

Annual update on social science in the FSA: Building capacity and supporting delivery

Report by Michelle Patel

For further information contact Michelle Patel on 0207 2768446

Email: michelle.patel@food.gov.uk

1. Summary

1.1 The Board is invited to:

- **note** the progress of the social science function in the FSA and the focus of current and future work,
- **note** the latest insights and current projects in the attached annexes,
- **discuss** where more information would be of interest to the Board.

2. Introduction

2.1 The Social Science team is part of the Analytics Unit in the Science, Evidence and Research Directorate. Social science is the study of society and how people behave and influence the world around us. The Food Standards Act sets out our commitment to the interests of consumers, and this is one of the ways in which we listen to the people and communities that we serve.

2.2 Moreover, taking an approach that takes account of the whole person including wider aspects such as education, employment, social norms, the built and online environment, drawing on multiple disciplines including psychology, behaviour science, sociology and anthropology to help us develop, implement and evaluate more effective relevant and realistic regulatory interventions.

2.3 This is the third annual Board update on Social Science. The [first](#) set out how we planned to increase the impact of social science in the FSA. The [second](#) asked the Board to endorse the progress made.

2.4 The [Advisory Committee for Social Science](#) now provides expert assurance to the Board on the use of social science in the FSA through a working group and gives us recommendations for better practice. Their parallel paper has set out how this will be done.

2.5 Short case studies of some of our current projects are provided at Annex A. Reports are published at <https://www.food.gov.uk/research/social-science>. This third paper sets out our latest evidenced insights across the regulatory chain (see Annex B) and our commitment to making our evidence base more useful and used.

3. Evidence and Discussion

3.1 Our consumer insight programme is well established. As recognised at the recent International Social Science Liaison Group meeting in May 2019 in Ottawa, we are seen as leaders in applying social science to risk analysis. The fact that social science evidence is formally in our risk analysis process as part of the 'other legitimate factors' pertinent to risk management and communication sets us apart.

- a) Our collection and analysis of Official Statistics on consumer attitudes and behaviours from surveys like Food and You and our Public Attitudes Tracker allows us to identify risky areas (such as links between food insecurity and risky food behaviours particularly when it comes to use-by and best before dates) and how best to target them through segmentation.
- b) Our in-house work on behavioural science is now more mature and we are integrating behavioural thinking upstream across agency priorities, running behavioural trials to improve outcomes for consumers with hypersensitivities and working with experts to understand the 'moments of change' which will help us target food safety interventions.
- c) New quantitative methods developed this year will allow us to contribute more robust evidence on consumer acceptability, values and preferences to risk analysis of new products to market, whether through innovation or new trade arrangements.

3.2 We have been working hard to develop our insights across the regulatory chain. We work closely with colleagues across Analytics and in Regulatory Compliance to develop a grounded understanding of business behaviours, cultures and theories of change.

- a) We now have a regular tracker for small and micro food businesses which reports annually on their concerns and their confidence in us and will allow us to monitor changes over time. This has given us insights which are worth noting about how food businesses receive information, their digital literacy, and the platforms they use to sell food.
- b) Our work with Field Operations and NFCU to apply behavioural insights to key initiatives, such as intelligence gathering saved future resource by identifying obstacles specific to the food business environment.

3.3 Now, working closely with Analytics colleagues, the RoF Programme and Communications Directorate, we are starting to build a more systematic understanding of local authorities and other stakeholders.

3.4 We are also supporting work across Government:

- a) We have been providing insight to the Food Strategy team and they have adopted our measure of consumer perceptions of trustworthiness in the food system as part of an overarching measure of success for the

strategy. The ACSS have been asked to advise the team on other key metrics.

- b) Our measures of household food insecurity are currently the leading source of evidence on this high-profile cross-cutting policy area.
- c) Our work earlier this year to analyse over 1800 responses to the Defra/FSA consultation on allergen labelling ensured that the Board and Ministers could make an evidenced decision on this priority area and directly influenced the decision made.

3.5 Social scientists are integrated into key programmes at working level with dedicated resource providing grounding evidence and monitoring change. Our findings have materially influenced and shaped policy – for example:

- a) seeking the views of our EU national staff allows the Field Operations team to calibrate its human resources strategy and identify key areas for concern in the retention (and potential recruitment) of EU national staff on which the delivery of Official Controls is very dependent;
- b) evaluating impact and tracking consumer appetite is providing the evidence base to call for mandation of FHRS display in England;
- c) social research data shapes, tests and evaluates our communications campaigns, most recently the ‘Easy to Ask’ campaign on allergens;
- d) our comprehensive research with consumers and businesses to improve the food safety recalls and withdrawals system in the UK has resulted in a package of guidance, including help for businesses to conduct root cause analysis and consumer-friendly recall templates, now being implemented with encouraging uptake.

3.6 Behind the scenes, we have been focusing on bringing our social research methods up to date so that our work is faster, smarter and better value for money – for example:

- a) developing a cutting-edge web-push approach to our Official Statistics. Food and You is the FSA’s flagship survey and represents about half our social science research budget. Previous reviews have not been sufficient to secure the key shifts proposed by Professor Gaskell and the ACSS working group; these methodological changes will:
 - increase frequency and sample sizes giving us much more data particularly in Wales and Northern Ireland;
 - reduce duplication with other surveys;
 - align the questions with strategic priorities; and
 - reduce the cost, while retaining Official Statistics status.
- b) using open social media listening to hear millions of conversations about food in real time allows us to understand more about how risk is communicated from person to person as well as to respond more quickly to emerging issues; and
- c) opening up our social science, working with data scientists to hack our datasets, and experimenting with Citizen Science, allows us free access to other people’s insights, expertise and talent.

Future priorities

- 3.7 Current projects are giving us strategic insights to inform horizon scanning. This year, we will publish ground-breaking work on how a new generation of consumers appear to be connecting to food, to global systems, to information and to institutions, and on consumers' changing risk perceptions of emerging food technologies such as lab-grown meat which will help us with the pathway to regulation of these new products.
- 3.8 The development of social science within the FSA is an ongoing process, which consists of two separate but linked component parts. The first part – building capability, tools and methods to deliver evidence and the governance processes to assure them – is on track, with the FSA now having access to a full and current range of socio-economic analytic techniques. The second - ensuring that the evidence base being developed has real-world impact and is being used – is ongoing and will be a major focus for the future as we work to embed our new social science approaches across the FSA. Critical to this will be the need for proactive, early engagement across different FSA directorates.
- 3.9 Across Science, there is a renewed focus on co-designing research and evidence programmes with upstream input from policy and operations, to identify the FSA's evidence needs. These will be captured within the Areas of Research Interest document, which will be published in early 2020.
- 3.10 Social scientists are now integrated into key programmes at working level; however, we know there is still some way to go. We are very keen to discuss how we can bring social science to bear more effectively on Board, executive and policy decisions at the right point in the cycle, not just strengthening our evidence base but ensuring that where compelling new evidence is found, it has impact.

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