

Minutes of UKRI-BBSRC Council meeting held on 9 March 2021 via Zoom.

Those attending:

Steve Bagshaw
Professor Ewan Birney
John Bloomer
Dr Belinda Clarke
Professor Ian Graham
Professor Laura Green
Professor Gideon Henderson
Professor Martin Humphries (Chair of the meeting)
Professor Andrew Millar
Professor Malcolm Skingle
Professor David Stephens
Professor Melanie Welham (UKRI-BBSRC Executive Chair, items 1-9)
Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu (items 1 – 9)

Also attending:

Dr Amanda Collis
Dr Karen Lewis
Dr Sarah Perkins
Bill Poll
Laura Notton (item 7 and 10 only)
Alice Fayter (item 10 only)
Sarah Cresswell
Ksymena Grzybowska

ITEM 1. OPENING REMARKS

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and government's guidance on social distancing this meeting was held virtually via Zoom.
2. The Chair thanked Belinda Clarke and Ian Graham for their valuable contributions during their time on Council. Their membership was due to end on 31 March 2021 and this was their last Council meeting.
3. The Chair welcomed new Council members, who joined on 1 January 2021, Ijeoma Uchegbu and Steve Bagshaw. He also welcomed Rosie Cornelius (UKRI Deputy Director Analysis & Performance). Rosie would attend UKRI-BBSRC Council meetings in her role of UKRI corporate observer on UKRI-BBSRC Council.
4. Members were reminded to check their details currently being held on the conflicts register, circulated by email before the meeting, and update as necessary and send any changes to Council Secretariat. Members were asked to raise any conflicts arising during the course of the meeting.

ITEM 2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 9 DECEMBER AND 4 FEBRUARY 2021 2020 (UKRI - BBSRC 01A/2021 and 01B/2021)

5. The minutes were agreed as a correct record of the meeting.

ITEM 3. PROGRESS ON ACTIONS AND MATTERS ARISING (ORAL)

6. It was noted that all actions were completed or in hand.

ITEM 4. EXECUTIVE CHAIR'S REPORT (UKRI BBSRC 02/2021)

7. Melanie Welham introduced her report to Council. Council was interested to hear more about the National Engineering Biology programme and noted that BBSRC was working on developing the concept and actively planning to minimise the risk of a gap in funding following the end of the Synthetic Biology Research Centres, so as to safeguard the world-leading capability the UK has developed in this area. BBSRC was awaiting more information on Spending Review allocations before making any decisions. Depending on allocations, BBSRC may need to seek Council's advice.
8. Council commented that it was good to see that agri-tech and food systems featured in COP 2026 thinking, and it noted that BBSRC had made submissions into Cabinet Office for selection of exhibits alongside other UKRI submissions.
9. Council noted the update on the UK Innovation and Science Seed Fund (UKI2S), an early-stage venture capital fund which supports and grows ideas and businesses stemming from the UK's research base. The Core Partners of the Fund (UKRI and DSTL) had previously worked, through BBSRC's leadership, to secure a strategic partnership with Her Majesty's Treasury (HMT), relating to their Knowledge Assets Programme. This work was successful and via BBSRC's leadership, continued to embed the Knowledge Asset remit into the UKI2S investment scope (as HMT received a positive settlement via the Spending Review 2020 for their Knowledge Assets Programme). The HMT engagement reflected BBSRC's efforts as a key member of the Core Partner group, and indicated HMT recognised the potential of UKI2S as a mechanism to support the commercialisation of ideas from the public sector. BBSRC's challenge was to expand the fund. Council would receive a link to the report.

Action UKRI BBSRC 45/2021: Council would receive a link to the report relating to UKI2S (Karen Lewis).

10. Technology Development Review was delayed, but Council was assured that this was now on track for the delivery next year.
11. Council considered the rating for Data Intensive Bioscience Review, which had been rated as green and agreed it should be amber.

Action UKRI BBSRC 46/2021: Council considered the rating for Data Intensive Bioscience review, which had been rated as green and suggested it should be amber (Amanda Collis).

ITEM 4. UPDATE FROM UKRI (ORAL)

12. The Chair welcomed Rosie Cornelius, in her role of UKRI corporate observer on Council, to her first meeting. Rosie provided Council with an update on the Spending Review and highlighted the likelihood of significant ODA reductions. UKRI was working hard to ensure clear communications and

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what it meant for the community.

13. Rosie provided other updates as follows:

- UKRI was developing its strategy and would continue engaging with Councils and stakeholders.
- UKRI was liaising with BEIS around the set-up of ARIA and Council flagged that Devolved Administrations should also feed into ARIA and discussed its uniqueness.
- Council noted that the development of an Innovation Strategy, announced in the government's Plan for Growth, was being led by the BEIS Secretary of State and was developing rapidly. Council emphasised commercialisation and positioning closer to market and consumers.

14. Council asked about cross-departmental working and collaboration around grand challenges and strategies and it was noted that the UKRI CEO had been meeting with CSAs and government representatives.

15. The Chair thanked Rosie for her updates.

ITEM 6. UPDATES FROM GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND THE WIDER CSA NETWORK (ORAL)

16. The Chair invited Gideon Henderson (DEFRA CSA) to share his updates with Council. He commented on the planning Defra had undertaken after the Spending Review announcement and focus areas such as air quality, animal and plant health, Net Zero and use of data.

17. DEFRA's objective was to map out natural capital ecosystem and feed into government's thinking. He also talked about innovation and DEFRA's £12M commitment into transforming food production and planning a larger programme focused on the 'farm end' of the system. BBSRC and Innovate UK would be involved. He also mentioned the impact of ODA on DEFRA's funding.

18. Gideon talked about future food production and oceans as a source of food and BBSRC and NERC's role in this.

19. Council noted that there would be a white paper on the National Food Strategy in the Autumn 2021. Council noted that the gene editing consultation was closing on 17 March 2021 and encouraged Council and their networks to send submissions.

20. The Chair invited Andrew Millar (Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture, Scottish Government CSA) to share his updates and they were as follows:

- Draft Strategy for Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture was issued last Autumn and was open for consultation. Input from Councils on alignment of research topics would be very useful.
- Climate Change Plan set out how Scottish Government would reach Net Zero commitment. Since 2012 Scottish Government was funding funding peatland restoration and afforestation, and there were huge opportunities for biology and BBSRC in the context of Net Zero (e.g. growing moss on restored peatland, Miscanthus). Acting quickly, learning by doing and systems-based approaches would be paramount. Council also discussed a possibility of research calls with industrial practitioners and landowners.

21. Council agreed that 'right plants, right place' could potentially be a strategic discussion topic.

Action UKRI BBSRC 47/2021: Council agreed that 'right plants, right place' could potentially be a strategic discussion topic (Ksymena Grzybowska to add to the forward look).

22. The Chair thanked Gideon and Andrew for their updates.

ITEM 7. UPDATE ON SPENDING REVIEW ALLOCATIONS (UKRI BBSRC 03/2021)

23. Laura Notton introduced this paper which reflected the current position in relation to the Spending Review. Council noted BBSRC was still working with the same scenarios. Council endorsed the principles agreed at the previous Council meeting in February 2021 and commented that it would be useful to see the mapping the landscape analyses. It agreed maintaining responsive mode, however, added it was important to use targeted initiatives.
24. At its last meeting, Council had asked for additional data on actual budget lines and consideration of threats and this was provided at Annex 1 of the paper. Council endorsed it and agreed to keep the same priority list. It was acknowledged that there were some areas that came through strongly in December 2020 and February 2021 meetings and innovation was one of them.
25. Annex 2 of the paper provided a more holistic view on innovation. In relation to that, Council commented that it would be important to understand where Innovate UK was going to be positioned. Council was pleased to see the acceleration of impact and noted that there was a clear BBSRC strategy and overarching vision for innovation and that metrics for measuring progress were evolving. However, monitoring progress was multifaceted and challenging and culture change was harder to capture. Council suggested having a specific item on the Innovation Strategy.

Action UKRI BBSRC 48/2021: Council suggested having a specific item on the Innovation Strategy (Ksymena Grzybowska to add to the forward look).

26. Council discussed whether Institutes would be disproportionately disadvantaged by ODA reductions and Council was assured that BBSRC and UKRI were working through the implications of changes to ODA budgets. Council commented on the importance of maintaining partnerships. BBSRC confirmed that stakeholder engagement with Institutes and strategic partners would be key once more information was available. Council asked about the scale of funding that could be affected and data from UKRI would be provided.

Action UKRI BBSRC 49/2021: Council asked about the scale of funding that could be affected by ODA reductions and data from UKRI would be provided (Amanda Collis).

27. Council requested information on areas that could be impacted by the Spending Review through ODA reductions and EU funding and asked this was monitored.

ITEM 8. JOINT BBSRC-NERC PROPOSAL: BIOLOGICAL AND ECOLOGICAL TECHNOLOGIES TO DELIVER A RESILIENT, PRODUCTIVE AND SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENT (UKRI BBSRC 04/2021)

28. Amanda Collis introduced this paper, which provided an update on the development of the proposed joint BBSRC-NERC programme '*biological and ecological technologies to deliver a resilient, productive and sustainable environment*'. The programme concept aimed to bring together molecular and digital approaches with systems thinking to address the challenges of biodiversity loss and land-use and had been developed as a result of the Executive Chairs of BBSRC and NERC attending each other's Council meetings in 2020, to seek the respective Council's support for joint working and to agree priority challenge areas.
29. A small Task and Finish group was established in Spring 2020 to develop a proposed shared research and innovation agenda, and a larger sub-group of BBSRC and NERC Council members met in October 2020 to discuss the proposal.

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30. The sub-group of Council members agreed that the programme should focus on the interaction between agriculture and biodiversity and resilience. It was acknowledged that there would be co-benefits to the Net Zero agenda, and that the innovation community on the farming/ecology side should be actively involved. The focus would be on the UK challenge, noting the broader global context.
31. The paper proposed to establish a strategic steering group comprising a sub-set of members of BBSRC and NERC Councils, augmented with additional expertise, as necessary. The group, reporting to the BBSRC and NERC Executive Chairs would provide a high-level steer for the implementation of the programme, including funding priorities and balance of funding mechanisms to deliver substantive long-term impact.
32. Council made the following comments:
 - Steering group membership should include early career researchers and ensure input from the industry and agri-tech centres
 - A statement about what success would look like in year one etc. was needed
 - This should be framed as 'lab to field' exercise
 - It will be important to capture public and policy makers' imagination, e.g. population focus
 - The focus should range from molecular to landscapes
 - The joined-up approach should extend to the Institutes e.g. Rothamsted Research and PSREs
 - Some adaptation and flexibility would be needed in bringing two Councils together. Soil and water as key landscape elements were identified as common interests between the two Councils. Cycles and metagenomics were other areas of mutual interests.
33. Council noted the initial focus would be on building communities and interactions and then on funding mechanisms.
34. Council agreed that BBSRC, working with NERC, took forward the proposed programme, subject to available funding. Council also agreed to establishing a strategic steering group comprising a subset of NERC and BBSRC Council members to manage the strategic direction of the programme, including necessary expertise.

Action UKRI BBSRC 50/2021: Council agreed to establishing a strategic steering group comprising a subset of NERC and BBSRC Council members to manage the strategic direction of the programme, including necessary expertise (Amanda Collis).
35. The Chair thanked the members of the Task and Finish group and Council members for their comments.

ITEM 9. BBSRC INSTITUTE STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATION (UKRI BBSRC 05/2021)

36. Sarah Perkins introduced this paper, which presented the draft Institute Strategy developed by Council Task and Finish Group and discussion points to take forward recommendations.
37. Council commented that rapid progress had been made since the last Council meeting in December 2020 and that the paper was excellent.
38. Council made the following comments in relation to the Strategy:
 - Key role of the Institutes was strategic science, especially in areas that are not covered by other organisations in the UK. This should be reflected in the wording of the Strategy.

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- Strategic alignment in the context of national capability was considered and whether there was the right set of Institutes doing the right science.
- The Strategy should highlight that BBSRC strategically funded Institutes have three nation coverage.
- Institutes should work towards the best practice set out in the Strategy and engage in research culture change. It would be important to consider appropriate assessment/monitoring to ensure Institutes were delivering and research culture transition happened. It was noted that there would be international input in the assessment process.
- Council emphasised the importance of succession planning and training.
- Cross-Institute funding would encourage collaboration.
- There were different governance models within the Institutes' portfolio and adherence to those was dependent on the Trustee Board Chairs. This was an area that BBSRC would like to see addressed by Institutes, e.g. by carrying out timely governance arrangement reviews.
- Council would be interested to see the diversity of funding between Institutes, including BBSRC and non-BBSRC funding and success rates, and this could be a good starting point for discussions with Institute Directors.
- Council considered the current portfolio of Institutes and its scientific coverage and asked a question about additional Institutes, e.g. strategic forestry institute or engineering biology. There was a broader question whether creating Institutes to cover scientific gaps was the right approach. It was also noted that the alignment within the current portfolio should be ensured first before thinking about new Institutes. It would be useful to have a discussion with Institute Directors about wide portfolio of UK Institutes, including PSREs, Weybridge, Rosalind Franklin Institute and the wider UKRI Institutes portfolio. The Annual Strategic Workshop would be an opportunity to start these conversations with Institute Directors.

39. Council endorsed the recommendations of the Council Task and Finish Group as per the paper and the Group would consider Council's suggestions and implementation timings.

40. In terms of the next steps, Council noted that the Institutes Strategy would be published in June 2021 and that there would be an opportunity to start the conversation about UK Institutes portfolio at the BBSRC Annual Strategic Workshop in June 2021. Council would also be invited to input into the assessment process.

Action UKRI BBSRC 51/2021: There would be an opportunity to start the conversation about UK Institutes portfolio at the BBSRC Annual Strategic Workshop in June 2021. (Sarah Perkins).

41. The Chair thanked members of the Task and Finish Group for their contributions in developing the Strategy.

ITEM 10. BBSRC: ALWAYS THE BRIDESMAID AND NEVER THE BRIDE – A STRATEGIC DISCUSSION (ORAL)

42. The Chair handed over to Melanie Welham, who set the scene for this discussion before leaving the meeting.

43. Melanie talked about realising the opportunities for bioscience in relation to some of the grand challenges, e.g. Net Zero, the Bioeconomy and thinking about opportunities when considering solutions, e.g. in areas such as climate change or energy (biobased approaches were critical for

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replacing fossil fuels). Ensuring the voice of bioscience was heard across UKRI and promoting distinctiveness of BBSRC and bioscience were key.

44. Melanie handed over to Andrew Millar to lead the discussion.

45. Council made the following comments:

- BBSRC underpinned a lot of research and needed to be more visible and ensure decision makers understand transformative technologies. Communicate better about the role of the underpinning science.
- Space between funding agencies was complex and BBSRC should ensure that key audiences (including BEIS and the Treasury) were aware of BBSRC's role as a trusted body to deliver funding.
- Use broad descriptors, such as bioeconomy instead of life sciences and use language understood by ministers.
- It was commented that biology was not viewed as the owner of areas that were important for government, such as health, wealth, and environment. BBSRC was not the first place to go to.
- BBSRC played a central role and was key part of the whole landscape. All Councils had their role in UKRI, a joined-up enterprise.
- Generating interest for shared activities across UKRI and industry was identified as important.
- BBSRC should capitalise on the public and government's focus on research seen as essential to climate change and pandemic.

46. BBSRC and bioscience had a critical role to heal, feed, and fuel us and this should be our key message. Council agreed that adopting 'smart specialisation' approach was a way forward.

47. The Chair thanked all Council members for their contributions to this discussion.

ITEM 11. COUNCIL FORWARD LOOK AND AOB (UKRI BBSRC 06/2021)

48. Council noted the paper and asked for the discussion items to be prioritised.

Action UKRI BBSRC 52/2021: Prioritise items for future Council discussion. (Ksymena Grzybowska)

Council Secretariat

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Agenda Item	Action Description	Owner	Delivery Date	Status
	Actions from 23 September 2020			
7	Action UKRI-BBSRC 34/2020 – UK Plant Science Research Strategy - further refinement, and consideration of how recommendations would be taken forward, including engagement with different partners (e.g. Defra), would continue and be led by Jane Langdale and Melanie Welham. (Melanie Welham, Jane Langdale)	Melanie Welham Jane Langdale	February 2021	Ongoing
9	Action UKRI BBSRC 35/2020 - The Executive would consider mechanisms for engaging Council in providing advice on the big ideas pipeline programme (Amanda Collis)	Amanda Collis	May 2021	Ongoing
	Actions from 9 December 2020			
4.	Action UKRI BBSRC 36/2020: Identify five topics within UKRI that require synergies and provide some common ground for communities. This could be an action on all Executives and the topics could be individual agenda items for future strategic discussions at Council (Melanie Welham, Martin Humphries)	Melanie Welham Martin Humphries	June 2021	Ongoing
9.	Action UKRI BBSRC 40/2020: There was a risk around large strategic programmes, if there was no uplifting funding. The Executive would consider this when BBSRC develops its approach to the current Spending Review settlement, recognising that BBSRC might need to make decisions before allocations were confirmed (Melanie Welham).	Melanie Welham	March 2021	Completed

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	Actions from 9 March 2021 meeting			
4	Action UKRI BBSRC 45/2021: Council would receive a link to the report relating to UKI2S (Karen Lewis). The link to the report is here.	Karen Lewis	June 2021	Completed
4	Action UKRI BBSRC 46/2021: Council considered the rating for Data Intensive Bioscience review, which was rated as green and suggested it should be amber (Amanda Collis).	Amanda Collis	June 2021	In hand
6	Action UKRI BBSRC 47/2021: Council agreed that ‘right plants, right place’ could potentially be a strategic discussion topic (Ksymena Grzybowska to add to the forward look).	Ksymena Grzybowska	June 2021	Completed
7	Action UKRI BBSRC 48/2021: Council suggested to have a specific item on Innovation Strategy (Ksymena Grzybowska to add to the forward look).	Ksymena Grzybowska	June 2021	Completed
7	Action UKRI BBSRC 49/2021: Council asked about the scale of funding that could be affected by ODA reductions and data from UKRI would be provided (Amanda Collis).	Amanda Collis	July 2021	In hand
8	Action UKRI BBSRC 50/2021: Council agreed to establishing a strategic steering group comprising a subset of NERC and BBSRC Council members to manage the strategic direction of the programme, including necessary expertise	Amanda Collis	September 2021	In hand
9	Action UKRI BBSRC 51/2021: There would be an opportunity to start the conversation about UK Institutes portfolio at the BBSRC Annual Strategic Workshop in June 2021. (Sarah Perkins).	Sarah Perkins	June 2021	In hand

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11	<i>Action UKRI BBSRC 52/2021: Prioritise items for future Council discussion. (Ksymena Grzybowska)</i>	<i>Ksymena Grzybowska</i>	<i>June 2021</i>	<i>Completed</i>
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