



Defra Science Advisory Council

January 2017 Teleconference Minutes

Matters arising

Action Number	Action detail	Owner	Deadline
Jan (17) 01	Work with the SAC Chair to ensure the SAC engage at key points during the development of EU exit.	Secretariat	asap
Jan (17) 02	Note the dates of the joint Defra and Royal Society Conference (29th and 30th March).	SAC members	asap
Jan (17) 03	Look for opportunities for greater coordination with the Economic Advisory Panel.	Secretariat and SAC Chair	asap
Jan(17) 04	Provide an update, at the March principal meeting, on the SAC-ED re-refresh, inviting the Chief Veterinary Officer if appropriate.	SAC-ED Chair	asap

1. Introduction

Professor Godfray welcomed attendees. Attendees and apologies are recorded at Annex A.

2. Chief Scientific Adviser's (CSA) update

In addition to the issues highlighted in Annex A of the meeting paper the CSA provided information on the following areas:

- a. **Air Quality** is an ongoing ministerial priority and the CSA is discussing the importance of embedding science into air quality policy with Sir Mark Walport, Government Chief Scientific Adviser.
- b. **Avian Influenza (bird flu)**. There are three confirmed outbreaks in the UK and Defra has declared a protection zone around each of these. The SAC will be contacted should additional scientific input be required.



- c. **Earth Observations.** The creation of a government wide observation service is underway and is currently embedded within Defra.
- d. **EU Exit.** Work is underway to review existing work on EU Exit across the department and think about the preparations required for EU Exit. The SAC's input will be sought on the science aspects and the Secretariat will liaise with the SAC Chair to determine how to do this.

Action: Jan (17) 1: SAC Secretariat to work with the SAC Chair to ensure the SAC engage at key points during the development of EU exit.

- e. **The joint Defra and Royal Society conference:** "Science for Defra: Excellence in the application of evidence". The conference will be held on the 29th and 30th March. SAC members will receive a formal invitation but until then dates should be noted in diaries. Additionally, the Howard Dalton lecture will take place on the 29 March and this year's speaker is Lord Krebs.

Action Jan (17) 02: SAC members to note the dates of the joint Defra and Royal Society Conference (29th and 30th March).

Following the CSA update, the SAC Chair congratulated the CSA on his published Nature article. Read a [copy of the article](#).

3. Review of the Expert Evidence Groups

The review lead explored, with the SAC, the strand of the implementation programme relating to the development of Strategic Evidence Committees. The SAC welcomed sight of the implementation programme and commented on its sound approach and opportunities for cross-fertilisation of ideas. Members were unsure that a Network of Evidence Experts would deliver the expected benefits but agreed that it was worth exploring further. SAC members highlighted that there is a willingness, within the science community, to engage with Defra but the department needs to be clear about its needs.

It was agreed that the supporting papers, aligning the ExCo delivery systems and Expert Evidence Groups to future Strategic Evidence Committees, should include the SAC Social Science Expert Group. The SAC are keen to explore opportunities to join up and co-ordinate with the Economic Advisory Panel.

To avoid assumptions that the work will lead to new committees it is important to be clear about the rationale for why the Strategic Evidence Committees are required. The review outcome is about strengthening how the department manages its committees and works with external evidence experts to ensure Defra becomes a better customer.



In conclusion, the SAC underlined the importance of looking critically at the proposed structure, demonstrating value for money and ensuring there is no overlap in committee responsibilities and remit.

Action Jan (17) 03: Secretariat, working with the SAC Chair, should look for opportunities for greater coordination with the Economic Advisory Panel.

4. National Foot and Mouth Table Top Exercise

The SAC Chair attended an impressive top table exercise to examine the UK's capacity to respond to a large scale, cross-border outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) on 8th December. The exercise simulated an evolving FMD outbreak over the period of a couple of weeks. A role for the SAC sub group on Exotic Diseases (SAC-ED) was identified, not in the first few days of an outbreak, but in instances where containment was not immediate. The SAC-ED would assist by interpreting the various forms of advice which Defra received. The SAC-ED could also, provide constructive advice and challenge. The SAC-ED will be kept in the loop early on in an outbreak and remain primed to engage. See also 5 below.

5. Sub Group Updates

a) **SAC Exotic Diseases Sub Group (SAC-ED).** James Wood, Chair of SAC-ED, updated SAC on a recent meeting with Defra's Chief Veterinary Officer, Nigel Gibbens and the SAC Chair to discuss the future operation of SAC-ED. SAC-ED will be retained but clarity is required on the groups role. Two main functions emerged from the discussion, the first related to activating SAC-ED during an emergency to provide advice, support and challenge and the second referred to an annual SAC-ED meeting to consider "peacetime" activities such as looking strategically at how outbreaks have been handled and identifying 'lessons learnt' to feed in to contingency planning.

The group's membership will be reviewed to ensure the right mix of skills and expertise; the SAC-ED Chair is keen to encourage cross-linkage with Defra's Social Science Expert Group and the Economics Advisory Panel. The SAC-ED must understand how Defra works to ensure it can offer value and this will form part of the member induction process. James Wood will work with the SAC Secretariat to review both the group's membership and terms of reference.

Action Jan (17) 4: The SAC-ED Chair will provide an update, at the March principal meeting, on the SAC-ED re-fresh, inviting the Chief Veterinary Officer if appropriate.

Data Sub Group. Paul Monks, Chair of the sub group, updated the SAC on a workshop held on 15th December to explore "Developing an effective Defra Data Science Function".



This was the first in a series of workshops aimed to help the sub group focus on and address a specific set of questions to assist Defra in the development of its Data programme. In addition to sub group members and Defra officials four external experts attended the workshop. An intellectual and stimulating discussion was held. Paul Monks will be preparing a report of practical outputs and then organising further work. The Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser congratulated the SAC on the success of the workshop, the workshop has stimulated discussion within Defra and is already having an impact on Defra thinking.

6. Any other business

No other business was raised.



Annex A: Attendees and apologies

SAC Members

Charles Godfray (Chair)
Sheila Bird
Tim Jickells
Paul Monks
Henrietta Moore
Wayne Powell
Sarah Whatmore
James Wood

Defra officials

Ian Boyd – Chief Scientific Adviser
Iain Williams – Deputy Chief Scientific Adviser
SAC Secretariat

Devolved Administration Observers

Alistair Carson - Department of Agriculture and Rural Development Northern Ireland
Chris Lea – Welsh Government

Apologies

Louise Heathwaite – Chief Scientific Adviser for Rural Affairs and Environment, Scottish Government and Scottish Devolved Administration Observer