

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FOOD STANDARDS SCOTLAND BOARD
HELD 17 SEPTEMBER 2025
10:45 – 15:45
PILGRIM HOUSE, ABERDEEN**

Present

FSS Board

Heather Kelman, Chair
Alban Denton
Carol Evans
Phillip Couser
Kate Richards
Paula Charlesworth
Christina Bichan

FSS Executive

Geoff Ogle, Chief Executive
Ian McWatt, Deputy Chief Executive
Garry McEwan, Head of Corporate Services - via Teams
Kate Smith, Head of Marketing & Communications
Christine Hill, Head of Private Office – via Teams
Joanne Smith, Board Secretary

Apologies

1. Introduction, apologies, matters arising

1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the Food Standards Scotland Board meeting in Pilgrim House, and also those attending via Teams.

1.2 No apologies were received.

2. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

2.1 No conflicts of interest were declared by Board members.

3. FSS Strategy 2026-31 Development and Progress

Proposed Delivery Plan Methodology

3.1 The Chair invited Garry McEwan, Head of Corporate Services and Natalie Greenland, Head of Corporate Support to present the latest iteration of the 2026-31 FSS Strategy, and to update the Board on emerging themes from the consultation and proposed steps to monitor successful delivery of the three priorities within the Strategy from April 2026 onwards.

3.2 Board members provided feedback on various aspects of the strategy and consultation results.

3.3 The Board asked about the types of respondents and the accessibility of the consultation and it was confirmed that responses were received from individuals and organisations and that efforts were made to ensure accessibility.

3.4 There was also discussion on how delivery and success will be measured, with suggestions to articulate what success looks like within the strategy and annual delivery plans. The Board heard there is ongoing work on developing performance metrics to monitor progress towards our three priorities.

3.5 Following discussion, the Board approved the proposed steps to monitor the successful delivery of the strategy through annual delivery plans aligned with the three priorities. This approach will ensure agility and responsiveness in the operating environment, with regular performance reviews, progress reporting and feedback mechanisms embedded in the governance framework to ensure continuous improvement.

3.6 The Chair thanked Garry and Natalie for their update.

4. Governance Document Review

4.1 The Chair invited Christine Hill, Head of Private Office to present the revised suite of corporate governance documents in advance of the new strategy which included a revised Framework document..

4.2 The Board noted minimal changes were made to the standing orders, which were mainly operational and structural adjustments. Key changes included the removal of outdated references and clarifications on the appointment of the deputy chair and the process for ministerial approval in the absence of the chair.

4.3 Board members discussed and agreed on various amendments, including adjustments to quorum requirements, reporting on food standards, and ensuring clarity in the framework document regarding redundancy policies and alignment with Scottish Government policies.

4.4 Following discussion the Board:

- Approved the framework be submitted to Ministers.
- Noted that following the publication of the FSS Strategy 2026-31, the Code of Governance and Statement on Performance of Functions will be reviewed and presented at a future Board meeting.
- Approved the changes to the Standing Orders document and agreed the updated governance documents for adoption and publication.

4.5 The Chair thanked Christine for the paper.

5. Trust and Misinformation

5.1 The Chair invited Kate Smith, Head of Communications and Marketing to present a paper introducing the growing challenge of misinformation in food and feed safety and nutrition, particularly through social media, and its impact on FSS to deliver its objectives. Drawing on international insights and FSS own experience the paper asked the Board to discuss whether FSS should develop a more formal approach to misinformation as part of the draft Communications and Marketing Strategy, which will be presented to the Board in December.

5.2 The discussion focused on the importance of accurate and transparent communication and the need for proactive measures to counteract misinformation and enhance public trust, particularly in respect to the public's growing reliance on AI generated answers, which often bypasses accurate sources and presents incomplete information. The importance of engineering FSS's presence at the top of search engines was also discussed.

5.3 The discussion then moved to case studies demonstrating the challenges and opportunities in combating misinformation and the importance of timing and anticipation in communication was emphasised, suggesting that proactive engagement and understanding of novel science are crucial. The importance of collaboration with policy and science colleagues was emphasised to ensure a comprehensive and credible response.

5.4 Further discussion explored the balance between proactive and reactive approaches to misinformation. It was suggested that FSS should be more explicit in its role in tackling misinformation, with a risk-based approach to selection and prioritisation of topics.

5.5 The discussion highlighted the current state of trust and awareness of FSS among consumers. It was noted that while nearly three-quarters of people trust FSS to do its job, awareness and understanding of FSS's role are weaker, with almost a third of consumers unaware of who protects them from food safety risks. This trust is seen as both an asset and a vulnerability, as misinformation can undermine it.

5.6 The discussion included suggestions for improving awareness through targeted communication efforts and ensuring that FSS's information is accessible and discoverable, particularly in the context of AI and other technological challenges.

5.7 Board members acknowledged the significance of this issue and expressed support for the proposed strategies. The session concluded with a commitment to continue addressing trust and misinformation as a critical aspect of FSS's communication strategy by focusing on risk-based and proportionate responses. A further paper will be presented to the Board for consideration at Decembers meeting.

5.8 The Chair thanked Kate for her detailed paper.

6. Website update and demonstration

6.1 The Chair invited Linda Jamieson, Head of Digital and Content, to present an update on progress made and next steps in relation to the FSS website rebuild; this included a presentation of final user testing results, and the Board were given a demonstration of the new website, which is planned to go live on 01 October 2025.

6.2 A comprehensive update on the website project was presented, outlining the goals and progress. The project aims to meet accessibility requirements, which are legal obligations for public bodies, and has been developed using a mobile-first approach and the Scottish Government design system. Extensive accessibility audits and testing have been conducted, including screen reader tests, with users providing positive feedback.

6.3 It was noted that the security and resilience of the new content management system replaces an outdated system. The text alert system for product recalls has been rebuilt to provide a more robust solution. Third-party security testing identified three low-risk issues, which are currently being addressed.

6.4 Extensive user testing was conducted with consumers, local authorities and external stakeholders and their feedback on improvements were highlighted, such as digitalising publications, integrating the "Eat Well Your Way" quiz, and presenting information in plain English. The website's content is designed to be clear and concise, catering to users who scan information rather than read in-depth.

6.5 The Chair thanked Linda for her presentation, and it was agreed to postpone Board feedback and questions until after the website launch with a short session scheduled for October's away-day.

6.6 The Board expressed their admiration for the project's progress and the ambitions for the new website. The importance of feedback for continuous improvement was emphasised and the team thanked for their efforts.

7. Royal Environmental Health Institute of Scotland (REHIS) - Past, present and future – Celebrating 150 years

7.1 The Chair welcomed Jackie McCabe, Chief Executive of REHIS and Sheena Redmond, Trustee and Chair of the Examination Professional Standards Committee to the Board meeting, inviting them to present a brief history of REHIS.

7.2 The Board heard that there are approximately seventy vacancies, with an ageing workforce exacerbating the issue, and they acknowledged the financial challenges in retaining positions within local authorities. They noted that retention rates are generally high, with professionals often moving between employers, rather than leaving the field.

7.3 REHIS aims to improve and protect health and well-being through education, training, and qualifications in environmental health. Celebrating its 150th anniversary, they continue to play a crucial role in setting standards and qualifications for environmental health officers in Scotland, who cover a vast range of functions.

7.4 The Chair thanked Jackie and Sheena for their informative presentation.

8. SAFER Programme update

8.1 The Chair invited Bryan Campell, Head of SAFER Programme to provide the Board with an update on progress and to give them an opportunity to discuss the new draft vision statement and objectives for 2025/29.

8.2 Following discussion, the board approved the governance arrangements and the establishment of the first programme board, with representation from various stakeholders, including Scottish Government, COSLA, SOLACE, FSA, Public Health Scotland, Society of Chief Environmental Health Officers, and food business

representative bodies. Alban Denton will represent the FSS Board at these meetings, although he is not available for the first meeting on 07 October 2025 and Christina Bichan will deputise in his absence.

8.3 It was agreed that the programme board would set its own terms of reference, which would then be ratified by the FSS Board in their role as Sponsoring Board to ensure oversight without duplication of effort.

8.4 The Board asked for clarification of the funding and staffing structure of the programme, specifically whether part of the salary for key players, , would come from the programme's budget. The board were advised that work is ongoing, with appropriate accounting for the time and costs associated with the programme. The discussion highlighted the need to balance internal and external recruitment processes and the potential impact on business-as-usual activities. The strategic allocation of resources was emphasised, including the need for dedicated programme staff and other stakeholders to manage the programme alongside their regular duties.

8.5 The Board heard that the budget for SAFER is ring-fenced and managed within the broader accountability framework of FSS. Regular updates from the programme board to the FSS board will facilitate effective strategic oversight with the SAFER Programme Board having responsibility for strategic direction and decision-making.

8.6 The Board confirmed that the governance framework aligns with the funding allocation, and the role of accountable officers remains unchanged.

8.7 The Board questioned the inclusion of a stand-alone vision statement for SAFER, questioning its necessity. The discussion clarified that having a vision statement is not unusual for a strategic programme of this scale, which consists of multiple projects.

8.8 The Board suggested that the programme's objectives should as the programme progresses be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound), noting that the draft current objectives lack granularity and time-bound elements. The board heard that the objectives are evolving and will be refined during the first programme board meeting scheduled for 07 October. The board agreed to revisit the wording and indicated the specifics and measurable elements of the objectives will be documented in a detailed programme plan.

8.9 The Programme Board will focus on strategic direction and decision making, including developing options for future delivery, addressing funding challenges, and exploring digital solutions for business registration. The Board agreed to the proposal for the FSS Board to be the sponsorship group, providing strategic oversight, and operational hierarchy to the SAFER programme

9. Freedom of Information and Complaints – Annual Report

9.1 The Chair invited Natalie Greenland, Head of Corporate Support to present the annual report for 2024/25 on requests made for information under the Freedom

of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 (FOISA) and the Environmental Information (Scotland) Regulations 2004 (EIRs); and Formal complaints made regarding the service provided by Food Standards Scotland (FSS).

9.2 The report indicated a decrease in FOI requests compared to the previous year, with all requests responded to within the required timeframe. The top categories of FOI requests were identified, and trends are being monitored.

9.3 The report also highlighted that no complaints were received in the last financial year, marking the third consecutive year with none.

9.4 The Board noted the information provided and commended the team for their compliance and effective handling of FOI requests and complaints, recognising the importance of maintaining high standards in these areas.

9.5 The Chair thanked Natalie for her paper.

10. Finance and Business Committee – oral update

10.1 The Chair invited Alban Denton, Chair of FBC to provide an oral update from the FBC meeting held on the 27 August 2025.

10.2 The current financial position and budget management was discussed, and the committee noted the agreed underfunding and the ongoing work with Scottish Government to address the budget pressure.

10.3 They received an update on data protection breaches, hybrid working consultations, and communication strategies.

10.4 The Board noted the positive progress in managing financial challenges and commended the executive team for their efforts in maintaining strict financial management and addressing key issues.

10.5 The Chair thanked FBC for the important work of the committee.

11. Audit and Risk Committee – oral update

11.1 The Chair invited Aileen Brown, Chair of ARC to provide an oral update on the in-person meeting which took place on 03 September 2025.

11.2 ARC received an update from the Chief Executive on the financial position, pay award negotiations, the SAFER programme, and public service reform.

11.3 Scottish Government Directorate of Internal Audit and Assurance (SGDIAA) presented an update on the follow-up review of the Engagement and Communications audit, and reported that of the three medium recommendations, two were partially implemented and one was not implemented but is expected to be addressed in the strategy work that is ongoing.

11.4 The Annual Performance Report for 2024-25 was presented, advising that ten KPIs were successfully achieved.

11.5 ARC also received the Scottish Government Corporate Systems Annual Assurance Report and noted a reasonable rating. This was a topic of a recent meeting between Aileen, Geoff Ogle and the Director of Internal Audit where again our frustration was conveyed that there was no account taken of service levels to users of the systems. However, it was noted that there was still a lengthy list of areas of improvement.

11.6 FSS Internal Audit presented an update in relation to the Feed Audit and ARC were pleased to note this is now closed as there is sufficient evidence to demonstrate a sustained commitment to addressing the findings. The report has been uploaded to the website.

11.7 The Shellfish Controls and Egg Hygiene audits still have outstanding actions, and these continue to be tracked.

11.8 The Trichinella Testing Report was presented, this gained a reasonable assurance with three recommendations, none of these are considered to pose imminent risk to public health.

11.9 The ARC received the SFELC Audit report in May where a fundamental legal impediment to the continuation of the committee had been identified. The ARC asked the executive to consider whether any potential contingent liability as a result of this should be disclosed in the annual report.

ACTION POINT : 25/10/11 : Geoff Ogle

11.10 ARC received the first Annual Cyber Security Assurance Report and in addition received an excellent presentation from Tigan Daspan, Head of Digital Transformation on the subject.

11.11 ARC reviewed the risk register, agreeing to the score decrease for official controls delivery from 100 to 50 based on full resourcing now being in place, thus removing it from the strategic risk register. They also noted and agreed to decrease the score for the public sector reform risk from 100 to 75.

11.12 ARC discussed the cyber security breach risk and whilst supportive of the ongoing work described by Tigan in his annual report, it was considered on balance that this risk is uniquely treacherous given the fact that controls can have no assumed longevity and in addition the impact of breach can be immediate and severe. ARC recommended that the boards risk tolerance in relation to this risk be reconsidered carefully when the overall risk tolerance is reviewed at the next meeting. Meantime, the cyber security breach risk will be recognised as a live issue.

11.13 Three live issues remain the same: budget, local authority delivery and external policy pressures.

11.14 Deloitte provided an update on external audit. Fieldwork is now complete and the internal review underway with no material issues expected, pension information should be available by 30 September 2025.

11.15 The ARC had another opportunity to review the Annual Report and provided input.

11.16 The Chair thanked ARC for the important work of the committee.

12. Minutes of 18 June 2025

12.1 The Board asked what stage recruitment of a Chief Scientific Advisor was at and Geoff is to make enquiries.

ACTION POINT : 2025/10 :

12.2 With the exception of one minor correction, the Minutes of the meeting held 18 June 2025 were agreed as an accurate record.

13. Action Log

13.1 There are currently no outstanding actions.

14. Chair Report

14.1 In the period between 18 June to present day the Chair attended meetings and events as per the published Chairs Report.

14.2 They noted attendance at a new chair circle initiative, attended by Chairs from various sectors, to allow networking and updating on relevant topics, allowing opportunities for chairs to learn from other boards and experiences.

14.3 The first meeting focused on artificial intelligence and the role of boards in AI and included key questions boards should consider. This was deemed a valuable event.

15. Chief Executive Report

15.1 The FSS Chair invited Geoff Ogle to provide an oral update to supplement his written report.

15.2 Geoff advised that the new strategy sign-off is planned for the December meeting, and this will also cover communication and marketing strategies.

15.3 He advised that meetings with the Department of Health and Social Care regarding the 10-year health plan and mandatory targets have made good progress, with a willingness to work on a four-country basis.

15.4 The Public Service Reform work continues to advance, focusing on efficiency and shared services. Internal obstacles within SG are being addressed to facilitate progress.

15.5 Resourcing issues for SAFER and Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) were discussed, with an emphasis on internal resource allocation before seeking external support, however due to numbers it will not be possible to fill all vacancies internally.

15.6 The ongoing requirement for dynamic alignment with EU legislation was highlighted, necessitating continued resource commitment. Geoff and Katie Pettifer, CE of FSA, are preparing to give evidence to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (EFRA) in October.

15.7 Planning is underway for the parliamentary event taking place on the 02 December to mark 10 years of Food Standards Scotland, with invitations to stakeholders being finalised.

16. Quarterly Finance Report, Strategic Risk and Issues Register Report, Risk Register and Issues Register – for ratification

16.1 The Board ratified the reports previously provided to the FBC and ARC.

17. Questions from Public

17.1 There were no questions from members of the public in attendance.

18. Q&A

18.1 No other business was discussed, and the meeting was closed.