Defra Science Advisory Council

Minutes of the Principal Meeting, 5th December 2018

Actions arising

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1. Welcome and apologies

Apologies were received from SAC member Professor Powell, Northern Ireland representative Alistair Carson and Deputy CSA Iain Williams. No conflicts of interest were raised.

2. Chief Scientific Adviser’s (CSA) update

The CSA provided an update to SAC on the department’s activities. The discussion including EU exit preparations, the Government CSA network and international activities.

In relation to EU exit, CSA provided an update on the department’s preparations including the prioritisation of business, staff and resources. Defra will shortly be moving into a response phase mode of working which will include emergency planning exercises. It is planning for the practical issues. CSA has discussed with the Secretary of State potential fail points.

The SAC offered to assist and provide advice when required. They suggested where possible to consider efforts to keep longer term projects on track past the EU exit date. The SAC recognised the efforts being made by the department. CSA suggested that the SAC be available as mentors for Defra policy officials and encouraged members to strengthen relationships with their Defra pairs.

**Action: December 18 (01) – SAC members to make contact with their Defra pairs or let the secretariat know if they require a new pairing.**

**Action: December 18 (02) – Secretariat to link SAC members who don’t currently have a pair with suitable policy contacts.**

The CSA also updated the SAC on the Government CSA network and the efforts to improve the way science works across government.

The CSA is to chair a high level meeting in December with the 5 Eyes community on agricultural biosecurity and to promote science and research collaboration with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA.
Furthermore, the CSA is involved in international efforts to share how the UK uses science to support policies with other countries particularly on science support for regulatory control for trade. A memorandum of understanding has been exchanged with Qatar and there are potential discussions with Pakistan. The UK approach may be transplanted into their policies and improved. This recognises the significant structural and skills subset that the UK has.

3. ExCo Science and Evidence Funding

The science and evidence funding paper sets out a clear direction in terms of research and innovation for the next 5 years. It is designed to be an indicative, high level vision and to refocus science and evidence funding onto research and development separating this from the statutory monitoring requirements. The proposal includes research funding which could be allocated to the Defra agencies. The SAC were asked for their views on the four areas being focussed on, to consider whether the strategy is feasible and what barriers might be encountered.

Overall the SAC supported the proposal but had the following advice:

- The importance of making explicit areas which wouldn’t be covered by UKRI and are unique to Defra. For example, both the 25YEP and the Health and Harmony (post CAP farming) plan require the development of specific monitoring and types of analyses that wouldn’t fall under the UKRI remit.
- They encouraged this to be used as an opportunity for greater partnerships with the research community.

The SAC highlighted the need to relate the proposal to the stakeholders and those responsible for carrying out the actions. They advised that global challenges need to be framed as societal issues not just technical.

The SAC encouraged Defra to ensure that the skills required to push through the agenda existed within the department, or would be acquired, to enable delivery of the innovation agenda. Stressing the importance in funding the translating of research into innovation.

The SAC noted that the proposal would be stronger with the input of the devolved administrations, ensuring this is working at a UK wide level. The CSA confirmed that this will be the case and that the proposal will make this input explicit.

4. Centres of excellence

The SAC were asked to consider the proposals for Defra’s Centres of Excellence (CoE) after the successful establishment of the Earth Observation CoE. Two new
CoE are proposed; data and environmental DNA. These will be established using the same principles at the Earth Observation CoE and the lessons identified. Membership will be from across the Defra group, providing the leadership and coordination and ensuring they are connected centrally as a virtual team. This CoE structure also provides a clear engagement channel for OGD’s and wider stakeholders that are an important part of the CoE’s success.

It was noted that the definition of a centre of excellence in this context differs to that in an academic context.

The SAC agreed that this was a good mechanism for communicating within Defra Group and that it was important to maintain good links across all three CoE, especially given the shared ambition around data science. They advised that Defra should strive to interact with the external community in a coordinated way using these CoE. The importance of recognising a professional group was also discussed with the view to empower that profession and offered a number of suggestions and lessons from a range of mechanisms. The SAC asked to view and comment on future annual reports and offered to review future proposals.

5. Organisation scenario planning

The SAC were briefed on the organisation scenario planning and asked to consider how they would like to contribute. The planning is at an early stage and considers Defra’s configuration, capability and size and what this might look like in 2030. To date the project has focussed on the current state, ‘as is’. It aims to look at the optimal design for the future. The team are conducting scenario planning to describe future states that Defra may find itself in. The CSA noted that so far the process has considered what Defra has and how it delivers these functions. The CSA welcomed challenge from the SAC.

The SAC agreed that deciding on a future desired state would be beneficial without making any prior organisational assumptions. The process can then be reversed based on the functions to be delivered. However, the SAC recognised that some of the conditions for Defra’s organisation scenario planning have already been set by the 25 Year Environment Plan.

6. Horizon scanning

The SAC discussed the futures workshop which was proposed after the meeting with Defra’s Executive Committee in September 2018. It was decided that the exercise could be run in conjunction with the organisational planning 2030 programme. With the SAC contributing as a group rather than commenting individually.
The SAC agreed that their futures work should run in parallel with the other organisation planning workshops so that the outputs can be compared and not biased by other sessions. They asked for the scenario planning to take into consideration the MOD Global Trends document. It should cover the whole of the food, environment and rural affairs areas. The Strategic Design Team are to put together a preliminary paper for the January teleconference on a proposal for the March workshop.

**Action: December 18 (03) – The Secretariat to include further planning on the horizon scanning/futures workshop to the January teleconference agenda and add a dinner and workshop to the March Principal meeting.**

**Action: December 18 (04) – The Strategic Design Team to present a paper at the January teleconference on the proposal for horizon scanning at the March workshop.**

The Strategy Unit will be reporting to ExCo on single issue horizon scans approximately five times a year. The SAC offered to contribute to the reports and provide ideas on which to focus. A collaborative approach was welcomed. Reports are to be sent out to SAC members asking for input at an early stage so that the SAC can meaningfully contribute.

**Action: December 18 (05) – The Strategy Unit to send out the single issue reports to SAC members for comment ahead of reporting to ExCo.**

### 7. Social Sciences Expert Group (SSEG)

Professor Whatmore provided an update to the SAC on the recent SSEG activities. The SSEG has two new members, increasing its range of expertise. The meeting on 7th November considered several ongoing workstreams, among them contributing to work on landscapes as part of the 25 Year Environment Plan metrics framework, and inputting into the strategic review of the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment Survey (MENE). SSEG, in conjunction with the Chief Economist, will be organising a meeting with the Economic Advisory Panel to explore the potential for joint sessions. Professor Godfray encouraged SAC members to observe an SSEG meeting if possible. Professor Whatmore agreed to send out the dates of future meetings.

**Action: December 18 (06) – Professor Whatmore to share the dates of future SSEG meetings and to send a link to the MENE survey.**

### 8. SAC Exotic Diseases (SAC-ED)
Professor Wood provided the SAC with an update on the annual SAC ED meeting which was held in November. The sub group was set up to be activated in the event of a disease outbreak to advise the CSA and Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO). The annual meeting ensures that the members know each and allow any issues Defra may have to be presented to them.

The group had a useful discussion on African Swine Fever which is spreading across Europe from Eastern Europe and Western Russia. There were concerns that the UK pig industry is not currently equipped to deal with it. The group raised particular concerns about the communications with the pig industry and that opportunities are not being fully utilised by Defra. Professor Wood has proposed a small, focussed group gets together in early 2019 to focus on this issue. Professor Godfray asked Professor Wood to write to CSA about his concerns. The SAC raised further concerns on how the country might handle an outbreak during the EU exit process and agreed to discuss the issue further at the January teleconference.

**Action:** December 18 (07) – Professor Wood to write to CSA about the concerns around African Swine Fever.

**Action:** December 18 (08) – The Secretariat to add a discussion on African Swine Fever to the January teleconference.

### 9. SAC Workplan and emerging issues

The SAC discussed the forthcoming workplan. A number of items were proposed or amended. SAC members and devolved administration observers were encouraged to propose new items. A summary of the discussions is highlighted below:

- Engagement with UKRI could be discussed at the June Principal meeting.
- The future of land use should increase in priority. The UKRI are committed to the programme but need input from Defra before July. Professor Cox is to lead further discussions on this and the SAC input in the January teleconference.
- Food waste should be added to the work plan. The SAC should drive forward a discussion on the use of pig swill. Professor Godfray will discuss with the CSA how the SAC could contribute to the cross-Government efforts considering food waste.
- There is currently a disconnect between the agriculture and the environment sectors on efforts to drive down ammonia emissions. Cost effective measures exist but there are difficulties on their implementation. Professors Monks, Cox and Wood are to put together an idea for a future teleconference on how to join the two sectors and influence the sector which can drive the change.
Professor Godfray will be the chair of a new Royal Society programme on landscapes. He will circulate information on the group to the SAC.

**Action: December 18 (09) – Professor Godfray to share information on the Royal Society committee on landscapes.**

**10. AOB**

The SAC discussed the report produced by Professor Gibbens on the national science capability. This was viewed by SAC earlier in the year but a number of changes have since been made. The latest version of the report has been circulated to the SAC. The SAC is to send any further comments to Professor Godfray.

**Action: December 18 (10) – SAC to send comments on the National Science Capability paper to Professor Godfray.**

**Attendees and Apologies**

**SAC members**
Charles Godfray (Chair)
Peter Cox
Tim Jickells
Rowland Kao
Paul Monks
Henrietta Moore
Sarah Whatmore
James Wood

**Defra officials:**
Ian Boyd – Chief Scientific Adviser
SAC Secretariat

**Devolved Administration Observers:**
Katherine Raymond (by telephone) – Welsh Government
Andrew Millar – Scottish Government

**Defra Attendees in relation to specific items:**
Science and evidence resource funding – Office of Chief Scientific Adviser
Capabilities and quality – Office of Chief Scientific Adviser
Senior Strategy Adviser – Design Authority

**Apologies:**
Wayne Powell – SAC member
Alistair Carson – NI observer
Iain Williams – Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser