

FSA Science Council 7th Plenary meeting: 24 June 2020

Location: Videoconference

Attendees: See Annex 1

Materials: [Agenda and meeting papers](#)

Summary of Actions: See Annex 2

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Agenda Item 1: Welcome and Introductions

1. The Chair welcomed attendees to the 7th meeting of the Science Council. She specifically thanked Heather Hancock (FSA Chair), Guy Poppy (FSA Chief Scientific Adviser) and Robin May (FSA Chief Scientific Advisor Designate) for their attendance. A full list of attendees is provided in Annex 1.
2. The Chair welcomed new Science Council members Ms Claire Nicholson (new lay member for the Council) and Prof Jonathan Wastling. The third new member of the Council, Prof Peter Gregory was unfortunately unable to attend the morning session but would be attending the afternoon closed workshop.
3. The Secretary to the Science Council asked members if they have new interests that may be relevant to the topics discussed at this Science Council meeting. Members provided a nil return. The Secretary asked for members to review and

confirm the accuracy of their declaration in the Register of Interests (Doc. SC 7-1) by cop 3 July.

Action SC 7(1): Science Council members to review their entry in the Register of Interests and confirm its accuracy by cop 3 July.

Agenda Item 2: Draft Minutes of the 6th meeting and Actions Arising

4. The draft minutes of the 6th Science Council meeting on 17 December 2019 (Doc. SC 7-2a) were tabled for agreement by the Council. Members' changes provided after the meeting to the initial draft were reflected in this final draft. The minutes were agreed by the Council with one small editorial revision.

Action SC 7(2): Secretariat to publish the agreed final minute of the 6th Science Council meeting on the Science Council website by 30 June.

5. The Secretary then noted that all actions from the open session of the 6th Science Council meeting (Doc. SC 7-2b) have been either completed, are to be addressed at this meeting or have become ongoing activities.

Agenda Item 3: Science Council Chair's Report

6. The Chair gave a short presentation to the Council regarding her activities and those of the Council over the last 6 months (Doc. SC 7-3(s)).
7. The Chair summarised her key engagements with colleagues and peers since the 6th Science Council meeting, including a meeting organised by Sir Patrick Vallance (the Government Chief Scientific Advisor) of Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) chairs from across Government. She also thanked Prof John O'Brien for attending the March FSA Board meeting in her place to give the Science Council Chair's annual update to the Board (Doc. [FSA 20-03-07](#)).
8. The Chair then noted the progress on Working Groups 4 (data usage and digital technology) and 5 (food hypersensitivity), and that the former is nearing the end with its final report being considered at this meeting while the latter has made good progress but is being delayed somewhat by COVID-19. Working Group 4's final report is due to be presented to the FSA Board at their August meeting, with Working Group 5's interim report to be presented to them in September.
9. The Chair then briefly considered the effect of COVID-19 on the work of the Council and praised members and the Secretariat for being flexible and innovative in how they had continued to deliver the Council's work. She noted that the Science Council is ready to assist the FSA where it can in understanding both short and long terms effects of the pandemic on UK food systems.
10. The Chair then reflected on the achievements of the Council over its first 3 years, including work on science use and assurance, risk analysis and uncertainty, and horizon scanning. She noted the valuable relationships formed with the FSA Chair and Board, Chief Scientific Advisor and other FSA SACs. Finally, the Chair noted it has been a year of change, with founding members Mark Rolfe and Profs. Laura Green and Mark Woolhouse leaving and new members joining, so now is a good time to consider what the Council should do next.

Agenda Item 4: FSA Update

a) General Update

11. Dr Adam Cook presented (Doc. SC 7-4a). He informed the Council that FSA will publish its Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) in the week commencing 10 July. The ARIs have four priority areas for science and evidence research and within these are 11 research questions which the FSA would like to be addressed. The FSA Strategic Evidence Fund has agreed year on year funding increases over the next 3 years, with £500k more this year.
12. FSA is building the UK's food safety sampling capability, with establishment of a cross-government sampling committee involving FSA, FSS and Defra. There have been recent FSA Board papers ([FSA 19-06-09](#) and [FSA 19-09-06](#) in June and September 2019, respectively) on this topic and with reduced sampling due to COVID-19, the Science, Evidence and Research Directorate (SERD) is looking at sampling models and how best to sample in the future.
13. On recruitment over the last 6 months, there have been 6 new recruits to SERD, with 12 new vacancies in the process of being filled, including a new project officer position for Science Council work. Other successes were also touched on, including Scientific Advisory Committee recruitment to expand numbers, ensuring social science is included in the Codex allergen labelling review, and building strong relationships with Research Councils to have joint funding options (e.g. Strategic Priorities Fund).

b) FSA Horizon Scanning update – COVID-19

14. Michelle Patel gave a presentation about FSA horizon scanning (HS) activities on COVID-19 (Doc. SC 7-4b & Doc. SC 7-4b(s)). The type of HS being used is more near term than the typical 3-5 year timeframe and responds to immediate issues or anticipate questions FSA need to answer over 3-6 months. The FSA has been bringing in expertise to assist from various channels, including panels of internal FSA experts and chairs of SACs (including the Science Council Chair) have provided important insight.
15. The FSA Chair, Mrs Hancock, is on a Ministerial taskforce to help get information to where decisions are being made. Initial findings from consumer research on buying, consumption and food safety behaviours is being published on 25 June. Questions that need to be answered have started to form 6 key food themes around food insecurity, laboratories and sampling, business compliance, crime and substitution, consumer behaviour change and the world after lockdown.

Action SC 7(3): Secretariat to circulate link to COVID-19 consumer research report by mid-July.

c) COVID-19: Update and impacts

16. Prof Guy Poppy (FSA Chief Scientific Advisor) gave a short presentation on the FSA's actions around COVID-19. (Doc. SC 7-4c(s)). He noted the FSA has been involved from the beginning in cross-Government discussions and has worked

with Department of Health & Social Care (DHSC) and Public Health England (PHE) to assess the risk. This assessment went to the Civil Contingencies Committee, and Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR), stating that transmission of coronavirus via packaging and food is by surface contact, not food borne (like norovirus).

17. The Government Chief Scientist, Sir Patrick Vallance, is interested in whether changes in handwashing has affected norovirus infection rates. Due to the difficulty in gathering reliable primary information during lockdown, FSA is working with Defra and the Environment Agency to analyse wastewater to identify local outbreaks of COVID 19. There is also interest in using this approach to identify and manage norovirus outbreaks in winter, as it may help take pressure off the NHS if there is a second wave of COVID-19 at the same time.
18. FSA is working to protect the Health and Safety of FSA staff working in abattoirs from COVID-19, and helping the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to address the working environment. As seen recently in Germany, meat plants have plenty of contact surfaces, plus a cold environment and behaviour patterns that can spread the virus. FSA is working with other departments to ensure sectors are reopening as safely as possible, and FSA risk assessors have been participants on Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) working groups which have looked at environmental transmission of COVID-19 (on issues like food packaging).
19. FSA found the normal Bronze, Silver, Gold command approach to dealing with major incidents did not work with an outbreak like COVID-19 which has long term implications. An addition a Strategic Response Group that sits above Gold command was established to consider strategic implications of the virus and what the “new” normal looks like.
20. The Science Council then discussed the presentation with Prof Guy Poppy. Prof J O’Brien asked about research confirming that current hand hygiene advice was adequate. Prof Poppy noted that with businesses starting to open, the aim is for directly sampling in restaurants as part of the third study of infectious intestinal disease in the UK (IID3) and looking forward over the next 6-18 months to see whether the improvement in hand hygiene tails off. Wastewater analysis is a low impact proxy and the immediate question is whether the information collected provides quantitative data. Prof Poppy welcomed any advice from the Prof J O’Brien.

Action SC 7(4): Chief Scientific Advisor’s team to contact Prof J O’Brien to discuss proxy measures for handwashing such as wastewater analysis by the end of August.

21. Prof J O’Brien asked if there are further food safety issues raised by COVID-19 in abattoirs. Prof Poppy responded that FSA would continue to focus on food safety, and will help public health bodies and HSE around exposure by surface contact but he did not think there is a food safety issue here.

22. Prof J O'Brien asked how the risk analysis process will evolve in the future, especially how it feeds into the science/policy nexus. Prof Poppy said that the risk analysis process FSA has developed is only now being used in real world situations so there is obviously a feedback cycle to improve and learn from experience. It needs continuous improvement and he would welcome feedback. Prof Sarah O'Brien thought that this experience will be invaluable for managing disruptions to the food supply from EU Exit.

Agenda Item 5: Working Group 4

23. The Working Group on data usage and digital technology is close to reporting and will present its results to the FSA Board on 26 August 2020. Prof. Patrick Wolfe presented the draft final report for this Working Group (Doc. SC 7-5), which has been through a few iterations of feedback from the Science Council, for any final feedback and agreement.
24. It was agreed that the report should add to the ethical issues in data sharing some consideration of barriers to data sharing in science and research. This is because how legal protections on privacy (such as GDPR) are being applied is causing difficulties in sharing data for research, and that further guidance is needed for researchers. Members were asked to send in any further comments within the next two weeks. The consensus was that the report was very good and just needed a few adjustments, with the Council agreeing broadly on their signoff, with the Chair working with Prof Wolfe to finalise the draft.

Action SC 7(5): Science Council Members to provide any final feedback on the draft Working Group 4 report by 8 July.

Agenda Item 6: Working Group 5

25. Dr Paul Turner provided a brief update on the current status of Working Group 5 on food hypersensitivity. (Doc. SC 7-6, Doc. SC 7-6(s)).
26. The following progress was noted:
- a. Workstreams 5.1/5.3: Completed interviews with FSA and external advisers; completed desk study (review of reviews); case studies are being developed and an interim report has been prepared.
 - b. Workstream 5.2: Public survey launched on 20 February (responses from public, businesses and clinicians). The next stage is to take the survey data and synthesise top 10 priority issues using a modified James Lind Alliance method. The two-day prioritisation workshop has been delayed as it was planned to be face-to-face but now may now be online.
 - c. Workstreams 5.4/5.5: These both rely on Workstream 5.2 so the original 19 October date for an HS workshop is unlikely. New dates will be found.

Agenda Item 7: The FSA Risk Communication Toolkit

27. Michelle Patel and Catherine Clarke gave a joint presentation on development of the FSA Risk Communication Toolkit (Doc. SC 7-7, Doc. SC 7-7(s)).

28. The Science Council members were impressed with this work. Claire Nicholson asked if FSA had considered how this approach might have worked with historic cases such as cured meat or E-coli. Ms Patel said they had already considered 2 or 3 historic communications exercises (Cannabidiol (CBD) & Salmonella in eggs) to reflect on what is known now and how that might affect what was done then. This exercise flagged a few small issues, for example there were some places where different phrasing might have been applied or different communication channels used.
29. Prof Poppy noted that last time he met with Prof Chris Whitty (Chief Medical Officer) the CMO had paid tribute to how FSA had managed food incident communications and that he would like to share FSA's tools and techniques (as public health messages). This work could be a good example to send to Prof Whitty and to initiate collaboration with the Department of Health on a range of issues.

Action SC 7(6): Michelle Patel to share work on FSA risk communications toolkit with Prof Chris Whitty's team at Department of Health by 30 September.

30. The Chair asked when the toolkit might be launched and how widely would it be made available. Ms Patel said primary users are the FSA but others, such as the Paris Risk Group, are interested. Communication change specialists are also an audience. This work is the first study which looks at risk communication from all these perspectives and would prove useful to communication practitioners. The next step is to draft the toolkit and test with cross government communications networks, and then communications practitioners and academics. It would then be disseminated and published more widely.

Agenda Item 8: Update on FSA Scientific Advisory Committees

31. The Chair asked the Secretary to the Science Council to note the outcome of the review of how Science Council members' participation in other SACs has been operating. The Secretary noted that members who have attended SAC meetings are now content with the way they are informed of upcoming meetings and provided with paperwork. The conclusion is that the process is working well.
32. The Secretary then noted that the secretariat for the Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) had asked if Science Council attendees could provide an update on Science Council business at their meetings. The Secretary therefore suggested that members may wish to discuss this proposal with their paired SAC secretariats in future.
33. Prof J O'Brien has attended COT and its sister committees and noted that he is balancing being an observer and not a participant, whilst still providing a useful link to the Science Council. He thinks there is scope for Council to help with SAC activities on horizon scanning and to contribute on topics that fall into an interdisciplinary space given that SACs are very specialised. He agreed to discuss with the COT Chair the provision of an update on Council work at their next meeting.

34. Dr Turner attended an Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes workshop in February. Due to clinical responsibilities he has not attended more recent meetings. The Chair noted she had attended an Advisory Committee for Social Science (ACSS) meeting this week and provided an update on Council business. She had also met with their Chair Prof Susan Michie and agreed to share information on upcoming projects or activities, once known, to facilitate collaboration (where appropriate).
35. It was noted that after the departure of Mr Mark Wolfe there is a vacancy for a representative of the Science Council on the Advisory Committee on Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF). Prof Peter Gregory (who could not attend this morning's meeting) has expressed his interest in this position if asked, and Prof Jonathan Wastling also expressed an interest in attending the ACSS. The Chair noted this and said there is flexibility to consider more than one member being a "buddy" to a SAC. A decision will be made as to membership after this meeting.

Action SC 7(7): Chair and Secretariat to consider membership's attendance at other SAC meetings and agree how and who will attend by 17 September.

Agenda Item 9: Wrap Up and Close Session

36. The Chair thanked everyone for their time and attention and noted the dates of the next two Science Council meetings: A closed workshop on 17 September 2020 and the next open meeting on the 3 December 2020.

Agenda Item 10: Questions and comments from the public

37. The Secretary noted that no written questions for the Science Council have been received ahead of the meeting. Audience members were asked if they had any questions for the Science Council and none responded. Therefore, the Chair called a close to the meeting.

Annex 1: Meeting Attendees

Science Council

- Prof. Sandy Thomas - Council Chair
- Prof. John O'Brien - Council Member
- Dr. Paul Turner - Council Member
- Prof. Patrick Wolfe - Council Member
- Prof. Sarah O'Brien - Council Member
- Ms. Claire Nicholson - Council Member
- Prof. Jonathan Wastling - Council Member

Advisory Committee on Social Science

- Prof Julie Barnett - Advisory Committee for Social Science

Food Standards Agency

- Mrs Heather Hancock - FSA Chair
- Prof. Guy Poppy - FSA Chief Scientific Adviser
- Prof. Robin May - FSA Chief Scientific Adviser designate
- Prof. Rick Mumford - Head of Science Evidence and Research
- Ms. Julie Pierce - Director Openness, Data, Digital, Science and Wales
- Dr. Adam Cook - Head of Science Strategy, Capability and Research
- Dr. Chun-Han Chan - Science Council Secretary
- Mr. Paul A Nunn - Science Council Secretariat Lead
- Ms. Alisha Barfield - Science Council Secretariat
- Ms. Michelle Patel - Head of Social Science
- Ms. Rebecca Sudworth - Director of Policy
- Ms. Catherine Clarke - Head of Marketing Projects (FSA Comms)
- Dr. Ben Goodall - FSA Research Co-ordination and Partnerships Lead

Audience

- Ms. Sushma Acharya - FSA Allergy Policy
- Mr. Geoff Owen - FSA PMO Allergy Board
- Ms. Rachel Elsom - Public Health England

Final Draft Minutes

- Ms. Aisling Jao - FSA Administrative Support (SAC)
- Ms. Sophie Morris - Private Secretary to the FSA Chair

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Annex 2: List of agreed actions from the Science Council 7th open meeting on 24 June 2020

Action Ref.	Description	Responsible	Deadline
SC 7(1)	Science Council members to review their entry in the Register of Interests and confirm its accuracy	Science Council members	by cop 3 July
SC 7(2)	Secretariat to publish the agreed final minute of the 6th Science Council meeting on the Science Council website	Secretariat	by 30 June
SC 7(3)	Secretariat to circulate link to COVID-19 consumer research report	Secretariat	by mid-July
SC 7(4)	Chief Scientific Advisor's team to contact Prof J O'Brien to discuss proxy measures for handwashing such as wastewater analysis	CSA Team	by the end of August
SC 7(5)	Science Council Members to provide any final feedback on the draft Working Group 4 report	Science Council members	by 8 July
SC 7(6)	Michelle Patel to share work on FSA risk communications toolkit with Prof Chris Whitty's team at Department of Health	Michelle Patel	by 30 September
SC 7(7)	Chair and Secretariat to consider membership's attendance at other SAC meetings and agree how and who will attend	Secretariat	by 17 September