



Defra Science Advisory Council (SAC)

Minutes of meeting - 13 July 2022

Actions arising

Action number	Action	Owner
July (22) 01	<u>Workplan</u> : The secretariat to add a future presentation from the Food Science Team to the SAC workplan with a view to further discuss eco-labelling and food consumption trends.	SAC Secretariat

1. Welcome and apologies

The Chair welcomed attendees, apologies are recorded in Annex A.

2. Agri-food chain sustainability

Defra presented the systemic, multi-disciplinary and cross-government, approach being utilised for agri-food chain sustainability. The current programme of research is supporting delivery of Net Zero and the Government Food Strategy following the recently published independent [National Food Strategy](#). While the current research programme within the Agri-Food Chain Directorate is focused on the government's Net Zero and food strategies a complex set of other policy developments are also being supported (e.g. and the 25 Year Environment Plan), additional research also engages in systems thinking. It was highlighted that if Defra are to try and understand the problems facing the food system and cost-effective ways to tackle them, there needs to be greater collaboration with experts in government, academia, industry, and the third-sector.

Sustainable consumption

Evidence (e.g. [The independent National Food Strategy](#), [Eat-Lancet report](#), [Committee on Climate Change report](#)) illustrates how changing diets could be a mechanism to reduce emissions and dietary related diseases. Although the current UK's dietary model is based around the [Eat Well Guide](#), and health, the UK government is under increasing pressure to take greater account of environmental sustainability as a driver. Coupled with this, there is, growing [external] interest for the UK government to set meat consumption reduction targets and to understand the role of emerging trends such as alternative proteins and novel food sources. Defra plan to review the evidence in base in this area later in the year and the SAC welcomes this.



Acknowledging a substantial shift in UK consumer dietary choices (e.g. consumers trying to reduce the carbon footprint of their food), the SAC cautioned that an apparent eco-labelling free-for-all across the private sector would make it difficult for Defra to regulate the market. The SAC agreed that Defra should look to learn from private sector organisations yet emphasised that Defra must be critically aware of the vested interests of independent businesses. The SAC suggested adopting an approach to eco-labelling of food by consolidating what private industry are doing whilst building upon Defra's approach. The SAC cautioned that the integration/combination of eco-labelling and health labelling of food may cause consumers to become blind to, or overwhelmed by, the abundance and/or complexity of labels on their food, questioning the efficiency of any eco-label getting its message across effectively.

The SAC discussed what Defra can achieve in the short term versus longer term and the need for these achievements to be assessed (e.g. using indicators of policy effectiveness). The SAC highlighted the need for Defra to assess impacts of third-party actions that drive consumer behaviour (e.g. advertisement campaigns and links to engagements across social media) alongside their own policies. Furthermore, the SAC noted that within the presented materials there was little discussion around food waste which was considered a big area that Defra could make very rapid advances. Recognising tackling food waste would not completely resolve issues around food chain sustainability, the SAC thought considerable inroads to meeting targets/aims could be achieved with progress towards zero waste.

The SAC recommended that Defra needs to consider the UK's diverse range of food cultures especially given recent, rapid changes in food cultures and dietary preferences. Shifting food cultures are now strongly mixed with identity politics with potential for greater division within society around issues of food consumption preferences. The SAC suggested that Defra seek additional evidence from anthropology, sociology, and human geography within their analysis.

Defra highlighted some recently initiated research with the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) on [food system trials to encourage healthy, sustainable diets](#) alongside their ongoing research into the trade-offs between different eco-label components, assessing:

1. the influence of eco-labelling on consumers decision making,
2. cost-benefit analysis of different labels,



3. which consumer information type is most effective at influencing consumer choice and long-term change, alongside which will aim to measure different interventions in the food system,
4. different demographics and food cultures/practices, linking to the existing research.

Government public procurement

As part of Defra's policy review and proposals to help government understand how Defra could meet wider government environmental goals, research has been commissioned from the [Waste & Resources Action Programme](#) (WRAP) and City University. The commissioned research is aimed at providing a better understanding of hotspots in the supply chain and the scale and impact of public sector spending, including interventions which could support sustainable and healthier food and catering services. The resulting report is currently undergoing peer review.

The SAC suggested that when reviewing the data on food supply within public procurement - a multitude of types of 'meals' would be represented - analysis as to the meal type could offer further insight into greenhouse gas (GHG) estimates. Defra officials advised that where the data was available, primary/secondary data from the different organisations within the procurement chain were assessed to understand scale and impact of the different meals yet acknowledged this is currently a fragmented picture.

Food chain environmental data

Defra outlined their need for more high-quality data on supply chain emissions and other environmental impacts from which a baseline can be established and emissions hotspots identified; working with industry to standardise company level emissions reporting alongside developing mandatory eco-labelling guidelines. Defra highlighted several key questions around the current quality and accessibility of environmental impact data and the granularity of data in terms of modes of production, seasonality, and geography.

The SAC discussed other aspects that should be considered in eco-labelling beyond simply embedded carbon, for example assessing embedded water or impact(s) of supply chains on biodiversity. The SAC considered how an efficient system of eco-labelling could use an indicator that focuses on carbon but also discussed how a focus on carbon could risk policy development that triggers unintended consequence elsewhere (e.g. negative implications for water); starting with a system that utilises carbon assessments with sense checking for unintended consequences and then developing this as the policy and measurement/analysis techniques evolve was thought a best compromise. Defra advised that they are aware of the difficulties in



measuring a diverse set of metrics (e.g. from carbon to biodiversity) yet are invested in focusing on improving the data as a first step, acknowledging that an eco-labelling scheme developed without robust underlying data will be of little use.

A concern around language was raised by the SAC; the SAC discussed terms such as “food security” and “food sustainability”, noting how varying analysis goals can be achieved depending on the assumptions made within the methodology and terminology. As such it was considered that Defra should take a proactive lead on clarity around language with the food sustainability space. Defra noted while their published work does provide more concrete explanations around definitions (e.g. the [food security risk assessment](#)), it would need to be a discussion point for a wider governmental review within the policy development framework.

Defra concluded by suggesting a return to the SAC, specifically regarding the questions relating to consumer perception towards eco-labelling and likely future food consumption trends. The SAC welcomed a future meeting and suggested that in the interim Defra could contact SAC members directly to maintain a joined-up dialogue.

ACTION July (22) 01 is that the secretariat to add a future presentation from Defra’s Food Science Team to the SAC workplan with a view to further discuss eco-labelling and food consumption trends.

3. Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) update

Owing to the CSA’s absence the deputy CSA (DCSA) provided an update on several key items:

1. Defra now has a new minister (Minister Double), and it was acknowledged that in the coming months there will likely be a focus on streamlining the work presented to ministers.
2. Defra’s Sustainable Farming Initiative (SFI) has been launched, representing a considerable step forward for the new system. SAC input into the Environmental Land Management schemes was acknowledged.
3. Defra has been heavily involved in the development of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). It was noted that one of the interesting recent outputs of this work has been the publication on values of ecosystem services, which had strong UK input. Evidence from IPBES will support COP15, the Biodiversity Conference of the Parties (COP).



4. In July the CSA attended a meeting of G20 Agricultural Chief Scientists, which is designed to feed into the ministerial meeting of the G20.
5. Defra continues to engage in a diverse range of trade deals which are likely to shape Defra's work going forward.
6. Defra continue to support the government's push for association to certain EU science programmes, while also planning for how to manage further delay.
7. Defra have written to the EU asking for a meeting to discuss the Horizon programme; while the latest developments are unlikely to speed the discussions, Defra are planning on how to manage further delay.

5. Work plan and any other business

No workplan items were raised.

The SAC Chair raised the recent government announcement in cuts to numbers of civil servants and emphasised their concern on the resulting risk to Defra's science provisions, innovation, research, and evidence base. The DCSA outlined that the CSA is aware of such concerns and has been making representations to Defra's Executive Committee to try and ensure that scientists and other specialists are considered in future planning, alongside CSA involvement on the experts pay case.



Annex A: Attendees and apologies

SAC Members

Louise Heathwaite (Chair)

Lisa Collins

Peter Cox

Lin Field

Rosie Hails

Marian Scott

Felix Eigenbrod

Susan Owens

Rosie Hails

Rowland Kao

Defra Chief Scientific Adviser's Office

Rob Bradburne – Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser

SAC Secretariat

Devolved administration observers

Caryl Williams – Welsh Government Observer

Defra officials in relation to specific agenda discussion

G7 - Food Science Team

HSO - Food Science Team

HSO - Food Science Team

G6 - Science, Innovation, GM/Genetic Resources

G6 - Food Chain Analysis Team, and Economic Analyst Lead

G7- Social Research Lead

Food Data Transparency Partnership Policy Lead

Public Procurement/Government Buying Standards for Food Policy Team

Public Procurement/Government Buying Standards for Food Policy Team

Defra observers

Defra UKRI PhD intern

Apologies

Gideon Henderson – Chief Scientific Adviser

Richard Bardgett – SAC member

Nick Hanley – SAC member

Alistair Carson – Northern Irish Government Observer

Matthew Williams – Scottish Government Observer