

Minutes of UKRI-BBSRC Council meeting held on 18 March 2026 in Swindon.

Those attending:

Dr James Briscoe (Senior Independent Member and Chair of Council)
Professor Tim Dafforn (item 5 only)
Professor Anne Ferguson-Smith (Executive Chair)
Professor Anjali Goswami (Defra CSA) (items 8-12)
Andy Griffiths
Professor Christine Orengo
Dr Neil Parry
Professor Jo Price
Professor Eriko Takano
Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu

Executive Leadership Team attending:

Dr Amanda Collis
Dr Jef Grainger
Dr Karen Lewis
Dr Sarah Perkins
Zahir Sachak

Attendees for items only:

BBSRC Head of Evaluation (item 8 only)
CCORA Chair, Director of the Mary Lyon Centre at MRC and MRC Head of Programme: Infrastructure (Item 9 only)
BBSRC Associate Director of Global Food Security Programme and Hopkins van Mil Director (item 10 only)

Secretariat:

BBSRC Council Secretariat Manager (Secretary)
BBSRC Council Secretariat Admin Support

ITEM 1. OPENING REMARKS (ORAL)

1. The Chair welcomed Council members to the meeting.
2. Apologies were received from Ewan Birney, Stephen Spoel, Amanda Collis and Claire Graves.
3. The Chair, on behalf of Council, congratulated Martin Humphries, (former BBSRC Council SIM and Chair) on his award of the Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) for services to Bioscience.
4. The Chair reminded Council members of the expectation to attend Council meetings in-person.
5. 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 meeting.

ITEM 2. MINUTES OF THE COUNCIL MEETING HELD IN DECEMBER 2025 (UKRI BBSRC 01/2026)

6. The minutes were agreed as a correct record.

ITEM 3. PROGRESS ON ACTIONS AND MATTERS ARISING (ORAL

7. The Chair confirmed that all actions from the previous meeting had been completed or were otherwise covered on the agenda. There were no additional matters arising.

ITEM 4. EXECUTIVE CHAIR'S REPORT (UKRI BBSRC 02/2026)

8. The Executive Chair introduced her written report and provided further context on key developments.
9. Council noted that the organisation continued to adapt to the UKRI-wide framework following the Spending Review, including the transition to a more structured funding model organised around strategic “buckets” (see item 7 on the agenda).
10. It was highlighted that responsive mode funding remains a core component of BBSRC's portfolio, although a temporary pause in administrative processes had been necessary to align with the transition to a new UKRI grant system. Council discussed the impact of this on the research community, noting feedback indicating concern about uncertainty and a perceived lack of clarity in communications. BBSRC and UKRI leadership have prioritised clear, consistent communication and reassurance where possible.
11. The Executive Chair outlined extensive engagement with stakeholders across academia, industry, and government, both to explain emerging changes and to contribute to the development of a single UKRI strategy. Council welcomed this engagement but emphasised that messaging to the community must be coherent, accessible, and timely, particularly during a period of change.
12. On organisational matters, Council noted updates on the BBSRC Executive Leadership Team, including interim cover arrangement for Chief Operating Officer and the establishment of a new Executive Director role focused on advancing knowledge. The Executive Chair also drew attention to internal initiatives aimed at strengthening organisational culture, including staff-led work to improve engagement and wellbeing.
13. In discussion, Council reflected on the importance of maintaining organisational stability and staff morale during this transition, and of ensuring that BBSRC continues to articulate a clear strategic identity within the evolving UKRI system. Council agreed that strong leadership and effective communication—both internally and externally—would be critical in supporting the organisation through this period.
14. The Chair thanked Anne for her report.

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

15. Tim Dafforn (MoD CSA, BBSRC Council member) provided an overview of defence science priorities. Council noted that the MoD is strengthening its engagement with the research base, including through initiatives such as the Defence Universities Alliance, which has attracted participation from a wide range of UK institutions. This was seen as a clear indication of growing demand within defence for cutting-edge scientific expertise.
16. Council discussed how advances in areas such as engineering biology, health resilience, and biosecurity are becoming increasingly important in the defence context. Council recognised that BBSRC is well positioned to contribute to these agendas, particularly through its leadership in engineering biology and its strong academic and industrial networks.
17. The discussion highlighted opportunities to develop more structured collaboration between BBSRC and the MoD, including potential joint workshops and co-designed programmes. Council emphasised that such engagement should focus on areas of mutual benefit, ensuring that defence needs are met while maintaining alignment with BBSRC's broader strategic objectives.
18. The Chair thanked Tim and invited Anjali Goswami (Defra CSA) to provide her updates.
19. Council noted that DEFRA is currently advancing a number of significant policy initiatives, including work on farming profitability, the development of a land use framework, and broader strategies linked to net zero and biodiversity recovery. These areas were seen as directly relevant to BBSRC's remit, with bioscience playing a central role in underpinning evidence-based policy development.
20. There was also a recognition that DEFRA's priorities are creating opportunities for greater co-design of research programmes, enabling early alignment between scientific capability and policy needs. Council emphasised the importance of maintaining strong engagement with DEFRA to ensure that BBSRC-funded research continues to inform policy effectively, while also preserving the independence and long-term perspective of the research base.
21. The Chair thanked Anjali for her updates.

ITEM 6. SPENDING REVIEW ALLOCATIONS AND UKRI OPERATING MODEL (UKRI BBSRC 03/2026)

22. The Executive Chair introduced this item, setting out the overall funding envelope provided to UKRI and the implications for BBSRC. Council was informed that the settlement provides a degree of medium-term stability for the research and innovation system within a more structured and directive funding environment than in previous periods.
23. It was explained that allocations are now organised through a UKRI-wide framework structured around defined "buckets", including funding for curiosity-driven research, priority programmes aligned to government objectives, and innovation-led activity delivered in close partnership with Innovate UK. In addition, a substantial allocation for "wider priorities" had been secured in order to maintain support for areas of research that sit outside the core industrial strategy focus.

24. Council discussed the overall balance of the settlement and noted that, while the headline allocation was positive in comparison to earlier expectations, a significant proportion of funding is effectively pre-committed. As a result, Council recognised the importance of careful prioritisation and active portfolio management.
25. There was broad support for aligning research investment with major national challenges—such as economic growth, sustainability, and health resilience. However, Council emphasised that investigator-led discovery research should remain the foundation of long-term scientific progress and underpins the capacity to respond to future challenges.
26. Council explored the risks associated with the new funding structure, including challenge of ensuring that bioscience priorities are not diluted within cross-UKRI programmes. Council noted that the success of the model will depend heavily on governance arrangements, particularly the effectiveness of cross-council programme boards and the clarity of decision-making authority.
27. In considering the implications for BBSRC specifically, Council agreed that the organisation will need to operate with greater strategic discipline, making clear choices about where to focus resources and how to balance competing priorities. There was also an emphasis on the importance of clear communication to the research community, particularly in explaining how funding opportunities will be structured and how researchers can engage with the new system.
28. The Chair thanked Anne and Council members for their comments.

ITEM 8. MID-TERM REVIEWS (MTR) OF BBSRC INSTITUTES (UKRI BBSRC 04/2026)

29. The Chair welcomed Laura Green (former BBSRC Council member, who sat on the Pirbright Institute MTR Panel) and BBSRC Head of Evaluation to the meeting and invited Sarah Perkins to introduce this paper. Sarah highlighted key findings of the mid-term reviews of BBSRC's eight strategically supported institutes and reflected on the current Institute Assessment Exercise (IAE) process and associated funding model, building on the MTR findings to identify specific areas where optimisation is required to ensure that BBSRC's approach incentives desired outcomes, aligned to UKRI's new mission.
30. Council considered the outcomes of the mid-term reviews of BBSRC-supported institutes, noting that the reviews provided a comprehensive assessment of scientific performance, strategic positioning, and institutional sustainability.
31. Council welcomed the strong scientific quality evident across the institutes and their continued contribution to the UK's bioscience landscape. However, the discussion highlighted that the reviews had identified a number of consistent areas for further development, particularly in how institutes articulate and leverage their role as national capabilities.

32. Council discussed the need for institutes to more clearly define and communicate the value of their assets, including physical infrastructure, data resources, and intellectual property. It was noted that these assets are often under-recognised and under-utilised, and that a more strategic approach could enhance both impact and financial sustainability.
33. There was also significant discussion on the importance of strengthening knowledge exchange and external engagement. Council emphasised that institutes should adopt a more proactive and structured approach to building partnerships with industry, government, and other stakeholders, including exploring opportunities for co-investment and commercialisation where appropriate.
34. Council noted that delivering on these expectations would require cultural and strategic shifts within some institutes, including greater emphasis on translation, collaboration, and outward-facing activity. Council stressed the role of BBSRC in setting clear expectations and supporting institutes through this transition.
35. *This section of the minutes was deemed business sensitive and was therefore recorded separately in a restricted annex.*
36. Council noted that the set of principles to guide the design of the next IAE process are intended to provide a more structured and transparent framework for evaluating institute performance, moving beyond scientific excellence to include a broader set of expectations. These include areas such as strategic alignment, delivery of national capability, stakeholder engagement, and contribution to economic and societal impact.
37. Council discussed the role of the IAE principles in driving behaviour and cultural change, particularly in encouraging institutes to take a more outward-facing and partnership-oriented approach. Council agreed that the framework should support institutes in strengthening their positioning as national capabilities. Council supported the direction of travel and agreed that the IAE principles represent an important step towards a more coherent and strategic approach to institute oversight.
38. The Chair thanked Council members involved in the IAE process.

ITEM 9. UPDATE AND PROGRESS ON MRC/BBSRC LANDSCAPE REVIEW OF CAPACITIES, CAPABILITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN RESEARCH ANIMALS (CCORA) (UKRI BBSRC 05/2026)

39. The Chair welcomed Nancy Rothwell (CCORA Chair), alongside the Director of Mary Lyon Centre at MRC and MRC's Head of Programme: Infrastructure to the meeting and invited Nancy to provide an initial readout of the findings of the joint MRC–BBSRC landscape review of capacities, capabilities and opportunities in research animals, noting that the work is beginning to provide a clearer picture of the current national infrastructure and emerging pressures.
40. Council was informed that initial findings indicate significant variation in utilisation across animal research facilities, with overall capacity not always being used efficiently. At the same time, the cost of maintaining these facilities is increasing, creating financial sustainability challenges for institutions.

41. Council discussed how the nature of animal research is evolving, with a shift away from high-volume use towards studies that require more complex, technical expertise. This shift has implications for the types of facilities, specialist skills, and support services required, and may not align with the current distribution of infrastructure.
42. The review also highlighted concerns around workforce sustainability, including the availability of skilled technical staff, and the need to ensure appropriate training and career pathways. Council noted that these issues are critical to maintaining national capability in this area.
43. There was discussion of the potential need for greater coordination and sharing of facilities across institutions, including more strategic approaches to capacity planning at a national level. Council recognised that this could help to improve efficiency and resilience but would require careful consideration of governance, access, and funding models.
44. Council agreed that the review is both timely and necessary, given the scientific, financial, and ethical dimensions of animal research. Council emphasised the importance of taking a long-term, system-wide view, and of ensuring that any future approach supports high-quality science while maintaining public confidence.
45. It was noted more detailed analysis will be brought back to Council in June 2026 as the review progresses, to inform potential strategic decisions.

Action 1/26: add MRC/BBSRC landscape review of capacities, capabilities and opportunities in research animals to the agenda for Council meeting in June 2026. Completed.

ITEM 10. UKRI ULTRA-PROCESSED FOODS PUBLIC DIALOGUE (UKRI BBSRC 06/2026)

46. The Chair welcomed Associate Director of Global Food Security Programme and Hopkins Van Mil Director to the meeting, who presented key findings of the paper that included a near-final version of the report.
47. Council discussed the findings of the public dialogue on ultra-processed foods in more depth, reflecting on both the specific insights and the broader implications for BBSRC's role in evidence generation and public engagement.
48. Council noted that the dialogue demonstrated a high-level of public concern about the prevalence and potential health impacts of ultra-processed foods, with participants often expressing strong views even where their understanding of the science was partial. There was a shared perception that such foods are widespread and particularly associated with poorer health outcomes, especially among children and in more deprived communities.
49. A key theme of the discussion was the lack of clarity and consistency in the evidence base, including uncertainty around definitions of ultra-processed foods and the strength of links to specific health effects.

Council noted that this scientific complexity is not well conveyed in public discourse, contributing to confusion and, in some cases, mistrust.

50. It was noted that the dialogue indicated scepticism towards industry, particularly around product marketing, labelling, and health claims, which were often perceived as misleading or driven by commercial interests. In contrast, independent, publicly funded research was viewed as more credible, reinforcing the importance of maintaining independence and transparency in BBSRC-supported work.
51. Council discussed the need for clearer and more accessible communication of evidence. Participants in the dialogue had expressed a desire for straightforward, evidence-based guidance to support informed decision-making, suggesting that current messaging around diet and health is fragmented and difficult to interpret.
52. The discussion also recognised that ultra-processed foods represent a complex, system-level issue, intersecting with food affordability, convenience, supply chains, and consumer behaviour. Council noted that this complexity requires coordinated, interdisciplinary research, as well as careful consideration of how evidence can inform policy without oversimplifying the issue.
53. Council acknowledged the value of the dialogue approach itself, noting that it provides insight into public values, perceptions, and information needs, which can help shape both research priorities and communication strategies. There was support for continuing to use such approaches in areas of high societal relevance.

ITEM 11. BBSRC COUNCIL APPRAISAL RESULTS (UKRI BBSRC 07/2026)

54. Council considered feedback from the recent Council appraisal exercise, reflecting on its effectiveness in providing strategic oversight and its role within the wider UKRI governance structure.
55. Council noted that the appraisal highlighted strengths in the breadth of expertise and quality of discussion within Council, but also identified opportunities to strengthen its impact. In particular, there was recognition of the need for clearer alignment between Council discussions and UKRI-wide strategic priorities. Council should continue to focus on high-level strategic direction while ensuring sufficient visibility of risks and delivery challenges.
56. The discussion highlighted the importance of strengthening connections between Council and the UKRI Board, with members suggesting that more direct engagement would support better mutual understanding and more effective coordination (e.g. inviting UKRI Board members to Council dinners was suggested). Council also discussed engaging more closely with institutes through holding Council meetings on institutes sites.

Action 2/26: invite UKRI Board members to future Council dinner and schedule Council meetings in BBSRC strategically supported Institutes once a year. Ongoing.

ITEM 12. AOB AND COUNCIL FORWARD LOOK - AGENDA ITEMS (UKRI BBSRC 08/2026)

57. No additional items were raised by Council members. Possible future agenda topics were noted, including an update on the operation of the reformed Responsive Mode system (scheduled for September 2026) and institute assessment processes (scheduled for June 2026).

Council Secretariat

May 2026

ANNEX 3

Agenda Item	Action Description	Owner	Delivery Date	Status
<i>Actions from March 2026 Council meeting</i>				
9	<i>Action 1/26: add MRC/BBSRC landscape review of capacities, capabilities and opportunities in research animals to the agenda for Council meeting in June 2026. Completed.</i>	Secretary	May 2026	Completed. On agenda
11	<i>Action 2/26: invite UKRI Board members to future Council dinner and schedule Council meetings in BBSRC strategically supported Institutes once a year. Ongoing.</i>	Secretary	2026	Ongoing