

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR THE INDEPENDENT SCIENTIFIC ADVISORY COMMITTEES

PREAMBLE

*Guidelines 2000: Scientific Advice and Policy Making*¹ set out the basic principles which government departments should follow in assembling and using scientific advice, thus:

- think ahead, identifying the issues where scientific advice is needed at an early stage;
- get a wide range of advice from the best sources, particularly where there is scientific uncertainty; and
- publish the scientific advice they receive and all the relevant papers.

The *Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees*² (currently being updated) provided more detailed guidance specifically focused on the operation of scientific advisory committees (SACs). The Agency subsequently commissioned a *Report on the Review of Scientific Committees*³ to ensure that the operation of its various advisory committees was consistent with the remit and values of the Agency, as well as the Code of Practice.

The Food Standards Agency's Board has adopted a **Science Checklist** (Board paper: FSA 06/02/07) to make explicit the points to be considered in the preparation of papers dealing with science-based issues which are either assembled by the Executive or which draw on advice from the Scientific Advisory Committees.

The Board welcomed a proposal from the Chairs of the independent SACs to draw up **Good Practice Guidelines** based on, and complementing, the **Science Checklist**.

¹ Guidelines on Scientific Analysis in Policy Making, OST, October 2005. *Guidelines 2000: Scientific advice and policy-making*, OST July 2000

² Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees, OST December 2001

³ Report on the Review of Scientific Committees, FSA, March 2002

THE GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES

These Guidelines have been developed by 9 advisory committees:

Advisory Committee on Animal Feedingstuffs ⁴
Advisory Committee on Microbiological Safety of Foods
Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes
Advisory Committee on Research
Committee on Carcinogenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment ⁵
Committee on Mutagenicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment ⁶
Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment ⁷
Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition ⁸
Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee ⁹

These committees share important characteristics. They:

- are independent;
- work in an open and transparent way; and
- are concerned with risk assessment not risk management.

The Guidelines relate primarily to the risk assessment process since this is the committees' purpose. However, the Agency may wish on occasion to ask the independent scientific advisory committees whether a particular risk management option is consistent with their risk assessment.

Twenty eight principles of good practice have been developed. However, the different committees have different duties and discharge those duties in different ways. Therefore, not all of the principles set out below will be applicable to all of the committees, all of the time.

⁴ Joint FSA/Defra Secretariat, FSA lead

⁵ Joint FSA/HPA Secretariat, HPA lead

⁶ Joint FSA/HPA Secretariat, HPA lead

⁷ Joint FSA/HPA, FSA lead

⁸ Joint FSA/DH Secretariat

⁹ Joint Defra/FSA/DH Secretariat

This list of principles will be reconsidered by each committee annually as part of the preparation of its Annual report, and will be attached as an Annex to it.

Principles

Defining the issue

1. The FSA will ensure that the issue to be addressed is clearly defined and takes account of stakeholder expectations. The committee Chair will refer back to the Agency if discussion suggests that a re-definition is necessary.

Seeking input

2. The Secretariat will ensure that stakeholders are consulted at appropriate points in the committee's considerations and, wherever possible, SAC discussions should be held in public.
3. The scope of literature searches made on behalf of the committee will be clearly set out.
4. Steps will be taken to ensure that all available and relevant scientific evidence is rigorously considered by the committee, including consulting external/additional scientific experts who may know of relevant unpublished or pre-publication data.
5. Data from stakeholders will be considered and weighted according to quality by the committee.
6. Consideration by the secretariat and the Chair will be given to whether expertise in other disciplines will be needed.
7. Consideration will be given by the Secretariat or by the committee to whether other scientific advisory committees need to be consulted.

Validation

8. Study design, methods of measurement and the way that analysis of data has been carried out will be assessed by the committee.

9. If qualitative data have been used, they will be assessed by the committee in accordance with the principles of good practice, e.g. set out in guidance from the Government's Chief Social Researcher¹⁰.
10. Formal statistical analyses will be included wherever possible. To support this, each committee will have access to advice on quantitative analysis and modelling as needed.
11. When considering what evidence needs to be collected for assessment, the following points will be considered:
 - the potential for the need for different data for different parts of the UK or the relevance to the UK situation for any data originating outside the UK; and
 - whether stakeholders can provide unpublished data.
12. The list of references will make it clear which references have either not been subject to peer review or where evaluation by the committee itself has conducted the peer review.

Uncertainty

13. When reporting outcomes, committees will make explicit the level and type of uncertainty (both limitations on the quality of the available data and lack of knowledge) associated with their advice.
14. Any assumptions made by the committee will be clearly spelled out, and, in reviews, previous assumptions will be challenged.
15. Data gaps will be identified and their impact on uncertainty assessed by the committee.

¹⁰ There is of guidance issued under the auspices of the Government's Social Research Unit and the Chief Social Researcher's Office (Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A Framework for assessing research evidence. August 2003. www.strategy.gov.uk/downloads/su/qual/downloads/qqe-rep.pdf and The Magenta Book. www.gsr.gov.uk/professional_guidance/magenta_book/guidance.asp).

16. An indication will be given by the committee about whether the database is changing or static.

Drawing conclusions

17. The committee will be broad-minded, acknowledging where conflicting views exist and considering whether alternative hypotheses fit the same evidence.

18. Where both risks and benefits have been considered, the committee will address each with the same rigour.

20. Committee decisions will include an explanation of where differences of opinion have arisen during discussions, specifically where there are unresolved issues and why conclusions have been reached.

21. The committee's interpretation of results, recommended actions or advice will be consistent with the quantitative and/or qualitative evidence and the degree of uncertainty associated with it.

22. Committees will make recommendations about general issues that may have relevance for other committees.

Communicating committees' conclusions

23. Conclusions will be expressed by the committee in clear, simple terms and use the minimum caveats consistent with accuracy.

24. It will be made clear by the committee where assessments have been based on the work of other bodies and where the committee has started afresh, and there will be a clear statement of how the current conclusions compare with previous assessments.

25. The conclusions will be supported by a statement about their robustness and the extent to which judgement has had to be used.

26. As standard practice, the committee secretariat will publish a full set of references (including the data used as the basis for risk assessment and other committee opinions) at as early a stage as possible to support openness and transparency of decision-making. Where this is not possible, reasons will be clearly set out, explained and a commitment made to future publication wherever possible.
27. The amount of material withheld by the committee or FSA as being confidential will be kept to a minimum. Where it is not possible to release material, the reasons will be clearly set out, explained and a commitment made to future publication wherever possible.
28. Where proposals or papers being considered by the Board rest on scientific evidence, the Chair of the relevant scientific advisory committee (or a nominated expert member) will be invited to the table at Open Board meetings to provide this assurance and to answer Members' questions on the science. To maintain appropriate separation of risk assessment and risk management processes, the role of the Chairs will be limited to providing an independent view on how their committee's advice has been reflected in the relevant policy proposals. The Chairs may also, where appropriate, be invited to provide factual briefing to Board members about particular issues within their committees' remits, in advance of discussion at open Board meetings.