

## THE ROLE AND WORK OF FSA'S SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH UNIT

### Executive Summary

In drawing up its 2005-2010 Strategic plan and accompanying Science Strategy the Agency recognised that it needed to strengthen its access to the social sciences. In July 2007 a central Social Science Research Unit (SSRU) was established which in turn set up a Scientific Advisory Committee focusing on the social sciences – the Social Science Research Committee (SSRC).

The paper provides an overview of the remit of the SSRU and documents progress of both the Unit and the SSRC at July 2008 and November 2008.

Jane Barrett, Head of the SSRU and Robyn Ackerman, Senior Social Science Research Officer will be giving a presentation at the meeting to provide further details.

The Committee is invited to:

- note the development of social science research in the FSA

The Committee will have an opportunity to discuss and ask questions about the work of the central Unit and Committee following the presentation.

**SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH UNIT, ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH DIVISION**

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## SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH UNIT

This is a new Unit that was established in July 2007 with the appointment of a Head of Social Science Research. The Unit is now six strong (4.7 full time equivalent) soon to be 8 strong (6.7 full time equivalent).

### Purpose of the Unit

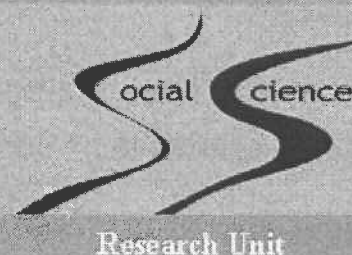
The purpose of the Unit is to ensure the provision of timely, high quality research and advice on social science evidence to support the development and evaluation of policy to customers across the Agency.

### Objectives for 2008/09

- ◆ Hold the first two meetings of the Social Science Research Committee.
- ◆ Draft and seek endorsement (by the FSA executive and SSRC) of a FSA Social Science Research Strategy
- ◆ Develop a programme of cross-cutting social science research
- ◆ Advise and support policy teams in identifying, commissioning and delivering the social science aspects of their work so that it adds value and complements other analytical work to achieve policy aims
- ◆ Maintain and develop links with Other Government Departments and external researchers so that the Agency can optimise learning from other relevant work in delivering its objectives
- ◆ Further raise the profile of Social Science within the FSA so that colleagues are aware of the value social science can bring to their area, and develop the service to more areas within the FSA commensurate with resources available.

### Current work activities

- ◆ Managing the new (April 2008) Social Science Research Committee (SSRC) to provide independent challenge and advice to the Agency. The SSRC met for the first time in July 2008 and meets again in November 2008. Key activities for the SSRC include:
  - ◆ Reviewing the Agency's attitude research and annual consumer attitudes survey
  - ◆ Supporting the implementation of the Agency's Social Science Research Strategy
  - ◆ Advising how social science can help understand and explain the recent significant increase in listeriosis in the elderly population
- ◆ Ensuring that the Agency is linked into relevant government and external networks such as the Government Social Research (GSR) service and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)

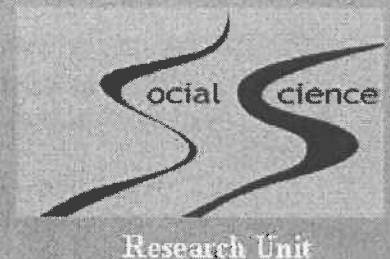


- ◆ Continuing to develop an in-house capacity by recruiting a third team leader and a senior social science researcher. We are also applying for an ESRC intern and exploring sponsoring a social science PhD.
- ◆ Developing a portfolio of cross-cutting social science activities for the Agency to draw on e.g.:
  - ◆ Commissioned a Public Attitudes to Food Issues survey for 2008
  - ◆ Developing a research collaboration with the ESRC to provide a holistic social science approach to investigating the drivers of food choice (including use of food labels)
  - ◆ Sponsoring a module on the British Social Attitudes survey on food technology
  - ◆ Commissioning two evidence reviews – food technology and organisational behaviour change in the food industry
  - ◆ Contributing to a cross government behaviour change project
- ◆ Providing support and advice on existing and new Agency projects that have a social science focus e.g. signpost labelling evaluation, general food labelling behaviour project, infant formula, and animal cloning.

#### **What's coming up?**

- Contributing to the next strategic plan including work to develop indicators and a programme of evaluation
- Supporting the Saturated Fat Campaign
- Further research to support the development of a nutrition information scheme for the catering industry
- Supporting the food hygiene campaign

**Social Science Research Unit, November 2004**



## SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH UNIT – NOVEMBER 2008 UPDATE

### Summary

This note sets some of the key activities the Unit has been involved with since the first Social Science Committee Meeting in July. It also looks forward to things we hope to deliver over the next six months.

The note is provided for information.

### Background

1. The SSRU was established in July 2008 and has five main responsibilities:

- Developing and implementing a social science research strategy for the FSA
- Carrying out cross-cutting social science research
- Managing social science research on behalf of FSA policy teams
- Providing research based advice and briefing
- Setting up and providing secretariat support to the Social Science Research Committee

### Key developments and activities since July

#### Strategy

2. We organised a workshop with FSA staff and a couple of committee members to develop an implementation plan for taking the strategy forward (paper).

3. We have also been keeping abreast of developments and contributing to the next strategic plan.

#### Cross-cutting social science research

4. We commissioned a Public Attitudes to Food Issues survey as an alternative to the annual Consumer Attitudes Survey while we work with members of the SSRC to review the Agency's overarching attitudes research (paper). There is a debriefing of the Public Attitudes to Food Issues survey at the end of November with a draft report due early December. We expect to publish the report early 2009.

5. With nutrition colleagues and members of the SSRC we met the ESRC to develop a business case for a FSA-ESRC research collaboration (paper).

6. We commissioned an evidence review on emerging food technologies and are about to commission another review looking at organisational behaviour change in the food industry.

7. The fieldwork for the food technology module in the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) began and we have been exploring the possibility of funding a module in 2009/10.

8. We have organised several seminars for FSA staff:

- the role and work of the Social Science Research Unit
- what is evaluation?
- consumer and social science in Food Standards Australia and New Zealand

On 27<sup>th</sup> November we have arranged a public policy seminar with the ESRC looking at public behaviour in times of economic downturn and rising food prices – SSRC members have received details about this event.

### Project support and advice

9. We continue to provide advice to the evaluation of the nutrition from of pack labelling schemes. The qualitative phase has completed and the main quantitative fieldwork is now underway.

10. We also continue to support the research that has been commissioned to inform the review of the formula milk review.

11. We issued and have received responses to an OJEU advert for a behaviour study looking at how people use mandatory food labels. We plan to commission this work later this month.

12. We have also developed an urgent piece of research looking at public attitudes to nutrition information schemes in catering establishments.

### **Staffing**

13. Danielle De Feo joined the Unit at the end of September as a Social Science Research Officer. Danielle joins Joanna Disson who leads a research team focusing on behaviour research, particularly in the area of food labelling policy.

14. We are in the process of recruiting a third team leader and a senior social science research officer.

15. We have also made a bid for an ESRC PhD intern to synthesise the Agency's work with and understanding of elderly consumers.

### **External events**

16. Between us we have attended a range of relevant external events including:

- Changing Families, Changing Lives conference
- GSR seminar on customer insight
- International Sociological Association conference
- ICA Behaviour Change breakfast seminar

### **Forward look**

17. Over the next six months key activities will be:

- Following the FSA's response, taking forward the Committee's recommendations on attitudes research
- Contributing to the next strategic plan including work to develop indicators and a programme of evaluation
- Supporting the Saturated Fat Campaign
- Further research to support the development of a nutrition information scheme for the catering industry
- Supporting the food hygiene campaign

**Jane Barrett**  
**Social Science Research Unit**