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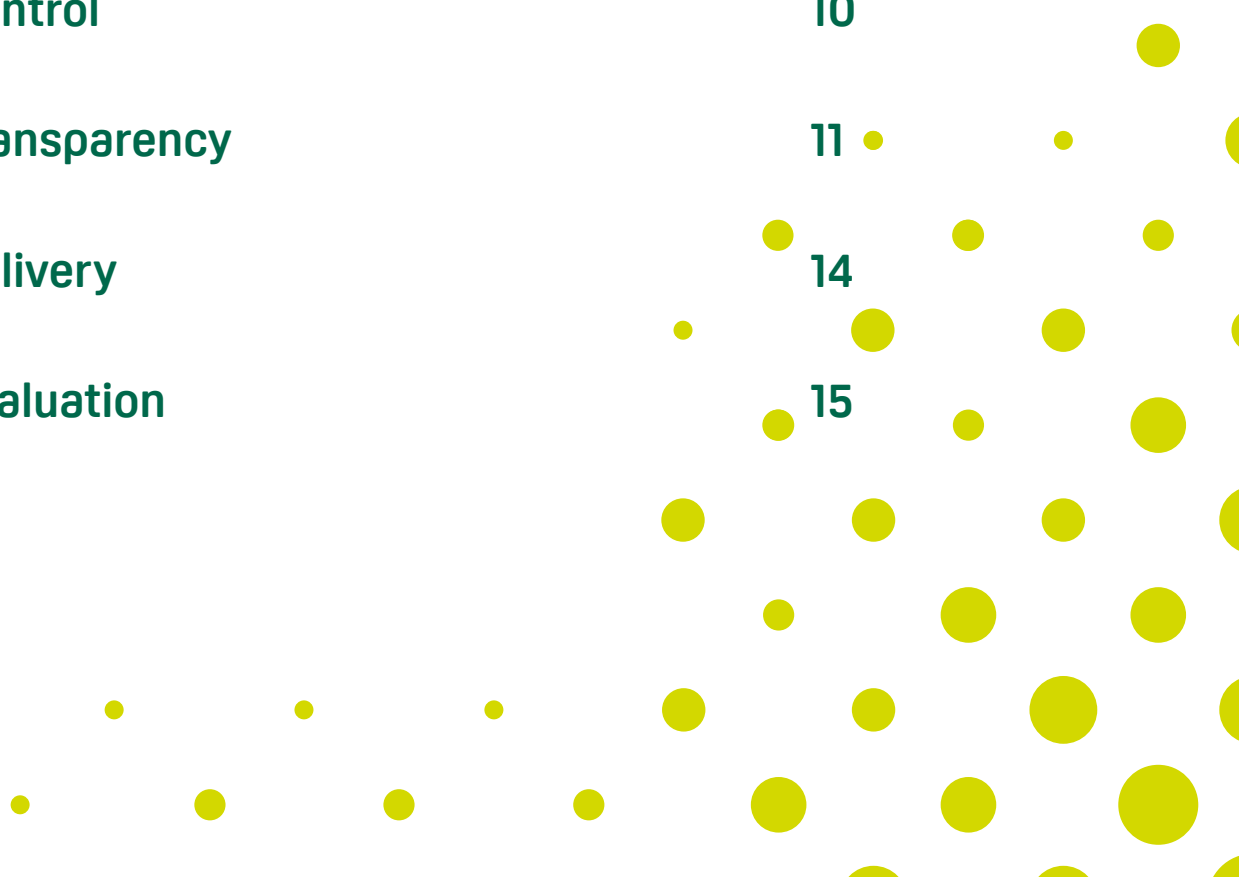
The FSA Risk Communication Toolkit

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Contents
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Foreword	3
The FSA Risk Communication Toolkit	4
What is Risk Communication?	5
What is Food Risk to Consumers?	5
Principles for Communicating Risk	6
Context	7
Purpose	9
Control	10
Transparency	11
Delivery	14
Evaluation	15



Foreword

As the Food Standards Agency (FSA) enters a new era following the UK's departure from the European Union, taking on greater responsibility for food safety, we wanted to renew our commitment to openness and transparency and set out what that means for our communications in this Risk Communication Toolkit.

Since the FSA was established in 2000 we have dealt with numerous major food incidents and delivered many successful communications campaigns. We're proud of our track record on this and the part it's played in maintaining high levels of public trust in the FSA and its advice. But as we enter a period where what we do is likely to come under more scrutiny than ever before, it feels right that we formalise our risk communications principles for the first time.

This toolkit is based on a thorough review of current evidence, including primary research with communicators themselves, so that it reflects best practice and the highest professional standards.

For our communications team, it will help to ensure we're attuned to the needs of different audiences, remind us to listen, adapt our communications where necessary and make sure our messaging is clear and consistent.

But risk communications is not just about communicating externally. Good risk communication is also an essential part of policy making. As an organisation that relies on science and evidence to inform our work, it's vital that we work together to provide clear explanations for our science and consult with others to refine our approach to regulation. This will help us to do risk communication in a way that explains risk clearly to people and helps them to do the right thing – which may be to change behaviour, take some action, or do nothing at all.

I hope this will be a useful guide, not just for FSA communications professionals but for the wider organisation. Whether it's used as an occasional reference point or a regular checklist, the aim is to encourage everyone to think more broadly about how and what we are communicating, and to adopt the principles and techniques set out in the toolkit.

Effective risk communication is vital to our mission of ensuring consumers have food that is safe and what it says it is. I'm confident this guide will be invaluable in helping us achieve it.



Steven Pollock

Director of Strategy, Legal, Communications and Governance



The FSA Risk Communication Toolkit

This document gives us a framework for communicating food risk to consumers. It has been developed to:

- Make risk communications planning rigorous and consistent with the latest thinking
- Support science, policy and strategy teams in understanding how to communicate effectively

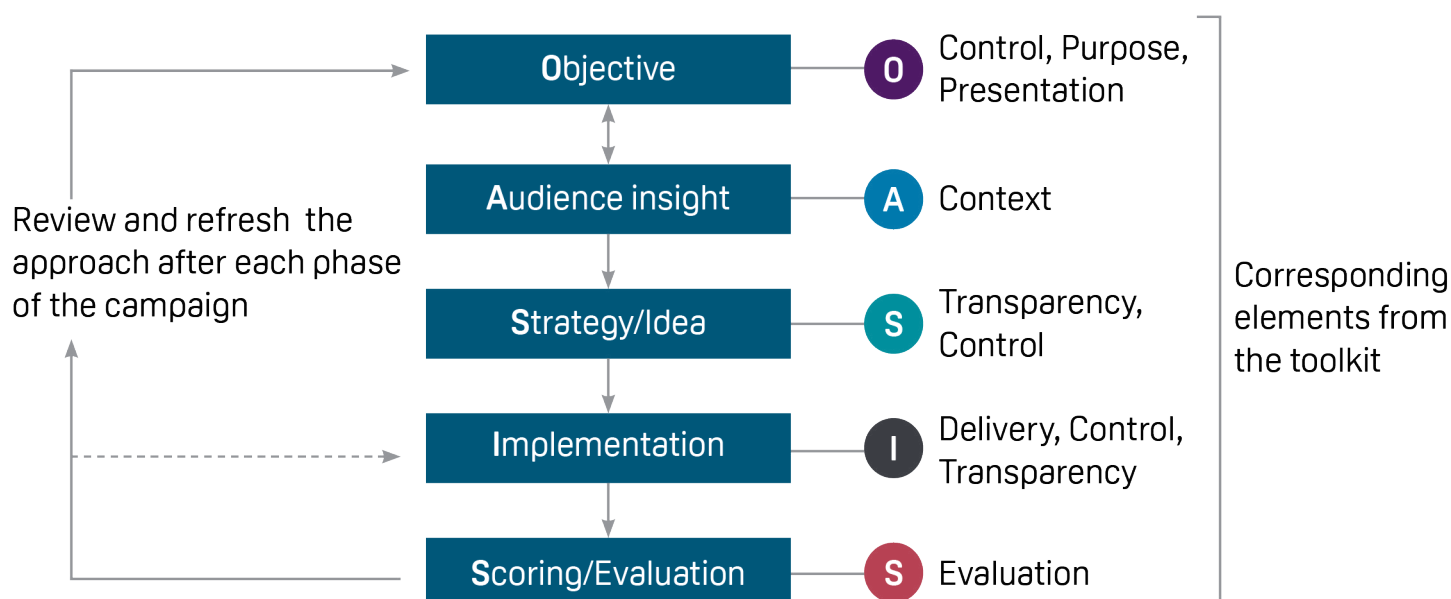
It is drawn from advice from the [FSA Science Council](#) and a working group of the [FSA Advisory Committee for Social Science](#), and supported by bespoke research including:

- A [review of the available literature](#) exploring risk communication theory and the way that 18 other Government organisations have set out their communications toolkits

- Qualitative research with communications practitioners and intermediaries as well as consumers across England, Wales and Northern Ireland

The toolkit comes with a checklist to use when developing risk communications. It is not prescriptive - every risk has its unique characteristics and considerations - however, asking yourself these questions will make sure that you are following the right principles for effective communication. In some cases we have suggested ways to make different types of communication most effective.

The core principles outlined in this toolkit are complementary with the [Government Communications Services' OASIS model](#) which was developed to bring order and clarity to planning campaigns.



What is Risk Communication?

'Risk communication' refers to the exchange of real-time information, advice and opinions between experts and people facing threats to their health, economic or social well-being. The ultimate purpose of risk communication is to enable people at risk to take informed decisions to protect themselves and their loved ones. Risk communication is how we align public and expert perceptions of a risk. To do this properly we may need to know as much about where a consumer is coming from as we do about the risk itself. This is because from a public point of view, risk is not just defined by the actual hazard, risk is a feeling which is influenced by many things, such as unfamiliarity, unnaturalness or prior

associations, especially when it comes to something new or unexpected, or that goes against something people have taken for granted. So the risk perceptions of an expert and the public might be very different - the risk may be unknown or poorly understood. People might start to panic when they don't need to, or on the other hand they might be unaware that they are taking a serious risk. The job of risk communication is to explain a risk accurately to people in such a way that they understand what it means and the explanation of the risk helps them to do the right thing - which may be to change their behaviour, take appropriate action, or do nothing at all.

What is Food Risk to Consumers?

Food is part of everyday life and any associated risks may feel unavoidable. To consumers buying, preparing, cooking and consuming food, it is habitual and many can feel they can identify and mitigate food risks easily. While there is some concern for food safety and hygiene it is not often top of mind. People often discount the likelihood or severity of food risk and are more likely to

worry about other people's well-being more than their own. Food risks do not feel serious, unless they have an immediate effect on health i.e. food poisoning or allergic reactions. By comparison consumers feel that financial and health risks seem more serious, for example purchasing a house, car or white goods.



Principles for Communicating Risk

This toolkit sets out seven principles for communicating with the public about risk.

1. Context

2. Purpose

3. Control

4. Transparency

5. Presentation

6. Delivery

7. Evaluation

1. Context

It is important to consider not just who your audience is but the context that this risk has for them and how it fits with or conflicts with existing narratives – the beliefs they already have about the world as well as the risk itself. This is crucial to understand up front because it influences how people respond and so how you should approach communication. Changing behaviour, particularly asking people to do something new is very dependent on how people feel. For example, in some communities (such as Black and ethnic minority communities, for example) people have been less willing to take the Covid-19 vaccine; research shows this may have more to do with what people believe about government and who they trust than about this vaccine in particular. More generally, on new technology most people are naturally cautious until they believe the benefits outweigh the risks.

People might see things very differently from you so before you can communicate you need to understand where they are coming from and take those views seriously even if you don't agree. Then, you might need to adjust your risk communications to address the worries and think about who people might trust enough to change their mind. Communication starts with listening.

Things to consider:

? Who are you communicating with?

? Can you find out more about them and what they think through media monitoring, social media listening, stakeholder intelligence, data analysis or through bespoke insight work? Do we have any existing social research on this audience?

? Can you target them by demographics, life stage, or where they live?
Is this communication relevant to niche, vulnerable or hard to reach audiences?

? Have you considered levels of literacy, comprehension, and other things which might affect how accessible your communication is to the target audience?



What are consumers thinking and saying about this issue?
Where are they looking for information and who are they listening to?



How will your message land with this group? What will they take away from it?
What will they do with the information?



Who else (including stakeholders) are talking about this issue and do they have
an audience we want to reach?



2. Purpose

Having a clear idea of the outcome you want your communication to achieve from the start will help you with clarity and targeting.

Things to consider:



What do you want people to feel, think and do?



Do you want people to change their behaviour as a result of the risk? If so, have you included a specific action you want people to take in your messaging? For example, encourage consumers not to wash chicken or sign up for food alerts



Are you reacting to a particular situation?



Are you safeguarding confidence in UK food?



Are you safeguarding the reputation of the FSA?



Have you defined your metrics/success criteria for your evaluation?

3. Control

Though outcomes can be unpredictable, it is possible to influence how things might go. This might include pre-testing messages, deciding how you want messages to be sequenced, having contingency plans, proactive stakeholder engagement and thinking about the impact of timing and how stakeholders might respond.

Communicating a risk as soon as reasonably possible reflects transparency and trustworthiness, both of which are part of how the FSA operates.

Things to consider:



Do you need to understand more about the risk?



Have you tested your communication with the target audience?



Have you thought about sequencing, the right order of messages and how you might back them up on other channels?



Have you thought about the impact of timing? Could you be criticised for communicating too early or too late?



Do you know what questions you might be asked? Do you know the answers?

4. Transparency

In the FSA we commit to being trustworthy. This means being open and honest, giving the reasons behind the decisions we make. It is more trustworthy to let people know that there is an issue even if you don't yet have all the facts and to be open about the basis of decisions.

Things to consider:



Have you presented the evidence behind decisions?



Have you set out the facts, what you do and don't know, and what we are doing to gather more information?



If appropriate, have you acknowledged when and if advice or evidence changed and why?



Are you being clear about both the risk and how certain you are about the risk? For example while the risk from CBD is not certain, enough is known that it could be risky for vulnerable audiences (pregnant women or those with underlying health conditions)

5. Presentation

Explain the risk as clearly as possible. The language you use and the way you provide data can affect how it is perceived.

Risk can be presented in two ways:

- absolute risk - how likely the risk is
- relative risk - how likely a risk will happen in comparison to something else

Things to consider:



What is the best way to present this risk?

- **Quantitative data i.e. giving the numbers behind a risk**

This is when you describe a risk in terms of how often it happens and what the impact is. Percentages can be easier to understand than frequencies (number of times a particular value for a variable (data item) has been observed to occur in a set period of time). For example, 10% of people will be affected may be easier to understand than one in 10 people affected. However, frequencies can make the risk feel less abstract. However, presenting too much information quantitatively can be overwhelming and confusing for many people

- **Qualitative data i.e. describing the risk**

Often risk is described according to a series of levels (e.g. high, medium and low) when the data is too complex or insufficient to give absolute numbers. This can explain what a risk means to an individual and provide context to a quantitative presentation of a risk. However, qualitative expressions can be easily interpreted in different ways. Some could perceive a low risk as something quite severe and vice versa

- **Framing i.e. presenting the risk**

Using expressions of probability can affect how people hear the risk. For example, using words like 'likely' and 'some chance' make things sound probable compared to; 'unlikely' and 'doubtful' which make them sound improbable. This is called 'framing'. If you frame something in terms of outcome (e.g. 95% success vs 5% failure) people will focus on the outcome you've used

'Gain-framed messages' (communicating the benefits of action) are effective for preventative behaviours while 'loss-framed messages' are more effective when communicating uncertainty and encouraging caution (e.g. 'bleach kills 99.9% of germs' is a gain-framed message whereas 'one in a hundred of these sweets is poisoned' is a loss-framed message)

- **Visuals i.e. illustrating the risk**

Graphics can work well if they are easy to interrogate. They can help consumers identify the chances of risk (e.g. 1 in 25 people), who is most at risk, or the nature and extent of the risk

When communicating a quantitative probability, including a visual alongside the numbers can help people understand. Visual communication can be more emotive and engaging/memorable, but if they look less than professional they can undermine your message. Graphs can help people understand a risk quickly, but different types of visualisations are better for different tasks:



Line graphs can be effective in communicating risk over time



Pie charts are effective at communicating the proportions of different risks



Bar graphs are effective at helping people understanding and compare between multiple different risks



Pictographs such as icons arrays (e.g. an image of ten identical body shapes, with different patterns to show those affected by risk as a proportion of the total) are effective at presenting binary risks that either do or do not exist or numerical changes in risk such as ‘before and after’ scenarios

FACT

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Data tables or ‘fact boxes’ work for more detailed, verbatim information



Maps can convey a lot of data about where a risk arises and are engaging and familiar, but keep them simple to avoid information overload

6. Delivery

The same message can have a different impact depending on the channel, who delivers it and how it is targeted. Targeting your message explicitly to clearly identified individuals or groups can make communications feel particularly relevant to them. This can, however, be a barrier to broader engagement on the issue.

Things to consider:



Which channels should you use?

- Check to see whether there is any insight on the media consumption habits available on the audience you wish to target
- Consider the pros and cons of different channels. Consumers expect to receive serious risk communications through traditional media channels (TV and print press) which are considered more appropriate for in-depth detail but allow your message to be filtered through the media's agenda
- Social media has potential to engage consumers through two-way communication and is considered appropriate for timely dissemination. It allows quick and direct access to an audience but can be considered less trustworthy but can be considered less trustworthy and come across as 'fake news'



Who should the messenger be?

- Messages from independent organisations like the FSA are believed to be impartial, but it is important that this independence is backed up with expertise (whether scientific, medical, or through personal experience of the impact of the risk)
 - Senior representative from organisation - demonstrates the organisation is taking the issue and messaging seriously. Appropriate when there is a serious issue or a reputational risk.
 - FSA Scientists and experts - add credibility to communication but be careful that overly technical language does not become a barrier to engagement
- Have you considered third party supporters from industry, science, consumer or other government departments?
 - A third party 'endorsement'/perspective - experts can add credibility and reinforce independence

7. Evaluation

It is important to monitor and evaluate all FSA risk communications effectively to show how they have contributed towards successful outcomes, providing clear evidence of impact. [The GCS Evaluation framework](#) can be a good starting point. Effective, iterative monitoring and evaluation will help you to:

- articulate the value and benefit of our risk communications
- provide actionable insight and direction to improve risk communications on an ongoing basis

Things to consider:



Can you evaluate the effectiveness of what you've done?

- Measure effectiveness against a set of metrics / success criteria/ C-SMART objectives (challenging, specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timed)
- Peer review - in some cases you may want to get your evaluation externally assured by experts through peer review. The analytics unit can help with this



Are there clear lessons to be learned?

- 'Wash up' session to summarise project and identify any issues/areas of improvement/things to take forward

Further Reading

If you're interested in learning more about the academic thinking behind this toolkit and on risk perception and communication, this [short report on communicating risk \(2018\)](#) is worth a read.

It brings together the latest thinking and has a full range of references and sources as well as looking at how other authorities have approached similar toolkits.

