

**MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE FOOD STANDARDS SCOTLAND BOARD
HELD 25 MARCH 2026
11:35 – 15:45
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
Kate Smith, Head of Marketing &
Communications
Christine Hill, Head of Private Office
Joanne Smith, Board Secretary

By Invitation

Yasmeen Hussain, Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) Board Member
(Observer)

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. Yasmeen Hussain, a member of the SAAS Board was introduced as an observer to the meeting.

1.2 No apologies were received.

2. Declaration of Conflict of Interest

2.1 No conflicts of interest were declared by Board members.

3. Financial Approach for 2026-27

3.1 The Chair introduced Iain Blackwood, Interim Head of Finance and Procurement to his first board meeting, and invited Garry McEwan, Head of Corporate Services to introduce a paper setting out the Finance Approach for the coming year.

3.2 The Board noted the budget allocation of £24.8 million, with £23.7 million designated as the resource budget for 2026-27. The remaining £1.1 million comprises non-cash depreciation and annual managed expenditure. The resource budget is effectively the allocation for FSS to deliver on its new five-year strategy, underpinned by three priorities: public health and consumer protection, evolving and reforming the regulatory landscape, and providing an effective public service for the people of Scotland.

3.3 The Board heard that the initial budget requirement was £32 million, however this was significantly reduced to £24.4 million, although there was no prior notification that there would be a significant reduction on what was requested and acknowledged as the need in 2025/26. Despite efforts to close the gap, there remains a £700,000 budget pressure which SG have been advised about. Several challenges were highlighted, such as a 5% vacancy rate, recruitment freeze and the SAFER programme. The budget will be closely monitored via the Strategic Risk Management Forum, the Finance & Business Committee and the Strategy Forum.

3.4 The board discussed the financial paper, with members expressing concerns about the budget gap and the impact on staff morale. There was a consensus that further information and a more sustainable path forward are needed.

3.5 The board agreed to revisit the financial paper at the June meeting, prior to this additional information will be sought from Scottish Government.

3.6 The Chair thanked Garry and Iain for their paper.

4. SAFER Programme Update

4.1 The Chair invited Ian McWatt, Deputy Chief Executive to present an update on the SAFER Programme Board held 12 February 2026.

4.2 The Board heard that the evidence and research phase is underway, focussing on creating a more targeted, digitally enabled, and sustainable system.

4.3 The programme's delivery was highlighted as needing greater pace and transparency, alongside careful management of potential delays arising from some stakeholders' lack of confidence to progress the work and concerns about perceived pre-judgement of the outcome.

4.4 The board discussed the implications of cross-charging staff time to SAFER, to use organisational expertise and knowledge to support the programme. Whilst this helps mitigate budget pressures, it introduces risks if SAFER funding is not secured.

4.5 The board noted the content of the SAFER programme paper and supported the ongoing work, including the formation of technical advisory groups (TAGs) and the research and evidence strategy.

4.6 The next SAFER Programme Board meeting is scheduled for 12 May, and feedback will be provided at the June board meeting.

4.7 The Chair thanked Iain for his update.

5. Finance and Business Committee (FBC) – oral update

5.1 The Chair invited Alban Denton, Chair of FBC, to provide an oral update from the FBC meeting held on the 04 March 2026.

5.2 They noted that the Finance Team have recently recruited three new members of staff.

5.3 They noted the tightening financial assumptions and the reduced opportunities to manage the budget. Staff costs continue to rise, putting significant pressure on the organisation.

5.4 They heard that SAFER spend will be included in the quarterly finance paper, reported separately to ensure transparency, and to ensure no overlap or underlap of costs.

5.5 They were presented with the results of the Civil Service People Survey (CSPS), these were broadly positive but showed some dilution of engagement related to workload, resourcing, and pressure. The committee acknowledged the challenges ahead and the importance of maintaining staff morale and engagement.

5.6 They received a presentation on the Carbon Management Plan and heard that despite efforts to manage carbon impacts, the structure of the organisation, particularly in terms of building and travel, limits the ability to reduce carbon footprint effectively. The committee heard that despite efforts to reduce headcount, the carbon footprint per full-time equivalent (FTE) could still increase due to fixed building emissions.

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

6. Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) – oral update

6.1 The Chair invited Aileen Brown, Chair of ARC to provide an oral update on the in-person meeting which took place on 10 March 2026.

6.2 The ARC reviewed the Risk and Issues Registers and noted the top three risks remained unchanged: changes to FSS role and remit, public service reform, and maintaining effective food surveillance capability. Despite the stability in these risks, significant mitigation actions have been taken.

6.3 A new risk related to the annual report production was proposed for addition to the strategic risks, with a high likelihood and impact score of 100. This risk pertains to potential disruptions to the annual report and accounts timeline, which could lead to statutory breaches. This was approved by the board, with the rating and wording agreed upon.

6.4 They discussed strategic issues, including budget allocation, local authority food delivery models, and external policy pressures, with no changes reported.

6.5 They reviewed the annual reporting and accounts approach for 2025-26, noting a constructive and future-focused collaboration between management and Deloitte. The external audit plan presented by Deloitte was detailed, with Michelle Hopton, the new engagement Director, attending the meeting.

6.6 Scottish Government Directorate of Internal Audit and Assurance (SGDIAA) presented audit reports on health and safety for field staff, and data protection, these

were graded reasonable and substantial assurance, respectively, with management actively addressing the findings.. The ARC approved the SGDIAA's audit plan for 2026-27, which includes audits on food crime and incident management, food surveillance capability, and cyber security and resilience.

6.7 FSS Internal Audit presented an update on the microbiological criteria audit report, which received a limited assurance rating. The ARC requested more detailed alignment of actions to responsible officers.

6.8 They received updates on official controls audits: it is hoped that the egg hygiene audit will be completed by April; the shellfish audit remains open pending conclusion of the EU audit, and the hazardous substance report will close shortly.

6.9 The SFELC audit has been superseded by the SAFER program, and the committee acknowledged that is a great deal of activity which will ensure systems and processes are created which are fit for purpose and the future.

6.10 The ARC approved FSS's audit plan for 2026-27, which includes audits on wine standards, meat hygiene in game handling establishments, and overarching internal monitoring.

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

7. Minutes of meetings held 10 and 17 December 2025

7.1 The Minutes of the meetings held 10 and 17 December 2025 were agreed as an accurate record with no matters arising.

8. Action Log

8.1 There are currently no outstanding actions.

9. Chair Report

9.1 In the period between 10 December 2025 to present day the Chair attended meetings and events as per the published Chairs Report.

9.2 Further to the report the Chair highlighted a constructive meeting with stakeholders from the Society of Chief Officers from Environmental Health Scotland regarding the SAFER programme.

9.3 The Chair also attended a lecture on mobile teaching kitchens and the Scottish hub in Dundee, which has received support from FSS. The lecture showcased the positive impact of these programmes on participants' skills and confidence.

9.4 The Chair confirmed that interviews to replace the outgoing Chief Executive will take place on 23 April 2026.

10. Chief Executive Report

10.1 The FSS Chair invited Geoff Ogle, Chief Executive Officer, to provide an oral update to supplement his written report.

10.2 The Board heard that FSS have successfully recruited a new Head of Data and Digital and Ronnie Simpson, currently with Marine Scotland, will start on 20 April. Recruitment of a new Chief Scientific Advisor is progressing.

10.3 Geoff advised that DG Health and Social Care has authorised the recruitment of five additional staff, with a target of 20 needed, to fulfil SPS work.

10.4 The Board heard that the CSPS results placed FSS ninth across the GB civil service.

10.5 Geoff highlighted the imminent publication of a public consultation on the updated 2018 nutrient profiling model. This model is expected to include a broader range of products under high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) restrictions, potentially posing technical challenges for the industry.

10.6 The board was informed about engagement handling with the Scottish Government post-election and plans to engage with new Ministers at the earliest opportunity.

10.7 The Board requested further information regarding magnesium being classed as a novel food and this will be added to the next Board Monthly Update.

ACTION : 2026/01 : Joanne Smith

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

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

11.2 The Board queried the timeline for completing the food surveillance capability risk, noting a one-year extension despite being 80% complete. It was clarified that the delay is due to external factors related to the new lab's target operating model, which is under discussion with the Scottish Government.

12. Questions from Public

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

13. AOB

13.1 A Closed Session took place prior to the open Board Meeting regarding FSS Operating Environment for 20267-27 Financial Year.

13.2 The CEO presented a briefing to the Board on the operating environment for 2026/27, and the Board discussed the opportunities and challenges presented and the potential impact on delivery of the strategy. Actions to mitigate the possible risks were discussed. This paper is now available on the website.