

# Implementation of the EFSA Social Science Roadmap

## An update in support of EFSA Strategy 2027

### 1. Introduction

The aim of this document is to provide an update on the implementation of the roadmap for applying social sciences in the work of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), specifically in support of the implementation of [EFSA Strategy 2027](#). EFSA's use of evidence and expertise from the field of social science was formalised in 2018 - the commitment to build a function within the Authority resulted in the [first iteration of this roadmap](#). As per the objectives, the function has evolved in providing advice to processes across the organisation and promoting cooperation in the area of social research and advice.

It is now time for the Authority to embark on the second phase of the roadmap implementation – EFSA is committed to do so by building on the achievements and lessons from the past three years, led by a sustainable in-house team working in the wider ecosystem of social scientists from the field of food and science regulation.

### 2. Background

The commitment to develop an in-house social science function came at the crossroads of multiple factors shaping the environment in which EFSA operates. On one hand, the call for transparency in the risk analysis process emphasised the need for increased open dialogue with society – a need so evident that it resulted in the amendment to the General Food Law ("Transparency Regulation")<sup>1</sup> which provides solid grounds for using social sciences in the realm of the EU food safety system.

On the other hand, social science was not a novelty for EFSA. Humanities and social sciences have attracted significant interest over the past decade in terms of the roles they can play in institutions using natural sciences to assess environmental and health risks. Such roles include, for example, understanding of the social, political and economic context in which science is delivered as well as using qualitative and quantitative methods to explore risk perceptions to inform communication of risks.<sup>2</sup> In fact, EFSA started conducting large-scale citizen surveys back in 2005 when it commissioned a Eurobarometer survey on food-related risks jointly with the Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE). Smaller, targeted studies have also been conducted to inform specific risk communication products (e.g. antimicrobial resistance, chemical mixtures). EFSA's [Guidance on Communication of Uncertainty in Scientific Assessments](#) built on input from social scientists, for the first time, to complement scientific guidance work of EFSA's Scientific Committee.

Together, these factors combined to offer an opportunity for the Authority to invest in building evidence about society and using that evidence to increase the value it provides to EU citizens, introducing social science in its work in a structured way. By learning from peer organisations and international partners, EFSA proposed a model where social science would be housed within the Communication Engagement and Cooperation Department, assuming a somewhat corporate role,

<sup>1</sup> Regulation (EU) 2019/1381 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on the transparency and sustainability of the EU risk assessment in the food chain

<sup>2</sup> [Incorporating social sciences in public risk assessment and risk management organizations](#) (Wendling, 2014)

but strongly focusing on the communication aspect of EFSA's core business. This was in line with the majority of relevant provisions from the Transparency Regulation as well as the recommendations stemming from the 3rd external evaluation of EFSA in 2018.

Over the 3-year period of such structured implementation (2018-2021)<sup>3</sup>, social science at EFSA has grown from an ad hoc to a well-established function, providing services across a range of EFSA's activities:

- **Research** conducted generated valuable insights, including EU-wide findings informing strategic communication purposes (e.g. [Eurobarometer on Food Safety in the EU](#)), specific target audience research (e.g. insights that shape [EFSA campaigns](#)) as well as understanding of our institutional partners and stakeholders (e.g. [Reputation Barometer](#) studies).
- The **advice** function was strengthened mid-2019 with the establishment of the [Social Research Methods and Advice Working Group](#). With such a structure in place, EFSA's potential to provide technical assistance in the area of risk communication was recognised – the WG delivered its first [scientific report](#) at the request of the European Commission in April 2021. Contributions to other processes were sought, such as providing societal perspectives to new risk assessment approaches and foresight exercises for strategic planning (e.g. [system-based approach to the environmental risk assessment of multiple stressors in honey-bees](#)).
- Networks of social science **expertise** were forged, both in the EU and international fora. EFSA now plays an active role in the alignment and harmonisation of social research methods linked to consumer monitoring (e.g. [joint contract set with ENVI agencies for social research](#)) as well as reputation and trust measurement in regulatory science (e.g. [work with USFDA on maintaining consumer confidence in the regulatory system](#)).
- Social science advice was provided to **corporate processes**, for example the preparation of EFSA Strategy 2027, design and holding of internal (e.g. all staff meetings) and external (e.g. [scientific colloquia](#)) events, and enlargement of EFSA's learning offer with a dedicated social science training programme for staff.

Such progress was made possible by EFSA's commitment to invest resources in the function. A combination of human and financial resources allowed the implementation of the roadmap along the framework proposed in 2018; this will now serve as a basis for aligning it to the aspirations laid out in the Strategy 2027. Considering technology developments and information consumption trends, social sciences will continue to help EFSA shape the way it delivers value to its customers, partners, stakeholders, and the public at large.

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<sup>3</sup> See [roadmap update and alignment with the strategic planning cycle at EFSA \(2020\)](#)

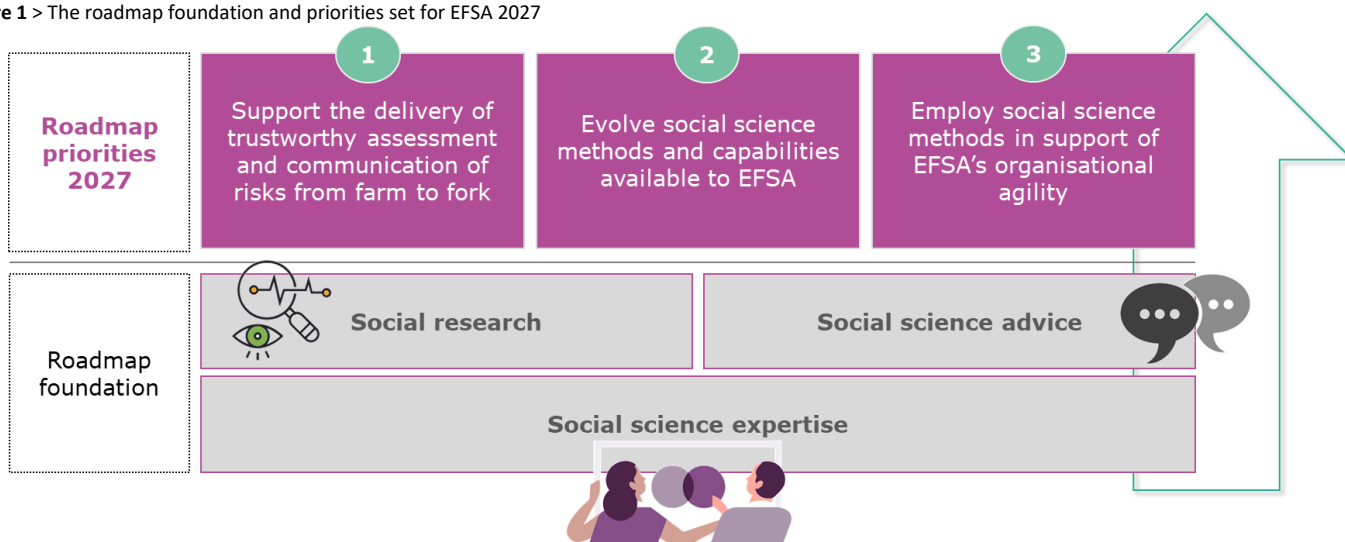
### 3. The framework and priorities in support of EFSA 2027

The framework proposed in the previous version of the roadmap is set to apply throughout the Strategy 2027 implementation period. In other words, a sustainable in-house team working in the wider ecosystem of social scientists from the field of food and science regulation (“expertise”) will implement actions across two pillars: 1) the “research” pillar, which will focus on building knowledge about our customers, partners, stakeholders and the public at large through qualitative and quantitative research; and 2) the “advice” pillar, which will aim to interpret the research findings to increase the relevance of EFSA’s scientific advice and risk communications.

This means EFSA will need to keep ensuring an adequate expert base to advance as per each of the pillars and work towards **three priorities of social science for the 2022-2027 period**, aligned with the ambitions set out in the Strategy 2027 (see Figure 1):

- **Priority One** will be to **support the delivery of trustworthy assessment and communication of risks from farm to fork**. This is fully aligned to Strategic Objective 1 with social science playing a key role in the audience-first approach<sup>4</sup> for risk communication and an advisory role in broadened engagement of partners and stakeholders.
- **Priority Two** will be to **evolve the social science methods and capabilities available to EFSA**, both in-house as well as within the food safety knowledge ecosystem. It will contribute to the aspirations set under Strategic Objective 2 to maintain relevance for the future by increasing social science capabilities in terms of knowledge, expertise, methodologies, and data.
- **Priority Three** will be to **employ social science methods in support of EFSA’s organisational agility**. Under Strategic Objective 3, EFSA aims at improving its reputation as an accountable institution and an attractive employer. Therefore, social science methods and tools will be used to design interaction and research within EFSA, as well as with our institutional partners.

Figure 1 > The roadmap foundation and priorities set for EFSA 2027



It is envisaged that the proposed framework will guide EFSA’s work up to the end of the Strategy 2027. Also, the mid-term Strategy review will be used to review the roadmap and assess progress to update the plan if required. Annual reporting and envisaged roadmap reviews are detailed in the “Way Forward” section.

<sup>4</sup> Embedding audience analysis throughout risk communication practices is an integral part of EFSA’s vision described in the editorial about [Future directions for risk communications at EFSA](#) (2020)

### 3.1 Priority One > Support the delivery of trustworthy assessment and communication of risks from farm to fork

Under Priority 1, EFSA will **generate and use insights from social research to ensure quality throughout its risk communication**.<sup>5</sup> An audience-first approach will allow risk communication to meet its objectives, as set out in the Transparency Regulation. Social science is set to play **a key role** in implementing this approach.

EFSA will conduct primary and secondary research to inform communication planning, particularly large-scale campaigns and priority topics for communication in a given year. Insights from social research are expected to guide the choice of topics, the identification of the most appropriate tone and content, as well as ways to measure and report on the impact of communication activities. Relevant findings will also help enhance the visual impact and usability of EFSA's digital platforms.

Social research will be conducted along three tracks:

- The **"society"** track will allow periodic monitoring of the factors<sup>6</sup> required for audience segmentation and tailored communication with the public at large: i) food safety knowledge; ii) risk perception; iii) use of information sources and iv) trust in different actors from farm to fork. As an example of an activity under this track, two Eurobarometer studies will be planned for the period – one in 2022 (start of the Strategy and EFSA's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary) and one in 2025 (following the Strategy review cycle); at the same time EFSA will work with the Member States to agree on a common methodology and expertise requirements to implement such studies at national level in the longer term. The purpose will be to generate data that can guide EFSA's communication strategies as well as support those of the Member States. Targeted population-based studies will supplement this approach - e.g. flash polls will be used to generate quick insights on a specific topic among EU citizens.
- The **"ecosystem"** track will include targeted quantitative or qualitative studies to generate insights on a specific topic or from a specific audience group among EFSA's customers, partners, or stakeholders. These can be deployed to collect data in an area where insights are missing (e.g. foresight/preparedness exercises) as well as to seek feedback from a particular segment within EFSA's ecosystem (e.g. a study with risk managers on the relevance of EFSA's communications material). The Authority will deploy a new set of tools from the social science toolbox under this track – e.g. experiments will be designed to simulate real-time situations and social media listening will be used to map online discourses in real-time.
- The **"personal"** track marks another step forward for EFSA in line with the audience-first approach. Activities under this track will focus on personalising user experience across our communication tools, making user research an integral part of this roadmap. Gathering periodic user data to customise what users experience on EFSA digital platforms is expected to result in identification of personalised journeys for all of those interested in EFSA's work.

Data analysis and visualisation expertise, that has grown in-house over the initial roadmap implementation period, will help tailor reports to the needs of communication, engagement and scientific officers using the findings of social research. Areas of communication planning and analytics of impact of communication activities will particularly benefit from data science expertise. Where social research covers multiple Member States, targeted visualisations will be designed to help communication at national level. As an example, EFSA will work with Member States to develop contextualised information that explains the concepts of hazard and risk – based on differences between the EU Member States. The [Communication Experts Network \(CEN\)](#) will remain our key partner when designing, implementing and analysing results of research conducted across the EU.

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<sup>5</sup> EFSA 2027 Strategy reference: SO1 > Expected Outcome 1.2 > Expected Operational Result 1.2.1

<sup>6</sup> See [EFSA Technical Assistance in the Field of Risk Communication \(2021\)](#)

Working with peer organisation is essential to this roadmap and EU partners will play an important role in the realisation of actions under Priority 1. In partnership with ENVI agencies, EFSA recently set up a joint contractual facility that will allow the implementation of the three tracks for the Strategy period. This joint facility is expected to further foster cooperation in the area of social science, including through implementation of joint projects. Work with the Joint Research Centre (JRC) will focus on applying behaviour sciences - an area of recognised JRC competence - to understand the economic and social factors that can inform assessment and communication of risks. This will build on established liaison with the Foresight, Modelling, Behavioural Insights & Design for Policy Unit, sharing expertise and experience in science and policy-related research. As mentioned in the previous roadmap, EFSA will continue to assess progress and determine the joint priorities for social science work with EU partner institutions, with the ambition of translating into a “One Health” approach to social research during this roadmap period.

EFSA will foster its capacity to **provide technical assistance in the area of risk communication** upon request of risk managers, building on the lessons from advice provided to the European Commission in the context of the preparation of the General Plan for Risk Communication. This will include following up on recommendations stemming from the [EFSA scientific report](#), such as testing the framework for generic risk profiles, harmonising consumer-facing questionnaires or exploring the proposal for a platform for communication that combines food-related information, including the scientific aspects, within an infotainment approach. Support to the development of the crisis communication roadmap will also be provided.

The Authority will maintain expertise that allows excellence in social research and advice to support all the research tracks, **evolving its existing Working Group** to be able to meet any requests for technical assistance that may arise in the future. In addition to maintaining expertise in the areas of sociology, psychology, behavioural economics and communication science, experts in data and computer science, environmental psychology, anthropology and other relevant fields will support the EFSA Working Group. The evolution of EFSA’s role in communication science will be supported by targeted activities implemented under Priority 2 of the roadmap.

Risk analysis involves different levels of interactive exchange: 1) the dissemination of public information about risks to consumers or other affected groups; 2) the dialogue within and between risk assessment and risk management; 3) engagement with interested parties affected by risk analysis outcomes.<sup>7</sup> Social science will therefore also play an **advisory role in broadening the engagement of partners and stakeholders<sup>8</sup> in EFSA’s risk assessment process**, based on the principles of openness and transparency.

Specifically, support will be provided to implement EFSA’s evolving engagement framework across its value determinants – quality of science and preparedness, sustainability of the risk assessment process and relevance for policy makers and society. This will include testing the use of tools proposed in the [Engagement Toolkit](#), work on matching stakeholder interests and expertise to areas of EFSA’s work, as well as enhancing the ways stakeholder feedback is collected and used in the decision-making process. The latter will also include stakeholder feedback on engagement methodologies employed. The shift towards an open dialogue throughout risk analysis will also mean that EFSA may require targeted research to be conducted to better understand views, positions or perceptions of interested parties or dynamics within communities interacting in the area of food safety. Resources from the “ecosystem” research track will be used to cover such needs and support stakeholder mapping exercises for specific mandates or areas of EFSA’s work.

Integrating input from social sciences within the thinking on new risk assessment approaches allows consideration of perspectives of interested parties– as noted in the recommendations of the [system-based approach to the environmental risk assessment of multiple stressors in honey-bees](#) (where targeted research was conducted to include stakeholder views). Social research can also highlight

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<sup>7</sup> See [EFSA Technical Assistance in the Field of Risk Communication \(2021\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> EFSA 2027 Strategy reference: SO1 > Expected Outcome 1.1 > Expected Operational Results 1.1.1 and 1.1.2

the need for targeted communication to stakeholders in areas of their interest or where further information is needed to clarify the approaches and, ultimately, contribute to the building of trust in the science underpinning the risk analysis process in the EU. The Authority will therefore ensure that societal perspective is included in its scientific colloquia, conferences, as well as new approaches proposed to address risk assessment needs of the future. Inclusion of social and behavioural studies in the realm of food safety within the EU research agenda will be promoted, as per the plan set under [Food Safety Regulatory Research needs 2030](#).

### **3.2 Priority Two > Evolve social science methods and capabilities available to EFSA**

Priority 2 aligns the thinking around social science at EFSA to one applied to other scientific areas in the context of Strategic Objective 2. In other words, social science will follow suit by **increasing capabilities in terms of knowledge, expertise, methodologies and data**<sup>9</sup> required to ensure long-term relevance of EFSA's work. This will imply investing in new ways of conducting social research and working with partners to ensure availability of societal insights on any future topic relevant to the EU food safety system.

The traditional **social research toolbox** will be upgraded with flash citizen polls and experiments, accompanied by a shift of traditional techniques online (e.g. reduction of in-person focus groups). With that in place, additional methods will be explored to further capitalise on technology developments and reduce respondent fatigue. This will include gamification of surveys to enhance respondent experience, split testing of communication material and potential use of eye tracking techniques for improving the usability of digital products. Ethnographic studies will also be explored, based on experience of peer organisations. Social Scientists will work closely with the Knowledge, Innovation and Partnership Management Unit (KNOW) to support foresight and preparedness processes for future areas of EFSA's work.

On its own, EFSA will not be able to conduct all of the social research required to deliver on the commitments of the General Food Law and address future food safety issues. Expertise from Member States authorities will be sought, with contribution in specific areas of competence. Especially where such capabilities complement those of EFSA, the Authority will invest in **joint social research projects** with peer organisations. Lessons from the very first partnering grant in the area of social science agreed in 2021 (German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment – *"Microplastics > Understanding public perceptions in the area of food and feed safety and improvement of relevant risk communication"*) highlight the fact that the only way to generate societal insights across various topics within the EU food safety system is to effectively invest in joint projects with competent national authorities in the research lead seat. EFSA's membership in the [Paris Risk Group](#) is expected to boost this collaboration opportunity.

The longer-term goal for this second phase of implementation will be to set-up a functioning "society watch", with harmonised social research methodologies, in the area of food safety in the EU. This could result in creating an **"open database" of evidence from social research** conducted by Member States, the European Commission, sister EU agencies and independent studies funded under the EU research programmes. This shared evidence source can then be used to inform the work of different actors within the EU food safety system. Use of decentralised mechanisms for data collection, such as community-based monitoring, will be explored as part of the design of the common platform.

Another important aspect is the ability EFSA must have to draw on social science experience, globally, to address topics that may have already been explored by one of its international peers. We will therefore continue to actively work within the **International Social Science Liaison**

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<sup>9</sup> EFSA 2027 Strategy reference: SO2 > Expected Outcome 2.1



**Group**<sup>10</sup> which provides a forum for social scientists from government organisations involved in the areas of food, nutrition and health to discuss and collaborate on issues of mutual interest. The most recent project that the Group is working on is an online repository of all consumer monitoring-related questions in the area of food safety made available to global researchers, including how these were used to inform institutional work. The group is also considering joint publications on how social and behavioural sciences have been used in the development of food and nutrition policy and regulations. Sharing of lessons and expertise when it comes to building and maintaining citizens' and stakeholders' trust in the regulatory system, initiated with a community of practitioners<sup>11</sup> in 2020, will be regularly tabled by EFSA as part of the agenda of the group. These kinds of initiatives will expand, with a strong commitment from EFSA to play a prominent role – and even assume a chairing/co-chairing role at some stage during EFSA 2027 period, within a rotating chairing system.

Where EFSA has invested in its capabilities to deliver core work and where these have been recognised by the academic community – such as in the case of risk communication – the nature of our work allows us to take a prominent role applying the latest scientific thinking to our activities. This roadmap offers a unique opportunity to take a coordinating role and evolve **a knowledge hub for risk communication science at EFSA** – on one hand gather evidence generated by the community of academics and practitioners, on the other apply it in our core work. Five components to make this happen will be: i) include risk communication as one of the priority topics for EFSA's Science Studies and Project Identification & Development Office (SPIDO); ii) dedicate resources in the social science function specifically to risk communication science and related research; iii) ensure active EFSA participation in relevant academic and practitioner's fora; iv) attract guest scientists from peer organisation to spend "risk communication" semesters at EFSA; and v) reserve a set of communication activities annually that will pilot the new approaches stemming from knowledge management activities – for example new ways to test content of communication campaigns or measure their impact among target audiences. The Authority will devise a detailed plan to operationalise the above approach, in parallel with the development of the SPIDO roadmap for risk communication (planned for 2022).

In fact, with a focus on scientific expertise around risk communication at EFSA, complemented by other disciplines within its Working Group and the network of partners from the EU food safety ecosystem, social sciences at EFSA are on the path to becoming a recognised competence for the organisation. Requests for technical assistance to EFSA, coupled with joint projects with partners, warrant for consideration to ensure **regular interaction between the Working Group and EFSA's Scientific Committee**, and may open the door for social scientists to take a role in its work in the future. This could include members of the Working Group advising the SC on specific topics, participating as observers in areas where risk assessment will require complex risk communication or providing input into the relevance analysis of new risk assessment approaches. Other experts from the area of social sciences, such as partners contributing to the risk communication knowledge hub may also take such role. The Communications and Partnership Department (ENGAGE) will work with the Risk Assessment Services Department (ENABLE) to explore ways to operationalise the abovementioned approach, starting from a model currently deployed for management of cross-cutting working groups.

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<sup>10</sup> The International Social Science Liaison Group (ISSLG) provides a forum for social scientists from organisations involved in food regulation, food safety and public health nutrition to discuss and collaborate on issues of mutual interest. Currently, it brings together practitioners from Australia and New Zealand, Canada, the European Union, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

<sup>11</sup> More info on cooperation in the area of risk communication led by FSA and EFSA [here](#)

### 3.3 Priority Three > Employ social science methods in support of EFSA's organisational agility

Under Priority 3, social sciences will be used to inform research at EFSA, streamline use of feedback mechanisms across the organisation and support the provision of partners' feedback on EFSA's overall performance.<sup>12</sup>

Over the 2018-2021 period, social sciences received increased attention within EFSA, recognising the role they may play in **gathering and analysing feedback from colleagues** and informing staff interaction – contributing to the organisational culture. Such activities must continue in the context of this roadmap, with the function providing expert input into all-staff surveys, focus groups for various organisational processes, use of polling tools for interactions with broader groups as well as analytics of use and satisfaction with the internal EFSA communication tools. Where relevant, input into design and facilitation of events will be provided. EFSA will continue with the roll-out of its **social science training for staff** – a modular approach covering the basics of the disciplines, tips for designing surveys as well as explaining the science of risk communication. The target will be for all staff to graduate from at least one module by end of Strategy 2027, integrated within EFSA's learning offer. The module on communicating uncertainty in scientific assessments, available to EFSA panels as well, should be delivered to all of the panels by end of 2023. All relevant modules of the European Food Risk Assessment Fellowship Programme (EU-FORA) will be periodically updated with the developments in science of risk communication.

An organisational culture supported by social research methods and tools must consider how much feedback it requires from both its staff and external parties. Proliferation of surveys can cause respondent fatigue, which in turn may result in lower participation rates and sub-optimal input received from colleagues, customers, partners and stakeholders. To mitigate such risks for the organisation, a **Customer Feedback Mechanism process**, initiated in 2020, will continue to review feedback plans across the house in an effort to optimise the use of various tools (surveys, focus groups, interviews) in terms of both targeting and timing. A committee composed of social scientists from the ENGAGE Department and quality and performance management colleagues from Management Services Department (EMPOWER) will work to review EFSA's feedback plans on a rolling basis and ensure adequate planning and implementation of feedback mechanisms. This will include quality review vis-à-vis social research standards and relevance check when it comes to target audience needs. EFSA will also maintain records on how such feedback was used to improve its activities, granting this activity a contribution to EFSA's quality policy.

Finally, **measuring EFSA's reputation** as an accountable institution – as mandated by the Strategy 2027 – will benefit from the experience to date in using satisfaction and reputation tools. The Customer/Stakeholder Feedback Survey and the Reputation Barometer, which were used by the Authority in alternate years, present an opportunity for combining the two tools into an annual study targeted at our customers, partners and stakeholders. A revised tool, planned to be piloted in the first half of 2022, will allow for baseline and follow-up measurement of EFSA's performance vis-à-vis the expectations of its ecosystem. It will be deployed and managed in partnership between the EMPOWER and ENGAGE departments, bringing the social science and performance management excellence together in design, implementation and analysis of results. Results of the study – used to compute a number of KPIs at outcome level for Strategy 2027 – will be reported through EFSA's Annual Activity Reports.

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<sup>12</sup> EFSA 2027 Strategy reference: SO3 > Expected Outcome 3.1



## 4. Way forward

EFSA's commitment to further evolve its social science function has been translated into this roadmap, set to guide implementation over the EFSA 2027 strategy period. Current staffing arrangements allow for a scenario that can sustain its implementation, with partners from the food safety knowledge ecosystem providing their expertise contribution – particularly in achieving priorities 1 and 2 of the roadmap.

The social science function will continue to be housed within the Communication Unit of the Communications and Partnership Department (ENGAGE). The Authority will maintain in-house expertise that covers: i) qualitative and quantitative research techniques in the areas of psychology, sociology or behavioural economics that support communication and engagement activities; 2) risk communications science; and iii) data analysis and visualisation. The staff with core expertise will work within the Strategic Communications Team – their competencies will be complemented by social science background of the Team Leader, relevant experience in research, analytics and communication of other team members, as well as a dedicated trainee. As mentioned under the three priorities, external expertise will have multiple avenues to enhance the team on partnership-, project- or visit-based grounds.

During [One Conference 2022 \(Health, Environment, Society\)](#), a dedicated session will be held on "Putting science into context – the future of social sciences in risk analysis". The discussions, which will address the changing paradigm of including society in the policy-making process as well as risk communication in the digital age, are expected to provide further ideas on how to promote and integrate the work of the function within the broader "One Health" environment. In addition, social science perspectives will be part of a number of conference sessions, as per the scientific program.

Progress across the three roadmap priorities will be assessed periodically. This will be done both at EFSA process level ("Social Research & Communication Planning" under the EPA 3.0 architecture) as well as within the Strategic Plan performance framework, with a dedicated KPI measuring the impact of social research on EFSA's communication efforts. A mid-term review of the roadmap will accompany the same exercise undertaken for EFSA 2027 – with the next roadmap update expected in late 2024/early 2025. Progress made and evolving requirements may result in additional resources dedicated to the function – this will be captured accordingly in EFSA's governance and performance management structures.

Regardless of the staffing scenario, staff working within the function will seek to build knowledge about European society and use this growing expertise in a way that strengthens the risk analysis process. Ultimately, social science at EFSA should and can have a fundamental and positive impact on the quality of science and public information that EFSA delivers. That remains its key contribution, as per the first roadmap.