

# FSA Science Council 9th open plenary meeting: 10 June 2021 (final draft)

**Location:** Videoconference

**Meeting Papers:** [Science Council 9<sup>th</sup> plenary meeting webpage](#)

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

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

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## Executive Summary

- The Chair presented a summary of the last 6 month’s Science Council activity.
- Members agreed the principles and guidelines and final report for the critical review of the appraisal of third-party evidence.
- Update provided on FSA activity since last year’s Council recommendations on data usage & digital technology. Further Council engagement is being considered.
- The CSA updated the Council on his recent activity and discussions (including gene editing, labelling reform, genomic surveillance, and net zero carbon).
- A discussion of the recommendations from the Council’s review of food hypersensitivity, FSA current activity and future plans, and lessons learnt.
- Updates from Science Council members attending Scientific Advisory Committees (SACs).

## Agenda Item 1: Welcome and introduction

1. Sandy Thomas welcomed attendees (see [Annex 1](#)) to the 9th open meeting of the Science Council. Jonathan Wastling and Emily Miles sent apologies for their absence.
2. Members confirmed to Chun-Han Chan that they have no new interests that may be relevant to the topics discussed at this Science Council meeting and were asked to review their entry in the Register of Interests ([Doc. SC 9-1](#)) by cop 18 June.

**Action SC 9(1): Science Council members to review their entry in the Register of Interests and confirm its accuracy by cop 18 June.**

## Agenda Item 2: Minutes of 8th Council open meeting and actions

3. The draft minutes of the 8th Science Council open meeting on 3 December 2020 ([Doc. SC 9-2a](#)) were tabled and agreed by the Council with no further changes.

**Action SC 9(2): Secretariat to publish the agreed final minute of the 7th Science Council meeting on the Science Council website by end of June.**

4. Chun-Han noted that all actions ([Doc. SC 9-2b](#)) were complete aside from:
  - **Action SC 8(3):** “On request from John O’Brien Secretariat will arrange an update on proxy measures for handwashing.” John O’Brien said that there have already been good conversations on this and as this is a moving target, he is content to close the action.
  - **Action SC 8(7):** “Robin May to ask GO-Science to share their list of SACs with him and provide a copy to the secretariat.”
  - **Action SC 8(9):** “Secretariat to include the Defra gene editing consultation outcome in a future Science Council meeting (post-consultation)”. Robin advised Defra would be releasing the consultation results in mid-July.

**Action SC 9(3): The CSA to provide an update to the Science Council on the Defra gene editing consultation once available (provisionally by end of September)**

## Agenda Item 3: Science Council Chair’s report

5. Sandy Thomas presented an update on her activity since the 8<sup>th</sup> open meeting ([Doc. SC 9-3b](#)). She is keen for WG5 to be shared widely including advice on how research is commissioned, and specific advice for the FHS research community. She also expressed her preference for a face-to face meeting in September should it be allowed.

## Agenda Item 4: FSA Science Update

6. Adam Cook provided an update on the activity of Science Evidence and Research Division over the last 6 months ([Doc. SC 9-4](#)). He covered the four main areas for update: **Staffing, Research and Evidence Programme, key performance indicators (KPIs) and collaborations and publications.** On research and

evidence, he suggested the Council could become involved in prioritisation and engagement (via steering groups etc). He also offered to bring the latest KPIs to the September Council meeting for discussion.

7. Questions/feedback from the Council:

- **Portfolio of research: How do you measure different factors when prioritising competing proposals on a limited budget?** Last year research had an underspend so capacity rather than budget was the limiting factor. FSA are developing a prioritisation process to use within and between programmes and in the summer, steering groups will look at whether ambition exceeds budget and, if more funds are not available, where priorities lie and if partnerships could provide access to additional funding.
- **Portfolio of research: Prioritisation should engage with a broad stakeholder base and the nominal group technique (NGT) may be helpful. If prioritisation is done internally, are there experts on this approach to help FSA get wider insight?** Steering groups (with the right people) provide internal insight and we are looking at how to balance that with external stakeholder engagement. Adam is keen to consider how best to engage SACs and Science Council, and link that to wider priority setting exercise activities with more stakeholders. Council suggested that if FSA has no existing knowledge in house on NGT, we should train a couple of exemplars to spread the skillset.
- **Portfolio of Research: Nutrition and Health budget set to zero, is it not a priority for FSA?** Nutrition and health are a priority for Northern Ireland (NI), so the focus is on how to create a system that works for whole of the FSA, even though almost nothing was spent on this last year.
- **Feedback on the paper: More information to give a richer picture of FSA's science spends would be welcome i.e. the kind of information found in the CSA report to the Board (e.g. the division of the budget was interesting but what is the total budget and what is its trajectory? How many more staff were recruited to cover regulated products?)** FSA is currently looking at how to combine several reports into one science report. Adam can discuss with Robin how to do a more data rich science update to the Council. The new FSA research portfolio tool holds project information which can be broken down by contracts vs fellowships vs grants vs institutions. Members agreed this kind of extra information would be useful in future updates. Adam agreed to include this in his update to the Council and would welcome feedback to strike the right balance for members. The Chair said she was happy to discuss this offline in the next 4 weeks than wait for the September meeting.

**Action SC 9(4): Adam Cook to present KPIs to Science Council for discussion at their next meeting on 23 September.**

**Action SC 9(5): Adam Cook to consider and feed back to the September Council meeting about training FSA exemplars on the nominal groups technique.**

**Action SC 9(6): Adam Cook to circulate to members the additional information as requested by members ((i) total budget and its trajectory; (ii) Number of additional staff recruited to cover regulated products) by mid-July.**

**Action SC 9(7): Adam Cook to liaise with the Council Chair and CSA to agree specific information that should be included in future updates.**

### Agenda Item 5: Rapid Evidence Review: Critical Review of the appraisal of third-party evidence

8. Ben Goodall introduced the item, reminding members principles and guidelines [went to consultation from 22 March to 22 April](#). Today's aim is to agree a final report (subject to adjustments) and discuss communication plans ([Doc. SC 9-5](#)).
9. The [consultation](#) on the draft principles and guidelines lasted one month, with 11 responses from a range of organisations and individuals representing wider networks.
10. Feedback from the Council:
  - **Generally, well received and considered easy to follow as a lay person.**
  - p.27 of the report "**The FSA [...] is open to change as new evidence becomes available**". It was agreed as an important principle to highlight, but not put it in bold and in isolation. It shows the FSA is open to change based on evidence but there were concerns that overemphasis could encourage the submission of spurious information where the aim of the guidance is to set minimum quality standards.
11. The Council agreed unanimously that they were content with these outputs (pending any small changes). Members were reminded they had one week to make final comments.
12. Ben provided an overview of the communications plan, which has been approved by the Executive Management Team (EMT) and signed off by the Future Publications Panel (FPP).
13. The principles and guidelines (Annex 2 of [SC 9-5](#)) will be published on food.gov.uk with a launch communication on the FSA blog and intranet promotion. This will be accompanied by long term embedding of internal recognition and use of the guidelines (including preparing additions to induction materials, etc). Rick noted that these guidelines had been taken to EMT and to Business Development Group (BDG), which consists of deputy directors to get buy-in on a day-to-day level. Sandy suggested sharing the guidelines with Government networks, GO-Science and we should engage with Robin about CSA circulation (on top of social media etc.)

14. The main lessons learnt from this first rapid evidence review (RER) were discussed. Ben observed that whilst the review had been short in duration, a lot of work had been involved and the pace had been relentless. In future the Council and secretariat should consider the most appropriate ways of working, looking at the current workload of the secretariat and Council members and managing the addition of RERs to avoid spikes in demand. Peter noted that this RER had needed dedicated staff member (Catriona McCallion) and often their rate of work was determined by how quickly the Council lead could respond. Those limitations of staff availability in secretariat and likely demands on Science Council needs to be thought through for short term pieces of work.

15. Sandy picked up Peter's important point about resources and with respect to his work on this review, no one else on Council would have been able to be so generous with their time. Peter and Sandy also thanked Ben for all the work he has done to support the Council as he is leaving the FSA to join Defra.

**Action SC 9(8): Council members to provide and last comments on the draft report or principles and guidelines by cop 17 June 2021.**

**Action SC 9(9): Secretariat to update Sandy Thomas and Robin May on the promotion of this work on social media etc and with CSA networks, GO-Science and other Government networks.**

#### **Agenda Item 6: Working Group 4 (WG4) review of data usage and digital technology: Post review update from the FSA**

16. Julie Pierce presented the paper ([Doc. SC 9-6](#)) updating the Science Council on FSA activity since the recommendations from Working Group 4 were presented one year ago. She noted the value of regular conversations with Patrick Wolfe since then, sharing experiences, and discussing standards and governance challenges.

17. Patrick agreed there had been many positive changes in light of the recommendations (both on internal capability and capacity and being a leading body on wider government data-related initiatives). He felt the Council should have an ongoing role engaging with the FSA on this topic, as well as regular updates.

18. Science Council questions/comments:

- **Important to champion change in this space and that the FSA publicises its innovations (through scientific literature and other media) and does not overlook its impact on the worldwide community.** Julie noted that how the FSA publicises its work varies, depending on what is judged the best route for the target audience: blogs or through OGDs or through scientific community. She noted the need for FSA data champions and a continuous effort towards effecting change (shifts are occurring across government) and that she valued the Council's support on this. Julie also noted that businesses, with the current pandemic, seem more willing to engage and share data than before.

- **Looking at the 2020 annual surveillance report to the FSA Board ([FSA 20-11-04](#)), cited in the update paper, how does FSA know their predictive tools (for developing sampling programmes) and practices such as web scraping<sup>1</sup> (to spot new bio-based food contact materials placed on the market) actually work? Especially in the latter case of web scraping as not all company information is placed online?** Julie replied that the assurance will often depend on the tool, so for example predictive tools to identify where sampling should focus can be compared to real sampling data to see if it is accurate. As for scraping tools, FSA is not looking for 100% coverage, and it allows us to see a small number of less visible businesses, who don't appear through more formal engagement processes (10-20% extra).

19. Sandy asked the secretariat to work with Patrick and Julie to suggest on how Science Council can formally engage in a flexible way at the next meeting.

**Action SC 9(10): Secretariat to coordinate discussions between Patrick Wolfe and Julie Pierce to continue engaging on data in a flexible manner.**

### [Agenda Item 7: Chief Scientific Advisor's update](#)

20. Robin May provided a brief verbal update:

- FSA has two new **Board members**, Fiona Gately and Lord Blencathra, who have already been very engaged with FSA science and will continue to have regular catch-ups with the CSA.
- The outcome of Defra's **Gene Editing** consultation is expected next month.
- **Net Zero Carbon (NZC)**, lots of cross government activity which Robin will keep Council updated on while raising the profile of our work. GO-Science is considering 3-4 'big topics' for potential exploration via the CSA network, including NZC and the impact of technology and behavioural change.
- FSA is engaged with other departments in developing proposals for a "**What Works**" centre. There are ongoing active conversations with Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and Defra exploring shared interests around healthy eating and sustainable food systems.
- **Labelling reform.** DHSC has published a white paper on labelling packages with calories and nutrition. There is interest in FSA and Defra in adding to package labels information on animal welfare, food miles, etc, for maximum consumer benefit. There are clear benefits in a shared approach and considering the role of technology in delivering clear, helpful labelling, so FSA has convened a cross-departmental workshop to explore this topic in more depth later in the summer
- FSA led a bid to Treasury with Defra and DHSC on **genomic surveillance**. Based on recent conversations, Robin is optimistic it will go ahead. If awarded,

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<sup>1</sup> Automatic scanning of the internet for information. [FSA web scraping policy](#)

this project will facilitate a cross-departmental initiative to use genomics to map out foodborne pathogens and AMR organisms within the food system and wider environment (farm to fork).

- The National Food Strategy final report will be published in July. Defra will lead the Government's response to this report, but the FSA is closely involved in these conversations.

#### 21. Science Council questions/comments:

- **Labelling reform: business is moving away from putting information on labels in favour of apps (with online shopping people are not able to see labels).** Robin said that all interested parties in Government will convene in July to agree what should ideally be available on labels (within a year, 2 years etc) such as QR codes linking to information as an potential option. Robin will feedback to the Council on the outcomes of this workshop. Later workshops will engage with business and associations (such as Red Tractor). Rick Mumford added that the FSA is planning to develop a labelling team to look at food hypersensitivity and beyond. He also noted the FSA are involved with an Innovate UK funded case study looking at the journey of meat from farm to fork, using blockchain for traceability and packaging sensor technology, with an eye on how this affects FSA interests (meat hygiene inspections etc).
- **The Advisory Committee for Novel Foods and Processes only considers supplements in isolation: should it consider the likely circumstance that people take multiple supplements. Is this worthy of a mini review?** Reasonable multiple exposure should be considered in the risk assessment. Supplements are problematic and previously there have been Board discussions with DHSC to discuss what is a food and a medicine, and FSA have reached out to DHSC to have a round table. The aim should be to tighten up food claims that are close to medical claims (e.g. supplements which claim to help with sleep).

**Action SC 9(11): Robin May to provide a written update to the Science Council on the discussions at the labelling reform meeting he will be attending in July.**

#### Agenda Item 8: Working Group 5: Food Hypersensitivity (FHS) Review

22. Paul Turner gave a presentation updating members on Working Group 5 (WG5) ([Doc. SC 9-5\(s\)](#)). The [final report](#) was published on 4 June and is, in effect, the second half with the interim report ([body](#) and [annexes](#)) from September being the first. He set out the principal recommendations of the review.

23. Rick said the FSA will consider how to act on the recommendations and build an implementation plan (firstly mapping actions to the right people). Many the recommendations are already in hand such as specific action on FHS research, and broader advice on how it commissions research, forms partnerships and identifies priorities. The FSA Board paper ([Doc. FSA 21-06-09](#)) gives more detail on these activities.

24. Discussion moved onto lessons learnt from running such a large project:

- It was noted that for Paul Turner and John O'Brien it was an enjoyable activity, but took longer, and was more work, than expected.
- Externally commissioned work may technically deliver what is asked for in the tender, but will need careful management to ensure outputs are delivered to expectations.
- If work is kept in-house, consideration should be given on resources and pressure to the Secretariat. The Council were fortunate to have the support of a fast streamer and the Secretariat to deliver this in this instance.
- Share with FSA staff lessons about engaging with stakeholders and planning work using priority setting exercises (PSE) and horizon scanning (HS).
- Better continuity of FSA staff supporting future projects: if they are a fast streamer with FSA for only 6 months to a year then it may be prudent to trim back project ambition.
- At the PSE and HS exercises, some FSA staff didn't actively engage in discussion with external stakeholders. Rick wondered if there is a perception in the FSA that Science Council is a body only connected to a narrow group of internal stakeholders, rather than one which serves the interests of the whole Agency? Next steps may be to consider how a wider FSA sense of connection and 'buy-in' to the Council can be encouraged.
- With large projects it is important to manage the scope right from the start. Secretariat taking on board this lesson with the net zero carbon review (NZC), planning a number of small areas of work in what is a very large topic rather than a large area at the start.

25. Sandy finished by saying that, given that as this was such an investment of time and resource, the Council and the secretariat need to make sure that investment is realised and that insights from report are widely shared.

**Action SC 9(12): Secretariat to liaise with Paul Turner, FSA Comms and the CSA to discuss sharing the insights from this review in the best way possible.**

### **Agenda Item 9: Update on FSA Scientific Advisory Committees**

26. Science Council members who attend other SAC meetings gave a brief update on issues that may interest the Council from their attendance over the last few months.

27. Sandy had attended the ACSS 6<sup>th</sup> plenary (1 December 2020), which she updated on Council activities. The plenary discussed terms of reference for the Science Council review of third-party evidence and the ACSS review of the impact of climate change on consumer food behaviours. The latter is of particular interest as it is thematically close to the two planned Council reviews of food safety implications of both a) moving to net zero carbon and b) disruptions to the food supply chain



from climate change (and other disruptors). The ACSS and Council secretariat are maintaining regular contact as these develop.

28. John O'Brien had attended several COT, COC and COM meetings and noted:

- A concern these committees have is the challenge of understanding food industry practice, manufacturing specs, etc. when carrying out assessments.
- COT is seeing increasing numbers of supplements for impact assessment (e.g. food supplements containing turmeric and ginger) containing active constituents at much higher doses than for culinary uses.
- The cannabidiol (CBD) question has consumed a huge amount of time in COT.
- COC/COM expertise is deep and celebrated for its guidance documents, which are used internationally.
- There is a plethora of new proprietary models for hazard identification (in vitro), but translating the result of a method to a risk assessment can be challenging.
- An area of future work is how the microbiome can impact test results, e.g. differences in microbiomes leading to same test materials giving different results.

29. Claire Nicholson had attended ACNFP on 9 June and noted some key points:

- CBD - A large number of CBD applications have been submitted to the Regulated Products Application Service and are currently undergoing suitability and validity checks before assessment with the ACNFP. In this meeting, the final version of the request for further information of the first CBD dossier assessed was reviewed by the Committee with minor changes and edits and amendments suggested before it is sent to the applicant. An initial discussion on how to manage these dossiers through the Committee process, given the large numbers, was held to inform the work of the Secretariat.
- ACNFP is assessing *Go Wolffia* a species of duckweed grown in Asia including Thailand and Laos. It is a traditional food grown in open ponds and cooked but the applicant wants to grow it in closed vertical farms and sell it as a fresh vegetable, i.e. salad. Vertical farms are a popular sustainable farming approach and may come up for consideration with the Council's NZC review.

30. Jonathan Wastling, who attends ACMSF, was absent but sent an update of the 19 April meeting read by Chun-Han (open session highlights given below):

- A sub-group will re-visit the topic of risks of botulism and vacuum packaging, given the increased prevalence of chilled foods, and concerns about shelf life and technological advances.
- Critical comments were made on the FSA's literature review on botulism in livestock, triggering an assessment of previous ACMSF reports on the topic.
- Committee updates were received from the working group on the epidemiology of foodborne infections held in January this year considering

outbreak reports of *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Cryptosporidium*, *Listeria* and STEC O157. Other working groups also reported.

- In the open meeting the public raised a number of questions/points on imported chicken and associated foodborne disease as well as packing and processing.

### Agenda Item 10: Wrap up and close session

31. The Chair thanked everyone for their participation and reminded members that the next closed project meeting of the Science Council is on the 23 September 2021. The Secretary noted that no questions had been submitted by the public, so the Chair closed the open session of the 9<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
- Peter Gregory - Council Member

#### Food Standards Agency

- Robin May - FSA Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)
- Julie Pierce – Director of Openness, Digital and Data, Wales and Science
- 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 Hartigan - Science Council Secretariat
- Ben Goodall - FSA Research Co-ordination and Partnerships Lead

## Annex 2: List of agreed actions from the Science Council 9th open meeting on 10 June 2021

Ref.	Description	Owner	Deadline / Review date
SC 9(1)	Science Council members to review their entry in the Register of Interests and confirm its accuracy by cop 18 June.	Science Council members	18 June 2021
SC 9(2)	Secretariat to publish the agreed final minute of the 7th Science Council meeting on the Science Council website by end of June.	Secretariat	30 June 2021
SC 9(3)	The CSA to provide an update to the Science Council on the Defra gene editing consultation once available (provisionally by end of September)	CSA	30 September 2021
SC 9(4)	Adam Cook to present Key Performance Indicators to Science Council for discussion at their next meeting on 23 September.	Adam Cook	23 September 2021
SC 9(5)	Adam Cook to consider and feed back to the September Council meeting about training FSA exemplars on the nominal group technique.	Adam Cook	23 September 2021
SC 9(6)	Adam Cook to circulate to members the additional information as requested by members ((i) total budget and its trajectory; (ii) Number of additional staff recruited to cover regulated products) by mid-July.	Adam Cook	15 July 2021
SC 9(7)	Adam Cook to liaise with the Council Chair and CSA to agree specific information that should be included in future updates	Adam Cook	31 July 2021
SC 9(8)	Council members to provide and last comments on the draft report or principles and guidelines by cop 17 June 2021	Science Council members	17 June 2021
SC 9(9)	Secretariat to update Sandy Thomas and Robin May on the promotion of this work on social media etc and with CSA networks, GO-Science and other Government networks.	Secretariat	15 July 2021
SC 9(10)	Secretariat to coordinate discussions between Patrick Wolfe and Julie Pierce to continue engaging on data in a flexible manner	Secretariat	23 September 2021
SC 9(11)	Robin May to provide a written update to the Science Council on the discussions at the labelling reform meeting he will be attending in July.	Robin May	31 August 2021
SC 9(12)	Secretariat to liaise with Paul Turner, FSA Comms and the CSA to discuss sharing the insights from this review in the best way possible	Secretariat	31 July 2021