

# Minutes of UKRI-BBSRC Council Meeting

## 13 March 2019

### Those attending:

Professor Ian Boyd  
Dr Belinda Clarke  
Professor Ian Graham FRS  
Professor Laura Green  
Professor Martin Humphries  
Dr Deborah Keith  
Professor Dame Ottoline Leyser FRS  
Professor Andrew Millar FRS  
Professor Malcolm Skingle CBE  
Professor David Stephens  
Professor Melanie Welham (UKRI-BBSRC Executive Chair and Chair of the meeting)

### Also attending:

Dr Paul Burrows  
Dr Amanda Collis  
Paul Gemmill  
Dr Karen Lewis  
Dr Alex Marsh  
Dr Kate Turton (for item 10)

Dr Oliver Hill-Andrews (Secretary)  
Sharon Southwood

### ITEM 1: OPENING REMARKS (ORAL)

1. Melanie Welham, Chair, welcomed everyone to the fourth Council meeting and introduced Alex Marsh, UKRI Deputy Director, Strategy as an observer.
2. Karen Lewis distributed a draft pamphlet titled *UK Biotechnology Influencing Everyday Lives*, which included examples of impact from research funded by UKRI-BBSRC.  
***ACTION BB19-01: UKRI-BBSRC to give Ian Boyd finished UK Biotechnology Influencing Everyday Lives pamphlets for distribution in Defra (Karen Lewis).***

### ITEM 2: MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 6 DECEMBER 2018 (UKRI BBSRC 01/2019)

3. The minutes were **AGREED** as a correct record of the meeting, subject to clarification of a reference to 'disproportionate' in paragraph 17.

### ITEM 3: PROGRESS ON ACTIONS AND MATTERS ARISING (ORAL)

4. Melanie provided Council with an update on all actions 'open' or 'in progress'.
5. Ian Graham updated Council on the task and finish group on bioscience for international development. The group had met twice and would meet again in the summer to identify key conclusions and agree its recommendations. Because the area was complex in terms of policy and research strategy, and often strayed beyond UKRI-BBSRC's remit, the group had focused on identifying the fundamental issues involved. These included the risk of overloading on the community, potentially unrealistic impact goals (and how impact should be measured), and the view that much ODA research was underpinning and enabling social and economic impact. Council noted a perception that Pathways to

Impact statements had narrowed over the years; it would be useful to make them more flexible and acknowledge different pathways to impact for different types of research.

***ACTION BB19-02: UKRI-BBSRC to consider its interpretation of Pathways to Impact and the guidance given to applicants (Amanda Collis).***

#### **ITEM 4: EXECUTIVE CHAIR'S REPORT (UKRI BBSRC 02/2019)**

6. Melanie presented her *Report from the Executive Chair*, which provided Council with an update on UKRI-BBSRC's recent activity.
7. The Executive Chair highlighted the following:
  - The Physics of Life Strategic Priorities Fund programme, led by EPSRC, with BBSRC and MRC, would award up to 8 projects in March to address challenges at the interface of physics and life science. Up to £15m was available for this call; a second call would run in 2021.
  - BBSRC had awarded £4.85m to a UK-wide consortium, "BRIGIT", to enhance UK surveillance and response to the threat of *Xylella fastidiosa* as Phase 1 of an £18.8m Strategic Priorities Fund programme on bacterial plant diseases with NERC, Defra and the Scottish Government. Phase 2 (due to launch summer 2019) would be an open call for multidisciplinary research on a wider range of bacteria which threaten plant health.
  - The £10m Future Biomanufacturing Research Hub (FBRH), co-funded by BBSRC and EPSRC (BBSRC contribution £2m), launched in February. Centred at the Manchester Institute of Biotechnology — with spokes at Imperial, UCL, Nottingham, the UK Catalysis Hub, IBioC and CPI — FBRH would develop new technologies based on industrial biotechnology.
  - BBSRC had confirmed funding for the Animal Welfare Research Network (AWRN) for another three years (to 2021). The network had secured co-funding from the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare. With nearly 500 UK members, AWRN was planning to expand internationally.
  - Eleven new Discovery Fellowships and five David Phillips Fellowships were awarded in the 2018 competition. An induction event for new fellows took place in February.
  - Forty-two UKRI Future Leader Fellowships had been awarded following round one interviews. Bioscience was well represented. Round two was undergoing review, with interviews scheduled for May and June.
  - As part of interim reporting for the UKRI Research and Innovation Infrastructure Roadmap, an initial analysis of the current research landscape was published in December. It supported the Progress Report, published in February, which identified future needs that could be addressed by infrastructures. This interim report would be used for further stakeholder engagement and the content would underpin the First Edition of the Infrastructure Roadmap, to be published in late summer 2019.
  - BBSRC received 38 applications to the Innovator of the Year 2019 competition. Shortlisting by a panel of experts chaired by Malcolm Skingle would take place in March. The award ceremony would be held in the Science Museum, London in May. Council members would be invited to the ceremony.
  - 24 BBSRC International Partnering Awards totalling £734k were awarded under the 2018 call, supporting partnering with Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Pakistan, Taiwan and the USA, as well as three International Workshops totalling £30k.
  - In January, BBSRC alongside funding partners in China, Thailand, Vietnam and the Philippines ran a dissemination workshop in Bangkok to mark the end of the Newton

Fund Sustainable Rice Initiative. The Thai Deputy Prime Minister Prajin Juntong gave a keynote presentation and awarded poster prizes to early career researchers. The event was covered on Thai news and in an article by the UK Ambassador to Thailand. BBSRC was praised for “acting as the bridge” between the different countries.

- Ten proposals had been recommended for funding under the FIC UKRI-JSPS (Japan) joint call — six in life sciences (four in BBSRC remit, 2 in MRC remit) and four in environmental sciences (NERC remit). UKRI allocated £5m to this call, matched by £2m from JSPS.
  - UKRI recently announced a £79m investment in international projects through Wave 1 of FIC. BBSRC led on two of these: UK-USA Breakthrough Technologies to Advance Crop Breeding (USA) and Ecology and Evolution of Infectious Diseases (USA/Israel). Outcomes of FIC Wave 2 were expected shortly. BBSRC led a cross-Council bid to further expand UK multidisciplinary participation in the Ecology and Evolution of Infectious Diseases (EEID) programme with US funders.
  - Under the ISCF Transforming Food Production challenge, 23 projects totalling £19.3m (with £7.7m leveraged funding from business) had been supported through the first Collaborative R&D competition covering productive and sustainable crop and ruminant production systems.
  - Three science news items had recently appeared (protein-based drug production in GM hen eggs; gribble digestive system may hold the key to sustainable biofuel production; and soil bacteria provide a promising *E. coli* treatment). An impact case study on improved control of bovine brucellosis (a commonly acquired zoonosis) in Punjab had also been published.
8. The Executive Chair also updated Council on the internal reorganisation of UKRI. Senior management had been working with Quartz Associates to ensure that the councils were able to administer the increased funding that was anticipated as part of the government’s aim to increase overall expenditure on research and development to 2.4% of GDP. The outcomes of this work could not yet be shared with staff and would include some internal re-organisation (such as changes in line management). The schedule for implementation of the changes was ambitious.
9. Council noted the Executive Chair’s report, and in particular:
- Commented that securing industrial involvement in the Future Leaders Fellowships was a challenge (partly because the 7-year duration of the fellowships was a significant commitment). However, the applications were of high quality and there was a good gender balance, particularly in applications in UKRI-BBSRC’s remit.
  - Noted that significant pieces of infrastructure, for example Scottish research vessels, had not been included in the infrastructure roadmap analysis and progress report. It was noted that the initial survey work had drawn out general trends and would be supported by further evidence.
  - Discussed the number of applications to the Innovator of the Year competition. UKRI-BBSRC worked hard to encourage submissions and was satisfied with their quality and quantity.
  - Noted that the gribble case study was a good example of new insights in science arising from varied backgrounds (one of the researchers has a keen interest in boating).

## **ITEM 5: UPDATES FROM GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS (ORAL)**

10. Ian Boyd updated Council on Defra’s progress in developing a set of systems research projects (in marine, air quality, rural land use, food, and resources and waste) which aimed to improve connections between the research community and policy

professionals. Defra had received high-quality applications from individuals interested in working at the interface of policy and research, some of whom also had experience of systems thinking. The senior research fellows had an office in Defra and were supported by civil servants. **ACTION BB19-03: UKRI-BBSRC to consider inviting Defra's food systems lead to a future UKRI-BBSRC Council meeting (Secretariat).**

11. One of the senior research fellows' jobs would be to ensure that Defra devoted enough resources to the governance of Strategic Priorities Fund projects. The SPF had been successful from Defra's point of view, particularly with regards to collaborating with the research councils.
12. Defra's food strategy was being developed and would likely be published in the autumn. It would also be put out for public consultation. The Agriculture Bill was still going through the House of Commons, and Defra was discussing how some of the funding that was used for direct income (pillar one) support could be diverted to research and innovation.
13. Defra had organised a horizon scanning and foresight workshop, which would have wide applicability (for example for UKRI-BBSRC's proposed strategic ideas pipeline). Participants at the workshop began to map what alternative futures might look like, and the importance and uncertainty of social change was a prominent theme. Defra was exploring how to make the outputs of the workshop more widely available.
14. Government had announced its tariff policy in the event of a no-deal Brexit. It included protections on certain types of food, which would help to buttress vulnerable industries.

#### **ITEM 6: STRATEGIC DELIVERY PLAN AND BUDGET (UKRI BBSRC 03/2019)**

15. Paul Burrows thanked Council for their comments on a previous draft of the Strategic Delivery Plan, which had been taken on board. Since December, the SDP had also been revised following comments from Professor Alice Gast (UKRI Board member), Sir Mark Walport and a copy editor. Council was invited to approve the SDP ahead of its consideration by the UKRI Board (on 27 March) and to delegate final sign-off on behalf of BBSRC Council to the Executive Chair.
16. Council asked about the changes suggested by Sir Mark. These were relatively minor, and included being more specific about near-term actions and more ambitious about long-term aims, and acknowledging cross-council partnerships. Council suggested adding a reference to EPSRC in the section on sustainable agriculture. **ACTION BB19-04: UKRI-BBSRC to consider adding an explicit reference to EPSRC in the section on sustainable agriculture in the SDP (Paul Burrows).**
17. Shared priorities between councils and criteria for measuring success (such as key performance indicators) would be included in the cross-cutting chapter, which would provide an overview of cross-cutting funds (for example the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund, Strategic Priorities Fund, Global Challenges Research Fund and Newton Fund), cross-cutting policy areas (for example research integrity, open access and equality, diversity and inclusion), UKRI's approach to evaluation, and UKRI transformation.
18. Council **APPROVED** the Strategic Delivery Plan and agreed to **DELEGATE** final sign off to the Executive Chair.
19. Paul Gemmill provided Council with an overview of UKRI-BBSRC's budget for 2019–20, which was the final year of the current spending review period. At the beginning of that period, BBSRC protected some areas, notably responsive mode and postgraduate training, which meant that other areas — such as the institutes and overall impact activity — saw reductions. An increase in cross-cutting funds had compensated somewhat, but restoring some of the councils' core budget allocation would be an important element in the next spending review bid.

20. Administration funding continued to decrease to 2020 in line with government efficiency directives and with the move to central UKRI of support services, such as finance and people development, resulting in a significant drop in administrative costs from 2018/19 and 2019/20.
21. Council **NOTED** UKRI-BBSRC's budget position for 2019–20, asked about the drop in co-funding (primarily owing to several multi-partner funding programmes coming to an end), and highlighted the importance of having good ideas available at short notice (in the context of an increase in the cross-cutting funds).

#### **ITEM 7: INSTITUTES IN THE BBSRC STRATEGIC CONTEXT (UKRI BBSRC 04/2019)**

22. Paul Gemmill introduced this item, noting that UKRI-BBSRC invested approximately a third of its annual funding (circa £150m per year) into eight strategically funded institutes through a range of mechanisms, including significant capital investment in infrastructure. It was therefore important, in the context of an upcoming spending review and the institutes' mid-term reviews, for Council to consider where the institutes sat in UKRI-BBSRC's strategic context.
23. There had been several changes in the funding context in recent years, which UKRI-BBSRC needed to respond to. These changes included a reduction in core funding, an increase in funding through collective funds including for research which is Official Development Assistance-compliant, the 'place agenda' (which some institutes could benefit from), and the development of research capabilities in universities. Council noted that EU Exit would also have an impact on the institutes: though evidence for a lack of retention of EU staff was anecdotal, for example 25 per cent of the John Innes Centre's funding came from the EU. Other changes that could affect institutes included the impact agenda within the Research Excellence Framework and the opportunities for cross-council working within UKRI.
24. Council commented on the current aims and deliverables of the institutes. Broadly speaking, the institutes served two functions: they were custodians of national capabilities (including intellectual capability) and they responded to strategic and national needs. Stimulating the long-term, strategic thinking was a challenge, and institutes should be encouraged to be more outward looking and emphasise their role in the nation as lynchpins of science. There was also a need to respond to changing priorities (for example the removal of the Common Agricultural Policy), but competitions for five-year funding did not incentivise strategic thinking. Council suggested that UKRI-BBSRC needed clearly to articulate its expectations of the institutes. Rather than seeing the institutes in silos, they should be set in a broader context (including within UKRI) to make them more than the sum of their parts. This required imaginative thinking, and greater connectivity in the research ecosystem.
25. Council also discussed the sustainability of the institutes' funding, including whether there was a correlation between an institute's success and multi-stream funding. It was generally the case that institutes lost their strategic focus once core funding dropped below 50–60 per cent of total income.
26. Institutes had been forced to act more like universities, for example by applying for responsive mode funding, which had an impact on perceptions in the research community. Council noted that institutes struggled to secure long-term funding from the private sector; UKRI-BBSRC should consider how to encourage the private sector to contribute more.
27. ***ACTION BB19-05: Executive team to consider discussion and think about next steps, including short-term actions on sustainability of institutes. Executive team will report back to Council with proposed next steps (Paul Gemmill).***

#### **ITEM 8: BBSRC STRATEGIC IDEAS PIPELINE (UKRI BBSRC 05/2019)**

28. Amanda Collis provided an overview of a proposed 'strategic ideas pipeline', which would help to capture and prioritise ideas for new strategic activities, priorities and interventions. The pipeline would help to ensure that UKRI-BBSRC was able to respond quickly to the opportunities provided by the new collective funding streams, but it would not be a competition for funding, nor would it be about ideas for large research grants or other 'commitment-ready' investment proposals that could be funded through existing mechanisms. Strategic ideas would be prioritised, at a relatively early concept stage, against criteria focused on excellence and transformative potential.
29. Amanda invited Council to discuss and comment on the plans for a strategic ideas pipeline, focusing in particular on the submission, prioritisation and development of ideas.
30. Council welcomed the proposal, and discussed:
- How to encourage the submission of creative ideas. Clear guidance was important, both to set out the desired scale of the ideas sought and to manage expectations (so that proposers did not expect research funding after the development of their ideas). New and exciting proposals would not come from academics alone, and would arise only after conversations with wider communities (including end users). Workshops could be commissioned, which would also ensure that important areas of strategic interest were not overlooked.
  - How to prioritise and develop ideas. While UKRI-BBSRC may receive many submissions to the pipeline, those that were prioritised and developed should together form a coherent strategic goal and vision; the Strategic Delivery Plan did not articulate a goal which allowed UKRI-BBSRC to judge the long-term utility of different proposals. Review panels and working groups would therefore require clear guidance. UKRI-BBSRC should be looking for the next overarching framework for biology (comparable to genomics or synthetic biology), which would bring together the different branches of the biosciences.
  - UKRI-BBSRC office workload. The proposed strategic ideas pipeline represented an evolution of office ways of working, with a shift of emphasis. However, staff workload should be borne in mind in the development of the pipeline.
31. ***ACTION BB19-06: UKRI-BBSRC to consider Council's advice, particularly with regard to the submission and development of ideas, which should be broadened in terms of the communities consulted. UKRI-BBSRC to run a pilot ideas pipeline by summer 2019 and present the results to Council (Amanda Collis).***

#### **ITEM 9: UPDATE ON STRATEGIC ADVICE TASK AND FINISH GROUP (ORAL)**

32. Malcolm Skingle updated Council on the strategic advice task and finish group, which had been set up to review UKRI-BBSRC's advisory structures. The group had considered such questions as whether Strategy Advisory Panels (SAPs) should be involved in funding calls, whether they should have standing chairs, how to strike a balance between continuity of panel membership and new members, and whether panel members should be encouraged to write papers in advance of meetings.
- This paragraph has been redacted as it relates to work in progress.*
33. The task and finish group would meet again to finalise its key recommendations and would consult with staff within UKRI-BBSRC who supported the SAPs. The existing advisory structures had been extended until the end of 2019, so work on the new arrangements would need to get underway as soon as possible after the June Council meeting.
34. ***ACTION BB19-07: Malcolm Skingle to update Council on the strategic advice task and finish group at the next Council meeting.***

## ITEM 10: CORPORATE STAKEHOLDER MAPPING (UKRI BBSRC 06/2019)

35. Paul Gemmill, supported by Kate Turton, outlined UKRI-BBSRC's approach to identifying key corporate stakeholders. Stakeholders were defined as those high-level organisations or individuals that could support or hinder the delivery of UKRI-BBSRC's strategic aims. There was significant overlap with individuals and organisations that UKRI-BBSRC worked with regularly, and the interface between the corporate and 'day-to-day' activities was managed across the office through regular Communications and Engagement Team (CET) discussions at branch and domain level and through cross membership of various project groups.
36. Every two years, as part of its management of stakeholders, UKRI-BBSRC commissioned independent stakeholder research to gauge perceptions of the organisation and explore the potential influence of significant external events. The majority of stakeholders knew a great deal or a fair amount about UKRI-BBSRC, felt that UKRI-BBSRC provided a strong voice for bioscience and saw the launch of UKRI as a positive opportunity.
37. Council provided numerous suggestions of potential stakeholders to add to UKRI-BBSRC's stakeholder map, including: the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the agri-tech centres, a broader range of government departments (the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Transport), synthetic biology businesses (for example Synthace), data science companies such as Microsoft and Google, agronomy companies, Ocado, Airbus, the European Research Council, Associated British Foods, Fujitsu, Dyson, British Airways and publishers. ***ACTION BB19-08: UKRI-BBSRC to consider Council's suggested stakeholders (Paul Gemmill).***
38. Council discussed how UKRI-BBSRC's executive team could influence stakeholders, and noted that 'influencer dinners' could be used to capture ideas for the strategic ideas pipeline. Council also noted that UKRI-BBSRC did not spend enough on communicating its activity to stakeholders and the public. This needed to be done in the context of UKRI, which was looking at its top 10–20 stakeholders and seeking to engage strategically. ***ACTION BB19-09: UKRI-BBSRC to consider Council's suggestion for how the executive team could influence stakeholders (Paul Gemmill).***

## ITEM 11: ANY OTHER BUSINESS / COUNCIL FORWARD WORK PLAN (ORAL)

39. Council was invited to suggest agenda items for discussion at future meetings. Open research data would be discussed at an upcoming meeting (to be led by Andrew Millar).

Council Secretariat  
March 2019