

Defra Science Advisory Council (SAC)

Minutes of meeting, 8th May 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. G20 Commission Review

Defra thanked the SAC and Social Science Expert Group (SSEG) members for their comments on proposed studies from South Africa on food security ahead of a G20 meeting in South Africa. SAC's comments were incorporated into Defra's feedback to the G20 on the current state of evidence, and the framing of the questions. Defra was able to emphasise the need for the studies to capitalise on existing research and to provide a balanced assessment of the issues.

The SAC offered to contribute further and to consider those in their networks who may be able to input. SAC members were encouraged to think of ways to increase the diversity of contributions.

The G20 team will return to the SAC at a future date to update on progress.

Action: Secretariat to add G20 to the workplan.

3. 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.

- UK has recently agreed a trade deal with India, with significant opportunities for the food and drink sector.
- Work is ongoing on the UK's reset of our relationship with the EU. The UK- EU Summit on 19th May 2025 presents a major opportunity for a new strategic alliance built on enhanced co-operation.
- Passage of the secondary legislation on genetic technologies for breeding is expected this week, laying out regulatory framework for precision breeding.
- The spending review is still ongoing. Defra is discussing its official development assistance (ODA) R&D spend with HMT in support of our overseas work; money will also be allocated to digitising national collections.
- Defra's Permanent Secretary is due to leave at the end of June, and David Hill (a DG in Defra) has been named as interim PS.
- The CSA and SAC Chair will attend Defra's Executive Committee to ensure DGs are aware of what the SAC can offer.
- The Corry Review has been released, which reviews Defra's regulatory frameworks. This to be followed by the publication of reports by Heather Hancock and John



Cunliffe on water and infrastructure sectors. [Delivering economic growth and nature recovery: an independent review of Defra's regulatory landscape - GOV.UK](#)

- A peat map of England will be published on the 10th May, a product of NCEA published by Natural England. This will help with realising the carbon and agricultural potential of peat.

4. Horizon scan for future pest control gaps

Defra briefed the SAC on the planned horizon scan to predict pesticide gaps. Defra sought SAC's advice on the proposed method and how best to disseminate the results.

The SAC:

- Provided some feedback on the technicalities of rank scoring metrics for officials to consider
- Suggested including other government department and arm's length bodies representatives. Defra asked SAC members to share contacts on the technology innovation side.
- Suggested a balanced consideration of the work hours requested, and the potential to deter academic engagement.
- Cautioned that the Delphi process is good for current issues with a consensus but difficult for obscure issues. The panel should be asked to not score on novelty but importance.
- Recommended exploring confidence-based methods to help weigh different points against each other.
- Suggested Defra consider how to account for potential conflicts of interest that could cause bias in responses.
- Recommended that Defra uses broad questions rather than narrow, specific questions.
- Recommended publishing the findings of the scan, possibly presenting at a relevant conference to get feedback. They suggested journals, such as Ecological Solutions and Evidence, funding councils and utilising the British Ecological Society repository.

The SAC were supportive of Defra's overall approach. They felt it was important to ensure a diverse range of voices and opinions are considered. The SAC were encouraged to share any relevant papers and feedback to the team on means of contributing.

5. Social Sciences Expert Group update

The chair of SAC's subgroup SSEG, gave an update of recent SSEG activities and 2 new members. They also discussed new ways of working which they are trialling out; and expressed a desire from SSEG that there be more synergy between the SAC and the SSEG.

6. Any other business

None were raised.



Annex A: Attendees and apologies

SAC Members

Rowland Kao (Chair)

Richard Bardgett

Nicola Beaumont

Camille Bonneaud

Lisa Collins

Felix Eigenbrod

Nick Hanley

Chris Hanton

Jane Hill

Susan Owens

Marian Scott

Defra

Justine Bejta – Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (DCSA)

Gideon Henderson – Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)

SAC Secretariat

Officials – G20 and Pesticides

Devolved administration observers

Johnathan Dalzell – Northern Irish Government Observer

Apologies

Simon Baldwin – Welsh Government Observer

Mathew Williams – Scottish Government Observer