



House of Commons
Health and Social Care
Committee

Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair of the Food Standards Agency

Third Report of Session 2021–22

*Report, together with formal minutes relating
to the report*

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 8 June 2021*

Health and Social Care Committee

The Health and Social Care Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Department of Health & Social Care.

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Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/hsccom and in print by Order of the House.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are Stephen Aldhouse (Committee Specialist), Jasmine Chingono (Clinical Fellow), Matt Case (Committee Specialist), James Davies (Clerk), Gina Degtyareva (Media and Communications Officer), Previn Desai (Second Clerk), Rebecca Owen-Evans (Committee Specialist), Sandy Gill (Committee Operations Officer), Bethan Harding (Assistant Clerk), James McQuade (Committee Operations Manager), and Anne Peacock (Senior Media and Communications Officer).

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1 Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair of the Food Standards Agency

1. In April 2021, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, informed us that, following the conclusion of an open recruitment campaign, his preferred candidate for appointment as Chair of the Food Standards Agency was Professor Susan Jebb.

2. The Secretary of State asked us to hold a pre-appointment hearing with the preferred candidate. The hearing took place on Tuesday 8 June 2021. Given the importance of the Food Standards Agency to the work of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee we invited Neil Parish MP, Chair of that Committee, to attend our evidence session. A transcript of the session is available on our website. We have also published, as an Appendix to this report, the candidate's responses to a set of written questions we sent her in advance.

3. The hearing, and the written questions, addressed Professor Jebb's background and experience, her motivation for taking up the role and her understanding of the work of the Food Standards Agency. We also questioned her on her priorities for the FSA and any conflicts of interests that may arise from her appointment.

4. **On the basis of the discussions during the pre-appointment hearing and of our consideration of her CV and the answers she provided to our questionnaire, we are satisfied that Professor Susan Jebb has the professional competence and personal independence required of the Chair of the Food Standards Agency. We are pleased to endorse her appointment and wish her well for her tenure as Chair.**

Appendix: Questionnaire completed by the Government's preferred candidate

Motivation

What motivated you to apply for this role, and what specific experiences would you bring to it?

I have worked in the food arena for my whole career and I have a good understanding of the food system. I have followed the work of the FSA since it was established, especially when it had greater responsibility for nutrition and health prior to the transfer of these functions to Public Health England. I admire the trust and confidence the FSA has built among consumers in the regulatory framework for food, its transparent way of working and the leadership it offers on a broad range of food issues.

My career has been driven by a desire that the public should have the knowledge and resources to motivate them to make informed choices, supported and enabled by evidence-based policies that facilitate access to safe and healthy food. This goal fits very closely with the mission of the FSA and it would be a privilege to Chair the FSA Board.

Specific experiences directly relevant to this role include:

- 1) *Scientific training*: I am one of the UK's leading scientists and a Fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences. My scientific training is helpful to lead a science-based Agency and my skills would complement the policymaking expertise of the Chief Executive. I have a proven ability to analyse, critique and synthesise complex information combining quantitative and qualitative methods and would be able to rapidly familiarise myself with the technical issues the FSA faces.
- 2) *Chairing skills*: I have considerable experience as a Chair or member of numerous boards, committees and advisory groups. This includes chairing a NICE Public Health Advisory Committee, working with academics, health professionals, third sector organisations and lay members to develop public health guidance on topics as diverse as prevention of suicide, oral health promotion, needle and syringe exchange programmes and HIV testing. I was Chair of the Association for the Study of Obesity where I overhauled governance and funding arrangements and introducing training for Trustees.
- 3) *Leadership*: My career record demonstrates strategic leadership in scientific research. I have previously established and led two large and effective research teams, first at the University of Cambridge and now at the University of Oxford. I have been responsible for setting the strategic direction, generating substantial research income, recruiting and retaining talented scientists, conducting world class research and communicating it to bring about changes in clinical practice and in public policy.
- 4) *Working with policymakers*: I have extensive experience of the science-policy interface and have worked effectively with several government departments for more than 15 years. My experience as an independent science advisor is well suited to leading a science-based Non-ministerial Government Department. For example, I was the lead science advisor for the Government Office for Science Foresight report on obesity in 2007 and continued

until 2015 as a science advisor to DHSC on food and obesity policy. The Foresight obesity report has been used as the basis for successive government strategies to tackle obesity. I have also contributed to work on standards for school food and food available to staff and visitors in hospitals. I have worked closely with NHS England on the development of policies for weight management, including for the prevention and treatment of diabetes.

5) *Working with stakeholders*: I am one of relatively few scientists to have built and maintained constructive relationships with the food industry, civil society groups and policymakers. I have strong negotiating and influencing skills, based on a behavioural approach which seeks to listen to others and to understand their motivations and the incentives which influence their behaviour. I chaired the Public Health Responsibility Deal Food Network from 2011–15, a group of policymakers, industry and consumer groups, working to develop voluntary agreements with the food industry to improve the food environment. As part of this role I interacted extensively with industry and third sector groups and developed a solid understanding of their priorities and ways of working. Members often held conflicting opinions, and we were operating in the face of considerable media hostility, yet the Board continued to drive change within the food industry towards healthier products. In large part this came from a very effective working relationship with the executive that valued and respected our different roles. As Chair I had a clear sight of our longer term ambition and short-term goals, developed in discussion with Ministers, but I trusted and relied upon the skills and insights of the civil servants in how to get things done.

6) *Representing consumer interests*: I trained as a health professional, and I will always have the health of the public front and centre in my decision-making. In my research programme I place particular emphasis on public engagement events to enable me to hear the views of the public at first hand. Recently I have been actively involved in the public dialogues for the National Food Strategy which provided new insights into the issues that matters most to consumers about food today.

7) *Good communication skills, including substantial media experience*: Food is a matter of intense public interest and engaging with others in active dialogue is one of the highlights of my professional life. I am known as an effective communicator, able to explain scientific issues to non-specialists. I have worked with the BBC to develop and appear in a series of programmes about food and weight control. I am regularly interviewed by print journalists, and for live and pre-recorded interviews, news and features, on television and radio. This experience will enable me to communicate the work of the FSA to others, including in potentially difficult circumstances.

If appointed are there specific areas within your new responsibilities where you will need to acquire new skills or knowledge?

I have no direct experience of working as a regulator. In preparation I have read a number of documents about good regulatory practice. I am struck by the synergies with my own work in behavioural science—since fundamentally regulation is about getting people to act in ways that they might not naturally be inclined to do, in support of specific objectives. I am familiar with using a range of tools from ‘light-touch’ monitoring through to much more prescriptive regulatory interventions, and the need to ensure that regulation is proportionate to the risk.

I found the report on farm inspection and regulation prepared for Defra by Dame Glenys Stacey very clear and informative and contacted her to discuss it further. Dame Glenys has kindly agreed to continue the conversation if I am appointed as the Chair of the FSA and I think she will be a valuable source of advice and support as I seek to develop my knowledge and skills in this area. There is also great expertise within the FSA Board and Executive which I would draw on.

I am aware that the National Audit Office is currently working on a new guide for regulators and I would seek out opportunities to learn from this work and to talk with others leading organisations which NAO identifies as following good practice.

How were you recruited? Were you encouraged to apply, and if so, by whom?

I was aware that the former Chair, Heather Hancock, had resigned to take up a new position at the University of Cambridge and in autumn last year I discussed the role informally with Lord Krebs, a colleague in Oxford and the first Chair of the FSA. I subsequently had a conversation with Emily Miles, the FSA Chief Executive. Some months later I was informed by the appointment committee at DHSC that the role was being advertised and I decided to apply.

Personal Background

Do you currently or potentially have any business, financial or other non-pecuniary interests or commitments, that might give rise to the perception of a conflict of interest if you are appointed? How do you intend to resolve any potential conflicts of interests if you are appointed?

I have been employed in the public sector throughout my career, first by the Medical Research Council and latterly by the University of Oxford. In the past, a small proportion of my research has benefitted from funding to my institution which has occasionally been from the food industry or weight management companies in the private sector. I do not undertake any consultancy work for the food industry, nor do I participate in advisory boards in a personal capacity.

As described below I intend to continue my research in Oxford. This falls into two broad areas: weight management and healthy, sustainable food purchasing. Although the food purchasing research concerns issues related to policy areas led by DHSC and Defra rather than FSA, I think it is important for all concerned that I avoid any direct conversations with the food industry, outside my potential FSA role, to reduce the risk of real or perceived conflicts of interest.

My husband is the senior partner in a medium-sized farm in Shropshire. I have no direct financial relationship with the farm, nor any role in decision-making about farm activities. I hold some shares in a managed trust fund which may include investments in some parts of the food system. I do not perceive that these constitute conflicts but wish to declare them as interests in the food system.

If appointed what professional or voluntary work commitments will you continue to undertake, or do you intend to take on, alongside your new role? How will you reconcile these with your new role?

If appointed I intend to continue as professor of diet and population health at the University of Oxford in a part-time capacity, equivalent to 2 days per week.

As part of my role in Oxford I am a member of a number of public sector advisory committees. I have resigned from some of these already and in most other cases I have indicated my intention to do so if I am appointed as Chair of the FSA (eg. Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition). This will reduce the other demands on my time. If it is considered appropriate, I would wish to continue as a member of the advisory group for the National Food Strategy, since the review will be completed very shortly, and to continue my membership of NHS England committees relating specifically to the treatment of obesity. But I am open to guidance as to whether these roles may risk a conflict of interest and I am willing to reconsider.

Have you ever held any post or undertaken any activity that might cast doubt on your political impartiality? If so how will you demonstrate your political impartiality in the role if appointed?

No. I have worked with government as an independent scientist since 2005, including work with Labour, Coalition and Conservative led Parliaments.

Do you intend to serve your full term of office?

Yes.

Chair, Food Standards Agency

If appointed what will be your main priorities on taking up the role?

1) *To uphold high food standards, particularly with regard to food safety.* We are currently experiencing shocks to the food system from two huge events, EU exit and the Covid-19 pandemic, so the first priority is for FSA to continue to do the basics well and to be trusted to do so, by Ministers across the UK, by consumers, industry and our trading partners. We must never take our food standards for granted. Food safety and authenticity are not about good luck, it's good management. FSA will need to bring scientific evidence to bear in trade agreements, and to be a voice for other values that consumers hold dear, such as animal welfare or equity. Arguably the UK currently has the highest food standards in the world and it is vital to maintain confidence among stakeholders and consumers. People need to be able to trust that food is safe and is what it says it is.

2) *To be a good regulator.* Now that the UK has much greater control of food laws, it is a priority to ensure that the new regulatory systems put in place post EU exit allow the FSA to operate as intended to protect public health or refine the systems as they are put through their paces. At this time of change, there is a particular opportunity to embed smart regulation, which is proportionate and risk based. FSA needs to support businesses, especially SMEs, to operate in the new regulatory environment, while also holding all food business operators to account for adhering to necessary food standards. I would be keen that regulatory systems for risk analysis work on a four nation basis wherever possible, but are also open to the need to reflect and respond to local issues which may, perhaps increasingly, lead to divergence in policy between countries.

3) *To meet key stakeholders.* Arriving new into a post is a unique opportunity to establish the foundations for effective future relationships. The Chair is an important interface for the FSA with the external environment and building strong working relationships with relevant Ministers in all countries, stakeholders in Local Authorities, industry, non-governmental organisations and consumer groups is an important priority. If I am appointed, meeting with them to listen to their views and learn about their perspectives will be vital in helping me to make a rounded impression of the strengths and weaknesses of the FSA and to identify opportunities to add value.

4) *To develop a new FSA strategy.* In spite of all the current pressures it is very important to also look beyond the immediate urgent issues and onto the important emerging priorities. EU exit provides for the UK to make independent decisions about food, and the Covid-19 pandemic has reshaped the public interest in food. These recent events, together with the imminent restructuring of Public Health England, publication of the National Food Strategy and likely subsequent conversations in government about the development and delivery of food policy, mean it is especially timely for the FSA to review its strategy and realign or reaffirm its priorities to meet the needs of its stakeholders and consumers. Any new priorities for FSA should be allowed to emerge from this process, not from my personal wish-list.

What criteria should the Committee use to judge your performance over your term of office?

1) *Increasing the visibility of FSA* and at the same time, maintaining or increasing trust in the FSA among the public that food is safe and is what it says it is.

2) *Building a constructive relationship with industry*, based on proportionate regulation and a “firm but fair” style that encourages business to work with the spirit, and not just the letter of the law, to achieve food standards.

3) *Working effectively in support of national priorities for food* by providing timely scientific evidence and consumer insights on food matters for which the FSA is responsible, to Ministers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, such that the work of the FSA is valued by policymakers.

However, I am very conscious that it is unrealistic to “please all of the people, all of the time”. I would want my personal performance, if appointed as Chair, to be judged for (i) following the science (ii) acting proportionately, (iii) managing the trade-offs in a way which puts consumer interests at the heart of decision-making, and (iv) communicating well, such that the FSA is transparent and clear about the principles it uses in its advice and decision-making.

For more specific metrics, I have indicated a desire to refresh the FSA strategy if I am appointed. In this situation I should be judged by the outcomes of the strategy development process and, alongside the Chief Executive, by the FSA’s delivery against the strategic objectives.

How do you assess the public profile and reputation of the Food Standards Agency?

In my view the Food Standards Agency is performing well at present. It has been led very effectively over the last six years by the former Chair, Heather Hancock and now has an

experienced policymaker and well regarded CEO, Emily Miles. The Board members bring an impressive range of expertise and skills and, when I joined the Board meeting as an observer last week, I was impressed by the quality of the discussion. The stakeholders I spoke to when considering my application to become Chair expressed confidence in the FSA and my impression is of an organisation with a solid structure and reputation for competence.

It is not possible to eliminate risk from the food system but I am encouraged that even with the changes to food systems over the last year or two, the number of food incidents has not increased, and that overwhelmingly meat food businesses are meeting standards which are satisfactory or higher. These are useful indicators that the regulatory system is working well to protect food safety. However, I am aware that some in the food industry feel that FSA is imposing regulation upon them in a disproportionate manner, adding costs and constraints to their businesses. I would want businesses to see FSA as working with them to achieve a common goal of food safety with minimal cost and burden. This delicate balance is something that needs to be addressed as part of the work on regulatory reform and if successful is an opportunity to enhance the reputation of FSA as a good regulator.

One of the challenges for an organisation such as the FSA, whose primary job is to minimise risk, is that if the system is working well it may go largely unnoticed. It is encouraging that the FSA annual report shows that 78% of consumers have heard of the FSA and of those, 73% consider it to be doing a good job. That's good, but not good enough. Talking to friends and family while I have been considering this potential role, I have concluded that consumer understanding of what FSA does is too low. For example, the 'FSA Explains' videos are very good, but not nearly as widely viewed as they could be. It's especially important for the FSA to build visibility and consumer confidence in the food system during 'quiet' times, so that it can draw on this capital when a crisis occurs. Consumers need to know about the FSA and to be confident that it will act in their interests, especially to ensure that food is safe and authentic.

Employee surveys at the FSA prior to the pandemic showed high levels of employee satisfaction and I am impressed by the FSA's commitment to flexible working and to inclusive employment practices. The FSA employees are important ambassadors for the FSA in their local communities and if they are happy in their job this will enhance FSA's reputation.

What risks do you think the Food Standards Agency will face over your term of office? How do you intend to manage them?

- 1) *FSA fails to prevent or to deal adequately with a major food-safety incident.*

A big food-related incident, which requires management beyond that deployed to deal with 'routine' incidents is always going to be a risk the FSA needs to face.

Management: If appointed, I would expect to rehearse the response to a major food incident very early on, so that I was prepared and understood my role as part of the team responding to the incident. Later, in planning for such incidents and looking to enhance existing systems, I would begin by asking searching questions about why and how things are done to try to prevent such incidents occurring. I would want to reassure myself about the rigour and robustness of the processes and procedures which are in place and that

they are commensurate with the risk level the Board has set. I would also want to work closely with Local Authorities to get work on the ground back to pre-pandemic capacity, using data to target resources most effectively at points in the system which present the greatest risks.

2) *Navigating the complexity of EU exit, assuring food standards in trade deals and working across the devolved nations as they exercise their independence.*

The full impact of EU exit for the UK is yet to be realised. There is a pressing need to establish what role the FSA will play in assuring food standards in the new food system and to mitigate any new risks that may arise.

Management: Ensuring the FSA provides timely scientific analysis and consumer insights such that processes to assure food standards on a UK basis work as intended.

Holding detailed discussions and sustained conversations to build and maintain relationships with Ministers in all three nations, recognising the potential for divergence in risk management decisions, which risks increased complexity and variation between nations in food policy that may result in consumers being less well protected.

Boosting resource and capability within the Food Crime Unit to prevent or protect the public from fraud arising from illegal imports.

3) *Failing to make progress on long-term challenges.*

In the face of financial pressures on the FSA and Local Authority partners there is a risk of failing to make forward progress in important new areas because resource is focused on supporting the food system to restore its equilibrium after a period of intense disruption. Food safety is such a paramount and acute concern where FSA needs to take a very risk averse approach that it would be easy to spend disproportionate time battenning down the hatches, and not spend time and resources on developing a strong food system which is resilient to longer term risks.

Management: Better use of data to enable a risk-based approach to food safety so that resources are most efficiently deployed.

Review and reset FSA strategy to align with national food policy priorities and delivery structures and allocate resource accordingly.

Professor Susan Jebb, May 2021

Formal minutes

Tuesday 8 June 2021

Members present:

Jeremy Hunt, in the Chair

Paul Bristow	Barbara Keeley
Rosie Cooper	Anum Qaisar-Javed
Dr James Davies	Laura Trott
Dr Luke Evans	

Draft Report (*Pre-appointment hearing for the Chair of the Food Standards Agency*), proposed by the Chair, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 4 read and agreed to.

Paper that was appended to the Report as Appendix.

Resolved, That the Report be the Third Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chair make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned till Thursday 10 June at 9.30am

Witnesses

The following witnesses gave evidence. Transcripts can be viewed on the [inquiry publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Tuesday 08 June 2021

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

List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

All publications from the Committee are available on the [publications page](#) of the Committee's website.

Session 2021–22

Number	Title	Reference
1st	The Government's White Paper proposals for the reform of Health and Social Care	HC 20
2nd	Workforce burnout and resilience in the NHS and social care	HC 22

Session 2019–21

Number	Title	Reference
1st	Appointment of the Chair of NICE	HC 175
2nd	Delivering core NHS and care services during the pandemic and beyond	HC 320
3rd	Social care: funding and workforce	HC 206
4th	Appointment of the National Data Guardian	HC 1311
1st Special	Process for independent evaluation of progress on Government commitments	HC 633
2nd Special	Delivering core NHS and care services during the pandemic and beyond: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report of Session 2019–21	HC 1149
3rd Special	Drugs policy: Government Response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2019	HC 1178