

ANNUAL REPORT FROM THE SCIENCE COUNCIL CHAIR

Report by Professor Sandy Thomas

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1. Summary

- 1.1 This report will provide an overview of the work of the Science Council and reflect on its successes and challenges over the past year as well a forward look into the future activities.
- 1.2 The COVID-19 pandemic has been a challenging period for everyone, and we have continued to progress our work programme. We have delivered recommendations on data usage and digital technology and interim results from our innovative project looking at key priorities and the knowledge landscape for food hypersensitivity.
- 1.3 The Council has also diversified its portfolio of projects, adding a rapid critical review on the quality of third-party evidence to the longer format reviews mentioned above.

2. Introduction

- 2.1 The FSA's Science Council is an independent expert committee comprising a Chair and seven members. It was established in April 2017 and our role to provide high-level, expert strategic insight, challenge and advice to the FSA's Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), the Board and Executive on the FSA's use of science to deliver its objectives is now well established.
- 2.2 Its purpose is to help to ensure that the FSA identifies, sources, integrates and uses the best scientific evidence and expertise from all relevant disciplines to inform and evaluate its work. FSA defines science in a broad and inclusive way, including the natural, physical, social and economic, digital and data sciences. This means the Science Council takes a multidisciplinary approach to deliver and inform its recommendations.
- 2.3 The Council meets four times a year: two open plenary meetings alternating with two closed meetings. These typically include updates on FSA science activity, progress on ongoing reviews, implementation of previous Council recommendations as well as discussion of science questions with the FSA.
- 2.4 The Council has carried out its work using a mixture of approaches with substantial questions being reviewed through Working Groups:
 - Working Groups can last between 12-24 months and are chaired by a Council member with experience in the topic under consideration
 - A maximum of two Working Groups active at any one time

- All Council members can participate in Working Groups.
- 2.5 This year we have started to develop a more diverse approach to our work portfolio, adding to our existing Working Groups with shorter rapid evidence reviews and medium-term reviews, lasting up to six months and 6-12 months respectively.

3. Recent and Ongoing Work Programme

- 3.1 In this section I will set out the reviews that have been ongoing for the Science Council over the period of my report, for each one stating the question/request that was put to the Science Council to answer, how it was structured and, where applicable, its deliverables. The broad timeline for these and the schedule of main Science Council meetings are shown in the Annex to this report.

Working Group 4 on data usage and digital technology

- 3.2 “How can the FSA better understand the next phase of technology developments, recognising future challenges and opportunities, and having sufficient understanding of them to be able to ensure positive governance of the food system?”
- 3.3 This question was set jointly between the FSA Board and Science Council and the subsequent review was:
- Established in [September 2018](#)
 - Chaired by [Prof. Patrick Wolfe](#), an international expert on data science
 - Split into two phases:
 - **Phase 1** was a scoping phase to better understand current FSA data usage across several business areas
 - **Phase 2** has commissioned research to look outwards at future trends and opportunities for data manipulation and utilisation.
- 3.4 The final report of this review, along with the FSA response, were presented to the [FSA Board at their meeting on 26 August 2020](#) (Board paper FSA 20-08-07).
- 3.5 The report contained the following recommendation to:
- Champion an integrated approach to data standards;
 - Champion data access and open data and look to mandate improved data access if in consumer interests;
 - Have a more consistent completion of the ‘innovation cycle’ and long-term monitoring of impact for data innovations;
 - Resource to retain internal skillsets, but also endorse flexible means of providing data skills and capabilities for the FSA;
 - Encourage the development of data capabilities and skills across the FSA staff base; and

- Grow the FSA’s technical leadership for data.

3.6 These recommendations were welcomed by the Executive and the FSA Board and progress on their application by the FSA will be reported to the Science Council by the Executive in the summer.

Working Group 5 on food hypersensitivity

3.7 The Science Council was asked by the FSA Board to:

- Consider and advise on future research priorities and direction in respect to food hypersensitivity
- Conduct a review of the science and evidence base for addressing food hypersensitivity, and the part the FSA and others should play in enhancing knowledge.

3.8 This Working Group is one of the most extensive and challenging initiated by the Science Council and was:

- Established in [November 2019](#)
- Chaired by [Dr Paul Turner](#), international expert on food hypersensitivity
- This review is split into three phases:
 - (a) Consider lessons to be learnt from the previous FSA Food Allergy and Intolerance Research Programme and identify FSA best practice in how science influences decision making
 - (b) Identify priorities for those affected by food hypersensitivity and then identify key gaps in current understanding of those priorities to provide future research recommendations
 - (c) Horizon scanning of the food hypersensitivity environment in the next 5-15 years and beyond to inform future long-term FSA research and policy direction.

3.9 Dr Turner presented an [interim report to the FSA Board on 16 September 2020](#) which set out conclusions from the first phase of the work and the timeline to deliver the full review by June 2021.

Rapid Evidence Review 1: Critical Review of Third-Party Evidence

3.10 The FSA is increasingly expected to form an independent position in response to a greater volume of evidence submitted by third parties to influence or change its policy. In March 2020 the FSA’s Chair of the Board asked:

- “How should the FSA evaluate the robustness of evidence submitted by non-commissioned third parties in an effort to change our policy, in order to ensure that the evidence considered to inform our advice and recommendations is sufficiently robust and based on the most up to date scientific information?”

3.11 In response, the Science Council set up a rapid evidence review to establish principles and guidelines for assessing the quality of evidence and provide assurance that the FSA has in place clear, robust and defensible processes for the objective and critical appraisal of third-party evidence submitted to the FSA.

- 3.12 This work was started in [September 2020](#); the decision to pursue a rapid review reflected the likelihood of increased external scrutiny of the FSA's advice and recommendations following the end of the transition period (31 December 2020).
- 3.13 This review has made excellent progress given the short timeframe available. The Science Council have outlined current best practice within the FSA and the use of nationally and internationally accepted guidance, which have been used to develop the Science Council's high-level principles and will be developed further into guidelines for the assessment of evidence.
- 3.14 The high-level principles and draft report were reviewed and well received by the FSA Executive Management Team (EMT) in February. The final principles, guidelines and report will be cleared by the Science Council in mid-March, allowing open consultation of the principles and guidelines in March-April.

4. Risks, Opportunities and Future Direction

- 4.1 As I mentioned earlier in this report the Science Council is diversifying the type of review that it carries out beyond the current in-depth Working Groups to include short and medium-term reviews. This is intended to allow us to be more agile, allowing us to do the kind of deep dive analysis that we have previously done, but also provide capacity to deliver more focused reviews for specific topics that are time sensitive alongside these.
- 4.2 The Council is also expanding, with the aim of recruiting two new members as part of the current Scientific Advisory Committee recruitment exercise. This will allow a wider range of expertise and greater capacity to take on new challenges.
- 4.3 These challenges include three new topics that the Council is interested in developing into discreet reviews throughout 2021 and beyond:
- A short review of other legitimate factors (OLF) to complement an assessment by the Advisory Committee for Social Science (ACSS) who are currently considering the same topic through a social science lens
 - A 'horizon scanning' project, looking at the potential impact on food systems of achieving net zero-carbon
 - A broad review to identify key risks and issues in a changing future food system (post-EU Exit and COVID-19).
- 4.4 The OLF review will be a short (up to 6 months) review which will follow on from the critical review of third-party data and pending outputs from the associated assessment by the ACSS. The net zero carbon review is planned to start around the middle of 2021 and will be scoped in consultation with key stakeholders to ensure it provides a meaningful and focused assessment of the topic. Finally, the broad review of the future landscape for the food system after EU Exit and COVID-19 is likely to be a workshop and is expected to take place early in 2022 with planning starting around mid-2021.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 I can't really talk about the last year without touching on COVID-19. The ongoing pandemic has affected all of us over 2020 in a multitude of ways. Social distancing has meant changes to the way we work and the way we live.
- 5.2 The Science Council has had to find new ways of collaborating and working, increasingly using video conferencing and remote tools. What has been pleasing and, to be honest, surprising, is how quickly we have all adapted this new way of working.
- 5.3 A lot of the credit for that goes to our secretariat who have gone out of their way to find technological and logistical solutions to make events we thought would be impossible (such as remote stakeholder workshops) work so well.
- 5.4 In fact, remote workshops have supported participation of people who were previously geographically far flung and might have struggled to take part in a physical meeting. However, nothing can really replace face to face discussion, and I look forward to a time in 2021 when the Council can meet in person again.
- 5.5 I am very pleased with what the Science Council has delivered over the last year. Looking to the future, we are planning reviews that will focus on some significant topics for the FSA: OLFs, net zero carbon and potential emerging risks in the food system after EU Exit and COVID-19.
- 5.6 I am very enthusiastic about the future of the Science Council over the next year and we will continue during this challenging time to provide high-level, expert strategic insight, challenge and advice on the FSA's use of science to deliver FSA objectives of a safe food system.

ANNEX: SUMMARY OF SCIENCE COUNCIL ACTIVITY AND OUTPUT (RECENT, CURRENT AND ANTICIPATED)

Date	March 2020	June 2020	September 2020	December 2020	March 2021	June 2021	September 2021	December 2021	March 2022
Science Council plenary	Closed Portfolio meeting.	7 th Open Meeting	Closed Portfolio meeting.	8 th Open Meeting	Closed Portfolio meeting.	9 th Open Meeting	Closed Portfolio meeting.	10 th Open Meeting	Closed Portfolio meeting.
Key Outputs	3 rd Annual report to FSA Board Anticipated handover of Working Group 4 report to the FSA for response formulation.	Working Group 4 report presented to FSA Board (Aug 2020)	Working Group 5 interim report to the FSA Board Start Rapid Evidence Review 1 of 3 rd party evidence quality	Anticipated handover of Working Group 5 report to the FSA for response formulation.	4 th Annual report to FSA Board Results of Rapid Evidence Review 1 report to FSA Board.	Working Group 5 report will be presented to FSA Board Start Rapid Evidence Review 2 on OLFs	Start Working Group 6 on zero-carbon	Anticipated handover of Working Group 5 report to the FSA for response formulation.	Workshop on key risks and issues in a changing future food system 5 th Annual report to FSA Board