

Short term horizon scanning re: Covid-19 and food risk

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1. Summary

1.1 This paper updates the Science Council on the work we have been doing to scan the short-term (1-6 month) horizon when it comes to the impact of Covid-19 on food safety, food authenticity and food regulation.

1.2 In line with the recommendations on horizon scanning from [Science Council Working Group 3](#) in May 2019, we are drawing on various sources of surveillance, economic analysis, social science, trade data and data science to understand how current and emerging risks can offer insights into drivers of future risks, drawing on the Strategic Evidence Fund to fill evidence gaps.

2. Introduction

2.1 Roles and responsibilities for CV-19 insight gathering

- For the immediate term

2.2 Incident Response Group (IRG) manages the process of incident response and Briefing Cell manages the information that supports and informs the response. This information is gathered from a variety of different sources, including insights and scanning of the near horizon. IRG tackles the immediate, pressing

and relatively straightforward questions, longer term ones are escalated to the next group. These questions are managed through a single list updated each day after triaging of new intelligence and information.

- For the short term (time horizon to 6 months)

2.3 The workstream outlined in this paper provides the Covid-19 Strategic Response Group (SRG) with insights and scanning of the near horizon to inform its work in response to questions or issues framed by SRG or its members, from others across the organisation, or brought up from IRG. Strategy Unit build the bridge between the outputs of this work and operational decision-making. The aim is to support effective decision-making by SRG to a six-month horizon.

- To inform our medium-term thinking (time horizon to 3 years)

2.4 Strategy Unit, supported by Steve Wearne, will lead work with EMT later this year using well-established approaches in order to develop scenarios to test our strategic thinking and future business planning. This will seek to integrate the pre-Covid-19 orthodoxy in relation to food system futures and an analysis of also Covid-19 related disrupters and their potential lasting impacts.

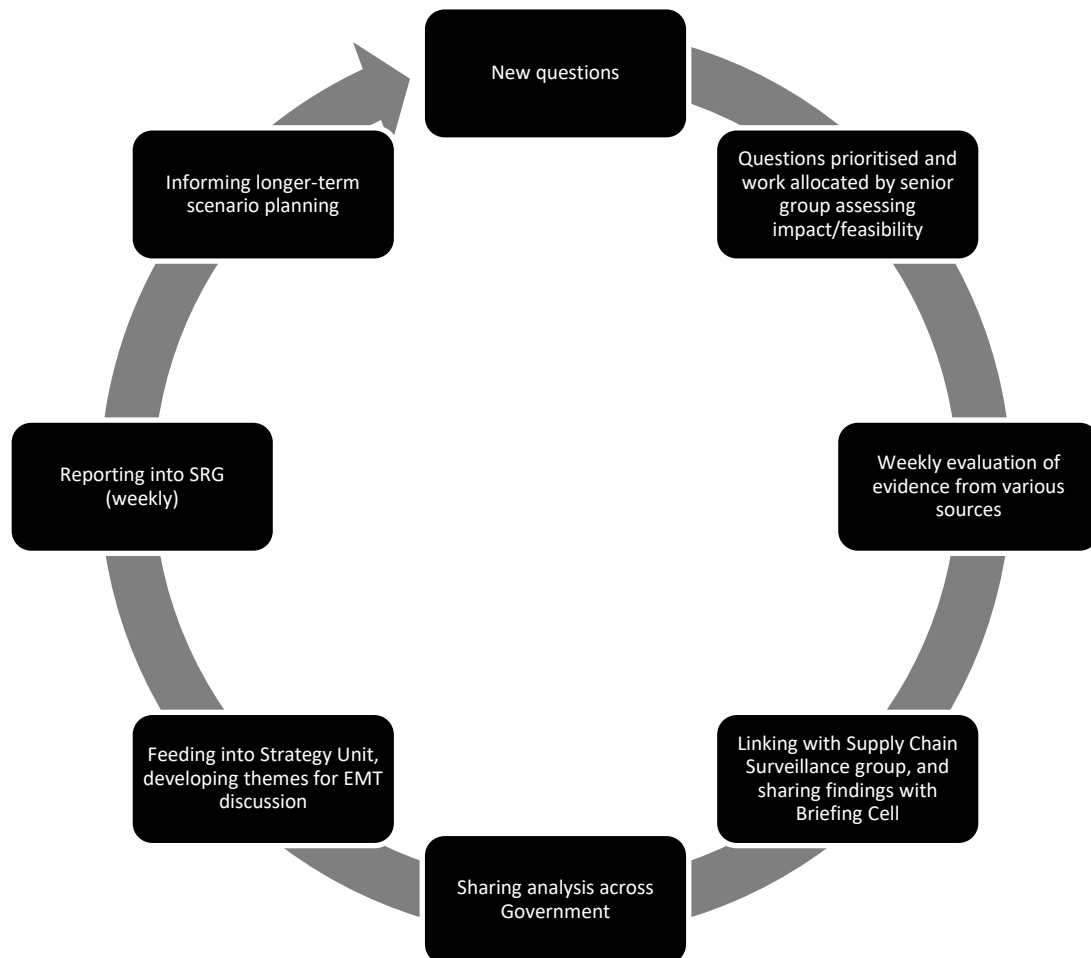
2.5 For each of the three above time horizons, we are breaking down the silos between strategy and science in particular, and flexibly deploying our resource across both directorates. We will work with others and already have constructive working arrangements with OGDs eg Defra, academia and commercial organisations.

3. Covid-19 (short term) Horizon Scanning

3.1 In mid-March, a team from across Science, Evidence and Research Directorate and Openness, Data and Digital were asked to answer (and in part predict) the questions that were outside the day to day tactical delivery of the incident management response to inform discussions at SRG. We used desk research to identify the main issues and develop a starter list of potential questions were discussed with senior leaders to prioritise what was a) easy and feasible to answer quickly or b) important to food safety, authenticity or regulation and

hence worth commissioning new work for, deprioritising the questions that do not meet these criteria.

- 3.2 Senior leaders from across the FSA now review questions and revise the previous prioritisation in line with emerging answers or ongoing events on a weekly basis. In parallel, we pulled together a small team from across SERD/ODD to start to answer the questions through insights from a broad range of disciplines e.g. operational analytics, data science, the latest economic, market and social research, intelligence from the food industry and other Government departments, qualitative research, consumer surveys and social media listening.
- 3.3 All statistics given in analysis are from statistically valid, UK representative research and either from a reputable published source (e.g. the Food Foundation) or our own survey; any uncertainties are surfaced.
- 3.4 We have also engaged with a (keen and growing) panel of experts drawn from academia and civil society, including the Chairs of the Science Council, the ACSS and the SACs who have helped us spot unknown unknowns and will now go on to consider emerging themes.



4. Progress

4.1 Additional questions have been coming from various sources, including colleagues in Defra and PHE, via surveillance, policy and operations colleagues. We are seeing fewer novel questions each week, which again is reassuring. Some are clear questions with yes/no answers and are being returned quickly. However, we have identified six broad themes meriting more strategic consideration. **These are:**

4.2 **Vulnerable groups** (with a particular focus on household food insecurity and risks to food safety, authenticity and regulation)

- An initial paper with a particular focus on the key triggers for household food insecurity, the areas where people might be most badly hit and risks

to food safety, authenticity and regulation was discussed by EMT 21/04. Subsequent analysis focused on the distinct impact on people aged 16-24. This work has fed directly into wider work on vulnerability including Defra's Ministerial Task Force.

4.3 Labs and sampling

- Our questions have been on alternative ways to generate samples, and the risk to the consumer re safety/authenticity from minimal sampling or changes to e.g. labels. This work has prompted work on alternative methods of sampling to be considered as part of the incident response.

4.4 Business compliance

- The questions are broadly around any issues or risks to consumer safety raised by new business models, staffing/training issues or prolonged business closure. RCD have taken responsibility for taking this work forward.

4.5 Substitution and crime

- Much analysis is already underway in NFCU and within Surveillance, looking at meat and other high demand products affected by a disruption to the supply chain which might incentivise food fraud.

4.6 The world after lockdown

- The questions focus on key uncertainties, emerging or ongoing consumption trends, and the impact of recession on businesses and consumers. As with the theme below, we are monitoring these through ongoing consumer research and market intelligence.

4.7 Consumer behaviour

- The questions are broadly around changes to consumer hygiene behaviours, changes to purchasing and cooking habits, including the increase of use of online platforms and food sharing apps.

- 4.8 We are now working with the leads across the agency to develop joint analysis with Strategy Unit on each of these themes, including indications of the weight of the evidence and thoughts on the 'so whats' for discussion at EMT.