

Review of FSA Social Science - Introduction

Background

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is an independent Government department working across England, Wales and Northern Ireland to protect public health and consumers' wider interests in food. Its mission is to ensure that food is safe, is what it says it is, and is healthy and sustainable.

The social science team is part of the Science, Evidence and Research Directorate of the FSA. It provides insight, analysis and evidence in relation to food policy for stakeholders inside and outside of the FSA. The team supports all stages of policy development including signposting existing evidence, leading or advising on research projects, and supporting the evaluation of policies for all parts of the FSA across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The team works in collaboration with other analytical professions that deliver research, evidence and advice.

The FSA social science team consists of six Principal Research Officers (three of whom are part-time), six Senior Research Officers, and three Research Officers (one of whom is a GSR placement student). Members of the team are established civil servants with many years of experience contributing social research to policy development and implementation. Some members of the team have worked in the academic sector as well as in commercial and third-sector research organisations.

The team undertakes a wide range of research including citizen science, tracking surveys, deliberative research, ethnography, interviews studies, experimental evaluation and rapid evidence reviews. It works with a wide range of internal and external stakeholders to identify research needs and deliver appropriate research evidence to inform food policy.

The default position of the team is to commission research from external agencies rather than undertake research in-house. This involves the procurement, contracting, management, quality assurance and publication of social research within tight timelines and the constraints of budgetary cycles. The social science team works closely with other Government analytical professions.

As part of its ongoing quality assurance procedures, the FSA social science team commissioned this independent assessment of its people (researchers) and outputs (products) against the GSR Code of professional standards, in order to identify its strengths and areas for improvement.

Objectives of the Review

1. To assess the contribution that the FSA social science team makes to the FSA and its mission, and to identify what it does well, areas for improvement, and make recommendations for CPD.
2. To assess the seven principles of the GSR Code for People and Products and the use of the GSR Self-Assessment tool to appraise social science outputs.

Approach

This review was undertaken using the following procedures:

1. Stakeholders' perspectives of the FSA's social science team.
2. Appraisal of the FSA's social science research outputs.
3. Appraisal of the GSR code self-assessment and an external peer review.
4. An online survey of the technical skills of FSA's social researchers.
5. A group interview with FSA's social researchers.

Three publications that represent the professional standards and skills required of government social researchers were used for this assessment:

1. The Government Social Research Code - People and Products (GSR, 2018)
2. Government Social Research Technical Framework (GSR 2022)
3. FSA Quality Assurance Toolkit published by the FSA Advisory Committee on Social Science (ACSS, 2023).