

Defra Science Advisory Council (SAC)

Minutes of meeting, 9 January 2025

1. Welcome and apologies

The new Chair, Professor Rowland Kao, welcomed attendees and reminded members to raise any potential conflicts of interest. Attendance is recorded in annex A.

2. Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) update

The CSA provided an update to the SAC:

- A list of appointable candidates to fill the SAC member vacancies has been shared with ministers, a decision is expected soon.
- Defra's Permanent Secretary, Tamara Finkelstein, received a Damehood in the New Year Honours List for her work at Defra. Professor Lin Field, former SAC member, was awarded a CBE for her contributions to crop science and support to Defra.
- The Secretary of State plans to emphasise the importance of farming as a business, the need for environmental stewardship, and promoting the idea of public money for public good in his speech at the Oxford Farming Conference.
- Recent flooding affected homes and farmland, with the Defra flood team actively involved in the emergency response.
- Defra plans to promote methane reduction strategies, including feed additives, vaccination, microbiome research, and genetics, in collaboration with the Science Media Centre.
- There was a slight increase in highly pathogenic avian influenza cases over Christmas, attributed to stormy weather affecting wild bird movements.
- Defra is in the midst of business planning which includes determining where money will be spent on R&D for the next financial year.

3. Defra Global Megatrends 2024, 4th Edition Report

Defra's Futures Team provided an overview of their global megatrends (GMTs) work. The GMTs aim to inform policymakers about potential future scenarios, helping identify opportunities and challenges. They also provide an evidence base for further work, including horizon scanning and understanding tipping points associated with the trends. Defra sought SAC's view on the implications of the GMTs for Defra, how Defra's policy and science interact with them, and what, if anything, should change.

The SAC felt that the work gives a useful overview and demonstrates the importance of keeping macro-environment issues in mind during policy development. The SAC approved of the new approach the team had taken linking trends to historical events that precipitated them, and exploring how the trends have played out to set the context for the current trends.

The SAC made some recommendations on potential future work, including further exploration of the interconnectedness of trends and impacts they had on each other, undertaking gap analysis, investigating other metrics and factoring in that the perspectives are both human and Eurocentric. The SAC emphasised the advantages of Defra mapping how policies interacted with the GMTs, which could help identify new research priorities and strategic policy gaps.

Finally, the SAC recognised that these megatrends require bold solutions. The SAC recognised that collaboration between Defra and other government departments is crucial to address trends that extend beyond Defra's remit, and stressed the importance of working across Defra teams, government departments and internationally. The SAC suggested translating the findings into a paper providing the key points, conclusions, and recommendations. This will form an evidence base for further work and enable Defra to adopt systems-thinking approaches to address the complex, overlapping challenges.

4. Any other business

SAC members were reminded to send potential agenda items for future meetings.



Annex A: Attendees and apologies

SAC Members

Rowland Kao (Chair)
Richard Bardgett
Lisa Collins
Felix Eigenbrod

Nick Hanley
Susan Owens
Marian Scott

Defra

Justine Bejta – Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (DCSA)
Gideon Henderson – Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)
Defra Futures Team
SAC Secretariat

Devolved administration observers

Alistair Carson – Northern Irish Government Observer
Caryl Williams – Welsh Government Observer
Mathew Williams – Scottish Government Observer

Observer

Representative from Andthen