

Minutes

Minutes of 110th meeting

ACM/MIN/110

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE MICROBIOLOGICAL SAFETY OF FOOD (ACMSF) - HYBRID MEETING HELD ON 23rd OCTOBER 2025 (ONE-HUNDRED AND TENTH MEETING)

Attendees

Chair:

Mr Alec Kyriakides

Members:

Dr Edward Fox

Ms Claire Tomaso

Dr Nicol Janecko

Professor Cath Rees

Professor Andrew Page

Dr Adri Bester

Professor Linda Scobie

Dr Jane Gibbens

Mr Martin Briggs

Dr Dragan Antic

Dr Iñaki Deza-Cruz

Dr Fahad Ahmed

Professor Muna Anjum

Professor Alasdair Cook

Representatives:

Dr Stephen Wyllie (APHA)

Professor Peter Borriello (Science Council)

Secretariat:

Dr Anthony Wilson

Dr Elaine Pegg

Ms Josephine Walker

Presenters:

Professor Paul Hunter

Dr Svetlozara Chobanova

Dr Aileen Mill

Mr Darren Holland

1. Chair's welcome

1.1 The Chair, Mr Alec Kyriakides, opened the meeting by welcoming members and guests, including presenters; Professor Paul Hunter (University of East Anglia), Dr Svetlozara Chobanova (Food Standards Scotland), Dr Aileen Mill (Newcastle University), Mr Darren Holland (FSA), and Dr. Stephen Willey (APHA).

2. Apologies for absence

2.1 Formal apologies were received from Wayne Anderson, Roberto Vivancos and Francis Butler.

2.2 The Chair emphasized the importance of attendance and accountability, noting that he would be seeking removal from the committee of persistent non-attenders.

3. Declaration of interests

3.1 The Chair declared he had peer-reviewed a document for Food Standards Scotland related to agenda item 10.

3.2 Alasdair Cook disclosed that his child had recently taken employment with Nestlé, though it was not relevant to the meeting's discussions.

4. Minutes of last meeting (ACM/MIN/109)

4.1 The draft minutes were reviewed page by page. There were no amendments. The final minutes will be published on the ACMSF website **ACTION**.

4.2 A member raised a query regarding the promised short-form summary report from the EFIG group, which had not yet been circulated. Dr Wilson clarified that such reports are typically produced for routine biannual meetings and would follow the December meeting.

4.3 The Chair proposed a more efficient approach for future meetings, suggesting members confirm they have read the minutes and only raise matters by exception, rather than reviewing each page.

5. Matters arising - Dr Anthony Wilson, FSA (ACM/1453)

5.1 Dr Anthony Wilson introduced paper ACM/1453, summarizing progress on previous action items:

- The Chair and Secretariat are shaping future meeting formats - as discussed in paper ACM/1454.
- The Pet Food Survey report is expected to be published in January 2026 and will be circulated at this time.
- Collaboration with FSRN on horizon scanning is planned for June 2026.
- Future agenda papers will include specific questions to better utilize committee expertise.
- EFIG reports will highlight limitations due to unknown sample sizes and aim to include species-specific *Salmonella* data.
- The issue of Shiga toxin-producing *E. coli* (STEC) in raw drinking milk will be raised with the Four Nations STEC Working Group, with a focus on public awareness.
- The FSA Science Council is reviewing the threshold-based approach to foodborne disease monitoring, with a potential agenda item in February.
- A response regarding misleading antimicrobial claims on chopping boards will be circulated post-meeting. **ACTION**

- A lessons-learned exercise on ethical approval delays in the IID3 study is planned.

5.2 A committee member noted practical challenges with wooden chopping boards and colour coding in food production, emphasizing the need for clearer guidance.

6. Chair Delivery Plan (ACM/1454)

6.1 The Chair presented an update on his delivery plan (paper ACM/1454), outlining three objectives:

1. Committee Composition and Terms of Reference Review: Deferred due to any potential impact on the committee from the ongoing sanitary and phytosanitary discussions with the EU.
2. Broader Horizon Scanning Exercise: Scheduled for June 2026, with scope to be discussed at the next meeting. An ad hoc group may be formed.
3. Industry-Aligned Meetings and Visits: Proposed visits to food production sites (e.g., chicken, sandwiches, eggs) to enhance understanding of industry practices. Members supported the idea but emphasized the need for clear objectives and consideration of logistical and biosecurity constraints. Suggestions included virtual or AI-assisted tours and inclusion of underrepresented sectors like produce and seafood.

7. Reminder of committee confidentiality agreement

7.1 The Chair reminded members of their duty to maintain confidentiality regarding reserved business and associated documents.

7.2 A concern was raised about reserved business content being visible during public sessions; this will be addressed in future meetings **ACTION**.

8. Committee Expertise review - Dr Elaine Pegg, FSA (ACM/1455)

8.1 Dr Elaine Pegg presented paper ACM/1455, summarizing members' self-assessed expertise across 49 topics. The review identified strong expertise in core areas but highlighted potential gaps in virology, behavioural science, and advanced risk modelling.

8.2 Members supported targeting these areas in future recruitment. It was also agreed to assess sectoral expertise (e.g., food manufacturing, retail, catering) to ensure broader representation **ACTION**.

8.3 Members who had not yet submitted their expertise assessments were encouraged to do so to provide a comprehensive and inclusive view of committee expertise.

9. Health Protection Research Unit (HPRU) overview - Professor Paul Hunter, University of East Anglia (ACM/1456)

9.1 Professor Paul Hunter from the University of East Anglia delivered a comprehensive presentation on the work of the Gastrointestinal Infections Health Protection Research Unit (HPRU), which is part of a broader network of HPRUs funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR).

9.2 The current HPRU on gastrointestinal infections is led by the University of East Anglia (UEA), in partnership with Newcastle University, the Quadram Institute, and UKHSA.

9.3 The HPRU is structured around several thematic areas, each involving at least two institutional partners, including UKHSA and one or more academic institutions. The themes include:

1. **Diagnostics:** Focused on the gut microbiome and its influence on gastrointestinal infections. The team is exploring how the microbiome affects disease severity and susceptibility. A significant area of interest is the role of neglected bacterial and viral enteric pathogens, such as astroviruses and sapoviruses, which are now more frequently detected due to the advent of multiplex PCR diagnostics. The team is also working on improving whole genome sequencing (WGS) to enable faster, patient-proximal diagnostics, which could enhance early detection of foodborne disease outbreaks.
2. **Surveillance Approaches:** This theme explores the integration of various surveillance systems, which often operate in silos. The goal is to use machine learning and artificial intelligence to synthesise data across human and foodborne surveillance systems, enabling earlier detection of outbreaks and better source attribution.
3. **Evidence-Based Interventions:** Led by Professor Marie McIntyre at Newcastle University, this theme includes:
 - Investigating drivers of infectious intestinal disease (IID) in community settings.
 - Learning from past outbreaks to inform future responses.
 - Developing strategies to reduce pathogen transmission.
 - A project called Food Check, which aims to improve food safety practices.

4. **Pandemic Preparedness:** Led by Professor Hunter, this theme focuses on emerging threats and rapid risk assessment protocols. It includes research on border security and the potential for enteric pathogens to be introduced via food and live animal imports. The team is also examining dose-response modelling, particularly how immunity and pathogen dose interact to influence disease severity. Notably, they are investigating how dose-response curves vary by season and population immunity, with early findings suggesting that norovirus dose-response differs between winter and summer.
5. **Public and Patient Involvement (PPI):** The HPRU is committed to inclusive research practices, including knowledge mobilisation, capacity building, and ensuring that research outputs are accessible and impactful.

9.4 Professor Hunter highlighted three specific projects:

- **Emerging and Neglected GI Pathogens:** The team is focusing on astroviruses and sapoviruses, which are increasingly detected but poorly understood. Key questions include their disease burden, transmission routes (e.g., foodborne vs. person-to-person), and clinical significance.
- **PRISM (Production Risk Systems-Based Micro-Simulation Modelling):** Led by Newcastle University, this project uses micro-simulation modelling to track pathogen transmission through the food chain. Initial work focused on leafy salads, with current efforts examining hepatitis A in strawberries.
- **Dose-Response Modelling:** The team is developing models to better understand how pathogen dose and host immunity interact to influence disease outcomes. This includes work on *E. coli* in freshwater and norovirus, with findings suggesting that dose-response relationships are not static but vary by season and population immunity levels.

9.5 Professor Hunter also discussed the flexibility of HPRU funding, which allows for rapid pivoting to address emerging public health priorities. For example, the team has been asked by the Department of Health to prioritise work on inland water quality, reflecting growing concerns about recreational waterborne illness.

9.6 In closing, Professor Hunter emphasized the potential for collaboration with the FSA, particularly in areas where foodborne disease intersects with broader public health concerns. He noted that HPRU funding can support research that benefits UK interests, even if not directly commissioned by UKHSA.

9.7 A committee member inquired about collaboration with the IID3 study. Professor Hunter confirmed close ties, particularly through Professor McIntyre and

Dr. Aileen Mill at Newcastle and anticipated future joint meetings to align research efforts.

9.8 A member requested access to Professor Hunter's slides for further review and raised concerns about the feasibility of setting annual work plans given the long-term nature of many research projects. **ACTION: secretariat to circulate slides.** Professor Hunter clarified that while the initial proposal focused on year-one activities, many projects would span the full five-year funding period, with flexibility to adapt to emerging priorities.

9.9 A committee member praised the presentation and raised questions about the clinical relevance of newly detected pathogens via multiplex PCR. He emphasized the need to distinguish between detection and disease causation. Professor Hunter acknowledged this challenge and noted ongoing efforts to use microbiome data to assess clinical significance.

9.10 A committee member asked whether zoonotic aspects were being addressed. Professor Hunter confirmed that while zoonoses are integral to many enteric infections, broader zoonotic research is primarily handled by a separate HPRU. However, there is potential for joint projects in the future.

9.11 The Chair concluded by thanking Professor Hunter for the insightful presentation and suggested that the committee may wish to invite him back in the future to provide updates as the HPRU's work progresses.

10. Development of trend analysis guidance - Dr Svetlozara Chobanova, FSS (ACM/1459)

10.1 Dr Svetlozara Chobanova from Food Standards Scotland introduced paper ACM/1459, which addressed the need for practical guidance to help food business operators (FBOs) conduct microbiological trend analysis. She explained that while trend analysis is a legal requirement under Article 9 of Commission Regulation (EC) No 2073/2005 (retained in UK law), there is currently little to no practical guidance available to support businesses in fulfilling this obligation. The regulation mandates that FBOs must not only conduct microbiological sampling but also analyse trends in their data to ensure food safety. However, in practice, many businesses either do not perform trend analysis or do so ineffectively due to a lack of understanding, resources, or awareness.

10.2 Dr Chobanova outlined several challenges that hinder effective trend analysis in the food industry:

- Lack of awareness: Many FBOs are unaware of the legal requirement to conduct trend analysis.
- Limited statistical expertise: Businesses often lack the technical knowledge to perform meaningful data analysis.
- Data quality and format: Microbiological data is frequently stored in disparate formats, including paper records, making it difficult to aggregate and analyse.
- Inconsistent sampling practices: Poor sampling protocols and inadequate documentation (e.g., missing production dates) undermine the reliability of data.
- Misinterpretation of results: FBOs often rely solely on presence/absence or critical limits (e.g., for *E. coli*) without understanding broader trends or early warning signs of process control issues.
- Lack of standardised approaches: There is no universally accepted method for conducting trend analysis, and the relationship between indicator organisms and pathogens is often non-linear and complex.

10.3 Dr Chobanova proposed two potential approaches for developing the guidance:

1. Formation of an ACMSF subgroup to lead the development of the guidance, with FSS providing secretariat support.
2. FSS-led development of the guidance, with ACMSF providing input through workshops and iterative feedback on draft versions.

10.4 Dr Chobanova also asked the committee to consider what key issues the guidance should address, how it should be pitched to accommodate varying levels of expertise among FBOs, and whether a tiered approach (e.g., basic vs. advanced methods) would be appropriate.

10.5 A committee member emphasized the widespread lack of awareness among FBOs regarding the legal requirement. She noted that even businesses with high-level accreditations often lack basic understanding of microbiological data and trend analysis. She highlighted practical barriers such as the cost and logistics of sample collection, transportation, and interpretation of lab results. She advocated for clear, accessible guidance and expressed willingness to contribute to its development.

10.6 Another member stressed the importance of articulating the value proposition of trend analysis. He argued that unless FBOs understand the benefits they are unlikely to adopt the practice, regardless of legal obligations.

10.7 The need for simplicity and clarity was echoed by another member, particularly for small businesses with limited technical capacity.

10.8 It was pointed out that the legal requirement itself provides a rationale for compliance but was agreed that businesses need to understand the practical benefits. It was recommended reviewing international practices, particularly within the EU, where similar legislation has existed for two decades.

10.9 Another member voiced support for the initiative and suggested leveraging existing data from FSA audits, particularly in slaughterhouses, to assess current levels of compliance and effectiveness. They also emphasized the importance of involving enforcement officers in the guidance development process.

10.10 Concerns were raised about the scope of the guidance, noting that different food sectors (e.g., meat, dairy, produce) have varying testing protocols and data types. It was questioned whether a single guidance document could effectively address such diversity.

10.11 The need to target both FBOs and enforcement officers was also highlighted, as many small businesses rely on external consultants who may also lack the necessary expertise. Language barriers and limited technical knowledge further complicate compliance was also noted.

10.12 Dr Marianne James (FSS) added that despite the legal requirement, trend analysis is rarely practiced outside of meat hygiene settings. She stressed the need for guidance that is both practical and culturally transformative, helping businesses see the value in using their data proactively. She also noted that FSS had searched extensively for international guidance but found none.

10.13 The committee concluded that:

- There is a clear and urgent need for microbiological trend analysis guidance.
- The guidance should be simple, practical, and accessible.
- It should include sampling best practices, data interpretation, and examples of trend analysis.
- The guidance should be pitched at multiple levels, with a basic “minimum standard” and more advanced options for larger businesses.
- It should also be useful for enforcement officers and consultants, not just FBOs.
- A multi-stakeholder working group, including ACMSF members, FSS, FSA, industry representatives, and enforcement bodies, was proposed as the most effective mechanism for developing the guidance.

- The committee agreed to support the initiative and contribute members to the working group.

10.14 The Chair thanked Dr Chobanova and Dr James for their presentation and confirmed that **the Secretariat would work with FSS to establish the working group and coordinate ACMSF's involvement ACTION**

11. Public Q&A

11.1 No questions were raised by members of the public.