

Minutes of UKRI-BBSRC Council meeting held on 11 December 2024 in Swindon.

Those attending:

Steve Bagshaw
Professor Ewan Birney
Professor Tim Dafforn
Professor Anne Ferguson-Smith (BBSRC Executive Chair)
Andy Griffiths
Professor Gideon Henderson (DEFRA CSA)
Professor Martin Humphries (Chair of the meeting)
Professor Christine Orengo
Dr Neil Parry
Professor Guy Poppy
Professor Jo Price
Professor Steven Spoel
Professor Eriko Takano

Also attending:

Dr Amanda Collis
Dr Jef Grainger
Dr Karen Lewis
Dr Sarah Perkins
Zahir Sachak
Ottoline Leyser (item 5 only)
Laura Notton (item 8 only)
Stephanie Blackwell (item 9 only)
Ksymena Grzybowska (Secretary)
Sarah Cresswell

ITEM 1. OPENING REMARKS

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, and particularly the following Council members to their first Council meeting. Their appointment started on 1 October 2024.
 - Eriko Takano
 - Tim Dafforn
 - Guy Poppy
2. The Chair, on behalf of Council, thanked Steve Bagshaw for all his valuable contributions during his time on BBSRC Council (four years in total). This was Steve's last Council meeting before his term ended on 31 December 2024.
3. Apologies were received from Ijeoma Uchegbu.
4. Members were reminded to declare any changes to their declarations of interests. They should be highlighted by Council members at the meeting and the Secretariat will follow-up to update declarations via the Portal after the meeting. Members were asked to raise any conflicts arising during the course of the meeting.

ITEM 2. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 24 SEPTEMBER 2024 (UKRI BBSRC 22 /2024)

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

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

6. The Chair went through the actions and all of them were completed.

This section was deemed business sensitive and was therefore recorded separately.

ITEM 4. EXECUTIVE CHAIR'S REPORT (UKRI BBSRC 23/2024)

7. The Chair invited Anne Ferguson-Smith to introduce this item.
8. Anne provided an update on the successful recruitment of the BBSRC Chief Operating Officer and BBSRC Council Senior Independent Member. Council also noted that The Quadram Institute had recruited a new Director and Executive Chair, Daniel Fygies, who would start in his post in April 2025; and that John Innes Centre's director recruitment was underway.
9. Anne informed Council that she was leading the UKRI work that was looking at the right shaping of institutes, centres, facilities and catapults. The aim of the programme was to ensure UKRI's institute investments allow institutes to be world-leading, agile and responsive and continue to deliver for the UK economy and society. The objectives of the programme focus on articulating the current value of our institutes and the impacts they deliver and how we can build on these in the future; having a clear understanding of the capabilities our institutes provide for the UK; identifying where efficiency and better integration between institutes and other parts of the system can occur to add value and exploring how funding and governance models provide for flexibility and sustainability. Council was assured that cutting institute funding or numbers was not a direct objective; this was about increasing the flexibility in what we already fund and will fund in the future. Council welcomed this and commented on the importance of articulating this piece of work in the context of Spending Review. It also added that heterogeneous governance of different institutes and broad ranging capabilities would mean a range of solutions and phased approach.
10. Council was interested to hear more about funding success rates and it noted that due to a significant increase in application numbers and average project cost what was forecasted, the success rate for both 24RM2 and 24RM3 was in the region of 16%. Forecasts (taking account of this increased demand) showed success rates in 2025 of 16–18%. BBSRC was monitoring the situation.
11. Council also noted that initial analysis suggested the spotlights programme had not led to high success rates for spotlight applications and BBSRC was considering, as part of broader thinking, around more effective tools for portfolio management to drive balanced outcomes and ensure strategic priorities are effectively factored as part of this.
12. Council noted that BBSRC was contributing to work through a pan-UKRI working group to develop a single, unified UKRI data policy (in relation to scientific data). This will have several benefits, particularly for cross-Council and multidisciplinary funding opportunities. Council discussed data defragmentation and duplication and emphasised the need for collaboration and joined-up approaches. Gideon expressed a desire to join- up UKRI efforts in this area. It was suggested that a brief update on where UKRI is in terms of data policy would be provided to Council.

Action BBSRC-UKRI 01/2025: it was suggested that a brief update on where UKRI is in terms of data policy would be provided to Council (Amanda Collis, ongoing).

13. Council discussed collaborations and engagement with ARIA in the context of Molecules to Landscape programme and Future Proofing Plants to Changing Climate programme. BBSRC was engaging with ARIA in different ways to ensure synergies.
14. Council also noted that a delay in launching phase II of the Molecules to Landscape programme had been agreed between NERC and BBSRC to recognise budget pressures, recent agri-food investments through the strategic themes, and BBSRC–NERC joint discussions. The scope and commitment to this programme would be revisited by partners in quarter 3.
15. In the Spending Review context, Council discussed working and engaging with different government departments and having a multidepartmental approach. It was commented that the institutes network needed to be agile and proactive in engaging with government departments and needed support to learn how to work with government. Council also discussed opportunities for conversations with government, especially in the context of growth missions (although spend through growth missions was not high and therefore a need to be thinking of other ways was discussed). A good example of working with government was The Engineering Biology Programme and there were other examples across UKRI.
16. Council discussed maintaining international partnerships and building relationships with different partners and agencies in the current geopolitical context. It was noted that BBSRC was leading The Future Proofing Plants to a Changing Climate programme with DFG (Germany), NSF & NIFA (USA). It was a great opportunity for building relationships with DFG.
17. Council noted that that BBSRC media activity and quarterly comms dashboard demonstrated considerable movement away from X (formerly Twitter) and an increase in using LinkedIn.

ITEM 5. UPDATES FROM OTTOLINE LEYSER (ORAL)

18. The Chair welcomed Ottoline Leyser, who covered the following in her update:
 - a) DSIT and UKRI priorities – UKRI was in between two phases of Spending Review and was iterating with DSIT on specific allocations to Councils. Overall settlement was flat cash and this was challenging, particularly in the situation of high inflation. Council noted that UKRI was aligned with DSIT on core priorities and UKRI continued to demonstrate it could deliver given financial constraints. In response to question relating to UKRI's autonomy from DSIT, Ottoline said that Councils would continue to decide on funding to deliver on priorities, collaboration and opportunities to work across UKRI.
 - b) Right shaping of Institutes – Ottoline updated Council on this work led by Anne (see paragraph 9 under item 4).
 - c) Engagement with ARIA – there was considerable engagement between UKRI and ARIA and UKRI has monitored closely the evolution of programmes to ensure synergies and avoid overlaps.
 - d) future funding that supports partnering with other countries – Ottoline said that the landscape was complex, especially in the current geopolitical situation. Individual Councils continued to partner with different countries successfully. UKRI was still waiting and see what the new government's direction would be.
 - e) Working with government departments – Ottoline reflected that UKRI was focusing on making the most of SR opportunities and was very pleased to see Councils coming together and working together delivering this key public role. Most importantly, government departments and UKRI were thinking holistically of research and innovation landscape and developing relationships with government departments and Chief Scientific Advisers. UKRI's positioning and its brand was

becoming known to different government departments but there was still some work to do. It was noted there was rise of opportunities to deliver national security. One barrier that was identified engaging with government as there was a mismatch of SR timings for different departments and UKRI and there was a need for a more alignment approach to enable collaboration.

19. Council was interested to hear more on the following:

- a) leveraging money from business perspective – Ottoline commented that business leverage analysis was on UKRI's Executive Committee's agenda and that the investment varied in different Councils. UKRI and the government's ambition was to create more joined up understanding of investment journey for companies. UKRI had a role for clear pathways to enable scale-up and bridge markets. It was noted that Patrick Valance's priority is a joined-up system and there is commitment to evolution of UKRI to enable this.
- b) training researchers and ensuring PhD programmes are suitable for both academics and those who want careers in industry. There were examples of industry internships in BBSRC programmes, but there was still more to do. Ottoline said that there was appetite in UKRI to look at what PhDs should look like, e.g. whether we value the right skills, like teamwork, wider research culture.
- c) working across regions and aligning science and innovation and business and UKRI's role - Ottoline said that this was another area of UKRI's interest that was progressing in a positive way. We need to ensure good economic growth through innovation ecosystem in multiple locations in the UK. Ideally, local authorities would have routes to engage with UKRI, however the trick was to balance autonomy of regions and national agenda. UKRI should be the place to see that overall pattern and support connectivity, not competition.
- d) How to set data coordination across UKRI up for success in the context of range of actors and goals – Ottoline emphasised that this work was about making the most of data that was already available e.g. though HDI UK (health data), ESRC funded UK Data Service and national data library without trying to homogenise it. Council noted that DSIT owned the national data library and that data work was led by DSIT.
- e) UKRI's role as a regulator to enable translation and return on investments – Ottoline pointed to UK Science and Technology Framework focused on five technologies, its adoption and an opportunity to use it as toolkit to drive return on investment.

20. The Chair thanked Ottoline for attending the meeting and for answering Council members' questions.

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

21. Gideon Henderson (Chief Scientific Adviser, Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs, DEFRA) provided updates as follows:

- DEFRA's Spending Review phase 1 allocations
- Spending Review phase 2 and likely timelines
- growth missions and other priorities, including DEFRA's
- Science and Technology Framework document
- COP29
- Recruitment of DEFRA's new CSA.

22. The Chair thanked Gideon for his update and for answering Council members' questions.

ITEM 7. REPORT OF THE BBSRC ROTHAMSTED RESEARCH ADVISORY GROUP (BBSRC 25/2024)

This item is deemed business sensitive and was therefore recorded separately.

ITEM 8. SPENDING REVIEW UPDATE (UKRI BBSRC 26/2024)

23. The Chair welcomed Laura Notton, BBSRC Associate Director, Strategy and Planning, to the meeting and invited her to introduce this paper.
24. The outcome of 'Phase 1' of the Spending Review (SR) had been announced at the Autumn Budget on 30 October, setting government departments' budgets for financial years 2024/25 and 2025/26. It was noted that DSIT would now need to allocate UKRI's settlement, after which BBSRC would need to work with DSIT to agree its allocation within UKRI. The Budget confirmed that 'Phase 2' of the Spending Review would set budgets to 2029/30, with outcomes to be announced in late spring 2025.
25. Council noted the update on preparations for SR25 and Laura sought Council's advice to shape the ongoing development of BBSRC and UKRI SR planning and messaging in the context of wider cross-UKRI, cross-sector and cross-government discussions. Council discussed the following:
 - Leveraging international funding
 - Increasing porosity and mobility of talent, retaining people, incentivising to take up careers in research and developing their skills. Ensuring there is career structure in the academia.
 - Ensuring there is talent in multi model AI,
 - Highlighting Engineering Biology as an example of strong stakeholders' engagement and porosity.
 - Emphasising food security in the context of national security and accessibility.
 - Changing the narrative in relation to health and basic science and highlighting its porosity.
26. The Chair thanked Laura for attending the meeting.

ITEM 9. UK BIOSCIENCES FORWARD LOOK REFRESH (UKRI BBSRC 27/2024)

27. The Chair welcomed Stephanie Blackwell, BBSRC Head of Strategy Coordination and Insight, to the meeting to discuss UK Biosciences Forward Look Refresh.
28. Stephanie provided BBSRC Council with an overview of progress relating to BBSRC's review and refresh of its Forward Look for UK Bioscience.
29. Stephanie summarised feedback from stakeholder engagements to date that aimed to capture and reflect shifts in the landscape and evolutions of focus of stakeholders, highlighting emerging themes and challenges that may help shape thinking with respect to a refreshed forward look, and early thinking around suggested ways in which BBSRC's Forward Look could evolve. This included reflections from the community on the forward look and top-line messages from BBSRC Executive Chair's roundtables and Strategy Advisory Panels.
30. Council was invited to consider potential changes to BBSRC's current Forward Look and questions posed in the paper relating to the direction of travel and advise BBSRC how its Forward Look might evolve to drive forward and enable research and innovation.
31. Council made the following comments in the discussion:
 - being bold about AI, and highlighting different aspects of it, e.g. AI and its transformative power to provide solutions, AI leading to revival of systems biology, AI as crosscutting tool, AI's potential to explain the mechanisms of life, integration of AI with experiments.
 - Porosity across UKRI, especially in health area

- Enabling porosity with industry and government departments.
- Strengthening food security and suggested to use a headline 'resilience, nutrition and food security'.
- Nurturing, upskilling and retaining talent and enabling porosity and mobility.
- New paradigm for training biologists (AI and robotics)

32. In terms of next steps, Council noted that this paper marked the end of the consultation phase of the review and refresh of the Forward Look. BBSRC Executive Leadership Team would meet in January 2025 to discuss collated advice from BBSRC's Strategy Advisory Network and BBSRC will begin to draft the refreshed Forward Look for UK Bioscience, seeking relevant advice as necessary. BBSRC was aiming to share a full draft of the refreshed Forward Look with BBSRC Council at its March meeting and to share emerging thinking around the refreshed Forward Look with trusted stakeholders at its Strategic Event in March 2025.

33. The Chair thanked Stephanie for presenting the paper and all her work on the Forward Look. Council commented that consultations were extremely thorough.

ITEM 10. AOB AND FUTURE COUNCIL FORWARD LOOK (UKRI BBSRC 28/2024)

34. Council noted the dates of future meetings and future agenda items.

Annex 3

Actions from December 2024 Council meeting:

- Action BBSRC-UKRI 01/2025: It was suggested that a brief update on where UKRI is in terms of data policy would be provided to Council (Amanda Collis, ongoing).

