

Minutes of UKRI-BBSRC Council meeting held on 11 March 2025 in Edinburgh.

Those attending:

Professor Ewan Birney
Professor Tim Dafforn
Professor Anne Ferguson-Smith (BBSRC Executive Chair, Chair of the meeting)
Andy Griffiths
Professor Gideon Henderson (DEFRA CSA) (items 1-7)
Professor Christine Orengo
Dr Neil Parry
Professor Guy Poppy
Professor Steven Spoel
Professor Eriko Takano
Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu (items 8-11)

Also attending:

Dr James Briscoe (items 1 – 7)
Dr Amanda Collis
Laura Dance
Dr Jef Grainger
Dr Karen Lewis
Dr Sarah Perkins
Zahir Sachak
Dr Stephanie Blackwell (item 6 only)
Susan Simon (item 8 only)
Martin Farley (item 8 only)
Laura Notton (item 9 only)
Jared Bayley (item 10 only)
Ksymena Grzybowska (Secretary)
Sarah Cresswell

ITEM 1. OPENING REMARKS

1. Anne Ferguson -Smith welcomed everyone to the meeting and informed Council that Martin Humphries (BBSRC Council Senior Independent Member and Chair of Council) was unfortunately not able to attend this Council meeting and that she would therefore chair the meeting.
2. The Chair welcomed Laura Dance, BBSRC Chief Operating Officer as of 3 March 2025, to her first BBSRC Council meeting. Previously, Laura was a Director of Corporate Services at the British Antarctic Survey.
3. The Chair also welcomed James Briscoe, incoming Council Senior Independent Member and Chair of Council, to the meeting. James was Principal Group Leader and Associate Research Director at the Francis Crick Institute. James attended this meeting virtually, as an observer before his appointment starts formally on 1 April 2025.
4. As this would have been Martin's last meeting, the Chair, on behalf of Council, formally thanked Martin for his remarkable service to the work of Council for past seven years. In his role as a Senior Inde-

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pendent Member and Chair of Council Martin ensured that Council discussions were engaging, inclusive and led to deeper understanding of issues, enabling Council to fulfil its role in providing strategic advice to the BBSRC Executive. The Chair also thanked Martin for his involvement in a number of interview panels and other activities outside Council meetings.

5. Apologies were also received from Jo Price.
6. 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 11 DECEMBER 2024 (UKRI BBSRC 01 /2025)

7. This paragraph was deemed business sensitive and it related to information captured in a restricted annex of the minutes from the last meeting held in December 2024.
8. The minutes were agreed as a correct record of the meeting.

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

9. The Chair went through the actions and all of them were completed.
10. This section of the minutes was deemed business sensitive and was therefore recorded separately in the restricted annex.

ITEM 4. EXECUTIVE CHAIR'S REPORT (UKRI BBSRC 02/2025)

11. Anne began her update by expressing continued enthusiasm for her role and working with excellent BBSRC colleagues.

Key appointments

12. Anne updated Council on the following key appointments:
 - Ian Chapman will join UKRI as its new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in August 2025. Ian is the CEO of the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) and is currently a member of the UKRI Board.
 - Angela Paradise joined UKRI as interim UKRI Chief People Officer.
 - Cristobal Uauy had been appointed as new Director of John Innes Centre.
 - Bruce Whitelaw will be retiring from his director role of Roslin Institute.

UKRI Executive Committee Meeting with Patrick Vallance

13. Anne reflected on the Spending Review process and said that there was connectivity between the UKRI CEO and the Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation, Patrick Vallance, who also has engaged with UKRI Executive Committee (ExCo). Council expressed an interest in hearing more about the meeting that UKRI ExCo had had with Patrick Vallance and noted key themes from that discussion:
 - a) relationships and interactions with DSIT
 - b) Engineering Biology
 - c) the next five years for UKRI with refreshed UKRI Executive Committee

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- d) Sustainability of Higher Education sector, its challenges and his focus on Research Excellence Framework (REF) and working with Research England.

The right-shaping of Institutes

- 14. Anne informed Council about the progress of the right-shaping of Institutes that she was leading across UKRI. This work was driven by an opportunity to take a holistic approach to national capabilities. 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 focused on articulating the current value of our Institutes and the impacts they deliver and how we could 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 could occur to add value and exploring how funding and governance models provide for flexibility and sustainability. Anne added that Public Sector Research Establishments (PSREs) and national laboratories wanted to engage in this process too. The plan was that an initial report would be drafted in April 2025 and taken to UKRI ExCo for discussion and the second phase would be about prioritising ambitions (not recommendations) identified in the report.
- 15. Council discussed the Royal Society's work led by Professor Nick Talbot around the role of government research investment (including PSREs) in the UK and its current work to refresh it and UKRI's desire to be aligned and connected to the outcomes of this work.
- 16. Council raised data connectivity/alignment and infrastructure being part of this review and noted that there had been UKRI ExCo discussions about tackling data defragmentation and UKRI's role in data sharing and access. The National Data Library could be a powerful tool going forward. Council also emphasised that data needed to be organised for AI to work and it also needed to be protected, sustained and standardised.

Infrastructure roadmap programme refresh

- 17. Council noted that UKRI was undertaking a major refresh of the infrastructure roadmap programme, which will be published in 2025. The refresh of the roadmap had three areas of focus:
 - a) a demonstration of our progress since 2019 and knowledge of the current landscape
 - b) a forward look to future opportunities
 - c) an illustration of the impact of research and innovation infrastructure.
- 18. UKRI ExCo was engaged with the infrastructure roadmap refresh and there was governance structure in place to deliver the refreshed roadmap.
- 19. From the industry perspective, there was an appetite to co-locate to work with the best infrastructure in the UK. Council discussed the need to involve industry in consultations and create networks to engage.

Community engagement

- 20. Council discussed community engagement, in particular BBSRC's Sparking Innovation Conference and targeting a diverse range of attendees.
- 21. Anne reflected on the BBSRC 2024 community webinar held in December 2024 to highlight progress against BBSRC's Strategic Delivery Plan (2022-25) and look at our future ambitions for UK bioscience. Two key themes of interest to BBSRC's stakeholders were discussed: 1)

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the importance of research technical professionals to bioscience and 2) BBSRC responsive mode evaluation and reform work (see item 9 of the minutes).

BBSRC organisational processes

22. Anne also informed Council that BBSRC was looking at its own organisational processes, e.g. responsive mode reform and grant delivery (see item 9 of the minutes) and workforce strategy and planning in UKRI landscape to ensure right interactions and right skills were in the right place. Greater connectivity, more effective resourcing, professional development and wellbeing of staff were key priorities for BBSRC.

Institutes Mid-Term Review

23. Initial discussions had been held with Institute Directors in November 2024 on the overall design and purpose of the Mid-Term Review of current Institute funding (review expected Q3 of FY2025/6). It was anticipated that this would be more forward looking than previous exercises, e.g. exploring each Institute's strategic vision and how this aligns with BBSRC's Institute Strategy in preparation for the next Institute Assessment Exercise. Mid - review will take place in the latter part of the year with submissions in the Summer. Assessment panels will comprise Council members, to ensure Institutes' future vision aligns with where we want to go as Council. Council welcomed this and emphasised the importance of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and the make-up of panels that would include key stakeholders, industrialists, Council members and possibly government representative too. UKRI right-shaping of Institutes work was also key in this context to map out criteria and recognise diversity amongst the Institutes and national capabilities.

ITEM 5. UPDATES FROM GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND THE WIDER CSA NETWORK (ORAL)

24. Gideon Henderson (Chief Scientific Adviser, Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs, DEFRA) provided updates on the following:
- a) DEFRA's 2025/26 R&D settlement
 - b) Government's five missions and R&D budget belonging mostly in growth mission
 - c) NetZero progress
 - d) A report from the UK's Climate Adaptation Research and Innovation Board (CARIB) overseeing the development of research and innovation in climate adaptation that would be published soon and would help informing bids.
 - e) UK National Biodiversity and Action Plan that was published in December 2024.
 - f) Government's commitment to Strong Foundations and national security as one of them, including defence, biosecurity, pandemic preparedness and animal health which was another opportunity for BBSRC to engage with the government.
 - g) Government launched a consultation on a new approach to Land Use empowering decision makers with the toolkit to protect the most productive agricultural land and boost food security.
 - h) Political situation in the USA and its impact on National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institute for Health (NIH).
25. Council expressed interest in hearing more about the UK's industrial strategy and it was noted that advanced manufacturing and life science were identified as key areas. Council said that there was good evidence for industrial growth potential and discussed what the strategy was going to be used for. Its effective use would drive industry investment and partnering and open doors for Engineering Biology and application in other sectors too. Council emphasised the importance of critical technologies and their application.
26. The Chair thanked Gideon for his updates.

ITEM 6. UK BIOSCIENCE FORWARD LOOK REFRESH (UKRI BBSRC 03/2025)

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 the framework and outline draft content of BBSRC's refreshed 'Forward Look for UK Bioscience'. This refreshed 'Forward Look' had been developed using the outputs of community consultation and subsequent feedback from BBSRC Strategy Advisory Panels and Council.
29. Council noted that the proposed framework would be shared at the BBSRC 30th anniversary strategic event the next day and feedback from the event and this Council meeting would be incorporated into the final product.
30. Stephanie invited Council to consider the following questions:
 - Does the proposed refresh of the Forward Look reflect the evolving needs and priorities of our stakeholders?
 - Do you consider that it will help drive and enable progress for bioscience?
 - What could successful outcomes look like?
31. The following comments were made in the discussion:
 - a) using appropriate language for the audience, including research community, industry, government and non-science audience.
 - b) ensuring there is a statement about Councils working together.
 - c) explaining BBSRC's central role in the ecosystem, how we position ourselves and key role in underpinning the connectivity in that ecosystem. Also, be explicit about BBSRC's role in driving culture change.
 - d) focusing on opportunities where we can have leverage (value added).
 - e) identifying ways how AI can be used as one of transformative technologies to enhance knowledge
 - f) key measurements for success would be impact, engagement, funding leverage and benefit to society (taxpayer's perspective).
 - g) articulating the link to Strategy Delivery Plan to demonstrate delivery of the forward look, how it would drive funding strategy and how it would be monitored.
 - h) expressing excitement of serendipity of bioscience.
32. The Chair thanked Stephanie for presenting the paper and leading the work on the Forward Look and Council members for their comments.

ITEM 7. RESPONSIVE MODE EVALUATION (UKRI BBSRC 04/2025)

33. The Chair invited Jef Grainger to introduce this paper which was a progress update to share work that had been initiated to evaluate responsive mode, and consider options for future reform, and the reasons behind this current focus.
34. BBSRC's current Responsive Mode (RM) delivery model represented an evolutionary product based on a Research Committee (RC) structure and delivery function that were last fundamentally reviewed and reformed over 15 years ago. Not including process changes - and transitional challenges - driven by incoming UKRI systems and policies, administrative efficiencies had been gained during this time.

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Policies and procedures also evolved, e.g. in response to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) drivers and technology improvements.

35. The current RM system was largely efficient, however there were some system challenges and growing anecdotal evidence that research community perceptions of BBSRC RM were not particularly favourable. BBSRC therefore initiated a comprehensive strategic evaluation of the BBSRC Responsive Mode scheme to develop a comprehensive and nuanced evidence base to inform our understanding of the scheme's strategic positioning and past performance. This would proceed alongside a parallel project to prepare options for improvement/reform of the scheme, informed in an agile way by the evaluation's emerging findings.
36. Council noted the wider policy framework/context that was evolving, e.g. UKRI cross research councils' responsive mode pilot scheme and resourcing constraints.
37. Council commented on the framing of the strategic evaluation of RM, including the core question set and evidence sources that would be tested, and whether this would sufficiently capture the information needed to take an informed and evidence-based assessment of the scheme's positioning and past performance.
 - a) Council reflected on the questions set and emphasised the need to look at the strategic position of the responsive mode, - whether it was delivering what it needs to deliver and whether there are any gaps to address.
 - b) Council considered how responsive mode was different to other types of funding and what its value was.
 - c) Reputation of the responsive mode needs to be elevated within the community and BBSRC needs to understand the community's needs.
 - d) Being able to demonstrate performance/outcomes of responsive mode to the government and evaluate how RM led to cutting edge/breakthrough science.
 - e) There was a comment about responsive mode being a delicate ecosystem that probably did not need to be redesigned completely and it was more about engagement and being ambitious.
 - f) Random sampling within the responsive mode system is underused.
38. Council endorsed the responsive mode evaluation and reform proposal agreeing that this piece of work should feature in BBSRC's suite of priorities. Council highlighted the importance of what it is designed to deliver, the wider context, KPIs and monitoring. Outputs would be brought back to future Council meetings for further discussion.
39. Council members were invited to declare their interest to join the expert advisory group that will oversee analysis of emerging evidence and options.
40. The Chair thanked Jef for the paper and Council members for their comments.

ITEM 8. ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY 2025 – 2030 (UKRI BBSRC 05/2025)

41. The Chair welcomed Susan Simon, UKRI MRC Director Capital & Estates, and Martin Farley, MRC Associate Director, UKRI Environmental Sustainability, to the meeting and invited Susan to introduce this item, the aim of which was to consult BBSRC Council to ensure organisation-wide commitment and ownership for the ambitions and targets of the UKRI Environmental Sustainability Strategy for the next period 2025 – 2030 (the current framework was due to expire in 2025).

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42. Council noted UKRI ambitions and constraints of the current strategy. UKRI was signatory to Concordat for the Environmental Sustainability of Research and Innovation Practice which was gaining a momentum. Council was also informed of the timeline with the aim to publish the refreshed strategy in September 2025 following obtaining approvals from the Unions, UKRI Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC), UKRI ExCo and UKRI Board.
43. The plan was to reframe the strategy to align with the Concordat, setting out what UKRI wanted to achieve embedding sustainability in everything we do. It was noted that action plan would not initially be included within the strategy and it would be developed when there was agreement on the ambitions. The strategy would set out specific targets and it would be important to report to Councils on reaching these targets.
44. Council noted that the governance had not been agreed and that Terms of Reference were being drafted.
45. Council was invited to discuss strategic priorities outlined in the paper that were based on those set out in the concordat, namely: leadership and system change, sustainable infrastructure, sustainable procurement, business and academic, travel and collaborations and partnerships. Council commented that the biggest impact would be in the area of sustainable infrastructure (e.g. computing and data infrastructure are energy consuming) and finding ways to distribute heat (circular economy).
46. Travel was an area that was also mentioned, however Council stressed protecting ability to have face-to-face meetings globally. Council noted that UKRI should set an example by advocating for in-person meetings, as creativity often emerges through face-to-face interactions.
47. Another aspect that was discussed was understanding how we leverage and prioritise opportunities and reviewing lessons learnt from the last five years and learning from others (e.g. The Pirbright Institute, EBI).
48. Council discussed the importance of encouraging researchers to think of the impact of their research in terms of sustainability and investing in research to see how to make research more sustainable (e.g. seeking ideas that could be funded, for example in the area of petrochemicals).
49. The Chair thanked Susan and Martin for attending the meeting and Council members were encouraged to send any further comments/suggestions to Susan Simon.

ITEM 9. SPENDING REVIEW UPDATE (UKRI BBSRC 06/2025)

50. The Chair welcomed Laura Notton, BBSRC Associate Director, Strategy and Planning, to the meeting and invited her to introduce the paper, which provided Council with an update on SR25, and 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. It also provided Council with a summary of BBSRC's anticipated financial position going into the next SR period (SR Phase 1, FY2025-26).
51. Council noted the update on the progress of SR2025. Phase 1 would determine UKRI's budget for FY2025-26 and, as reported previously to Council, it was anticipated that UKRI's overall settlement would be broadly 'flat', which would require tensioning of existing commitments and pressures across the UKRI portfolio. Council noted BBSRC's anticipated financial position going into the next SR1 period, including indicative allocations for 2025/2026.
52. Phase 2 was underway to determine UKRI's budget for FY2026-27 to 2029-30. UKRI received a commission for inputs into DSIT's Phase 2 SR bid in late January and iterations with DSIT were ongoing ahead of an initial end-of-February deadline for departmental submission to HM Treasury. There

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would then be a further period of iteration / negotiation between departments and HM Treasury, during which UKRI would be needed to respond to questions about our SR proposals as required. The Chancellor is expected to announce Phase 2 outcomes in a statement on 11 June 2025; the Phase 2 UKRI allocations process will begin thereafter.

53. Council was invited to comment on BBSRC plans and ambitions for the next SR period in the context of the UKRI SR framework set out in the paper and the following points were made:
- a) Council considered ways of obtaining additional non-core funding through working collectively to unlock local sources of leverage and incentivising local R&D activities.
 - b) Council discussed the importance of collaborations with larger foundations and non-for-profit organisations and noted the commitment to collaborate and build long-term relationships with The Gates Foundation and The Wellcome Trust and maintaining strategic dialogue, particularly in the Engineering Biology area. Partnering internationally was challenging and the UK Official Development Assistance (ODA) was one area to monitor closely due to its volatility. Council commented that Denmark's universities had more money for international activities and there could be opportunities to learn from them.
 - c) focusing on added value from cross-council activities/mechanisms and its scale and demonstrating the added value to the community as they see the core funding dropping. This would help shape and champion the culture of sharing.

54. The Chair thanked Laura Notton for attending the meeting and presenting the paper.

ITEM 10. BIENNIAL RISK REVIEW UKRI BBSRC 07/2025

55. The Chair welcomed Jared Bayley, UKRI-Senior Risk Business Partner, to the meeting and invited him to introduce this paper.
56. The paper provided Council with regular update and oversight of UKRI Risk Management activities operated by BBSRC, so that members are kept informed and can input, question and challenge where appropriate.
57. Council noted the update on UKRI ExCo quarterly risks review and periodic thematic 'deep dives' relating to geopolitics, trusted research and innovation, financial control. Council noted significant changes to the UKRI risk register, including addition of a new risk relating to effective management of intellectual property (access to IP) and risks with increased scores namely alignment of OpEx targets with the UKRI strategy, corporate plan and Strategic Delivery Plans, major gap or failure in our internal control environment, failure to attract and retain talented people and teams within the UK's Research and Innovation system and breakdown of financial control.
58. Council discussed potential UKRI wide risks relating to data and geopolitics (situation in the USA).
59. Council noted key changes to the BBSRC corporate risk register, including a new risk relating to BBSRC institutes financial stability that had been added to the corporate risk register as briefed in the previous update to Council. Council also noted that the score of risk relating to uncertainty of future funding had increased.
60. The Chair thanked Jared for attending the meeting and taking Council through the review of risks.

ITEM 11. AOB AND FUTURE COUNCIL FORWARD LOOK (UKRI BBSRC 28/2024)

61. Council noted the dates of future meetings and future agenda items.
62. Council noted that the September 2025 Council meeting date would need to be changed from 24 to 23 September.

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Action BBSRC-UKRI 02/2025: Council Secretariat to change the date of September Council meeting, completed.

Council Secretariat
May 2025

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, completed, available on the CouncilNET).

Actions from March 2024 Council meeting

- Action BBSRC-UKRI 02/2025: Council Secretariat to change the date of September Council meeting, (Ksymena Grzybowska, completed).

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