

Defra Science Advisory Council (SAC)

Minutes of meeting, 9th October 2025

1. Welcome and apologies

Attendance is noted in Annex 1.

2. Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) update

Defra's CSA updated the SAC on issues affecting Defra since the last meeting:

- Defra is taking part in a national exercise on pandemic preparedness. SAC-ED's involvement has provided support on animal health aspects. The CSA thanked the SAC and SAC-ED members for their support in the exercise.
- Defra's Fellowship Scheme is entering its third year. Defra is currently sifting applications and project proposals for the 2026 cohort. The scheme is a key initiative to introduce academia into a policy-focused environment.
- The CSA has visited her counterparts in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Discussions included farming, achieving Net Zero, and the Horizon Europe, programme. The visit aimed to strengthen ties on biodiversity, climate and agri-food research.
- Water and Environmental Improvement Plans (EIPs) are top priorities for the upcoming parliamentary session.

3. Update on Social Sciences Subgroup

Professor Owens provided an update on the Social Sciences Expert Group, a subgroup of the SAC.

- The SSEG recently held a joint meeting with the British Academy Public Policy Team and the Food Standards Agency's Advisory Committee for Social Science, with several Defra teams presenting. The purpose of the meeting was to enable an open dialogue across the groups. The discussion covered food system complexity and how place sensitivity could be applied to food policy and strategy. A note will be published of the key issues and questions that emerged.
- The next SSEG meeting will cover biodiversity, poverty and equalities, circular economy, environmental impacts of AI, building social science across other departments and ALBs, and social science in the Environment Agency.
- The SSEG will continue to look for opportunities for collaboration with other groups in Defra and externally.

4. Sludge

Defra's systems research programme updated the SAC on plans to consider the state of evidence on sludge management. Defra sought SAC's views on the proposed evidence review and 'hackathon' event and discussed where SAC can contribute.

The SAC:

- Offered to be involved in the full review and in steering group roles.
- Suggested Defra should consider:
 - The benefits of sludge application alongside the risk from pollutants.
 - How sludge management intersects with circular economy goals.
 - Patterns of sludge use.
- Suggested that the hackathon could be used to gather insights on the current evidence, upcoming research, and the decision-making needs across stakeholders, including industry and academia.
- Recommended that the hackathon includes non-governmental organisation representatives to ensure a balanced perspective.

The SAC supported the systems research programme's approach to reviewing the evidence gaps. They highlighted the importance of integrating diverse perspectives and offered to support the planning for the hackathon.

5. 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 Hutton
Jane Hill
Susan Owens

Defra

Justine Bejta – Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (DCSA)
Anjali Goswami – Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)
Systems research programme
SAC Secretariat

Devolved administration observers

Johnathon Dalzell – Northern Irish Government Observer
James Skates – Welsh Government Observer

Apologies

Alistair Carson – Northern Irish Government Observer
Nick Hanley – SAC member
Marian Scott – SAC member
Mathew Williams – Scottish Government Observer