

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FOOD STANDARDS SCOTLAND BOARD
HELD 26 MARCH 2025 – 10:45 – 14:30
PILGRIM HOUSE, ABERDEEN**

Present

FSS Board

Heather Kelman, Chair
Alban Denton
Aileen Brown
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
Christine Hill, Head of Private Office
Joanne Smith, Board Secretary

Apologies

Kate Smith, Head of Marketing & Communications

1. Introduction, apologies, matters arising

1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the Food Standards Scotland Board meeting and those attending via Teams.

1.2 Apologies were received from Kate Smith, Head of Marketing & Communications.

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 - 250301

3.1 The Chair invited Garry McEwan, Head of Corporate Services and Natalie Greenland, Head of Corporate Support to present a paper outlining the progress to date on producing the 2026-31 FSS Strategy, and to canvas views on the Draft Strategy Framework.

3.2 The Chair thanked Garry and Natalie for their paper and invited questions from Board members.

3.3 The Board noted the steps taken to develop the strategy framework and suggested it would be helpful for the strategy to include a summary setting out the key drivers used to develop it. Natalie explained that existing evidence gained through research had been used to build it, and that the Comms and Marketing team will be conducting further consumer insight. The request for a summary was noted for consideration.

ACTION : 2025/01 : Natalie Greenland

3.4 The Board suggested that SAFER should feature in the strategy, perhaps as part of Public Service Reform. This was noted for consideration.

ACTION : 2025/02 : Natalie Greenland

3.5 The Board agreed that the five guiding principles remain as is but requested that the 'Our Values' section be expanded, for example 'Consumer and Health Focussed'. This was noted for consideration.

ACTION : 2025/03 : Natalie Greenland

3.6 The Board suggested writing the vision from a regulator's point of view, to underpin the unique undertakings of FSS, would help strengthen the organisations value. Expanding the vision statement was noted for consideration.

ACTION : 2025/04 – Natalie Greenland

3.7 The Board agreed with the proposal to remove the current mission statement.

3.8 The Board agreed with the intent to focus the strategy on the purpose of FSS, (statutory objectives and operating environment), utilising separate annual delivery plans to detail how we are going to deliver.

3.9 Given the challenges encountered during the previous two strategies, firstly EU Exit, and then Covid-19, it was suggested that context be provided via VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) to frame the strategy. It was agreed to consider this as part of the next iteration.

ACTION : 2025/05 – Natalie Greenland

3.10 The Board noted the intent to move to annual planning and asked how consistency will be measured. Garry McEwan explained that an annual approach will allow more flexibility and focus and will allow the Board more opportunities to influence. Some elements are already measured on a yearly basis, and reviewing performance is at the discretion of FSS by way of KPIs.

3.11 The Board noted the next steps set out in the timeline and welcomed the opportunity to review the strategy at the Board meeting in June.

3.12 Thanks, in particular, were given to Christina Bichan for her invaluable input into the draft strategy for 2026-31.

4. FSS Operating Environment for 2025-2026 Financial Year - 250302

4.1 The Chair invited Geoff Ogle, Chief Executive to present a paper setting out the operating environment for the next financial year, outlining the challenges the organisation faces.

4.2 In particular Geoff drew the Board's attention to the fact that the functions of the organisation remain the same, with FSS once again receiving a flat-line budget. It will therefore be another challenging year to meet our statutory and legal obligations.

4.3 The Chair thanked everyone in the organisation for their work in pulling together the well-articulated paper and invited questions from the Board.

4.4 The Board noted the alternative working model of a compressed 9-day fortnight and asked whether this can work with equity. They heard that FSS has several options of flexible working to enable the organisation to ensure delivery of its objectives.

5. Financial Approach for 2025-26 - 250303

5.1 The Chair invited Geoff to introduce the paper which provided the Board with an overview of the process undertaken by the Executive Management Team in relation to the budget allocation for 2025-26.

5.2 The Board heard that in order to keep within budget, the headcount would need to be reduced by approximately 65 staff. This would equate to FSS not being able to meet its statutory functions and would potentially cease to be a viable organisation. The Board were reminded that SG operate a policy of no compulsory redundancies.

5.3 The Board discussed the expenditure requirement for the resource budget made by EMT for 2025/26 in line with the Framework Document requirement in paragraph 3.8 of the paper.

5.4 The Board noted that the proposal to work to a budget requirement of £30.2m comes with risks and asked what assurance SG had given that gives the Accountable Officer comfort. Geoff explained that rigorous assessments have taken place, and the risk will not manifest itself until approximately mid-February 2026, He reiterated his confidence and comfort with the proposals based on discussions with a number of SG officials. The Board heard that the Chair of Finance and Business Committee (FBC) will receive a monthly, as well as quarterly, update from the Accountable Officer on forecast, budget and updates on progress with SG health finance. The Board agreed to the proposal.

5.5 A robust discussion took place regarding the proposal to change the financial risk appetite from 'minimalist' to 'open'. In order to operate and plan beyond £22.7m FSS needs direction from the Board, and this direction needs to match the risk. The Board heard that they are not agreeing to a plan to overspend, but to work with SG to review the 2025/26 financial position as part of the normal Autumn and Spring Budget Reviews, and to also work with SG health finance earlier in the year to secure the 2026/27 budget provision.

5.6 Despite the Board being uncomfortable with the proposal to change the financial risk appetite they reluctantly agreed to change the wording to: '**Open to financial planning against forecasted requirement to enable delivery of the**

*organisation's core objectives recognising some residual risk of potential overspend but **averse** to any reduction in financial management and oversight'* and would like this kept under regular review.

5.7 In order to agree the next steps and confirm their position on the proposed £22.7 net allocation the Board asked that the Chair write to both Caroline Lamb, Director General Health and Social Care, and Jenni Minto, Minister for Public Health and Women's Health to record the decisions made in the meeting. based on the ask of paragraph 1.5 of the paper.

ACTION : 2025/06 : Heather Kelman

5.8 The Board agreed there is merit in a strategic review of the scope and functions of FSS as per paragraph 5.10 of the paper, and this will be considered as part of the letter to Ms Minto.

5.9 The Board will be provided with an updated report at the September and December meetings.

5.10 The Chair invited Anna Skowron, Head of Finance and Procurement to present on 'Allocation of Budget'.

5.11 The Board noted in particular that FSS is part of the SG Main bargaining unit for pay settlements and the potential rise to costs is based on finalised negotiations with Trade Unions.

5.12 The Board were content with the structure of the financial plan.

5.13 The Chair thanked Geoff and Anna for the detailed paper.

6. SAFER – oral update

6.1 The Chair invited Ian McWatt, Deputy Chief Executive to update the Board on the status of the Scottish Authorities Food Enforcement Rebuild (SAFER), which, as they will recall, is a redesign of food law delivery in Scotland.

6.2 The Board were pleased to note that Ministers and SG have agreed to underwrite the entire programme, with FSS receiving investment of £3.2m in year 1, £3.9m in year 2, and £500k in year 3. Recruitment has now commenced for a Programme Manager.

6.3 It was noted that SAFER will have an impact on the future strategy and finances and the Board received assurance that this will be a clear feature in future modelling. FSS are also looking to engage the Chief Economist to provide guidance going forward.

7. Finance and Business Committee – Oral Update

7.1 The Chair invited Alban Denton, FBC Committee Chair, to provide an oral update on the tenth meeting of the FBC which took place virtually on 05 March 2025.

7.2 The committee were presented with the results of the Civil Service People Survey and noted the elevated bullying and harassment figures, which mainly relate to Operations colleagues reporting bullying and harassment in the field, which is being addressed. Overall FBC were pleased to note a clean bill of health.

7.3 The FBC heard that requested additional funding had not been forthcoming at this stage and noted a paper on managing money will be presented at a future meeting.

7.4 The FBC noted that all invoices had been paid within the 10-day target period.

7.5 The FBC noted that FSS experience higher than average maternity absence, and related costs, with maternity cover not routinely being provided but considered on a case-by-case basis.

7.6 The FBC received the FSS Charge Rates for 2025-26 and heard that food business operators appreciate the effort to keep costs as low as possible.

7.7 The FBC received the latest Consumer Tracker results and were reassured by the data.

7.8 The Chair thanked the Finance and Business Committee for their work on this important committee.

8. Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) – Oral Update

8.1 The Chair invited Aileen Brown, Chair of ARC to provide an oral update on the in person meeting which took place on 10 March 2025.

8.2 They heard that a team building event is taking place later this month following the conclusion of the restructure.

8.3 They noted that the current budget position shows an underspend of £49k, and work continues to reduce this further.

8.4 Scottish Government Directorate of Internal Audit and Assurance (SGDIAA) presented the internal audit progress report and advised that the annual plan will be delivered in full and on time. ARC was advised that the EQA has been delayed until Autumn to allow for the new Global Internal Audit (GIA) standards to become embedded.

8.5 SGDIAA presented the agreed plan for 2025-26. There are 3 proposed audits: Review of Learning and Development, Health and Safety for Field Staff, and Data Protection. ARC would like to see the Audit Assurance branch review conducted in 2025-26 after it was paused in the current year. This will be done as an advisory assessment should resources become available.

8.6 ARC was presented with the findings of the follow up visit on Human Resources, Workforce Planning and People Strategy and noted that skills mapping will be taken forward by FSS HR and L&D.

8.7 FSS Internal Audit presented an update on all open files and ARC noted the reasonable assurance outcome of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) audit. The high priority recommendation from the Specified Risk Material Controls and Verification audit has now been closed with remaining recommendations progressing. The audit of the Scottish Food Enforcement Liaison Committee (SFELC) is underway, and an EU audit is being scheduled for June.

8.8 ARC was presented with the plan for 2025-26 and noted that there are 3 assignments looking at various aspects of meat hygiene official controls, these being trichinella controls, microbiological controls and the resource blueprint. The ARC agreed the plan.

8.9 Deloitte presented the external audit plan which, following a 'lessons learned' exercise will have strengthened processes going forward. The new engagement lead is Aberdeen based which should assist with meeting the agreed timeline. The ARC agreed the plan.

8.10 ARC reviewed the risk register and noted there were no new risks to consider. The risk score for Official Controls Delivery has changed from 150 to 100 due to new trainee vets having taken up post.

8.11 Three live issues remain the same: budget, LA food delivery and external policy pressures and management has increased the latter from high to very high due to its significance.

8.12 The ARC heard that management are monitoring an outbreak of foot and mouth disease in continental Europe.

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

9. Minutes of 11 December 2024 – 250304

9.1 The Board asked whether there was any update as to whether SG would evaluate the £3 million pledged to provide free breakfasts and were advised there was not.

9.2 The Minutes of the meetings held 11 December 2024 were agreed as an accurate record.

10. Action Log – 250305

10.1 Action 2024/02 – FSS to engage with SG on the reappointment of a new Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA). Update – ring fenced funding is now available to recruit for a CSA, the job description has been finalised, and recruitment will start imminently. This action can now be closed.

11. Chair Report – 250306

11.1 In the period between 12 December 2024 to present day the Chair attended meetings and events as per the Chair Report.

11.2 The Board heard that there will be some changes to committee membership, with Paula Charlesworth moving from FBC to ARC, and Phillip Couser moving from ARC to FBC. Alban and Aileen thanked them both for their input.

12. Chief Executive Report – 250307

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

12.2 Geoff advised that the Dietary Intake of Scotland's Children (DISH) webinar was very well attended, and he looks forward to next steps in the out of home sector, promotions etc. A paper will be tabled at the June meeting to report on the progress made.

12.3 He advised that that he will be taking over as Chair of the Scottish Delivery Bodies Group in April.

12.4 FSS will be working with the UK Government as appropriate as Defra develop their Food Strategy.

12.5 The Board noted the oral report and requested a read out of the meeting held with Emma Harper MSP to discuss issues around ultra processed foods.

ACTION – 2025/07 – Geoff Ogle

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

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

13. Questions from Public

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

14. Q&A

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