

Defra Science Advisory Council (SAC)

Minutes of meeting, 17 February 2025

1. Welcome and apologies

The 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

Defra's CSA updated the SAC on issues affecting Defra arising over the last month and invited questions from the SAC.

- Uncertainties around international policies may impact tariff rates, digital taxes, and international aid.
- As part of the 'EU Reset', efforts are underway to strengthen ties with the EU while retaining independence in areas like precision breeding for both crops and livestock.
- The focus is on closing budgets for this financial year and reviewing spending for the next four years. While next year's R&D budget is strong, future budgets may be pressured by other priorities. There is a push to coordinate government priorities on clean energy, growth, and climate adaptation.
- Defra continues to work closely with UKRI, and endeavours to move beyond just program delivery to also consider national capability and infrastructure.
- Key projects on innovation include increasing scientific ideas for market readiness, innovation in environmental monitoring, and seafood fund innovation projects.
- The Office for Environmental Protection Report, released on January 16th, highlights areas where the government could perform better in environmental protection.
- The SAC inquired whether there were plans to review the biodiversity net gain policy, as it approaches one year since implementation, to assess its impact on achieving housing and biodiversity targets. While there is no specific timeline for a review, all environmental policies across Defra will be reviewed.
- The SAC asked for an update on avian influenza. At present this year's events are not being considered as serious as the previous years. There is ongoing monitoring of cross-species transmission to cattle occurring internationally.

3. Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) applied research programme

Defra provided an overview of the CBRN applied research programme. Defra is the lead government department in England for recovery from deliberate CBRN releases, civil nuclear accidents outside of a nuclear site boundary, and overseas incidents impacting the UK. Defra is looking to further strengthen its Radiological and Nuclear (RN) capability.

The SAC discussed the current capability and aims for the future, providing suggestions for areas to explore. The SAC:



- Sought to understand what has already been accomplished and the transition to deployment and commercialisation of technology which is not routinely used in day-to-day operations. SAC suggested exploring further and suggested organisations.
- Suggested Defra considers developing a range of modelling scenarios in advance of an incident.
- Suggested considering lessons learned from events such as volcano and earthquake recovery, and flooding recovery. The SAC will share relevant papers. It was highlighted as important to factor in different sectors of the community when considering how to best communicate about recovery work to build the confidence of affected communities.
- Recommended that Defra consider the wider impacts of decontamination such as on food security and biodiversity. The SAC agreed that close collaboration with the relevant teams in Defra is important to build capability and understanding of the effects. SAC welcomed planned research with Fera and encouraged looking for similar opportunities to collaborate.
- Recommended investigation the technological investments of different types of sensors, including drone mounted.
- Recommended expanding current links with academia, including on modelling capability. SAC suggested building on the existing links, such as with Sellafield Ltd and Universities, to potentially include joint PhD funding on the environmental impacts.

Action: SAC members to share papers with relevant research that can be transferred to the CBRN field with Defra officials

Overall, the SAC supported the plans for the applied science research programme and encouraged maintaining relationships with related sectors as key. They also encouraged learning as much as possible from similar areas e.g. BSE infected cattle disposal sites and foot and mouth disease carcass burial pits for which Defra still holds responsibility. The diversity of CBRN risks means that a systems approach is vital. The team was encouraged to return to SAC to discuss plans once they are further developed.

4. Any other business

SAC members were updated on upcoming meetings.



Annex A: Attendees and apologies

SAC Members

Rowland Kao (Chair)
Richard Bardgett
Camille Bonneaud
Lisa Collins
Nick Hanley

Chris Hutton
Jane Hill
Susan Owens
Marian Scott

Defra

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

Devolved administration observers

Johnathan Dalzell – Northern Irish Government Observer

Apologies

Nicola Beaumont – SAC member
Alistair Carson – Northern Irish Government Observer
Felix Eigenbrod – SAC member
Caryl Williams – Welsh Government Observer
Mathew Williams – Scottish Government Observer