

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FOOD STANDARDS SCOTLAND BOARD
HELD 10 DECEMBER 2025
10:45 – 14:50
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 - via
Teams
Kate Smith, Head of Marketing &
Communications
Christine Hill, Head of Private Office
Joanne Smith, Board Secretary

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 – Approval and sign off

3.1 The Chair invited Garry McEwan, Head of Corporate Services and Natalie Greenland, Head of Corporate Support to present the final version of the 2026-31 FSS Strategy which moves away from a fixed three-year corporate plan to a five-year strategic vision supported by flexible annual delivery plans.

3.2 The Board noted that the strategy focuses on three key priorities aligned with FSS obligations. Minor amendments were requested, such as reviewing an image regarding healthy eating to ensure appropriateness.

3.3 The Board discussed the visibility of the SAFER programme within the document. It was agreed that while SAFER is a flagship programme, the strategy document should remain high-level to ensure longevity.

3.4 The Board approved the Strategy for 2026–2031, subject to final editorial proofing and noted the intention to formally launch it on 11 February 2026.

4. Annual Risk Appetite Review

4.1 The Chair invited Natalie to present the annual review of the FSS Risk Appetite Statement. The review aimed to align risk appetite with the new corporate strategy and best practice.

4.2 The Board debated the proposed risk levels, and it was agreed that the appetite for Technology and Innovation risks should be increased to High/Open to encourage progress.

4.3 The Board agreed to adjust the risk appetite regarding staff deployment to Medium/Cautious to allow for necessary flexibility in matching skills to demand.

4.4 The Board agreed to a Medium/Cautious appetite for reputational risk, noting that FSS must remain a trusted, evidence-based organisation but should not be afraid to make difficult decisions that protect public health.

4.5 The Board approved the revised Risk Appetite Statement, subject to the agreed amendments regarding Technology and People categories and complimented the clearer formatting of the risk categories.

4.6 The Chair thanked Garry and Natalie for their papers.

5. Refreshed Communication and Marketing Strategy

5.1 The Chair invited Kate Smith, Head of Communications and Marketing to present the refreshed 2026-31 Communications and Marketing Strategy which focuses on maintaining FSS's role as an independent, trusted, evidence-based authority.

5.2 The refreshed strategy addresses the changing information landscape, including the decline of traditional search traffic and the rise of AI and misinformation, and prioritises strategic impact and partnerships over volume of activity.

5.3 The Board approved the Communications and Marketing Strategy.

5.4 The Chair thanked Kate for her paper.

6. Annual Science Update

6.1 The Chair invited Jacqui McElhiney, Head of Science Division and Gillian Purdon, Chief Nutritionist to present the fourth and final review of the science and evidence programme underpinning the 2021–2026 strategy.

6.2 The Chair thanked them for their paper and invited questions from Board members.

6.3 The Board welcomed the update, acknowledging the lengthy list of projects and achievements made by the teams over the past year despite the resource challenges.

6.4 The Board noted the performance of FSS’s science delivery function during 2025 and noted key achievements over the year. They heard about initial proposals for new research in 2026/27 and how shifting priorities and ongoing financial uncertainty are being managed to ensure the effective delivery of the science function next year and beyond.

6.5 Regarding laboratory services for food and feed it was noted the steps that have been taken to address risks. This remains a concern however and it is important that over the next few months there is clarity from SG on the direction of travel in this area.

6.6 The Board noted the significant progress in foodborne illness research and input into the third study of infectious intestinal disease in the UK (IID3) and understanding risks associated with Shiga-toxin producing E.coli (STEC) and the strengthened evidence base for dietary policy, including updating Scottish Dietary Goals and conducting work on the out-of-home food environment.

6.7 The Board noted that the job description for a new Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA) has been approved, and recruitment will be progressed in 2026.

7. Refreshed Digital and Data Strategy

7.1 The Chair invited Jacqui, Tigan Daspan Head of IT Service Management, and Christina Coakley Head of Statistics and Data Science to present the refreshed Digital and Data Strategy for 2026–2031.

7.2 The Board noted the new strategy, welcoming the establishment of a dedicated division for Digital and Data to provide specialist leadership.

7.3 The Board noted the increasing use of AI and emphasised the need for a clear policy to govern its use responsibly. The Executive confirmed a group is already looking into AI in research and will bring a policy back to the Board.

7.4 The strategy acknowledged the need for investment and the Board heard that an additional £500k of funding has been sought, however it is designed to be deliverable within constraints if necessary.

7.5 The Board agreed this is a priority area for FSS and approved the refreshed Digital and Data Strategy, which supports the delivery of FSS’s new strategic objectives from 2026-31. The Board also noted the progress made in developing FSS’s digital capabilities.

8. Annual Review of Strategic Risk Register and Strategic Issues Register

8.1 The Chair invited Garry to present the annual review of the Strategic Risk and Issues Registers.

8.2 Key updates included the de-escalation of a risk related to control delivery, driven by improved recruitment and training, and a reduced score for public service

reform (PSR) following opportunities identified in the government's annual plan, particularly around digitalisation and shared services.

8.3 The Strategic Issues Register now includes cybersecurity, classified as a strategic issue due to evolving threats requiring continuous oversight. Other issues discussed were budget allocation, local authority food delivery models linked to the SAFER programme, and external policy pressures.

8.4 A meeting will take place in January to identify new risks or issues arising from the recently approved strategy and efforts to align risk appetite with operational decisions as part of a cultural shift.

8.5 The Board noted the report and the information in the annexes including the assessed levels of risk, issues and actions taken to mitigate any risks identified.

9. Finance and Business Committee and update on budget for 2025/26 – oral updates

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

9.2 The FBC noted that 11 of the 23 priority deliverables from Year 2 of the Corporate Plan are on track, with some delays noted due to resourcing.

9.3 The FBC noted that a review of meat hygiene charging mechanisms is underway to ensure fairness regarding unbudgeted pay awards.

9.4 Garry updated the Board on the remaining budget for 2025/26 noting that the budget gap for the current year has been resolved following an award of £2.84m from the Scottish Government. The year-end forecast is now within a variance of less than £100k.

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

10. Audit and Risk Committee – oral update

10.1 The Chair invited Aileen Brown, Chair of ARC to provide an oral update on the in-person meeting which took place on 26 November 2025.

10.2 They noted that the current budget position shows an approximate underspend of £100k by year end.

10.3 Scottish Government Directorate of Internal Audit and Assurance (SGDIAA) presented the findings of the Learning and Development report, which received a Reasonable Assurance rating. The ARC noted the proposal for a new L&D strategy and mandatory training programme.

10.4 FSS Internal Audit presented an update on all open files and ARC noted that the microbiological sampling audit is underway. The business assessments audit will

commence early 2026, along with the official control map update and the audit universe for risk planning for 2026-27.

10.5 The shellfish official controls audit remains open and ARC noted EU plans to audit bivalve molluscs; this will bring challenges given resource constraints and potential compliance issues.

10.6 Concerns regarding progress and missed deadlines for both egg hygiene and SRM audit was raised and the ARC were reminded of competing priorities and the need to prioritise based on risk and resource availability.

10.7 The ARC reviewed the Risk and Issues Registers and noted that Cyber Security risk has been moved to a strategic issue, reflecting the ongoing malignant environment and the need for constant vigilance.

10.8 The strategic issue related to FSS's budget allocation remains unchanged due to high uncertainty, however ARC noted savings of £2.38m which have been made over the previous nine months have put FSS in a favourable position.

10.9 ARC was presented with the outstanding internal audit recommendations since 2015 and noted there are four outstanding.

10.10 ARC was presented with revised Risk Management Policy and Guidance and complimented the clarity and structure of the comprehensive policy.

10.11 ARC received an excellent presentation on Business Continuity Arrangements and disaster recovery. This included a case study on a cyber-attack simulation and feedback from FSS recent participation in a UK Tier 1 pandemic exercise.

10.12 The ARC raised significant concerns regarding delays by Deloitte in completing the Annual Report and Accounts. It was agreed that this should be added to the risk register as a live issue.

10.13 ARC was presented with the annual environmental emissions report and noted a 20% reduction to carbon emissions compared to the previous year.

10.14 ARC conducted an effectiveness review and delays with Deloitte concluding the Annual Report and Accounts work was highlighted as the biggest issue.

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

11. Annual Review of Board, FBC and ARC Terms of Reference

11.1 The Chair invited Christine Hill, Head of Private Office to present the Annual Review of the Terms of Reference (ToR) for all committees.

11.2 The ToR for ARC and FBC were recently reviewed and the Board agreed that the Board ToR was still relevant. It was also noted that the Framework Agreement

with Scottish Government has been reviewed, updated and published, better reflecting the independent nature of FSS.

12. Minutes of 17 September 2025

12.1 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 September to present day the Chair attended meetings and events as per the published Chairs Report.

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 highlighted the Civil Service People Survey results, with FSS scoring 70%, which remains well above the Civil Service average.

15.3 FSS recently held a successful joint session with the FSA regarding the SAFER programme.

15.4 Regarding the budget for 2026/27, FSS has requested a £7m increase, including consolidating the £2.5m received this year. A confirmed budget allocation is expected around 20th January.

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.