



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs

Defra Science Advisory Council

Handbook 2021

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Introduction

This handbook sets out the code of practice for Defra's Science Advisory Council (SAC). Its purpose is to provide guidance on the establishment, management and activity of the SAC and its relationship with Defra.

It does not intend to duplicate information contained within other scientific codes of practice, or other related guidance, but aims to be specific to Defra's SAC.

It has been developed in line with the:

- [Government Office for Science's Code of Practice on Scientific Advisory Committees](#)
- [Principles of Scientific Advice to Government](#) which sets out the rules of engagement between government and those providing scientific advice

SAC activities

Role and remit of SAC

Defra's SAC is an advisory Non-Departmental Public Body (aNDPB) which provides independent and scientific support, advice and challenge to Defra.

The SAC will assist the Defra Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) in assuring and challenging the evidence that Defra uses in its policy development.

In delivering its function, SAC will focus at a high level, across all aspects of Defra's evidence; and will have a strategic role, where 'strategic' means the process of deciding what evidence Defra needs, now and in the future, and how it should obtain and use it.

In addition to the above role, the SAC may establish time-limited subgroups in relation to emergencies, or to carry out in-depth studies and other pieces of work.

Read the [SAC terms of reference](#).

Accountability for SAC

The Science Minister will act as the lead Minister overseeing SAC's work; and will meet the SAC Chair once or twice a year.

Structure of business

SAC business is conducted as follows:

- **Principal meetings:** These will be held approximately once every three months.
- **Monthly teleconferences:** The SAC will hold monthly teleconference meetings, except in the months when principal meetings are held and during the summer holidays. The teleconferences aim to keep the SAC in regular touch with Defra business.
- **Pairing scheme:** The SAC and Defra-official pairing scheme is designed to support communication and understanding between SAC members and Defra officials. **Annex A** provides details of the Terms of Reference of the pairing scheme. The Secretariat will re-visit the pairing scheme from time to time to account for changes in SAC membership and where relevant, changes to the Defra organisation.
- **SAC sub groups:** The SAC may establish time-limited sub groups in relation to emergencies, or to carry out in-depth studies and other pieces of work. These will be chaired by a member of the SAC. Sub groups may also include non-SAC members to increase the range of expertise available.
- **Meeting minutes:** Minutes of all SAC meetings will reflect the proceedings and discussions that take place. They will be recorded on a non-attributable basis except where the views need recording (for example, when declaring an interest). The Secretariat will aim to prepare minutes within one week of the meeting and after approval by the Chair circulate to meeting attendees for comment, depending on local business needs. As a maximum, minutes should be agreed and published within three months of a meeting.
- **Annual report:** An annual report of SAC work will be produced covering the reporting period April – March.

On occasion, SAC members may be asked to participate in other activities within Defra. All such requests should be communicated to and agreed by the SAC Secretariat.

Agenda setting

The Committee's agenda is set through discussion between Defra and the Committee itself. Final decision on agenda items is made by the CSA in collaboration with the Chair.

Openness and transparency

The SAC will operate from a presumption of openness. SAC business documents will be published on the SAC website¹, with the exception of papers of a confidential nature.

Reports and advice will include enough detail to identify the background information used and any assumptions made or criteria applied.

The SAC is subject to Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation², and the Data Protection Act 1998.

Confidential papers will be marked with protective markings and should be stored securely and read in locations that do not allow others to see (i.e. not on a train). Confidential papers will be marked as OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE and will be provided to SAC in a secure manner (typically as an encrypted file).

SAC outputs

Advice is given through the SAC meetings or in writing. It is objective and independent of government. There may be occasions where uncertainty exists, for example where there are gaps in the knowledge base; and in this case, SAC and the CSA will use its combined experience and judgement to present the level of risk and uncertainty associated with the advice given.

In addition, on occasions where a common consensus cannot be reached, the different opinions and reasons for these will be clearly reported.

Relationship with other Defra expert advisory committees

The SAC work with other committees when appropriate.

Relationship with the Devolved Administrations

The Devolved Administration nominated 'Observers' are invited to all routine SAC meetings. In cases of sub group meetings, a decision on their attendance will be taken when constituting the sub group.

¹ [Science Advisory Council - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

² Freedom of Information legislation includes the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Freedom of information (Scotland) Act 2002 and the Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

SAC presence within Defra

Both the Chair and the CSA want to maintain and raise the profile of the SAC within the Department to ensure that the SAC is an integral part of Defra evidence.

SAC membership

Balance of expertise

Members will have a range of backgrounds and expertise across natural, economic and social sciences of relevance to Defra work. Members will work across a range of topics, drawing on, but not limited by, their expertise.

The range of expertise required for the SAC may change over time, and therefore, the balance of skills, expertise and experience of members will be regularly reviewed in light of current and anticipated future work programmes. If necessary, additional experts may be co-opted for a limited period of time to provide specific input.

Appointments

Appointments and reappointments to the SAC are made in line with the guidelines of the Ministerial Governance Code on Public Appointments which sets out the regulatory framework for the public appointments process. The Nolan Principles of Public Life³ underpin the Code of Practice.

Members are usually appointed for a period of three years. Consideration will be given to the phasing and length of appointments to ensure both continuity and fresh perspectives, and also to the diversity of membership (including gender, age and ethnicity).

Performance assessment

To comply with the Commissioner's Code⁴, a mandatory annual appraisal of SAC members and Chair takes place.

The appraisal evaluates individual's contributions against the appointment criteria and the individual's actions to ensure SAC meets its aims and objectives, as defined by the SAC Terms of Reference. It also offers SAC members an opportunity to receive feedback on their performance during the course of the appraisal period.

³ [The Seven Principles of Public Life - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

⁴ [Governance Code - Commissioner for Public Appointments \(independent.gov.uk\)](http://independent.gov.uk)

The appraisal also provides Ministers with assurances that those appointed to Non Departmental Bodies are continuing to provide effective support to the bodies to which they are appointed and an evidence base for considering re-appointments. No-one should be reappointed unless they have performed satisfactorily.

Member specific guidance

Code of conduct

Members of the SAC and its sub groups must observe the highest standards of impartiality, integrity and objectivity in relation to the advice they provide. Members must at all times:

- comply with their terms and conditions of appointment, scientific codes of practice⁵, and this handbook
- follow the Seven Principles of Public Life set out by the Nolan Committee on Standards in Public Life⁶ and the Universal Ethical Code⁶
- not misuse information gained in the course of their public service for personal gain or for political purpose, nor seek to use the opportunity of public service to promote their private interests or those of connected persons, firms, businesses or other organisations
- declare and register any interests they have that are relevant to the remit of SAC

Any appointment can be terminated early by Ministers if the appointee fails to perform his or her duties to a satisfactory standard. In addition, members and the Chair can stand down if they so wish.

Liability is covered in the terms and conditions of appointment; however, further information on the Government's views on the potential for liability in negligence of government scientific advice has been provided by GO-Science⁷.

It is not expected that SAC members will be approached with gifts or hospitality in relation to their SAC work. In the event that this does occur, SAC members should notify the Secretariat who will advise on how to proceed.

⁵ [Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees: CoPSAC 2011 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/231222/code-of-practice-for-scientific-advisory-committees-co-psac-2011.pdf)

⁶ [Universal ethical code for scientists - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/231222/universal-ethical-code-for-scientists.pdf)

⁷ [Scientific advice to government: legal liability \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/231222/scientific-advice-to-government-legal-liability.pdf)

Communication

Ministers

The CSA and Secretariat should be made aware of any meetings between SAC members and Ministers or other government representatives.

Members are not restricted from communicating with Ministers and others in their capacity as private individuals. However, if communication takes place in this individual capacity (for example, before a Parliamentary committee) it should be made clear that the individual's view is not necessarily that of the SAC.

Media

Communication with the media is covered in the Government Office for Science's Code of Practice on Scientific Advisory Committees.⁸ The SAC Chair will be the primary spokesperson for any contact with the media unless the Chair or the Secretariat has made other specific arrangements.

If a member receives an approach for an interview on behalf of SAC, the request must be referred to the SAC Secretariat. The Secretariat will liaise with the Defra press office, the SAC Chair, and the CSA will be informed as appropriate.

The SAC will follow a "no surprises" policy when dealing with the media. This is to ensure that the CSA and Defra remain informed and are able to respond or offer their own input to the media as appropriate.

Neither Ministers nor SAC Chairs should make announcements on issues relating to SAC advice (including policy announcements where SAC has been asked to provide advice on the associated evidence) without communicating their intention and the nature of the message to the other.

Political activity

In accordance with the Terms and Conditions provided with their appointment letter:

Members will not:

- occupy paid party political posts or hold particularly sensitive or high roles in a political party

⁸ [Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees: CoPSAC 2011 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

- lobby against Government policy. Members who have concerns about any aspect of policy should escalate these to the CSA and if necessary through the CSA to Ministers.

Members will:

- inform the CSA, and through the CSA, Ministers of any intention to accept a prominent position in any political party and should understand that their SAC appointment will be terminated
- resign from the SAC if they accept nomination for election to the House of Commons, European Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish Government or the Welsh Government

SAC members must be, and be seen to be, politically impartial. It will be exceptional for members to attend party conferences in an official SAC capacity. Any request to attend must be approved by the Secretariat in conjunction with the Cabinet Office. Specific guidance, leading up to key political events, such as annual party conferences and local and general elections will be issued by the Cabinet Office and shared with SAC members.

Members attending party conferences in a personal capacity should not make political speeches or engage in other political or controversial activity. Members should advise the Secretariat of any intention to attend or speak at an annual party conference. At all times, members must remain conscious of their general public responsibilities and exercise proper discretion.

Activities during an election period

SAC members will undertake their duties with due regard to the Cabinet Office guidance for civil servants during an election period.

Time commitment

SAC members will be expected to commit to the expectations that were detailed in the terms and conditions.

Claiming remuneration and travel expenses

Claiming remuneration and travel expenses for SAC work is optional. Current remuneration rates along with Defra's policy on claiming travel expenses are at **Annex B**. Any queries regarding claims should be referred to the Secretariat.

Register of interests

All SAC members will declare interests that are relevant to the remit of the SAC. To ensure the register is accurately maintained, members will inform the Secretariat of any changes as they occur and the Register content will be reviewed at each principal meeting.

Further information about the Register of Interests can be found in **Annex C**.

Conflict of interests

At the beginning of each SAC meeting, members will declare if they have any specific conflict of interest in relation to the planned agenda.

The minutes of the meeting will record where members have withdrawn from a discussion due to a conflict of interest.

Annex A: pairing scheme

The SAC and Defra-official pairing scheme is designed to support communication and understanding between SAC members and Defra officials.

The SAC and Defra-official pairing scheme will:

- provide the Defra officials with the opportunity to update SAC members on the emerging policy and evidence issues of the policy portfolio covered by the pairing
- provide Defra officials with the chance to use the SAC member as an independent sounding board for informal advice/challenge
- give the SAC member an opportunity to update Defra officials on current and future work priorities for SAC
- enable the SAC member to develop a detailed understanding of the policy context and associated evidence for the policy portfolio covered by the pairing; and act as the 'SAC Champion' for the policy/evidence portfolio; leading discussion in SAC meetings around topics within their paired portfolio

Pairing meetings will take place regularly, usually via teleconference, and will usually be limited to around an hour's duration.

If applicable, a short note of any key agreements / actions arising from the meeting should be produced and shared with the SAC Secretariat. The Secretariat will pursue any topics raised as relevant for SAC discussion and incorporate these into the SAC work plan.

Annex B: procedures for remuneration and travel and subsistence

The following rules are based on Defra's Travel and Subsistence (T&S) rules which apply to all officials regardless of grade. All financial arrangements are constantly kept under review and members will be informed of any changes to Defra's travel and subsistence policy.

Remuneration rates

The SAC Chair and members will be remunerated for SAC business as described below; but not for travelling time to and from these meetings (although travel and subsistence costs will be payable – see below).

SAC remuneration rates are:

- SAC Chair: £53.00 per hour
- SAC members: £39.00 per hour

Therefore, principal meetings (based on a 5 hour meeting and including an average preparation time per meeting of 2.5 hours):

- SAC Chair: £398 per meeting
- SAC members: £293 per meeting

Monthly teleconferences (based on a one hour teleconference and an average preparation time of 0.5 hour):

- SAC Chair: £80.00 per teleconference
- SAC members: £59.00 per teleconference

The current remuneration for attendance at a sub group meeting is based on a rate of (preparation time will be based on same rate and agreed in advance of the meeting):

- SAC Chair: £53.00 per hour
- SAC members: £39.00 per hour

To note: The Chair fee is higher than that of members in part to reflect the greater preparation time and follow-up required by the Chair.

Additional SAC activities

The SAC Chair or members may be asked to participate in other Defra or Government activities as a direct result of their SAC membership. Reimbursement may be available for

the time (and expenses occurred) on these activities, but given the limited budget available, any attendance should first be agreed with the Secretariat.

Travel and subsistence

Accommodation

Any necessary accommodation will be arranged by the SAC Secretariat according to Defra rules and expenditure limits.

Subsistence

At principal meetings lunch/refreshments will be provided at meetings; so subsistence rates should not normally be claimed. Where this is not the case and reimbursement has previously been agreed in advance with the Secretariat, payment will be for actual expenditure within the ceiling limits. Subsistence will be paid where the expense incurred is reasonable and additional to the SAC Chair or members' normal expenditure.

The upper ceiling limits for subsistence claims are:

- £5 (when on SAC business for over 5 hours)
- £10 (over 10 hours)
- £15 (over 12 hours)
- £25 for over a 24 hour period (applicable if there is an overnight stay at a hotel where lunch and/or dinner is not included in the hotel charge)

Optional tips and gratuities; and costs relating to alcohol will not be reimbursed.

Original receipts for all costs must be provided.

Travel

Reasonable travel expenses will be paid to the SAC Chair and members.

The SAC Chair and members are asked to consider sustainability and environmental issues when planning journeys, and contribute to achieving value for money by complying with Defra's travel and subsistence policy in line with Treasury requirements.

All rail travel must be standard class.

Travel should be booked as early as possible to secure the best rates.

Oyster card statements which detail each journey / price (available at London Underground ticket offices) should be provided for underground travel.

Taxi fares should be claimed **only** where there is no other suitable method of public transport.

Travel using private vehicles is discouraged unless essential for example on grounds of disability or where there is no practical public transport alternative. In these instances private car travel mileage is payable at £0.45 per mile. In this case Secretariat agreement should be secured in advance of travel. Where public transport is available, but travel by car is still deemed essential, for example having to carry bulky equipment, then agreement should be sought from the Secretariat, and a rate of £0.25 per mile will be payable.

Car parking, congestion charges, and toll charges necessarily incurred on official business are reimbursable. Travellers will not be reimbursed for any parking fines or speeding tickets.

Receipts must be provided.

How to claim

In the first instance, you **must be on the Defra system**. If you have recently claimed from Defra then you will be. If not, there are two forms that must be completed – claims cannot be processed without these details.

First Defra Claim - Payroll records

- NTWK28: New Entrant form
- NTWK07: Bank details form

Claiming expenses and remuneration

Travel and subsistence: Complete APSOP21. This can be done in two ways (a) electronically and submitted via e-mail to the secretariat or (b) manually and submitted, to the secretariat, via post.

The form contains guidance along with a separate tab for attaching scanned receipts.

Remuneration: Complete form NTWRK58. In doing so, please note:

- You must indicate which SAC activity you are claiming for.
- Remuneration is subject to tax and National Insurance contributions (NIC). Defra will make the appropriate deduction of tax/NIC on member's behalf. Any figures of tax/NIC will be reflected in members' P60 annual summary. The payment of remuneration will be classed as income for anyone completing a self-assessment form at the end of the tax year.

Completing the form can be done in two ways (a) electronically and submitted via e-mail to the secretariat or (b) manually and submitted, to the secretariat, via post.

Annex C: register of interests

The register records declarations made by members in respect of interests they have that are relevant to the remit of Defra's (SAC).

There is also an opportunity for SAC members to declare, at the beginning of a meeting, any conflict of interests relating to meeting agenda items. Members will withdraw from discussion of matters in which they feel that they cannot act impartially. Where this occurs, it will be reflected in the official record of the meeting.

You should declare any financial or other interests, or any personal connections that arise during your term of appointment including those that could be seen as providing a conflict of interest – real or perceived – between your public duties and private interests.

When considering what interests should be declared, you should ask yourself whether a member of the public, acting reasonably, would consider that the interest in question might influence your words, actions, or decisions. The examples given below are not exhaustive.

Financial interests

These can include:

- directorships
- shares or share options
- consultancies
- research grants and fee-paid work. In particular, the following should be declared:
 - current research commissioned directly by Defra for which you are Principal or co-investigators
 - current applications for research commissioned directly by Defra for which you are Principle or co-investigators

Non-financial interests

These can include non-financial private links with outside organisations or a high level of political activity.

Additional examples include:

- current positions in your institution that could benefit from information gained through the SAC
- current positions in the wider research community that could benefit from information gained through the SAC
- research interests of close family or colleagues who may benefit from information gained in SAC discussion
- board positions with other organisations that might be influenced or influence information gathered from / shared with the SAC

A [register of members' interests](#) has been published.