framework formally includes social science input – making it the first in the world to do so, is an endorsement of its value.
- We have worked hard to make social science more accessible and engaging to our colleagues. Our behaviour change workshops (see below) have been developed as a shopfront for the team and more than a hundred colleagues – from policy, Regulating our Future, operations, nutrition, organisational development and communications teams - have participated, with several more workshops planned this year.
- Last month we extended our joint FSA/ESRC Symposium on Social Science to all three nations, giving external stakeholders a chance to see our most innovative work, and contribute to and endorse the themes of our future research agenda.

10. Delivering the FSA's objectives.

- We now have a social scientist embedded in the EU exit team, making it easier to anticipate what's needed, spot evidence gaps and join up across Analytics.
- We are delivering over 30 interdisciplinary social science and economics projects across RoF, including publishing reports which draw on the latest and broadest thinking around how to encourage business compliance.
- We are actively building the FSA's reputation for cutting-edge science and evidence with our stakeholder groups. building strong networks through the Government Social Research Profession, Behavioural Insights Network, internationally through speaking opportunities including the [EFSA Science Conference](#) and the OPSS/FCO International Regulators Conference, and through the Quads networks and the international liaison groups on social science and risk communication.
- We have contributed materially to doing the day job excellently. A few short case studies are attached as an annex.

The Advisory Committee for Social Science

11. We have recently appointed a new [Advisory Committee for Social Science](#) (ACSS) with a broader brief and deep expertise in behavioural change and risk communications.
12. Work is well underway with three current working groups, in line with the priorities set in 2017. All are set to deliver these first projects by April 2019. The Committee papers are published regularly at [www.acss.food.gov.uk](http://www.acss.food.gov.uk).

#### Working Group 1 – Behavioural Science

13. This group is looking at the different frameworks available for different types of behaviour change, and as the workstream progresses, will help us prioritise and develop fruitful areas for behaviour change experiments next year. They will:
- advise on the methodology and scope of a review of relevant frameworks, capturing areas of overlap and divergence;
  - develop a matrix/ decision-tree by which to prioritise policy issues from FSA's workshops and wider initiatives;
  - apply this matrix/ decision-tree to policy issues from FSA's workshops to develop a recommended shortlist for future experiments/interventions; and
  - provide advice on the best way to record outputs from the FSA's behavioural science research.

#### Working Group 2 – Risk Communications

14. This group will support the development of the risk communications aspects of our risk analysis framework. They will:
- act as 'critical friends', offering commentary and advice on where and how communication of risk occurs both in risk assessment and risk management;
  - give direction on the academic underpinnings of our proposed framework and ensure that it is grounded in the latest thinking; and
  - advise on the organisational processes needed to ensure that it is practically applicable.

#### Working Group 3 – Food and You

15. This group is helping us review our survey research, starting with our flagship survey, Food and You. We are undertaking a wholesale review for the next wave (2020), looking at methods, frequency and content. They will:
- look at the value, pros and cons of different methodologies and on how we might discover, develop, test and pilot these to find the optimum way of meeting the objectives of Food and You in the future;
  - advise on whether linking Food and You with other datasets might provide richer insights, or better value for money, and what the options for this may be; and
  - advise on how best to use and communicate the results of Food and You to maximise impact both internally and external to the FSA.

## Food and You

16. Food and You is our flagship survey, which currently runs every two years. Its purpose is to:
  - explore public understanding of, and engagement with, the FSA's aim of improving food safety;
  - identify specific target groups for future interventions (e.g. those most at risk or those among whom FSA policies and initiatives are likely to have the greatest impact);
  - describe the public attitudes towards food production and the food system;
  - monitor changes over time in reported attitudes and behaviour; and
  - broaden the evidence base and develop indicators to assess progress in fulfilling the FSA's strategic plans, aims and targets.
17. We would like to seek the Board's input into the review of Food and You being undertaken by the ACSS working group, would encourage the Board to give us their thoughts on its future direction, focus and priorities.

## Future priorities

18. We believe that with the changes above now implemented, we are ready to set a high ambition for social science in the FSA and are keen to secure the Board's endorsement of our plan so that we can move forward with our business planning.
19. We are working openly with civil society on big issues – for example the recently published work on [trustworthiness](#) in food and its regulators has provided a topical lever to engage with stakeholders including EFSA, Which?, 2SFG and the Food Ethics Council.
20. Clearly, a major priority for the coming few years will be to ensure that the best available social science evidence, particularly on consumer values and preferences contributes effectively to FSA and Ministerial decision making on risk and how to manage and communicate it.

## Social Science in our risk analysis framework

21. Behaviour is a key factor in determining risk. After EU Exit, as the FSA assumes more responsibility for risk assessment as well as risk management, understanding how people behave and perceive risk will be doubly important. Evidence from social science will contribute to our portfolio of evidence in various ways:

- Understanding likely exposure rates through data taken from the [National Diet and Nutrition Survey](#), and [Food and You](#).
  - Contributing to our risk assessment advice as part of the advice on ‘other legitimate factors’ accompanying our toxicological and microbiological risk assessment.
  - Underpinning our risk communications framework.
  - Ensuring that policy and operations interventions are:
    - a) informed by a robust understanding of the people and organisations involved;
    - b) based in an evidence- based approach to the most likely way to produce change; and
    - c) evaluated effectively.
22. How this will be embedded into business processes is set out in Steve Wearne and Michael Wight’s paper on risk analysis which the Board is also considering today.

#### Future priorities for the ACSS

23. Now that the Committee is well established, we would like to suggest some future priorities for the ACSS, supported by work in the social science team in the coming year.

#### Assurance

24. Our expert science advisory committees play an important role in providing assurance on the effective application of the sciences under their purview, including on what social science evidence is sought and how it is weighed, the quality of that evidence and that it is being applied consistently. As set out in [the paper on Governance agreed by the Board](#) in September 2018, they may occasionally be called upon for Board-level assurance on these issues.

#### Balance

25. The Board judges the balance between consumer protection, wider consumer interests/benefits, and non-consumer interests. Following the agreement of the broad shape of the FSA’s new risk analysis framework, we propose that a working group of the ACSS develop principles to shape the way that these decisions are taken.

#### Behavioural economics in food businesses

26. The Analytics team, of which the social science team is a part, is already looking at business behaviour, leadership and culture. As an area of focus for the Board, we propose that a working group of the ACSS contributes its direction to the longer-term programme of work and policy.

#### Risk and horizon scanning

27. We are keen to provide a leading-edge understanding of the wider food consumer interest. We propose that we work with the ACSS to consider some of the emerging issues of the day and to add context to strategic decision making. This might include:
- how and whether emerging technology is affecting consumer perceptions of risk, and whether this has changed over time;
  - emerging trends in food consumption, attitudes, perceptions and behaviours;
  - the impact of new and disruptive business models on and the implications for a regulator;
  - the longer-term values and preferences of consumers of food in a post EU-Exit world;
  - how best to connect science to society, and how to build and maintain trustworthiness in a complex and changing world; and
  - how new technologies (like Citizen Science and social media listening) can offer a complementary lens to our more traditional methods.

#### Conclusion

28. The Board is invited to:
- **note** the work done so far to implement the 2017 Review of Social Science; and
  - **discuss and endorse** the priorities for the social science function over the coming year, including priorities for the Advisory Committee for Social Science and the planned review of Food and You.

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