

General

Letter to Robin May -FSA Chief Scientific Adviser



From: Professor John O'Brien, Chair of FSA Science Council

Date: 12 September 2024

To: Professor Robin May (by e-mail), FSA Chief Scientific Advisor

Completion of the final report of the Science Council Working Group on Wider Impacts beyond Food Safety Risk Assessment.

Dear Robin,

It is my pleasure to submit the final Report of the Science Council Working Group on Wider Impacts beyond Food Safety Risk Assessment.

We are grateful to the Food Standards Agency for starting a conversation on this topic and hope that our report and recommendations may catalyse a new approach to meeting broad societal needs and expectations when selecting appropriate food safety risk management and policy responses. The terms of reference facilitated a broad consideration of impacts, wider in scope than simple risk-benefit analysis and "other legitimate factors". The scope excluded consideration of the process of risk assessment: the Science Council affirmed the recognition of primacy of risk before any considerations of wider impacts. The framing of wider impact assessments in the context of legislative mandates, policies and government guidelines was also seen as a prerequisite.

The most important outcome of our work is recognition of the need for cultural change in the way complex systems such as food are regulated by Government,

necessitating little investment. Other recommendations are specific and may require investment in new tools and/or data generation and application. Such recommendations could be implemented in targeted focused-improvements following consensus on expected outcomes.

It was evident, especially during the workshop, that there is a growing expectation among stakeholders to see a move away from isolated assessments limited to a single dimension or question. In practice, this entails a move from “black or white” thinking in disciplinary and/or regulatory silos to more holistic decision making. In addition, the accelerating pace of research and innovation adds a sense of urgency to the need for cultural and business-process changes. In particular, I am convinced that current research will reveal more and more one-health relationships necessitating agile, cost-effective, multi-agency, cross-governmental responses. In addition to the need for appropriate guidelines, workshop participants drew attention to opportunities afforded by better data quality, and triangulation of evidence. This would necessitate not only cross government cooperation but also more effective cross-disciplinary working.

I am grateful to my Science Council colleagues for their enthusiasm and contributions during discussions on this challenging topic. The input of the FSA Team for secretarial support and technical comments and the many workshop participants is also greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Professor John O'Brien

Chair, Science Council