

## **Minutes of UKRI-BBSRC Council meeting held on 12 June 2024 in London.**

### **Those attending:**

Steve Bagshaw  
Professor Ewan Birney  
Andy Griffiths  
Professor Gideon Henderson (DEFRA CSA) (items 3 -8)  
Professor Martin Humphries (Chair of the meeting)  
Professor Christine Orengo  
Dr Neil Parry  
Professor Guy Poppy (UKRI-BBSRC Interim Executive Chair)  
Professor Jo Price  
Professor Ijeoma Uchegbu

### **Also attending:**

Dr Amanda Collis  
Dr Jef Grainger  
Dr Sarah Perkins  
Bill Poll  
Zahir Sachak  
Dr Rosie Cornelius (items 4 to 6 only)  
Dr Alex Amey (item 7 only)  
Dr Alison Park (item 7 only)  
Dr Pete Burlinson (item 9 and 11 only)  
Dr Stephanie Blackwell (item 10 only)  
Laura Notton (item 10 only)  
Sarah Cresswell  
Ksymena Grzybowska (Secretary)

### **ITEM 1. OPENING REMARKS**

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and in particular two new Council members whose appointments started on 1 April 2024:
  - Andy Griffiths (Global Head of Sustainable Procurement, Diageo)
  - Neil Parry (Research Programme Director, Biotechnology and Biosourcing, Unilever)
2. This was Anne Ferguson-Smith's last Council meeting in her Council member role before her departure to take up BBSRC Executive Chair's role on 1 July 2024. The Chair thanked Anne, on behalf of Council, for all her contributions during her tenure.
3. The Chair, on behalf of Council, thanked Guy for taking on the role of Interim Executive Chair from 1 July 2023 to 30 June 2024. During his tenure with BBSRC, Guy drove forward BBSRC's mission and Council thanked him for his exceptional leadership, passion and dedication.
4. The Chair also thanked Amanda Collis (interim BBSRC Deputy Executive Chair) and Jef Grainger (interim BBSRC Research Strategy and Programmes Executive Director) for stepping up during the interim period prior to the appointment of the new BBSRC Executive Chair.
5. Apologies were received from Anne Ferguson-Smith, Steven Spoel and Karen Lewis.

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 12 MARCH 2024 (UKRI BBSRC 10/2024)**

7. The minutes were agreed as a correct record of the meeting.

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

8. The Chair went through the actions and all of them were completed.

#### **ITEM 4. EXECUTIVE CHAIR'S REPORT (UKRI BBSRC 11/2024)**

9. Council noted a performance summary highlighting key achievements, future plans and a scorecard summarising progress against the Near-Term Actions (NTAs) set out in the BBSRC's Delivery Plan as at the end of Quarter 4. Council noted amber rating for EMBLE-EBI and agreed with its rating.
10. As mentioned in previous Council meeting, BBSRC Executive identified and focused on four key areas for improvement after the last People Survey 2023 results, namely motivation, interest and engagement, learning and development, organisational change and purpose and objectives. Employee focus groups had been established for these areas and their work was moving towards the next phase of recommendations that would be provided to the BBSRC Executive Team. The work of the groups was very positive, impactful and led to greater engagement with staff (including through two away day events with all staff).
11. Guy Poppy reflected on initial results of the 2024 UKRI staff survey and commented that BBSRC scores in relation to questions about senior leadership and confidence about actions arising from surveys being taken forward were higher than in other parts of UKRI. Results relating to line management were also higher. Council asked that it would be useful to have a high-level overview of the 2024 People Survey results (BBSRC and UKRI). Council was informed that BBSRC scores for bullying and harassment were lower than in other parts of UKRI and the BBSRC Executive Team would investigate further and learn from other Councils where applicable.

#### **Action 99/2024: Council asked that it would be useful to see high-level overview of the 2024 UKRI People Survey results (Bill Poll, September 2024)**

12. The Chair thanked Guy and the Executive Team for addressing staff morale following the last People Survey in 2023 and said that a lot was accomplished to engage BBSRC staff.
13. Council was interested to hear more about the current situation with retention and recruitment of staff and was informed that BBSRC Executive Team was having regular discussions with BBSRC's new HR Business Partner to understand trends and addressing high turnover of staff, that was particularly challenging at Band D and E level. Other key areas of focus for the BBSRC Executive Team were career paths and progression and learning and development.

14. Council asked about CGIARs (the leading global partnership in food security for developing countries) and BBSRC links with CGIAR centres. Council noted that following the launch of the UK-CGIAR Centre by the Prime Minister in November 2023, BBSRC was seeking to co-fund a second round of awards under the Centre with Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), which would further strengthen UK bioscience collaborations with CGIAR. BBSRC linked with particular centres, largely in International Wheat Yield Partnership. The ambition was to build UK capacity that was relevant with centres overseas.
15. BBSRC was partnering with funders in the UK, Canada, Finland, Japan and The Republic of Korea to support the US National Science Foundation Global Centres competition, which enabled global consortia to create prominent and enduring global centres of excellence and Council discussed opportunities for engaging with industry community, e.g, through BBSRC industry clubs. This would also be an opportunity for communications and to increase visibility.

*This section of the minutes relating to BBSRC and UKRI's financial information was deemed business sensitive and therefore recorded separately.*

16. Council asked about funding for UKRI strategic themes and noted that there was additional money BBSRC received as the leader of the Tackling Infections theme. Funding was also leveraged with money from industry and the government. Council was informed how BBSRC budget of £571m was constructed and high-level financial information would be provided as part of the Spending Review discussion at the next Council meeting in September 2024.

**Action 100/2024: High-level financial information would be provided as part of the Spending Review discussion at the next Council meeting in September 2024 (Zahir Sachak, on agenda).**

17. BBSRC was working closely with Innovate UK using a 'systems approach' to innovation. There were several aspects to this work including developing an Investor Partnership programme for bio-innovation, engaging in the re-development of ICURE and more fully understanding the component parts of an innovation system and their interaction. The aim would be to work holistically across an innovation system, identify gaps, and apply this thinking to enhance and increase the efficacy of the system. Learning could be used to understand the effectiveness of existing and future Bio-Clusters and could inform BBSRC's approach to embedding 'Place' considerations. Council was interested to hear more about the progress and noted that BBSRC Associate Directors from BBSRC Capability and Innovation Domain participated in workshops and there were more workshops planned.

**Action 101/2024: Provide an update on the progress relating to BBSRC and Innovate UK's work using a 'systems approach' (Karen Lewis, September 2024).**

18. Council commented that BBSRC Sparking Innovation conference that brought together innovators, investors and the wider UK bioscience innovation community for networking and discussion of challenges/future needs was very successful.
19. Council discussed Research and Innovation Culture and focused on challenges and interdisciplinarity rather than disciplines when working with partners (e.g. other Councils, industry and universities). An example of National Biofilm Innovation Centre was discussed as an example enabling culture change.
20. Council noted a brief update on the last UKRI Board and Senior Independent Members conference held on 4 June 2024.

**Action 102/2024: A copy of the briefing and a summary of discussion from the last UKRI Board and Senior Independent Members conference held on 4 June 2024 would be circulated to Council members (Ksymena Grzybowska, completed)**

21. Council noted that BBSRC had stakeholders' engagement framework in place and work was progressing in this area. However, it was noted that BBSRC had light resources to deliver engagement strategy. Council was interested to hear more details about it in the future.
22. Council noted an update on Rothamsted Research.

#### **ITEM 5. UPDATES FROM UKRI (ORAL)**

23. The Chair invited Rosie Cornelius, UKRI Deputy Director Analysis and Performance, to provide UKRI updates. Rosie reflected on the following:
  - a) Spending Review, which was now likely to be multi-year.
  - b) Ongoing recruitment of UKRI's CEO.
  - c) New UKRI Chief of External Affairs and Communications, Poli Stuart-Lacey who would start her appointment in July 2024.
  - d) High-level 2024 UKRI People Survey results which were overall slightly more positive than last year's results.
  - e) City Region Deals and UKRI's role in the place agenda.

#### **ITEM 6. 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 as follows:
  - a) Following announcement of the general election on 4 July 2024 all public appointments and announcements were stopped.
  - b) DEFRA's planning for the next Spending Review.
  - c) G20 in Brazil.
  - d) Horizon Europe and BBSRC, NERC and DEFRA working closely on cluster 6 (Food, Bioeconomy, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Environment). There has been a slow improvement seen in the number of applications.
  - e) Civil servants' headcount control.
  - f) DEFRA R&D fellowships working in policy focused environment.
  - g) National capabilities and their importance to feed into government and fundamental science. UKRI's focus was on skills and research in the future.

#### **ITEM 7. UPDATE ON UKRI CROSS RESEARCH COUNCIL RESPONSIVE MODE PILOT SCHEME (UKRI BBSRC 12/2024)**

25. The Chair welcomed Alison Park, ESRC Deputy Director and Senior Responsible Officer for the Cross Research Council Responsive Mode (CRCRM) Pilot scheme, Alex Amey, MRC Business Engagement Manager and HO Interdisciplinary Responsive Mode, and Pete Burlinson, BBSRC Head of Strategy, Rules of Life, involved in the project board.
26. This item was an opportunity to update BBSRC Council on the CRCRM pilot and reflect on the bioscience community response so far.
27. CRCRM was an innovative project to support interdisciplinary research collectively as per 2015 Paul Nurse Review and later the 2022 Grant Review recommendations. This pilot aimed to help further break down silos and barriers to supporting interdisciplinary research in the UK. It would support bottom-up interdisciplinary research ideas that significantly span the remits of different Research

Councils. It was addressing common challenges reported by applicants, including the need to identify a lead Research Council and the difficulties in fairly assessing interdisciplinary research through traditional peer review.

28. Alison introduced the slides and talked about the aims of the pilot, timelines and assessment of applications. The CRCRM pilot had two funding opportunities; the first round was completed and 36 awards were funded with the next opportunity published in early June 2024. Through the two calls of the pilot UKRI would assess demand and refine processes. Feedback was being sought from stakeholders, including applicants and members of the interdisciplinary assessment college (IAC) after each stage of the process, which would contribute towards an evaluation of the scheme.
29. Council noted the presentation and welcomed the progress of the pilot to date and made very positive comments about the assessment of applications and the process.
30. Council asked about banding applications in different priority levels to tension across panels and applying partial randomisation process of high-quality applications. Such interventions were something that UKRI was interested in and working with the Metascience Unit would provide more data about using these types of interventions in the next year.
31. Council discussed the community response to the call and how they could be further supported to make the most of this funding scheme and emphasised the importance of evaluation of the pilot and working with the community and co-creating lessons learnt, e.g. reaching out to panel members, chairs and applicants for qualitative feedback. Evaluation should focus on informing future interdisciplinary funding opportunities and assessment processes, looking at research opportunities and potential impact as well as benchmarking and identifying gaps.
32. Council was pleased to see that BBSRC was collaborating with the DSIT/ESRC Metascience Unit about use of the cohort of CRCRM projects to help understand the barriers to success for interdisciplinary research to extract generalisable learnings about what behaviours, processes, infrastructure, culture, and incentives help or hinder successful interdisciplinary collaboration.
33. The importance of technology supporting the process was emphasised and complexity of processing applications on two systems (Siebel and the Funding Service) was acknowledged.
34. Council was interested to know about engagement with other eligible institutions (not only universities) and how they engaged with the pilot. UKRI would look into that.
35. Council noted that for round two UKRI was introducing institutional caps to ensure that there was capacity within the IAC for assessments and for UKRI resources to process the applications in a timely manner. Organisations would be given a cap and would be asked to prioritise their applications to submit within this allocation limit. Guidance would be provided to universities to ensure diverse selection of applications.
36. The Chair invited Pete to talk about bioscience analysis of the pilot and Pete said that there was a very good coverage in biosciences. Engineering Biology was not featuring strongly because of technology transformation hubs. However, it was noted that this could change in the next round.
37. Key learnings from round one were high demand and low level of interdisciplinarity understanding within the community. It was noted that there was a good rate of responses to surveys and UKRI was applying some of the learning to round two.
38. Council noted that UKRI was trialling several innovative ways of doing assessments and awarding of funding, including institutional caps on number of outlines submitted to manage demand, Panel only assessment (members drawn from interdisciplinary assessment college), no external peer review and banding and partial randomisation process of high-quality applications to award funding.
39. In summary, the Chair reiterated positive comments made by Council members, who welcomed innovative approaches taken in the CRCRM pilot.

## **ITEM 8 REVIEW AND REFRESH OF BBSRC'S FORWARD LOOK FOR UK BIOSCIENCE (UKRI BBSRC 13/2024)**

40. The Chair welcomed Stephanie Blackwell, BBSRC Head of Strategy Coordination and Insight and Laura Notton, Associate Director, Strategy and Planning, to the meeting and invited Sarah Perkins to introduce this item.
41. The paper provided Council with an overview of BBSRC's plans to review and refresh its 'Forward Look for UK Bioscience'. The aim of this work was to ensure that BBSRC's strategy to support UK bioscience reflected evolving stakeholder needs and values, and changes to the research and innovation landscape. It also outlined plans for stakeholder engagement to inform this work and consultation undertaken to date, highlighting emerging bioscience-led themes and challenges that may help shape thinking with respect to BBSRC's future direction.
42. Stephanie, who was leading the project, gave a presentation introducing the Forward Look refresh, outlining the indicative timeline for the review and themes emerging from BBSRC stakeholder consultations.
43. Council noted the plans to review and refresh BBSRC's Forward Look for UK Bioscience and was invited to consider and prioritise areas (the science-led themes and challenges identified through stakeholder engagements to date) that would deliver significant positive impact either in terms of scientific/technological advancement or in terms of addressing grand challenges and where BBSRC had a critical role to play.
44. Prior to the discussion of the specific themes, Council made an important comment about how this work would fit into the wider UKRI, its interrelations with different parts of the system and BBSRC's role.
45. Council considered the current geopolitical situation and its impact on food security specifically, that continued to be a key priority in the long-term. Council said that grand challenges remained largely the same.
46. Science-led themes and challenges/opportunities identified by Council were as follows:
  - a) Artificial Intelligence (AI), its multiple usage and its crystallising effect on biology (e.g. image analysis). Biodiversity and understanding ecosystems were areas ready for AI revolution (satellite imaging and gene sequencing).
  - b) Basic biology of aging and fertility
  - c) Learning from organisms under constant strain and from extreme environments (e.g. marine science)
  - d) Biology as a toolbox
  - e) Re-thinking nitrogen to reduce steps in farm paradigm.
  - f) Moving towards predictive biology (using data, AI and novel architecture)
  - g) Chemistry of the cell and its physiology
  - h) Application of AI to the literature
  - i) AI in drug discovery
  - j) Bridging the gap between genotype and phenotype
  - k) Imaging technologies (e.g. high-resolution imaging of brains) and connectomics.
  - l) There was a gap identified by Council relating to trees and forests.
47. Council made comments about using data insights to inform decision-making and reaching out to non-traditional networks and clusters. Council encouraged continued support for developing

fundamental skills and tools and efforts to attract talent to the UK to help resolving fundamental questions.

48. The Chair thanked Stephanie and Laura for attending the meeting.

#### **ITEM 9. BBSRC BIOSCIENCE BIG IDEAS PIPELINE: TARGETED CALL FOR IDEAS (UKRI BBSRC 05/2024)**

49. The Chair welcomed Pete Burlinson, BBSRC Head of Strategy, Rules of Life, to the meeting. Pete introduced his paper which provided a short update following the previous Council discussion in March 2024.

50. At its last meeting, Council reviewed the outcome of a targeted call for Big Ideas submissions that ran between October 2023 and January 2024. This included the prioritisation of ideas by the Big Ideas Panel chaired by Jo Price, Council member, as well as emergent research themes identified by the panel across the portfolio of ideas submissions.

51. Council noted the progress on implementing the outcomes of the Big Ideas Pipeline solicitation, and the scale and scope of engagement activities in follow up:

- a) feedback had been provided to the individuals who submitted ideas to the pipeline. The expectation was that the wider bioscience community would have the opportunity to reflect on the ideas and themes as part of wider community engagement around the Forward Look.
- b) Outputs of the pipeline were being fed into the cycle of business for BBSRC's Strategy Advisory Panels, initially via the Executive Director's report.
- c) Insights from the pipeline were also being brought to bear in on-going discussions with other Councils and Government Departments on the future focus of UKRI strategic thematic areas and technology missions.
- d) Given a key aspect of many of the ideas was increased community coordination and networking, subject to final confirmation of budget approval BBSRC would be highlighting a planned network funding opportunity delivered through Responsive Mode to the submitters as a potential next step to community-building around their concepts.

52. Council considered the scope for further prioritisation of high priority ideas and themes and the following points were made in discussion:

- a) Council emphasised the importance of mapping emerging themes onto the strategic themes and reflecting on priorities and their alignment with the BBSRC Forward Look.
- b) Council discussed the balance of ideas at the UKRI level and ensuring grouping, alignment and prioritisation across UKRI (via existing UKRI big ideas forum)
- c) Important themes that were highlighted that did not come through via the BBSRC Big Ideas Pipeline were air quality and exposome.
- d) Council acknowledged that there were many good ideas submitted via the Big Ideas Pipeline call, however budgets were limited. Therefore, Council emphasised the importance of communication and reflecting where UKRI could make a difference and where the competitive research advantage was.
- e) Council also discussed incentivisation of the industry community, bringing end users and scientists together and community ownership.
- f) Council agreed that there was value in running workshops for some of the ideas.

53. The Chair thanked Pete for attending the meeting and presenting the paper.

#### **ITEM 10 SPENDING REVIEW UPDATE (UKRI BBSRC 15/2024)**

54. Council noted the paper that provided a brief update on UKRI and BBSRC preparations for the next Spending Review.
55. Following the announcement that a General Election would take place on 4 July 2024, assumptions had been revised such that a full Spending Review with a multi-year settlement from the outset was now the primary planning scenario.
56. A more substantial paper would be provided to Council at its next meeting in September 2024.

**Action: A more substantial paper would be provided to Council at its next meeting in September 2024 (Sarah Perkins, on agenda).**

#### **ITEM 11. AOB AND FUTURE COUNCIL MEETING AGENDA ITEMS – FORWARD LOOK (UKRI BBSRC 16/2024)**

57. Council noted the dates for future meetings and future agenda items. The next BBSRC Council meeting in September 2024 in Manchester would be followed by a joint session and dinner with NERC Council. Council suggested the following themes such as biodiversity, air quality, climate adaptation, land use, trees and biology in extreme environments, ecosystem services, bioenergy, the role that techno-economic assessment and lifecycle assessment can / should play.
58. Council noted that BBSRC Executive Leadership Team was re-thinking ways of Strategic Advisory Panels (SAPs) engagement with BBSRC Council replacing past model of Council membership on SAPs that proved labour intensive. BBSRC was considering inviting SAPs Chairs to Council meetings and Council welcomed this idea and emphasised the importance of greater engagement between Council and SAPs.

Council Secretariat  
June 2024



Agenda Item	Action Description	Owner	Delivery Date	Status
	<i>Actions from June 2024 Council meeting</i>			
4.	<i>Action 99/2024: Council asked that it would be useful to see high -level overview of the 2024 UKRU People Survey results (Bill Poll, ongoing)</i>	<i>Bill Poll</i>	<i>September 2024</i>	<i>Completed. On CouncilNET</i>
4.	<i>Action 100/2024: High-level financial information would be provided as part of the Spending Review discussion at the next Council meeting in September 2024 (Zahir Sachak, on agenda).</i>	<i>Zahir Sachak</i>	<i>September 2024</i>	<i>On agenda</i>
4.	<i>Action 101/2024: Provide an update on the progress relating to BBSRC and Innovate UK's work using a 'systems approach. (Karen Lewis, completed).</i>	<i>Karen Lewis</i>	<i>September 2024</i>	<i>Completed. On CouncilNET</i>
4.	<i>Action 102/2024: A copy of the briefing and a summary of discussion from the last UKRI Board and Senior Independent Members conference held on 4 June 2024 would be circulated to Council members (Ksymena Grzybowska, completed)</i>	<i>Ksymena Grzybowska</i>	<i>June 2024</i>	<i>Completed</i>

