

# Research and evidence strategy

SAFER Programme

Published: February 2026



## Version control

Version	Date	Last review carried out	Next review date	Comments
0.1	12 February 2026			First draft
1	23 February 2026			Post-Programme Board amendments

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At Food Standards Scotland We have a unique role, working independently of Ministers and industry to provide advice which is impartial, and based on robust science and data.

Our remit covers all aspects of the food chain which can impact on public health – aiming to protect consumers from food safety risks and promote healthy eating

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## 1. Introduction

Delivering on the vision for SAFER to reform and modernise food law delivery in Scotland requires a strong foundation of research and evidence. This strategy outlines how we will build that foundation to ensure every decision is informed, transparent, and aligned with best practice.

The strategy sets out:

- the overarching research questions and the working assumptions guiding the research
- the anticipated research activities
- the professional standards to be observed and the range of analytical methodologies for appraisal and options analysis
- research output requirements, along with quality assurance mechanisms, clearly defining roles and responsibilities

An established and robust evidence base will underpin the options for reform and will ensure that every decision is proportionate, credible, and designed to deliver benefits for consumers, businesses, and enforcement bodies. It will support monitoring and evaluation to measure impact and adapt strategies as needed in addition to providing critical input for policy and legislative processes required to deliver a new system.

Without a strong evidence base, SAFER reforms risk being fragmented, costly, or ineffective. This strategy will encourage co-design and, when coupled with transparency around decision-making, will help to build confidence among stakeholders that the SAFER programme is working towards a shared goal, ensuring safe and authentic food for consumers in Scotland.

While the research and evidence activities will be driven by the needs of the programme, they will be underpinned by established professional processes and standards for each discipline for aspects such as ethics, quality assurance and publication and dissemination. As such, this strategy has been informed by HM Treasury's guidance for evaluation and appraisal: the [Green Book](#), the [Aqua Book](#) and the [Magenta Book](#).

## 2. Research approach

The SAFER programme's research strategy is structured around two groups of fundamental questions, which provide a clear framework for evidence gathering and evaluation. These questions are designed in line with the [Magenta Book](#) principles, ensuring they are relevant, evaluable, and capable of informing policy decisions:

1. Building on existing evidence, how does system performance at national level translate to delivery in practice?

- a) Is the system working as intended at any level, and does it operate differently for different groups?<sup>1</sup>

This question addresses the core evaluative principle of assessing whether the system achieves its intended outcomes for all stakeholders and explores equity and consistency across different groups.

- b) What components of the current system are working for different groups?

This focuses on identifying effective components and best practices, supporting continuous improvement.

- c) What are the challenges with the current system for different groups?

This question seeks to uncover barriers and inefficiencies to inform system redesign.

2. What changes could be made to improve how the system works?

- a) How do the approaches used by regulators in different countries differ, and which have proven most effective?

This comparative question supports learning from international evidence and benchmarking, a key principle for robust policy development.

- b) What is viable in a food law delivery system in Scotland?

These research questions provide a structured framework for critically examining the four pillars of the SAFER programme. In addition to assessing the current system, the research has been designed to map emerging evidence explicitly to each pillar, ensuring that insights directly support the development of pillar-specific outcomes.

While the detailed outputs will evolve as the work progresses, this strategy is intentionally structured to surface the evidence needed for each pillar and to guide its development. This approach provides clear assurance that aligning the evidence with the four pillars is a deliberate and central part of the programme.

### **3. Research working assumption**

As set out in SAFER's vision and objectives, the delivery scope has been defined as food law official controls and official activities undertaken as part of local authorities' food law delivery remit and FSS's key statutory obligations.

A working assumption can be understood as a belief or idea that is accepted as true for the purpose of conducting analysis, often without definitive proof. They are commonly used in policy to guide decision making, for example, it is often assumed that a certain policy will lead to a certain outcome, allowing for research and evaluation based on that assumption.

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<sup>1</sup> Different stakeholder groups, both direct and indirect, will be identified through a stakeholder mapping exercise.

Adopting a working assumption for SAFER provides a framework for research design and interpretation, with clearly defined boundaries. Setting this assumption from the outset supports programme acceptance and transparency, both critical factors to SAFER’s delivery.

Having regard of the SAFER Vision, to reform and modernise the delivery of food law in Scotland, and objectives, which can be found on the [Food Standards Scotland website](#), the SAFER research working assumption is: food law, if delivered consistently and in full across Scotland, assures food business compliance which in turn protects public health and consumer interests.

The working assumption provides boundaries within which research and analysis will be carried out, it is not a metric to be measured or assessed. It provides context that the current legislative framework is sufficient, regardless of the delivery model, which is out with the scope of the SAFER programme research and evidence strategy.

#### 4. Research activity

Research and due diligence activity should take place at the beginning of a programme, before the process of more detailed policy development or business case development and appraisal begins. This will allow the analysis to be supported by objective evidence. Where assumptions are needed, they should be reasonable and justified by transparent reference to the research information they are based on.

As a result, much of the research activity will be concentrated in tranche one and current, planned activity includes:

- legislative and stakeholder mapping exercises
- logic model development and evaluation planning
- evidence and literature reviews
- social research
- economic appraisal
- operational research systems mapping
- legal analysis

**Table 1: SAFER research activity**

Tranche	Dates	Phase	Work
1	January to March 2026	Scoping	Legislative mapping; stakeholder mapping; viable systems model; review of existing data
1	January to October 2026	Discovery	Social research; literature reviews; historical audit; statistical analysis
1	August to December 2026	Appraisal	Business case for change; social research with consumers; systems mapping; legal analysis
2	April 2027 onwards	Consultation and evaluation	Consultation analysis; economic analysis; social research; monitoring and evaluation planning

Continued research activity will be required throughout the lifetime of the SAFER programme and will be reactive and proportionate to the programme needs and the evidence base as it develops. Specific research activities will be prioritised according to the programme plan and resource requirements, with the activities required for scoping and discovery to be completed first in order to support appraisal activity and programme milestones.

## 5. Research and analytical skills

The outlined SAFER research activities will require a broad range of analytical and specialist skills across both tranches of the SAFER programme, drawing on expertise in statistics, social research, operational research, economics, and data science.

Across tranche one and tranche two, analytical inputs will include, but are not limited to:

- **Statistical and data science expertise:** statistical and data science input will be used to analyse internal and external datasets to build a robust understanding of the current system. This will include applying appropriate statistical methods to ensure data quality, identify trends and variation, and quantify uncertainty. This analysis will provide robust outputs to inform decision making and help determine where evidence is strong and where gaps remain.
- **Social research expertise:** social research will gather insights from key stakeholders to understand experiences and perspectives across the current system. This will be supplemented by analysis of existing evidence sources, enabling a comprehensive picture of stakeholder needs. Social researchers will also support other analytical disciplines by providing qualitative insights that contextualise quantitative findings.
- **Operational research expertise:** operational research will bring together diverse stakeholder perspectives to build a shared understanding of how the system operates and how proposed SAFER interventions may affect it. This will help identify where additional evidence is required and will later inform the development of logic models for options appraisal and evaluation of the chosen approach.
- **Economic expertise:** economic analysis will draw on available data to understand system performance, assess evidence from multiple sources, and support the development and refinement of options. Once options are shortlisted, economic appraisal will estimate value for money and assess the wider economic impacts of SAFER interventions, supporting robust comparisons against the counterfactual.

## 6. Analytical approaches: options analysis

Drawing on guidance from HM Treasury's [Green Book](#), analytical approaches are used to help identify:

- a quantitative understanding of the current situation known as business as usual (BAU)
- SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) objectives that embody the objective of the proposal
- the changes that need to be made to the organisation's business to bridge the gap. from BAU to attainment of the SMART objectives
- the logical change process i.e. the chain of cause and effect whereby making these changes will bring about the SMART objectives
- long and short lists of potential options to achieve SMART objectives
- potential impacts, both economic and social, above counterfactual of different options

There are many tools for options analysis. The best approach or approaches should be decided based on the desired outcome, evidence available, and consideration of factors such as risk and uncertainty.

Appraisal for government projects typically takes a social value appraisal approach, where costs and benefits are assessed based on the principles of welfare economics. This approach should include overall social welfare efficiency, rather than just market efficiency, meaning distribution and externalities are included. It should consider all significant costs and benefits that affect the welfare and wellbeing of the population.

## 7. Research publications and quality assurance

### 7.1 Research output

Procedures for publication are defined by the relevant research disciplines.<sup>2</sup> Distinct research projects and analysis that have been commissioned for the SAFER programme will be published as standard, following a rigorous peer review and quality assurance process.

Those involved in the quality assurance process will be selected based on the specific activity and expertise required. To support this process, it may be appropriate to establish an expert panel comprising both internal and external colleagues to FSS. Membership of this panel will be determined by subject matter expertise to ensure robust and informed decision-making throughout the process. This will ensure transparency, promptness and an evidence base that promotes public trust.

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<sup>2</sup> [Scottish Government social research: protocols and guidance](#); [The AQuA Book](#)

Decisions regarding publication and presentation to the Programme Board will rest with the Programme Manager. In line with research and analytical profession principles and standards, each research output will be published as a stand-alone paper. Outputs will include peer-reviewed reports, executive summaries and, where applicable, raw datasets.

## **7.2 Programme output**

Each Delivery Manager will compile a comprehensive report for their respective pillar required outputs, consolidating all evidence aligned with the research questions.

These reports will serve as the foundation for the options analysis. SAFER programme output and evidence reporting will be subject to a quality assurance process which will involve a multi-stage review designed to ensure accuracy, integrity, and consistency. The process is as follows:

- The process begins with the Analytic Team developing the initial evidence package, which underpins the pillar reports prepared by Delivery Managers.
- These reports are then returned to the Analytic Team for rigorous quality checks, focusing on the correct use and interpretation of the evidence package.
- Once refined, and where appropriate, the Delivery Manager, working in collaboration with the relevant Technical Advisory Groups (TAGs), will seek their peer review to strengthen assurance.
- Following this, the Programme Manager or Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) validates the quality-checked reports to confirm alignment with programme objectives.
- The final stage involves submission to the SAFER Programme Board for approval of the fully quality-assured pillar reports.

Throughout the process, feedback loops enable continuous improvement and iterative refinement, ensuring that all outputs are robust, reliable, and fit for decision-making.

## **8. Research risk**

Publication and dissemination of research should be timely for accuracy and transparency but it is also appropriate to be aligned with other programme priorities and outputs. The analytic team will work closely with the programme team to ensure priorities and timescales are aligned to reduce risk to research outputs or delivery.

The research and evidence gathering activity may also uncover findings that are out with the SAFER scope that the programme is unable to deliver on due to non-alignment with the objectives of the programme. The analytic team will therefore work closely with the Delivery Managers and other teams within FSS and contribute to future research planning to minimise this risk.

The final risk to acknowledge is the resource capacity of the analytic team, access to required technical skills, either internally or externally, within the required timeframe.

This risk will be continually monitored based on research activity planning and managed by the programme team, if this risk becomes apparent it will be escalated to the programme board.

## **9. Research and co-design**

Research will play a critical role in shaping the co-design process that SAFER aims to deliver. By generating robust evidence, we will ensure that co-design activities with the Scottish Government, local authorities, other government bodies, and key stakeholders are informed by meaningful insights and grounded in evidence.

The successful delivery of this research and evidence strategy depends on close alignment with the SAFER programme plan and wider FSS organisational priorities. This interdependency will enable insights to both inform and be informed by complementary projects, ensuring a consistent and integrated approach that supports policy development.

Embedding research within the broader programme context guarantees that outputs are evidence-based and directly contribute to achieving strategic objectives. Through collaborative engagement and shared learning, this strategy will produce actionable findings that drive meaningful reform.