

Review of FSA Social Science - Chapter 1

Stakeholders' Perspectives of the FSA social science team

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Stakeholders' views on the work of the FSA's social science team were explored by undertaking ten online in-depth interviews. Five of these interviews were with internal stakeholders and five with external stakeholders. The topics covered in these interviews are presented in Annex 1.

What does the FSA social research team do well, and less well?

Commissioning and Managing Research

Both internal and external stakeholders were generally positive about the contribution of the social research team to commissioning and managing research. An often-mentioned strength was the team's ability to identify and clarify the problem(s) to be researched or evaluated, and to articulate the business needs for research or evaluation.

Internal and external stakeholders commended the team for being "really good at constructive challenge and facilitation" and helping policy colleagues to think through what it really is that they are trying to evaluate. The ability of the team to draw upon a "great back catalogue of work" was also noted, and that consequently policy, strategy and delivery colleagues "don't need to guess or hypothesise."

An internal policy stakeholder commended the team for helping to successfully navigate government procurement contracts which were described as "a bit of a headache". This policy colleague cited a recent instance in which a procurement issue was presenting a considerable risk to the programme in question. The social science team offered "some really useful insights and flexible solutions" which impressed this policy maker.

Many government research projects are procured by call-off contracts with external commercial contractors and academic researchers. This is the case with FSA social research. One such external commercial contractor suggested that this call-off arrangement often enhances the commissioning process by bringing in an independent 'critical friend' to ask challenging questions such as "have you thought about doing this instead?" and "do you think this is feasible?".

Problems with the commissioning process were seen by external stakeholders to emanate from the Government procurement process, rather than the team's abilities. This process was described as "bulky" and "inappropriate for procuring research and evaluation". The weightings given to different aspects of research procurement were seen by one external researcher as a particular weakness. The procurement process overall was characterised as "not fit for purpose" by internal and external stakeholders.

One internal stakeholder suggested that the team “are not commissioning well” and that they were “naïve in their commissioning”. The concern here was more to do with the haste of commissioning and the speed of initiating research or evaluation once a contract was issued. The proposed solution from this stakeholder was to get greater movement between academics and government so that the latter can “commission intelligently”.

The team was also commended for accepting these external challenges and either changing their approach or providing good reasons for continuing to proceed in their proposed ways. This was seen by external contractors as an illustration of the good two-way relationship of FSA’s social research commissioning.

Managing projects

The team was also considered by stakeholders to be generally good at managing research projects and, for policy makers, often “lending an air of authority” to the management of research.

Other positive features of the team’s research management included being good at managing internal relationships, acting as intermediaries with policy colleagues and other stakeholders, and filtering technical advice “through the lens of what the organisation needs”. One internal stakeholder applauded the work of the team for “working the contractors pretty hard and not giving them an easy ride”.

The social science team’s recent narrative review of the existing literature for the FSA’s Kitchen Life 2 project was also highly commended by internal stakeholders. This identified some of the key behaviours, actors, triggers and barriers that occur in both domestic and business kitchens. This project won the 2023 Analysis in Government (AiG) Innovative Methods Award, which was described by Professor Sir Ian Diamond, National Statistician and Head of the Government Analysis Function, as a “fantastic piece of work” ([footnote 1](#)).

One interviewee, however, suggested that the social research team would benefit from developing its skills in using existing systematic reviews and meta-analysis, and commissioning such products where possible. These approaches to evidence synthesis are more systematic, rigorous and detailed than most literature reviews and rapid evidence assessments.

A more cautious observation about the team’s research management was noted by some internal and external stakeholders, particularly concerning the consistency of contractors’ delivery of research. Delays in providing the content and quality of research in a timely manner had led one policy colleague to “having the difficult conversation with contractors that social researchers should have had and pushing for more timely delivery”. This, however, was a minority perspective.

Another suggestion for improvement was around the need for policy colleagues to know “the two or three big things” to take from a research report” as well as having some indication of how a particular set of findings fits in with the accumulated evidence from other studies.

Research Skills

Stakeholders were asked about the team’s technical research skills. There was a greater response to this question from research interviewees than from policy colleagues. On the positive side some research stakeholders thought the social research team to be “extremely competent” and “not having anything that is outside their sphere of ability”. This included having good quantitative and qualitative research skills and the ability to commission and analyse some high-quality internal evidence reviews and controlled evaluations. One research interviewee suggested that “on the technical skills I haven’t seen any weaknesses”.

One external interviewee noted that the greatest value of the team was in co-designing research, bringing the policy people in and checking that the output would meet policy needs.

A minority of research stakeholders were more critical, saying: “I don't think they would stand out as being particularly strong methodologically” and “I don't rate them very highly on social science ability at all, they have no quantitative skills”. These two comments were not representative of the research stakeholders who were interviewed, nor do they align with the professional and academic backgrounds of the team. It was acknowledged by internal and external research stakeholders that research skills varied across the team by grade and experience, and that there are researchers whose methodological skills are excellent.

Internal stakeholders valued the team's qualitative analysis and their evaluation of the equality issues surrounding food policy and food insecurity. Exploration of consumers' attitudes and perceptions on food products was also highly valued, as was the 'lived experience' work of the social research team. This was described by one policy colleague as “really good, really powerful stuff” that provided “fantastic” evidence for FSA's work on the cost of living crisis and household food insecurity.

This was reiterated by another senior internal stakeholder who thought the team had “really stepped up in response to the cost of living crisis”, giving policy teams evidence that helped them understand the lived experience of food insecurity, enabling them to “nuance our day-to-day communications through a very consumer-centric, very behavioural, very social science perspective”.

More broadly, the team was described as having “a huge amount of in-house expertise” and providing a “variety of really interesting high quality research that contributes towards the evidence base for our policies”. This included the “ability to provide quick and detailed comments on things where input was required”, and “some really strong areas of consumer insight that allows us to make very powerful statements as an organisation”.

The team was also considered “really pioneering” and “creative” in terms of changing the policy narrative around affordable and sustainable food, climate change and other policy issues. Their work was valued by policy stakeholders for being “creative and pushing boundaries”, “understanding consumers” and “having really important things to say about a range of topics”. One external stakeholder thought that “everything that I've seen has been good and they've been able to advocate very strongly for all their work and what they've done with it”.

How might the contribution of the FSA social research team be improved?

One suggestion from an internal policy colleague was to foster greater subject matter expertise around the different areas of the FSA's work. This might include “shadowing other parts of the Agency to understand their needs or to understand subject matter areas more deeply”.

Another suggestion was for the social science team to undertake more horizon scanning analysis to establish upcoming challenges for the FSA, balancing the team's “extensive amount of operational research and analysis with these longer-term strategic approaches to evidence gathering”. This might be done in collaboration with the strategic insights team in the FSA's Analytics Unit. It should be noted that the horizon scanning work by the social science team to date was applauded by other internal stakeholders.

Summary

The social science team is highly valued by most internal and external stakeholders. Some concerns were expressed about the technical skills of some members of the team, especially in quantitative methods and evidence synthesis approaches, though this was not universally felt by

all stakeholders.

Other issues that could be improved upon are the consistency in the effectiveness of commissioning and managing social research, the management of external contractors and identifying the “big messages” of research findings.

1. See: [A message of Congratulation from Professor Sir Ian Diamond](#)