

# FSA Science Council 8th open plenary meeting: 3 December 2020: Final Draft

**Location:** Videoconference

**Meeting Papers:** [Science Council 8<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting webpage](#)

**Attendees:** See [Annex 1](#)

**Summary of Actions:** See [Annex 2](#)

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## Executive Summary

- The FSA Chief Executive, Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA) and Head of Food Safety Policy explained practical issues facing the FSA from 1 January 2021.
- An update on progress of Working Group 5 on food hypersensitivity was given by the review lead, including plans for a horizon scan workshop to be held in March 2021.
- The FSA CSA and Head of SSCR discussed developments in FSA science, and EU Exit.
- The Science Council was updated on a new rapid evidence review, to codify minimum quality standards for evidence submitted to the FSA.
- Council members gave a brief read-out of SACs meetings they had attended.
- The Chair discussed her last 6 months activity and looked forward to 2021.

## Agenda Item 1: Welcome and introduction

1. The Chair welcomed attendees to the 8th meeting of the Science Council. A full list of attendees is provided in [Annex 1](#).
2. The Secretary asked members if they have new interests that may be relevant to the topics discussed at this Science Council meeting. Members gave a nil return. The Secretary asked for members to review and confirm the accuracy of their declaration in the Register of Interests (Doc. SC 8-1) by cop 11 December.

**Action SC 8(1): Science Council members to review their entry in the Register of Interests and confirm its accuracy by cop 11 December.**

## Agenda Item 2: Minutes of 7th Council open meeting and actions

3. The draft minutes of the 7th Science Council open meeting on 24 June 2020 (Doc. SC 8-2a) were tabled for agreement by the Council. Members' changes provided after the 7<sup>th</sup> meeting to the initial draft were reflected in this final draft. The minutes were agreed by the Council with no further changes.

**Action SC 8(2): Secretariat to publish the agreed final minute of the 7th Science Council meeting on the Science Council website by 8 January.**

4. The Secretary noted that all actions had been completed aside from action SC 7(4) to discuss with John O'Brien proxy measures for handwashing such as wastewater analysis. This action had been withdrawn, but secretariat would arrange for him to be updated on progress if he wished.

**Action SC 8(3): On request from John O'Brien Secretariat will arrange an update on proxy measures for handwashing.**

## Agenda Item 3: European Union (EU) Exit

5. The Chair introduced this item on what the practical changes will be for the FSA and FSA science from 1 January 2021 after fully leaving the European Union.
6. Michael Wight explained that the FSA has reorganised, emphasising science and evidence and developing a new Risk Analysis Process (RAP) to deliver UK decision making outside the sphere of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). The scale is challenging, as EFSA approved up to 300 regulated products a year (although the UK may not see that many). FSA will look to streamline the operation after the first month based on lessons learnt. It has produced flow charts for stakeholders of the RAP and regulated product approval process, which the Chair asked to see. Michael noted that the FSA may be lobbied on these decisions, so the Council's review of third-party evidence is very welcome.
7. Rick Mumford agreed FSA has been building science capacity in recent months around regulated products, recruiting to Scientific Advisory Committees (SACs) and Joint Expert Groups (JEGs). The currently inactive Advisory Committee on Animal Feed is being reviewed to consider its risk assessment role.

**Action SC 8(4): Michael Wight to provide the secretariat with approval process flow charts to circulate to Council members.**

8. Robin May noted in the short-term things will be familiar, but different. The biggest uncertainty is a scale of approval applications, but he thinks the system FSA has in place is robust. Further in the future, government is keen to explore new areas (such as gene editing and GM). This leads to questions for the FSA such as what if UK moves out of line of EU on issues such as this?
9. Emily Miles noted EU Exit and COVID-19 pushed a lot of other ongoing initiatives down the agenda this year (such as how we work with Local Authorities (LAs) to regulate business, making our meat hygiene operations more efficient and food hypersensitivity), and moving into 2021, the fallout of these two will remain. LAs are stretched with COVID-19 (and vaccine distribution) so FSA needs to take care when we ask them to make interventions.
10. Emily then set out her FSA 'wish list' for next year:
  - Publish good science-based risk assessments on novel foods and new products;
  - Improve directions we give to LAs on interventions on food hygiene.
  - Start to review how we regulate big food businesses (retailers/digital platforms) which operate from multiple locations to regulate them as whole enterprises;
  - Substantial developments in some of the FSA's long-running investigation on meat fraud;
  - Looking internally, improve our diversity at senior levels in the organisation.
11. The Chair then opened the table to questions from members.
  - **When will the FSA reach a 'steady state' following all these changes?** Emily noted that 'steady state' was not something the public sector had seen in some years; but she thought by the second quarter of 2021 we will be able to see how well the regulated products process is working and by the end of the year, FSA will better understand resourcing needs and what to improve in 2022 (such as how to address other legitimate factors in risk assessment). Robin added that he hopes FSA will reach a 'new normal' in 12 months on regulated products. Michael added that now that decisions will be made by consensus of the four countries in the UK rather than the 28 EU Member States, it was possible that decisions would be made faster and more relevant to UK consumers and businesses.
  - **Given inevitable comparisons going forward between FSA and EFSA's approaches, how will FSA adopt a way of working that is appropriate for the UK?** Emily replied the opinions of the FSA and EFSA will often agree because the scientific analysis won't be that different. The differences will be with the broader EU as being outside the EU Commission and Council, we will

be in a space where we can make public advice to Ministers on our risk management choices. For example, FSA has been very explicit that it will look at other legitimate factors.

- **What will be the relationship between the FSA and devolved administrations and the challenge presented by an Irish sea border?**  
Robin noted on the science the four countries are unlikely to differ in opinions. Emily said that FSA supports Welsh and Northern Ireland (NI) ministers and works closely with Food Standards Scotland (FSS). A framework approach to manage how the four nations come together on food and feed issues (including composition and nutrition labelling) is now at the point of being signed off by Ministers; within this there is a dispute resolution process.
- FSA's role in NI is to help Port Health authorities identify the checks they have to do for EU compliance. NI will follow EU rules. The FSA Board is clear that there will continue to be consideration of risk across all four UK countries. It is possible that even with the same decisions to make, the UK might move at a different pace in GB.

#### Agenda Item 4: Working Group 5 update

12. Paul Turner introduced this item, providing an update on Working Group 5 on food hypersensitivity (FHS). The main points from the update paper were:

- The project is on target to deliver by its amended milestones. The Chair noted the delay due to COVID-19 and asked how much leeway there was, and Paul accepted that the timing will be tight (especially for HS) but achievable.
- The tender call for WG5.4 is nearly complete and on schedule to deliver its report on time.
- WG5.5's Horizon Scanning (HS) workshop will now be on 9 and 10 March 2021.

13. The key areas of research prioritised by WG5.2 are similar to the FSA's existing areas of research interest (ARIs) FHS (Annexes 3 and 4). One gap is informing FSA of FHS incidents, but improvements are being made on an operational rather than a research level, although there is scope for research on how best to collect data and monitor in real life. John added the WG5.4 literature review will establish the existing evidence base for the priority questions set by WG5.2.

14. Paul noted that there is a lot to be learnt in general from the review on the prioritisation and HS approaches which could be applied outside FHS. As such he encouraged engagement from FSA staff in other areas in the upcoming HS event and to attend as a participant or an observer. Paul then thanked the Working Group 5 secretariat and others who have helped with organisation.

15. The Chair then opened the floor to discussion.

- Rick noted that ARIs are to be dynamic, and FSA wants to update them regularly. He and Robin agreed that there are lessons from WG5 on how to run 'big question' projects (such as zero carbon) and build future FSA science research programmes. Paul added in his view there was good support for this process from FSA staff, but would he welcome more involvement from others.
- John noted a key challenge for FSA is corporate memory: the FSA doesn't always 'know what it knows' and knowledge may be important at a later date.
- Julie Hill thanked Paul for involving the Advisory Committee on Social Science (ACSS) and said they were happy to be involved in any net zero review. She noted the ACSS have an Assurance Working Group on social science but similarly to WG5, their advice can have wider relevance. She also presented to the FSA Board on ACSS assurance work and would be pleased to share this.

**Action SC 8(5): Julie Hill to provide the secretariat with a copy of her presentation on ACSS assurance for circulation to the Science Council.**

### Agenda Item 5: FSA Update

16. Robin May gave an update on his first 6 months as FSA CSA. He met informally with colleagues involved in the National Food Strategy (including Lord Krebs) to see where they see work together, identify any potential issues and look at what is on the horizon. He has also met animal and plant health agencies to discuss issues such as import/ export challenges, and zoonotic infections and how they affect food.
17. He has a meeting next week on wider international activities, especially the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties (COP) 26 and G7 next year (both of which the UK is hosting). FSA wants food and the food system to be prominent (liaising with Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) and Defra) including joining up of best practice in data sharing, and horizon scanning with other G7 partners. Robin will keep the Council updated.
18. He appeared at New Scientist live last weekend talking on the future of food and food safety to over 1,000 people. It was a good way to engage with them on a range of topics (robots in farming, lab grown meat, powdered grasshoppers).
19. This year's comprehensive spending review (CSR) ended up being a single year settlement (rather than the normal 3 years). The FSA outcome retains core activity, but major ambitions were not cleared (e.g. large-scale genome surveillance for food pathogens. It is expected there will be another spending review next year.
20. There is a public consultation on gene editing due very soon led by Defra to which the FSA has already contributed about public perception of gene editing and genetic modification of crops. FSA is preparing for that consultation and planning to do some fact-based communications for the public on what this is and

what the issues are. We are also preparing for where the consultation goes, and possible subsequent legislation. FSA has held workshops with colleagues across academia and policy already this year and will do more next year in that space.

21. Robin's 'wish list' is for the FSA is:

- to factor OLFs into its decision making in a consistent, robust and defensible way: how to weigh OLF in wider consumer interests in food (e.g. environment and animal welfare) and ethics and, he is discussing these issues with DHSC and Defra.
- Looking for better visibility for SACs across government, and their use across departments. He is having conversations about how to improve advisory committee visibility and improve cross-government access to expert insight.
- A lot of work goes into identifying evidence gaps when tendering for research and FSA receives few bids. Many academics may not be looking at government tender portals but focus instead UKRI, so we could better interact with the research community and tweak our systems to attract those experts.

22. There was some discussion on the last point. Sarah O'Brien noted as a previous FSA contractor, one of the issues is the prestige associated with government funding as opposed to UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) funding. Also, that some of the things FSA will want from research will be different from something that UKRI would tend to fund.

23. Rick explained that this point is understood and FSA is looking at how to streamline the process to attract the best researchers on projects and how impact can be encouraged (maybe not as published papers but as 'influencing policy'). To see how papers are used and utilised, FSA has taken forward some previous Council advice on key performance indicators (KPIs) and is using Digital Object Identifier (DOI) numbers on FSA and Science Council reports, as with academic journals.

24. Patrick Wolfe welcomed these steps. Researchers are looking to have impact and a strong policy impact is a good motivator. Also, the dynamics that shaped people's priorities in academia before the pandemic may have changed. If the FSA sees this as an opportunity and wants to build links to the research community in different ways than done before, he is happy to help facilitate.

**Action SC8(6): Robin May to contact Patrick Wolfe to discuss ways in which he may help facilitate building links to the research community.**

25. Adam Cook presented highlights from the paper that had been circulated ahead of the meeting providing an update on Science Strategy, Capability and Research recruitment, SAC recruitment, preparations for EU Exit (risk assessment and official control labs) and the programme approach to research and evidence.

26. The Chair opened the update item for discussion and asked how Council could be more 'plugged in' to help out. She attends cross-department SAC Chair

meetings organised by Patrick Vallance's office at GO-Science, but these have tended to focus on exchange of views rather than joined up working.

27. Robin said he had talked to Patrick Vallance about cross-SAC working. There is a list held by GO-Science showing SACs and their members and Robin is keen for this to become a webpage listing all SACs along with their expertise. There are issues around GDPR, so he has put idea to GO-Science. It would be good to share best practice, and perhaps coordinate better across government committees in 2021
28. The Chair noted she would like to have sight of the GO-Science list of SACs and that she would support a webpage of the type Robin is suggesting, allowing the Council to invite external experts to relevant meeting discussions.

**Action SC8(7): Robin May to ask GO-Science to share their list of SACs with him and provide a copy to the secretariat.**

29. Jonathan Wastling highlighted concerns in the press and the public about government science advice being vulnerable to 'groupthink' and being open and transparent around the challenges this bring especially with expectations that decisions can be made faster outside the EU. How can the Council assist with that? Robin agreed and is concerned about the interface which lies between evidence on one hand and broader public perception on the other. A second concern is there has been a move to put individual scientists 'under the microscope' which is a concern. He sees his role as providing a buffer for that, with expert advice coming from the CSA's office and supports the FSA approach to provide transparency through the publication of our advice.
30. Amber Haywood asked for any ideas to increase engagement between Home Office colleagues and their Scientific Advisory Council (HOSAC). Robin thought the lynchpin is that CSA/Executive interaction with the committee. He regularly attends Science Council meetings and has attended other SAC meetings as an observer. It can be difficult to engage parts of a department that don't see themselves as science related, so the key is that the CSA and relevant senior people in the department support the message that advisory committees have a lot of value to provide, even for areas which are not science focused. Robin offered to continue this discussion, perhaps together with the Home Office's new CSA.

**Action SC 8(8): CSA Private Secretary to contact Amber Haywood to discuss a follow-up meeting.**

### **Agenda Item 6: Critical review of the quality of 3rd party evidence**

31. The Chair introduced this piece of work, thanking Peter Gregory and Sarah O'Brien for taking forward this first Rapid Evidence Review. She briefly discussed the origins of this work, the structure of the review and what had been delivered so far and the timeline.

32. Peter Gregory explained what had been done under work package 1, a literature review of existing written guidance and interviews with staff which analyse data. He noted the original brief was to look at evidence from third parties, i.e. work not commissioned by the FSA, but noted that 'evidence is evidence' and should be looked at the same way, whatever the source.
33. The context and question of the original study is very important when looking at evidence, as is being transparent about how you deal with assessments and mechanisms to minimise impartiality and bias. Processes exist to address these, but they are not all written down so external parties will only have a partial view.
34. Peter informed the Council that from the interviews and review, it had become clear that the range of questions and contexts would make a checklist approach unworkable. He noted that checklists developed in the past for FSA good practice in science were written and approved but not widely adopted. Instead a series of principles for data quality which can be communicated to internal and external audiences would be more appropriate for use. The report will be circulated to the Council in January.

#### Agenda Item 7: Update on FSA Scientific Advisory Committees (SAC)

35. The Chair noted that the Council had attended quite a few SAC meetings over the last 6 months, which provided an important connection between the Science Council and their work. Members gave quick updates on their attendance:
36. John attends COT, COC and COM and noted the following topics of interest:
- A joint COC, COT, COM HS exercise flagged some important future issues: toxicogenomics, physiologically based pharmacokinetics, next generation sequencing (in the area of mutagenicity and carcinogenicity),
  - Microparticles in the food area and their potential interaction with other contaminants, microbes, adsorption onto surface, changing bioavailability, etc.
  - COC and COT are interested in applying the Adverse Outcome Pathways (AOP) approach in the area of toxicology.
  - Statistics & statistical significance versus biological significance in risk assessment.
  - For COT, bioplastics is an interesting area, looking at new technology that could be applied to food and may lead to new hazards, e.g. allergens.
  - Risk assessment of a chemical in a new context, e.g. COT looked at CBD in food, but was now being asked to consider smoking products.
  - He did express concern SACs often seem to find it challenging to understand industrial contexts and practices.
37. Jonathan Wastling attended ACMSF for the first time. Discussions included:

- E.coli-O157 in vacuum packaging and processes, epidemiology of food borne infections and the Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) programme.
- A horizon scanning paper on a huge crossover with themes coming forward on microbiological risk assessment, in particular packaging, which overlaps with toxicology. There is potentially a role for Science Council bringing these together.
- There were also concerns identified around changes to food supply after EU Exit, novel foods and COVID-19 related issues which have wider resonance (e.g. climate change). These are emerging themes the FSA may want to consider.

38. Claire Nicholson attended the ACNFP for the first time and noted two things:

- They are looking at the risk profile on edible insects, but the number of species and ways to eat them mean each individual context will have to be assessed. This scope is so large that any literature review to look at this topic will have gaps.
- They are doing a major piece of work on genome editing (GE) and hazard identification. The technology is moving so fast that any review is being overtaken by new advances before completion. The aim is to learn from the Defra GE consultation, with the main question distinguishing between simple vs. complex GE (the latter akin to GMO).

39. Peter followed this last point by reporting that he had attended the genome editing workshop as a Science Council member. The point was made that whilst GE it is very good at taking things out of DNA, GM is still needed to add things back in. So, in practice GE/GM are likely to run together. So more complicated transformations will use both, and the Council might like to hear more about that.

**ACTION SC8(9): Secretariat to include the Defra GE consultation outcome in a future Science Council meeting (post-consultation).**

40. In rounding up, the Secretary noted that members attending any external meeting representing the Science Council should send the secretariat either the feedback form or a 3-bullet e-mail (if something relevant to the Council was said) or nil return.

### Agenda Item 8: Science Council Chair's report

41. The Chair gave a presentation which covered the catch-up meetings she had over the last 6 months with the FSA CSA, Chief Executive and ACSS Deputy Chair. She gave an open invitation for members to suggest topics for future meetings with the FSA CSA.

42. She had attended an ACSS meeting, a cross FSA SAC Chair meeting, and the cross-government SAC Chairs meetings organised by Patrick Vallance's team at GO-Science. She updated members on progress made at these meetings, her

reports to the FSA Board on WG4 and WG5, and on the commissioning a critical review of third-party evidence.

43. Finally, she was pleased with how well meetings had been organised by the secretariat given remote working because of COVID-19 and that she looked forward to when the Council could next meet in person. She was also very pleased that the recommendations from Science Council Working Groups on science assurance and capability, risk and uncertainty and horizon scanning had contributed strongly to development of FSA science capacity and capability ahead of EU Exit.

44. She noted that if any members are interested in how the Science Council does HS then maybe they could take part in the WG5 HS workshop next year.

**ACTION SC8(10): Secretariat contact Council members to find out if they are interested in observing the Working Group 5 Horizon Scanning workshop.**

#### Agenda Item 9: Wrap up and close session

45. The Secretary noted that expenses claim forms for quarter 3 of this financial year will be sent out next week and asked that claims be returned by 4 January 2021.

#### Agenda Item 10: Questions and comments from the public

46. The Secretary noted that no questions had been submitted by the public, so the Chair closed the open session of the 8<sup>th</sup> Science Council open meeting.

## Annex 1: Meeting attendees

### **Science Council**

- Sandy Thomas - Council Chair
- John O'Brien - Council Member
- Paul Turner - Council Member
- Patrick Wolfe - Council Member
- Sarah O'Brien - Council Member
- Claire Nicholson - Council Member
- Jonathan Wastling - Council Member
- Peter Gregory - Council Member

### **Advisory Committee on Social Science**

- Julie Hill - Advisory Committee for Social Science

### **Food Standards Agency**

- Robin May - FSA Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)
- Emily Miles - FSA Chief Executive
- Michael Wight - Head of Food Safety Policy
- Rick Mumford - Head of Science Evidence and Research
- Adam Cook - Head of Science Strategy, Capability and Research
- Chun-Han Chan - Science Council Secretary
- Paul A Nunn - Science Council Secretariat Lead
- Autumn Pugh - CSA Private Secretary
- Manisha Wijesinghe - Science Council Secretariat
- Catriona McCallion - Science Council Secretariat

### **Audience**

- Natalie Coles - FSA Strategic Project Officer
- Lisa Nelson - FSA Communications Team
- Amber Haywood - Secretariat to the Home Office Science Advisory Council

Annex 2: List of agreed actions from the Science Council 7th open meeting on 3 December 2020

<b>No.</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Review date</b>
SC 8(1)	Science Council members to review their entry in the Register of Interests and confirm its accuracy by cop 11 December.	11 Dec 2020
SC 8(2)	Secretariat to publish the agreed final minute of the 7th Science Council meeting on the Science Council website by 8 January.	8 Jan 2021
SC 8(3)	On request from John O'Brien Secretariat will arrange an update on proxy measures for handwashing.	open
SC 8(4)	Michael Wight to provide the secretariat with approval process flow charts to circulate to Council members.	11 Dec 2020
SC 8(5)	Julie Hill to provide the secretariat with a copy of her presentation on ACSS assurance for circulation to the Science Council.	31 Jan 2021
SC8(6)	Robin May to contact Patrick Wolfe to discuss ways in which he may help facilitate building links to the research community.	31 Mar 2021
SC8(7)	Robin May to ask GO-Science to share their list of SACs with him and provide a copy to the secretariat.	31 Jan 2021
SC 8(8)	CSA Private Secretary to contact Amber Haywood to discuss a follow-up meeting.	28 Feb 2021
SC8(9)	Secretariat to include the Defra GE consultation outcome in a future Science Council meeting (post-consultation).	10 June 2021
SC8(10)	Secretariat contact Council members to find out if they are interested in observing the Working Group 5 Horizon Scanning workshop.	8 Jan 2021