

Health and Social Care Committee

Oral evidence: Pre-appointment hearing with the Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Food Standards Agency, HC 232

Tuesday 8 June 2021

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 8 June 2021.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Jeremy Hunt (Chair); Paul Bristow; Rosie Cooper; Dr James Davies; Dr Luke Evans; Barbara Keeley; Anum Qaisar-Javed; Laura Trott.

Neil Parish, Chair, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, attended the Committee.

Questions 1 - 25

Witness

I: Professor Susan Jebb, Government's preferred candidate for Chair of the Food Standards Agency.



Examination of Witness

Witness: Professor Jebb.

Q1 Chair: Good morning. Welcome to the Health and Social Care Select Committee's pre-appointment hearing for the new chair of the Food Standards Agency, an incredibly important role. It is very topical, given all the discussions about trade deals with Australia and other places. It is an area that extends beyond just the Health and Social Care Select Committee's remit, which is why we are delighted to welcome as our guest for today's hearing Neil Parish, who is the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee. We are delighted to have you with us.

The candidate who has been put forward by the Government for the role is Professor Susan Jebb, who is an extremely distinguished nutrition scientist. She is Professor of Diet and Population Health at the Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences at the University of Oxford. She also has a lot of experience serving and chairing boards that are relevant to the role. She knows the food sector extremely well and has well-known skills as a science communicator.

Congratulations, Professor Jebb, on getting to this final stage. I will start by asking you to give a brief resumé of why you would like to do this role, and what it is in your background that you think makes you particularly well suited to the role.

Professor Jebb: Thank you very much. I am delighted to be here and to be the Government's preferred candidate for the post.

My whole career has been spent in the food sector. I guess it is driven by a belief that good food really matters and that I want people to have the opportunities to have safe, healthy, sustainable and affordable food. I think that goal fits very closely with that of the Food Standards Agency, so in many ways it felt like a natural fit. I have followed the work of the organisation since its inception over 20 years ago.

My technical credentials for the role are, first, as a scientist. My background is very much in diet and health. It is not exactly the remit of the FSA, but I think that scientific training is extremely relevant. It teaches you to be able to assimilate scientific information and evidence very rapidly. It teaches you a logical and inquiring way of approaching problems, and I think that will be very helpful.

I have previously chaired public health advisory committees for NICE. They were not on matters that are my direct subject knowledge at all. They were topics as diverse as preventing suicide; oral health promotion; and needle and syringe exchange programmes. I think that shows that I am able to get to grips with new information very quickly and to bring boards together to develop new guidance.



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Perhaps unlike some of my colleagues, during my scientific career I have also spent quite a lot of time both as a member and as a chair of policy advisory and working groups for a number of Government Departments. I have always had a particular interest in how scientific evidence is used in a practical way to inform policy and practice. That really goes to the heart of where I think the FSA sits.

I have worked on things like school food, and hospital food for staff and visitors. I have also chaired important stakeholder groups. The most notable of those, and one that will be familiar to you, is the public health responsibility deal food network. That was particularly challenging because it brought together industry, public health professionals, NGOs and Ministers all in the same group, trying to achieve voluntary agreements with industry for a healthier food system. It was not easy and there was a lot of media scrutiny, but we made some important progress. Importantly, we also laid the foundations for the Government taking more strident action later. That was a good example of working very closely with the Executive to really achieve progress.

I am very connected to consumers. In my research programme, much of which is funded by the National Institute for Health Research, we have placed a high priority on doing applied research that answers questions that the public want to know. What is it that they think taxpayers' money should be spent on in terms of research? My team has just completed a priority-setting partnership with the public and patients to identify research priorities in relation to obesity. That has been a really good opportunity to hear from people about what matters to them.

In another research project that I lead, funded by the Wellcome Trust, in relation to sustainable diets, we have a touring exhibition that is going round the country. I spent the bank holiday weekend in a shopping centre in Cardiff, talking to people about what matters to them, what is important and what food values they have. That will be moving on to Leeds, Blackpool, Newcastle and Glasgow over the next few months. I try really hard to listen to what the public are saying on what matters. I think for the FSA, which tries to put consumer interests at the heart of policy making in relation to food, that is important.

Finally, I am absolutely committed to good food—good in all senses of the word. I am very passionate about that. Anybody who has worked with me and my team, or on committees that I have chaired, knows that I have a very strong work ethic and a very strong belief that food matters. I hope that commitment and enthusiasm will be inspiring for people within the FSA and will help the organisation to be all that it can be, in what is, as you have already alluded to, a particularly interesting time for food policy.

Q2 Neil Parish: Thank you, Professor. You have a great career and a huge CV. It is very impressive, but—dare I say it?—most of it is in academia. The Food Standards Agency was set up after BSE because previously the



food sector had been too close to Defra and those producing the food.

Of course, it is also the case that the chief vet is answerable for animals right up to the time they get into the food processing plant. When they are dispatched, it becomes the Food Standards Agency. The whole world goes on very beautifully until there is some sort of a scandal. Either they are putting horsemeat in the burgers or there is a salmonella scare or whatever. Then all the press goes up in flames: “What’s the Food Standards Agency doing about it?”

I want to ask you, quite bluntly, how you see your role as regulator of the food processing industry. I imagine that you would probably farm it out to somebody, but how would you really get to grips with food processing? The Food Standards Agency is not just about health. It is also about healthy food, healthy processed food and food that is traceable and that we can be sure about as we eat it.

Professor Jebb: It is absolutely correct that it is not my core area of scientific expertise but, as I alluded to earlier, the generic training of being a scientist helps one to approach new problems.

The FSA is all about ensuring that food is safe and that it is what it says it is. That is its core mission. As far as I can tell, it is doing that job pretty well. It is also, importantly, doing it in partnership with people like Defra and a whole army of other people, whether that is vets or local authorities. The good thing is that it is an organisation that is already set up, is already working well and is led by a very strong executive team.

To some extent, that is business as usual and it needs to continue. My job as chair is to go in, as a bit of an outsider, and ask some searching questions: “Why do we do that? Is there a better way of doing this?” That will be my approach. It will be to assume that right now this is okay and is working, but to ask where we can do it better.

As you know well, because of changes following the EU exit, there are opportunities for the UK to start to do things differently. I do not think we should change just because we can, but we definitely should change where we can do things better. I need to listen to people who are much closer to those areas than I am, hear their views and then assimilate those and think about what will be best for the UK, for farming and the food system. Goodness me, food processors—particularly the meat processors—have been right in the spotlight recently. It is encouraging, but, as far as food safety goes, amidst all the turbulence, they have managed to continue to uphold very high standards. That is all credit to them.

Q3 **Neil Parish:** I do not doubt your ability at all. I think you will be very able in the job. The one question I would like to follow up on is this. When there is a food scare, the trouble is that basically it becomes a witch hunt and they are looking to hang somebody. They will come at you, not because you are guilty of any particular sin but because you are head of the Food Standards Agency. Are you confident that you can see



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off the hounds of the press and everybody else when they come for you?

Professor Jebb: I am not confident I can see them off, but I am confident that I am resilient to withstand it. What is important to me is that I know that I have done everything I could, asked every question I could and put in place the systems that we think are important.

I cannot guarantee that there will not be a food scare, but I can promise you that when there is I will be present, I will be accountable and I will lead. Depending on what the nature of it is, that might be the FSA supporting another Department—perhaps Defra—or it may be the FSA in the frontline. The biggest risk is that there is going to be a food scare. We have been fortunate in that there have not been any, what you might call, non-routine incidents of late, but one will happen sooner or later. If that can be predicted, we ought to stop it, but there will be some things we cannot predict. The FSA will have very well-worked plans for dealing with those kinds of incidents.

I think one of my early jobs will be to get to grips with what those plans are and to really understand the role of the chair, the role of the executive and the role of Ministers, and then to stress-test those plans against some of the new scenarios that perhaps the last year has shown us may be problems.

Q4 **Dr Davies:** Professor Jebb, you have already outlined your impressive scientific background. I know you have previously given evidence to this Committee, for instance on obesity, which has been very helpful. Could you give some examples, as chair of the Food Standards Agency, as to how the scientific background that you hold would be of benefit?

Professor Jebb: The job of chair does not require that one is a scientist. The FSA has a whole series of scientific committees, and I would be looking to those committees to provide expert advice, following the proper protocols.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I think being a scientist allows me perhaps to critique in ways that others may not, and to ask particularly searching questions about the methodology. Because I am already in the food arena, I hope one of the things I can do is perhaps introduce some new networks to the FSA so that we open up the breadth of our scientific expertise. I am not applying to be the chief scientist of the FSA. Robin May is doing that very competently.

Q5 **Dr Davies:** In terms of time commitment, the role has been advertised as two and a half to three days a week. Do you think that is sufficient?

Professor Jebb: I hope it is sufficient. Heather Hancock, the previous chair, has been doing it at a similar level. She had the very unenviable task of equipping the FSA to be ready to take on all the extra responsibilities that were going to come following the EU exit. She did that very successfully. I trust it is okay.



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It is very dependent on having a good management team. At the moment, I am confident that we have. The FSA is very well led by Emily Miles. I trust that that will be sufficient, but obviously I need to get in there and get the lie of the land close up.

Q6 Dr Evans: Professor, you wear many hats in your CV. Do you see any conflicts of interest?

Professor Jebb: I have one hat, and that is as Professor of Diet and Population Health at the University of Oxford, and that gives me a lot of independence and flexibility. All the other so-called hats are tasks that I have taken on largely in a task and finish system, advising as a member or chair of different committees.

As I indicated at my interview, and to this Committee, I hope and intend to continue for the other part of the time—two days a week—at the university. In order to make that work, I need to scale back some of the things I do. That will largely involve resigning from many of the external committees that I sit on, so that in policy terms I can apply myself very firmly to the FSA. My work in Oxford will predominantly be around supporting my PhD students and our early-career researchers, training the next generation. I look forward to continuing to do that.

The good thing about an academic role is that it has a fair amount of flexibility. While the FSA job is two and a half or three days a week, I absolutely accept that a food crisis does not respect part-time working. This will be a seven-day-a-week job that is remunerated at around three days. I will try to get some proportionality into that. I have already discussed with the executive how we can make that work.

Q7 Dr Evans: I have a couple of other questions. You won the John Maddox prize in 2015. Can you explain to the Committee what that was for, and why it is important to you?

Professor Jebb: The John Maddox prize is awarded by *Nature*. It is really about scientists who have stood up in the face of adversity. I suppose it was probably for two things. One was continuing to make the case for the importance of the whole diet and not just sugar, at a time when the world was obsessed with sugar. Secondly, it was defending the importance of academics working in partnership or in collaboration with industry in search of public health benefits.

There had been quite a significant controversy because my research group had taken on a project that had funding from Coca-Cola. We had run a clinical trial and published that. In fact, we showed that a product that Coca-Cola had been developing did not deliver the health benefits that they had anticipated. I consider that was important and in the public interest. I am glad that work was done independently by us and not by Coca-Cola. I am glad it was published. I do not think that taxpayers' money should be spent on doing that sort of thing. It is right that the company does it.



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I did not take it on blindly. I took it on very thoughtfully because I felt that it was in the public interest. Of course, it attracted huge criticism because people like to find a problem. I not only explained why we had done it, but tried to set out that research budgets are very limited and why we need to draw industry into the R&D process.

Q8 **Dr Evans:** From my reading, it was very much because you stood up and took personal flak. In the role you are stepping into, you have hinted that you are going to ask questions. Does that mean that you see your role as an agitator or as a continuity candidate?

Professor Jebb: I think the system has been agitated already over the last year by EU exit and the Covid pandemic. I am not sure that it needs any more agitating for agitating's sake. I think it needs settling down and ensuring that it is fit for purpose for the scenario in which we find ourselves now. That means looking hard at the processes that Heather Hancock—the previous chair—put in place, to check that they really work as they are put through their paces. I am sure many of them will, but it is also highly, highly likely that we will need to change some aspects and respond to that. That sounds a bit middle of the roadish but—

Q9 **Dr Evans:** You are a moderator with a hard hat. My final question leads from this. Before Christmas, when the Environment Bill came forward, and the trade Bills were coming forward, the Food Standards Agency was used by Government to say, “We are going to make sure that food standards are protected.” There was a lot of debate in Parliament and then food commissions about all this kind of stuff coming in. What is your experience across understanding trade policy, and how does it integrate with your hard-hatted moderate approach?

Professor Jebb: I have been learning a lot about it in the last few weeks. My understanding is that the Agriculture Bill is very clear that the Secretary of State for International Trade would lay a paper before Parliament to set out the terms of any new free trade agreements.

Ministers have been very clear, repeatedly, and indeed recently, that they will uphold UK food standards. I hope and indeed expect that the FSA would be asked to input into those discussions. We would do so based on evidence, first and foremost, but based on consumer interests because that is also why the FSA exists. It is to put consumer interests and consumer views at the heart of government. Consumer interests go beyond just food safety. They stretch into a whole raft of other values that people have about food, and the FSA needs to reflect those to Government.

It is not for the FSA to decide what should happen in the end, but one of the things that I really like, and for me with a background as an independent scientist is the thing I really love about the way the FSA is set up, is its independence, and its ability to make its advice to Ministers public. I think that is an important protection.



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One final thing that is important is that any Minister can ask the FSA to look at a specific issue. We have already seen that this will be an area in which there will be intense parliamentary scrutiny. I hope that the FSA will be invited, one way or another, to make its voice heard in those discussions. That will be a mix of scientific evidence from the risk assessments, and waving a flag for consumer interests.

Q10 Paul Bristow: Professor, returning to your role at the University of Oxford, what benefits do you see for the chair of the FSA in maintaining those connections with academia and the scientific community?

Professor Jebb: I think it is helpful to have a practising scientist at the head of a science-led agency. I do not think that is a bad thing. The second thing it brings is that it gives me access to a broad network of people who are not embedded in the FSA. The likelihood of my continuing to hear views about the FSA and its work from a very wide cross-section of people is that much higher. Listening is quite an important part of the job. You can only really start to assess the agency from how other people experience it. It broadens those networks.

Q11 Paul Bristow: In your CV you highlight your membership of policy advisory groups for the Department for Health and Social Care, Defra, Public Health England and NHS England. How has your membership of those groups informed your view of Government policy making?

Professor Jebb: That is an interesting question. One of the things that strikes me in all those committees, particularly working across a range of Government Departments, is that food policy is not as joined up as it should be. Food is interesting. It stretches right across Government, but the FSA is the only place that will always put food first. For every other Department, there is generally another priority that is a little higher up the list. Often, there is not nearly enough learning and sharing of experience across Government on matters relating to food.

That is particularly important when it comes to dealing with the food industry. The food industry is an enormous body. At the moment, its relationships with Government are quite disjointed. There will be real opportunity in bringing that together in a much more cohesive way, so that you are leveraging the full influence of Government in conversations with the food industry. I think that would be better for business as well, because they would actually have a much more consistent message and would be much clearer about what the priorities are. Probably the thing I have learned most is the need for joining up and the risk of fragmentation.

Paul Bristow: Very interesting. Thank you, Professor.

Q12 Anum Qaisar-Javed: Thank you for joining us, Professor. As chair of the FSA, it will be your responsibility to lead and manage engagement with senior stakeholders—

Professor Jebb: I'm terribly sorry, but I can't hear you particularly well.



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Anum Qaisar-Javed: I hope it's not my accent.

Professor Jebb: No, it's not accent; it's just volume.

Anum Qaisar-Javed: I'll try to speak louder. I was a teacher, so I should be able to speak loudly. I'll try again.

As chair of the FSA, it will be your responsibility to lead and manage engagement with senior stakeholders in industry and science, with consumer organisations and with parliamentarians. What challenges do you anticipate in managing the FSA's relationship with such a diverse group of stakeholders?

Professor Jebb: You are right: it is a huge group of people. It is not only the different constituencies that you mentioned—Ministers, industry and consumer groups—it is also across multiple countries. I am acutely aware of the quite complex system that the FSA manages.

Food Standards Scotland is a partner organisation, and it is really important that we maintain good links with them. I know there is an MOU in place around that. There are also slightly different but equally important relationships in Wales and Northern Ireland. Of course, Northern Ireland works with Safefood, which is the whole of Ireland food group.

Yes, it is quite daunting, but the good thing is that all these stakeholders have established relationships with the FSA already, so I am not starting from scratch. What matters is that I start to meet people and build up personal relationships so that we have a good understanding of how each other works. With Ministers that is absolutely vital in all countries, because we are about to enter a time when food policy may be not centre stage but a big priority. We have the food Bill coming up. The national food strategy will be published in a month or so. It is really important to have those conversations with Ministers. That is the top priority.

When it comes to industry and consumer groups, of course there are bodies that one can work through. The FSA has a number of systems for hearing consumer views—things like the Food and You tracker. It is about me working hard, getting on with it and prioritising. That prioritisation, when it comes to industry and consumer groups, is first about picking off some of the biggest because they have the biggest footprint in the food system. It is about picking off some of those where we know the risks are the greatest, or where there are particularly sensitive issues. Some will be on a case-by-case basis, depending on what topic is the matter in hand.

You are absolutely right about the sheer number of people who have an interest in the food system. Frankly, every single person in the country has an interest in food. How one manages that and collects those views is tricky. You have a great opportunity when you come in as a new chair to listen to people and to hear what people have to say. I have already indicated that I would be keen that we should review and refresh the



FSA's strategy for the new world that we are in now. I think that would provide a useful focal point for having conversations with multiple groups.

Q13 Anum Qaisar-Javed: One of the criteria for the post is strong strategic leadership skills and a career record of achievement at the highest levels. You have a really impressive CV, which I have just read, but can you provide us with some specific examples of where you have provided strategic leadership?

Professor Jebb: I have two examples. The first goes back a little bit. It is the Foresight obesity report, which was a project by the Government Office for Science, and was published in 2007. At the time, the Government really recognised that they had to get to grips with both prevention and treatment of obesity.

I was the lead science adviser on that. I worked very closely with civil servants in what I think was the DTI when we started and BIS when we finished. We tried to draw together scientific evidence, to achieve not exactly consensus but a common narrative, so that we all had a clear understanding of the root causes of the problem. Then we did some work on future scenarios, and laid out a road map for policymakers that would help us achieve a sustainable response to obesity.

We did a lot of work with other Government Departments on trying to land that. I have been incredibly encouraged that that report has formed the basis of every subsequent obesity strategy by Government. That reflects initially a Labour Government, then a coalition Government and now a Conservative-led Government.

I think the reason we were able to do that is that we laid out the principles around which the strategy should be rested. We did not try to tell policymakers how to do their job. We laid out the principles of what a good strategy would look like. It was a genuinely strategic document rather than a to-do list. That meant that policymakers have been able to adopt that, learn from the principles and build their delivery plan around our strategy. That is probably the best example. I learned hugely from the civil servants who led that in the Government Office for Science, who were absolutely brilliant.

The second example is probably in the responsibility deal, which was a really challenging situation. It was meant to be just one part of the Government's response to obesity—about developing voluntary agreements with industry. Where do you start with that? I chose to start with some of the lower-hanging fruit, continuing the work on salt reformulation, but then gradually moving it into reformulation in relation to sugar, saturated fat and calories. Of course, that work has now been continued by Public Health England.

The other thing we did was to try to do some work on promotions and to develop voluntary agreements. We always knew that was going to be very hard. Many people felt that it was a waste of time and that we



should just mandate it—it should not be allowed. I felt strategically that that was not the right way forward, and that we should try to negotiate voluntary agreements first. As it happened, we were unsuccessful, but, as I said at the time, I think that was a necessary step to go through in order to show that regulation was absolutely necessary. I think that has built the foundation that allowed the Government, in the 2020 obesity plan, to go on and announce restrictions on promotions in-store.

Strategy is really about thinking ahead. The thing you most want to do might not be doable now, but you have to put in place some smaller steps that lead you to that bigger goal. I think I am very good at knowing where we are trying to get to and getting everybody to unite around a common vision, even if it is a little way off, and then back-casting about what we need to do now in order to get there. I guess that comes from the way I run my research group. What is the big question? Well, we cannot answer that just yet. What are the research projects we need to do that take us on that journey?

Q14 Neil Parish: Following on from where I left off, I think Christine Middlemiss was on the original panel that interviewed you. Going back to what I previously said, the chief vet has responsibility for getting the cattle, sheep and pigs to the lairage and then it is over to FSA. How are you going to work with Christine Middlemiss and engage generally with the stakeholders through the whole of the processing industry?

It is similar to my first question, but particularly on the relationship with the chief vet. She is a very good chief vet and I have every confidence in her. It is making sure that the vets in the actual slaughterhouse become FSA responsibility, whereas when the vet is looking after them in the lairage, they are Defra's responsibility. This is a strange beast. How are you going to handle all of that? I am sure that you can, but I would be interested in your answer, please.

Professor Jebb: My first approach is to go and have a long conversation with Christine and get the lowdown from her on how the system works, where it is working well and where it is not working so well. You have absolutely put your finger on the spot; I need to learn more about this. I would like to do some visits and go and have a look at what happens in practice. It is only by seeing these things at first hand that you start to see the issues.

I am also very aware that the issue of veterinary resource is a really tricky one at the moment. The FSA is responsible for the official controls for meat, and we are incredibly dependent on the veterinary profession to be able to deliver on that. Like many professions, they are in high demand, and that situation can only have been exacerbated by EU exit, with additional demands for inspections for export controls, and indeed some greater friction in inappropriately qualified vets coming into the country.



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I know this is a key resource. I know it is a tricky moment and I know I need to learn about it. I think I would be blagging if I tried to give you any more detail at this point, but I absolutely assure you that it is high on my to-do list.

Q15 Neil Parish: Can I sow a few seeds in your mind as you go to look at this process? Under EU law, all meat inspectors and welfare inspectors in slaughterhouses have to be vets. You can have veterinary trained officers and very good meat inspectors as well. I think you could change that in the future, and then call in vets when you actually needed them. You would have somebody inspecting the welfare of the animal. You would have somebody inspecting the process of slaughter. Then, if necessary, you call in a vet, or we could have it done by cameras. We make ourselves a hugely complex system. We need to look at a risk-based system, which you talked about a little bit. I just throw that into the equation for you to think about.

My final question is this. Controversially, in trade deals and the like, we are looking to make sure that we maintain high standards of animal welfare in production methods for imported products as we bring them in. I do not think it is necessarily the job of the FSA to check on that, but how would you see working with Christine and others to maintain high standards? There is no point in our having high standards in this country if we then get them totally undermined by imported meat and products. I know it is a pet theme of mine, but I intend to continue it while I have breath in my body. I just wondered what you think of that.

Professor Jebb: I am glad you are going to continue it because it is incredibly important. It is important to many more members of the public and consumers than just you.

I really hope that the FSA will be active in this area, and that it will be working very closely with Defra, who, of course, are the lead for animal welfare. I come back to the fact that this is not a new organisation. Relationships already exist at a technical level, and those will be happening day in, day out.

As chair, I think my job is to take a slightly more strategic oversight view. Hearing comments like yours about whether we have the balance of risk and proportionality right is absolutely something that I would want to look at in more detail.

At the end of the day, the FSA's primary job is to ensure that food is safe, that it is what it says it is and that we uphold consumer interest. Consumers are concerned about animal welfare. Those are the three things that the FSA needs to try to do, but we need to do them in the most proportionate way. With regulation, there is a whole spectrum of things that one can do, from very light touch to very heavy-handed enforcement. I think you should only go as high up that chain as is needed to achieve the results that you are trying to get at.



You mentioned a couple of interesting possibilities as to how we could perhaps do things slightly differently. One of them was less on-site visiting. Clearly, during the pandemic, there has been much greater use of remote monitoring, not only in slaughterhouses but for some of the food hygiene inspections. I think we now need to say, "What is the right balance of these things?" Some things can be done remotely, but I cannot see a situation where you would ever want vets not to be going into slaughterhouses. For some things you have to be there to see it. We need to work out what those things are, and that is all about us becoming a more efficient regulator. That is crucial. It is the only way we are going to be able to do it and to manage resources. It is not just about being a proportionate regulator; it is about using resources efficiently. We have all realised that less travelling around means less travel costs and more efficient working.

Neil Parish: Jeremy, would you allow me just one more question?

Chair: For sure, Neil. You go for it.

Q16 **Neil Parish:** This is very controversial, Professor. One of the issues we are trying to achieve is stunning for all animals at slaughter. We are looking at adopting a New Zealand method, where there is partial stunning, especially with halal slaughter, that allows the animal to recover in some sort of state but really to feel nothing at slaughter. If we can get there, it will be a very good place for us to be.

How comfortable are you with that? You do not have to get hugely involved in religious slaughter one way or the other, but I am very conscious that we are the people who decide how the animals are slaughtered, and that they should be stunned at the point of death. I flag that one up. You do not have to give me a terribly full answer.

Professor Jebb: I am absolutely aware that this is a very live issue. As you say, it is a Defra lead, but it is an area in which there are legitimate consumer interests. People's religious views in relation to food are a very important part of their food values, so it is absolutely essential that the FSA gets involved in the discussion.

At the very least, one can think about informing consumers about it, perhaps with some sort of labelling scheme. I think the FSA has a job of explaining matters to consumers. It has high levels of trust with consumers. All surveys tell us that people trust the FSA. We need to use that position to try to have a slightly more nuanced conversation with consumers.

Food is very emotional, and you quickly get into very polarised debates. The truth is usually that there is some sort of middle ground. FSA needs to try to explain that nuance and to have more careful conversations. There are things like the FSA Explains videos. They are really good, but they are not watched or seen by enough people. We have to raise the visibility of the FSA as an organisation that people can trust to give them the facts about food in a balanced and science-based way.



The issues around halal slaughter are one part of that. The broader issue about a careful and informed dialogue is something that I care passionately about. I think, if people understand more about food, they follow why policy is being made. If you explain it to people, they understand it. If they do not understand, it is because we have not explained it properly. I absolutely believe that.

Neil Parish: Thank you for indulging me, Jeremy.

Chair: Always a pleasure.

Q17 **Laura Trott:** Professor Jebb, in your questionnaire you set out the criteria by which you should be judged on your performance. That included increasing the visibility of the FSA, building a constructive relationship with industry and working effectively in support of the national priorities for food. What do you see as the main challenges of delivering on those criteria?

Professor Jebb: There are an awful lot of them. As I also said in my note to the Committee, you can't please all of the people all of the time. One has to be very conscious of that. As we have touched on, there are so many stakeholders in this arena that it is very difficult to do everything that everybody wants. The most important thing for an incoming chair is to review and refresh the FSA strategy, to be very clear what we are going to do and sometimes to make hard decisions about what we are not going to get involved in. It is simply not possible within the budget to do everything.

I am keen that we do not get so caught up in doing the real basics of food safety and food standards—particularly, as we have discussed, with all the trade agreements—that the FSA does not have some headroom to take on some of the other important but longer-term issues that are coming up. The current job is important, and it is vital that we maintain food safety, but there are issues around diet and health and issues around food and sustainability that are important Government priorities. I want to ensure that the FSA is able to play a full and active part in that. We need to be quite precise in working out what we are going to do. That is about discussions with stakeholders, the board agreeing that and then us focusing our effort in those areas rather than trying to do everything. It would be premature for me now to say, "And this is what we will do," until I have heard from others.

Q18 **Laura Trott:** Understood. You referred in your answer to the constraints of budgets. Obviously, public finances will be under severe strain in light of the pandemic. How will you make sure that the FSA is effective given the constrained budget conditions?

Professor Jebb: The FSA is working well and within its budget at the moment. I hope that will continue. It was given an uplift in recognition of all the additional work that has come as a result of EU exit. A huge amount of food law has now come back to the UK.



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The FSA has enough to do what it does now, but we need to be very careful about not over-committing and over-promising to do new things. I hope the FSA is already looking towards the comprehensive spending review and making its pitch for what it might do. The review of food policy coming up in relation to the food Bill is the opportunity for us to identify where we want the FSA to do more. I am ambitious that it should do more because food is such an important priority. I think the Government and the public have really recognised that during the pandemic. If we are to reduce the health risks that come from diet, and if we are to achieve net zero, we have to do it through changes in diet. I want to see what part the FSA should be playing in meeting those Government commitments.

Q19 Anum Qaisar-Javed: Hello again, Professor. In one of your previous answers, you spoke about raising awareness of the FSA—

Professor Jebb: I'm terribly sorry, but I still can't hear you.

Anum Qaisar-Javed: I'll speak even louder.

Chair: Much better. I can hear you better now. I hope you can, Professor Jebb.

Anum Qaisar-Javed: In one of your previous answers, Professor, you spoke about raising awareness of the FSA. Do you think the average person out there on the street understands the role of the FSA? As chair, what would you do to potentially change that and raise awareness of the agency?

Professor Jebb: Good point. When I read the FSA's annual report, it told me that three quarters of people had heard of the FSA and three quarters thought it was doing a great job. When I was considering applying for this job and talking to friends and family about it, I have to say that people had heard of the FSA but their level of understanding about what it did was depressingly low, so there is plenty of scope for us to do more.

That is important because, as I said previously, food matters to people. I think they want to know that somebody in Government is thinking about that and worrying about it, so that they do not need to worry quite so much. We need to increase the visibility and the understanding of what the FSA does by ensuring that we are part of public conversations about food. That might be in the media or through things like the FSA Explains videos. We have to build knowledge, understanding and trust in the FSA in the relatively quiet times, because we will need to draw on that trust and credibility when a crisis occurs.

Q20 Anum Qaisar-Javed: You spoke about the close working relationship that the FSA has with all the devolved nations. In Scotland, as we said before, we have Food Standards Scotland. What challenges, if any, do you see in ensuring a co-operative relationship between the food standards agencies in all four nations of the UK, and between the respective Governments of the UK nations on food standards?



Professor Jebb: I think this is a really important issue. In an ideal world, everybody would work to exactly the same systems. Everything would be joined up and that would make it easier for Government, for industry and for consumers. We do not live in a world like that. As I think is very likely to happen, we will see increasing desire to operate on a more local basis.

The good thing is that, for more than a decade, the FSA was operating across the whole UK. There is a common history to the organisation. There is a common way of doing things. Much of that has been able to be retained, certainly in relation to risk assessment. I think that is the crucial thing. It makes sense to do it once for everybody when one is talking about risk assessment.

However, when it comes to managing those risks, local conditions, local contexts and local factors will absolutely come into play. The FSA needs to recognise that and be able to operate in slightly different ways. We have seen this through the Covid pandemic. The risk assessment is the same, but the management issues have been different in different countries. Sometimes, there will be very good local reasons why things should be done differently. Sometimes, what matters most to consumers varies.

I live in Shropshire, a couple of miles from the Welsh border and not far from Dr Davies's constituency. What I absolutely recognise is that the conversations that go on in Shropshire around food are quite different from the conversations that happen in Oxford. At the end of the day, everybody wants safe, healthy, affordable and sustainable food, but underneath that the specific things that matter to them vary enormously.

I was in Cardiff the other week doing that public engagement event. The dominant narrative was about the importance of local food and standing up for the Welsh livestock industry in particular. When I am in Oxford doing public engagement and people talk about good food, they generally mean organic. These things differ, and Ministers in different countries will want to respond to the risk assessment in ways that are important and are right for their communities. The FSA needs to work with that, but the principle is that we try to do it as one nation where we can and that we make local decisions where that is important, and, yet again, that we communicate so that people understand what is happening in different places and understand why it is different rather than it just looking like a whim. People need to understand why sometimes it is important to be different.

Anum Qaisar-Javed: It is really encouraging to hear your views on the four nations and the different localised approaches. Thank you.

Q21 **Dr Evans:** You have hinted at a couple of policy areas that dip into your role, Professor. I am interested in the first one. The NHS White Paper set out food standards in hospitals. Do you think that should apply to residential and care homes?



Professor Jebb: Food standards are a great way of improving the nutritional quality of the food that is served, but you cannot introduce standards without having some sort of monitoring and enforcement. One needs to think through that very carefully, but as a principle I think that food provided in the public sector out of the public purse ought to uphold the very best standards that we aspire to.

Q22 **Dr Evans:** On that line, food labelling is topical and you have been involved in obesity before. You have also hinted at concerns with the slaughter of halal and kosher meat. Do you see that as a new role coming forward? Will the FSA's role in labelling become bigger or smaller? Where do you see the future of food labelling?

Professor Jebb: Labelling is one of those things where so many people are responsible for so many different things on the label. Nobody would ever design a system like this if you started with a blank piece of paper. We are where we are, and I think the food Bill is an opportunity to try to sort it out. I hope the Government will really get to grips with food policy across Government, and then work out who is best placed to do what.

A whole number of things are going to happen in the next few months. There is the publication of the national food strategy. There is the restructuring in PHE and the new Office for Health Promotion. Then there is the food Bill. This is the best moment we have ever had to sort it out. I hope the FSA can play a full and active part in that, whether it is leading or supporting other—

Q23 **Dr Evans:** Is that a pitch for your next job, for the FSA in total to take all this on and pull it together? I think that is an admirable position.

Professor Jebb: The FSA can definitely help with the join-up. As I said previously, it will always put food first. It can be the linchpin for providing scientific evidence on food and consumer insights on food. I do not feel strongly one way or the other whether FSA leads on it or whether it supports others in doing that. It is not my style to worry about that kind of thing, and how the machinery of government operates is definitely above my pay grade, but I think the FSA can make a contribution.

What motivates me in saying this is that food standards have mostly been used to minimise risks. That is great and important, but I also think you can use standards to maximise opportunities and to help position the food system to achieve the goals that Government are setting out for it. I think there are opportunities, and I would be very happy to take them on. I would be absolutely equally happy to support others in doing so. What I want is to get a food system that works, supported by absolutely—dare I say it?—world-leading food policy. If I was appointed, I would do everything I could to make that happen.

Q24 **Chair:** There is one final question from me. I really enjoyed working with you on the obesity strategy when I was Health Secretary. We did not get everything we wanted from No. 10 at the time, but I think we were both



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pleased to secure the agreement that we should have a national ambition to halve childhood obesity by 2030, which has shaped policy since then. What is your view about whether we are actually on track to meet that ambition?

Professor Jebb: If you are asking me to answer as a scientist, I can obviously talk about it at great length. If I was to be appointed as chair—

Chair: A brief summary, because we are talking about something different, but I am interested in this. There is obviously a link to the new job.

Professor Jebb: We have put some really important foundations in place. The 2020 obesity plan that the Prime Minister announced last summer goes a considerable step further forward than we have ever gone before. I am genuinely excited about that.

Although we have tried hard over the last 10 years, progress has been painfully slow. We have not turned the corner yet. Worse still, inequalities are increasing. We have put the foundations in place, and I guess I am confident enough that if we carry through on that and add the extra policies, which all along I have been saying matter, we really can make a difference. Having a Prime Minister who is so personally committed to the programme is very helpful, but it has to be done on a cross-party basis. The Health and Social Care Committee has been fantastic in keeping the focus on obesity. I hope it continues to do that. The FSA's work is primarily going to be in relation to prevention and helping people to have a good diet. Treatment is largely in the realm of NHS England.

Q25 **Chair:** Professor Jebb, we have taken up a lot of your time. We are very grateful. You have given us some very comprehensive answers. We will conclude the public session now. I invite all the Committee members to rejoin on the Teams link for the private session. In the meantime, thank you very much again, Professor Jebb, for joining us this morning.

Professor Jebb: Thank you, Chair, for some of the helpful comments that you have made today.

Chair: Not at all. Thank you.