

Defra Science Advisory Council (SAC)

Minutes of meeting, 20 April 2023

Actions arising

Action number	Action	Owner
Action (01)	DCSA to discuss with team how and where to incorporate major disruptors in this work for example extreme events like a pandemic.	DCSA

1. Welcome and apologies

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

2. CSA Update

The Deputy Chief Scientific Advisor (DCSA) provided updates on the following:

- His Majesties Treasury have entered into negotiations with the European Union on associating with [Horizon](#), [Copernicus](#) and [Euratom](#). The United Kingdom (UK) is looking to reassociate on fair and appropriate terms, and if unsuccessful will implement [Pioneer](#).
- [The land use for net zero call](#) has been published on the UK Research & Innovation website. Applications close on 25th July 2023.
- At the end of March Defra received instructions from the Defra Secretary of State to pause all new Research and Development (R&D) contracts until Ministers have had sight of these projects through a new Ministerial Star Chamber. The first Star Chamber meeting was held on 30th March 2023.
- On Monday Future Defra was launched. This is based around 3 pillars of how Defra of the future would like to work. The 3 pillars are:
 - Ambitious outcomes
 - Efficient working
 - Thriving people

Over the coming weeks Defra teams will start conversations on how to implement these pillars.

3. R&D Review on Evidence Priority Areas

Defra Science Strategy Team are currently focusing on the first objective of an R&D review, which is to identify Defra's key policy and delivery challenges that will require R&D over the next 10 years. The team previously attended the [June 2022](#) SAC meeting to introduce the R&D review project and presented an initial list of key policy challenges for Defra. At the June 2022 meeting the SAC highlighted some gaps in the assessment and the need to take a systems approach to consider some of the interconnections between policy/delivery challenges.

In response to the SAC comments, Defra undertook a systems mapping exercise to identify Defra's key policy and delivery challenges that are likely to need R&D over the next 10 years. These will be used to map R&D needs associated with the

different policy challenge areas, identify gaps in Defra's current R&D priorities and identify ways to address these gaps.

The SAC Chair was pleased that Defra had taken on board previous SAC feedback on this subject and included this in the project development.

Defra and the SAC discussed the strengths and limitations of the systems mapping approach followed that will provide a framework for identifying Defra's future R&D needs. The SAC raised a number of important points and provided valuable feedback on the systems map.

Framing of the systems map and linkages between policy/delivery challenge areas.

The SAC suggested consideration of alternative ways of framing the information in the systems map, for example using "enablers" in addition to policy challenges, and consideration of whether framing around "maximisation questions" was the most effective approach as opposed to considering benefits, costs and trade-offs. The SAC also noted that there was variation in the consistency and level of the policy challenges identified with some being broader or higher level than others.

Defra clarified that the focus of the systems map is policy and delivery challenges, but that "enablers" would be considered when identifying R&D needs in the next stage of the project. This would include "enablers" such as social science questions.

The tendency towards framing the policy and delivery challenges as "maximisation questions" reflected the way that policy challenges were presented in the documents reviewed, for example the [Environmental Improvement Plan 2023](#) (EIP). However, other ways of framing the issues would be considered when looking at the R&D needs associated with the key policy and delivery challenges.

SAC noted that there were some potential linkages between topics that were not reflected in the systems map. Defra explained that linkages were only included where there were explicit references to a link between policy challenges within the documents reviewed. Defra acknowledged this issue and would ensure that an explanation of the methodology used to identify links is included, along with an explanation of the limitations of this approach. Additionally, Defra will assess whether additional linkages should be added. The SAC suggested Defra could consider the mapping approach used in the doughnut framework, developed from the "Planetary Boundaries" concept¹, to display the connections in a way that makes it easier to understand the cross-cutting aspect of the linkages.

Gaps in policy/delivery challenge areas identified.

The SAC highlighted some potential gaps in policy challenges identified by the systems mapping approach. These included, consideration of extreme events, policy challenges from other government departments, and emerging chemicals (e.g. endocrine disruptors). Defra clarified that the focus is on Defra's policy challenges, but areas of conflict and synergy with other departments' policy goals could be

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959378014001174>

noted. The limitations section will address these aspects, and a list of missing topics will be collated.

Prioritisation of policy/delivery challenges

The SAC queried how Defra is prioritising challenges, particularly as the map as a whole is large and complex. Defra will consider the best way to show the information in the map to make it clearer and easier to navigate. This includes use of a new tool being developed by the Defra Systems Team. The next stage of the R&D Review will look at R&D needs associated with the policy/delivery challenge areas, and this will offer scope to consider prioritisation of the policy/delivery challenge areas in relation to R&D needs.

Next Steps

The policy/delivery challenges identified will be used as the framework for mapping Defra's future R&D needs. Further to this analysis, Defra will return to the SAC for input to identify gaps in the internal assessment, and to consider potential routes and sources for the R&D needed.

Action 01: DCSA to discuss with team how and where to incorporate major disruptors in this work for example extreme events like a pandemic.

4. Work plan and any other business

N/A

Annex A: Attendees and apologies

SAC Members

Louise Heathwaite (Chair)

Lin Field

Lisa Collins

Peter Cox

Susan Owens

Rowland Kao

Rosie Hails

Nick Hanley

Marian Scott

Felix Eigenbrod

Defra Chief Scientific Adviser's Office

Justine Bejta – Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (DCSA)

SAC Secretariat

Devolved administration observers

Paul Devine – Northern Irish Government Observer

Defra and other officials in relation to specific agenda discussion

Head of Science Strategy team

Science Strategy Team members

Defra observers

Apologies

Gideon Henderson – Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)

Richard Bardgett – SAC member

Matthew Williams – Scottish Government Observer

Caryl Williams – Welsh Government Observer