

Defra Science Advisory Council (SAC)

Minutes of meeting, 10th September 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:

- With recent ministerial changes, Defra now has Emma Reynolds as Secretary of State.
- Defra's CSA is working with the Government CSA on the focus on climate adaptation.
- The CSA is keen map Defra's science and social science activities to ensure the best interactions between projects, ensuring it is used proactively in decision making.
- A major review has been launched to assess how environmental monitoring data is gathered across Defra and where efficiencies could be found.
- Defra aims to strengthen its international leadership in science.

3. Ways of Working

The SAC discussed opportunities to refine and enhance the ways of working within the SAC and its subgroups. The SAC also explored means of achieving greater depth of interrogation of Defra science, co-creation of agenda items, and interdisciplinary engagement.

The discussion highlighted a need to evolve SAC's working practices to be more collaborative, responsive, and impactful. By improving engagement with subgroups, co-creation, and exploring innovative formats the SAC can better support Defra's scientific needs.

4. Update on SAC Exotic Diseases Subgroup

Professor Bonneaud gave the SAC an overview of the role of the SAC-ED and provided an update on recent activity and diseases that are being monitored by Defra. The SAC-ED has two functions; day to day where the group advises Defra on issues relating to animal diseases and in the event of a disease outbreak or exercise. The subgroup helps to assess Defra's preparedness, undertakes horizon scans, and reviews evidence-based disease control policies.

SAC-ED has been focussing on Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD), including consideration of social science aspects in partnership with SSEG

An item on animal disease cost responsibility sharing will be brought to the SAC for a broader discussion at the November meeting.

5. Update on Biodiversity Expert Committee

Professor Hill provided an update on the Biodiversity Expert Committee (BEC), a subgroup of the SAC. The BEC provides advice and guidance to Defra on biodiversity-related evidence needs. Recent areas of discussion and commissions include:

- BEC reviewed four proposed interim biodiversity targets and considered if they are sufficiently ambitious. Questions were raised about the measurability of actions on invasive species and nature-friendly farming. They also discussed the level of stretch on habitat restoration and SSSI improvement targets, and the science underpinning them.
- BEC discussed biodiversity valuation and applying marginal abatement cost models to biodiversity. Challenges included the complexity of tracking biodiversity and linking actions to outcomes.
- BEC suggested the opportunity for a future discussion on the role of sustainable agriculture in achieving biodiversity targets.

The BEC would welcome feedback on its impact. SAC would like to strengthen feedback loops including evaluating the performance of SAC and its subgroups.

6. Evidence-based support for the Future Water Framework Long-Term water target using Natural Capital and Ecosystem Data

NCEA colleagues sought feedback from the SAC on how NCEA data, alongside other data, could be used to produce an accurate picture of the state of the water environment, to include outcomes such as water for nature, public health, and resilience, and whether NCEA would need to be evolved or additional monitoring be required to achieve this.

The SAC:

- Stressed the importance of linking national-level NCEA data with existing local and regional monitoring efforts to create a holistic view of water quality.
- Discussed expanding monitoring to include pollutants like PFAS and antimicrobial resistance.
- Highlighted the dual benefit of citizen science—enhancing data collection and fostering public interest in water environments.
- Discussed incorporating social science perspectives, including public trust, perceived water quality, and cultural values, into the monitoring framework.

- Emphasised the importance of long-term data continuity and integrating historical datasets to support robust trend analysis, especially under climate change pressures.

The discussion highlighted the complexity of designing a future-proof water quality framework that balances ecological, social, and practical considerations. While the NCEA programme provides a valuable national baseline, the SAC emphasised the need for integration, clarity, and inclusivity in metric design. Further engagement with technical specialists and social scientists was recommended to refine the national picture of the water environment and ensure its relevance, measurability, and resilience. The team were invited to return to the SAC if deeper feedback on the metrics is required.

7. SAC Discussion

The SAC reflected on the day's discussions. The SAC:

- Felt that broad strategic asks can lead to more productive SAC discussions than specific, technical questions. However, they recognised that different teams are at different stages in their thinking and have differing requirements.
- Suggested that teams are encouraged to return for follow-up sessions after initial discussions allowing the SAC time to reflect and provide more targeted input. This will also help teams to refine their questions for the SAC.
- Proposed that some subjects would benefit from a dedicated session to collectively review before providing feedback.
- Proposed a guidance document for teams to help their preparations.
- Encouraged teams to come to the SAC at an early stage to help shape their thinking.

The SAC recognised that they have a role in helping teams to define the questions posed to them. An iterative process will help to support effective engagement.

Action: Secretariat to produce a guidance document for officials including good examples for framing questions.

8. Any other business

An update on the Social Science Expert Group was requested for a future meeting.



Annex A: Attendees and apologies

SAC Members

Rowland Kao (Chair)
Richard Bardgett
Nicola Beaumont
Camille Bonneaud

Lisa Collins (online)
Felix Eigenbrod
Jane Hill
Susan Owens

Defra

Justine Bejta – Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser (DCSA)
Anjali Goswami – Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)
Future Water Framework Officials
Natural Capital Ecosystem Assessment Officials
SAC Secretariat

Devolved administration observers

Paul Devine – Northern Irish Government Observer
James Skates – Welsh Government Observer

Apologies

Alistair Carson – Northern Irish Government Observer
Nick Hanley – SAC member
Chris Hauton – SAC member
Emily Miles - DG Food, Biosecurity & Trade, EU Reset
Marian Scott – SAC member
Mathew Williams – Scottish Government Observer