

Review of the Food Standard Agency’s Science Council and Advisory Committee for Social Sciences

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Introduction

- 1. The Food Standards Agency (FSA), established in 2000, is an independent non-ministerial government department which works to protect public health and consumer’s interests in relation to food in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Its work includes food safety and food crime, as well as helping to improve the healthiness and sustainability of diets.
- 2. Science and evidence underpin much of the work of the FSA and the Agency is supported by a range of Science Advisory Committees (SACs) which are constituted as non-statutory Advisory Non-departmental Public Bodies or Departmental Expert Committees (Table 1).

Table 1. Scientific Advisory Committees where the Food Standards Agency is lead or sole sponsor

Name	Acronym	Status
Science Council	SC	Departmental Expert Committee

Advisory Committee for Social Sciences	ACSS	Departmental Expert Committee
Committee on Toxicity of chemicals in food, consumer products and the environment	COT	Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body
Advisory Committee for Novel Foods and Processes	ACNFP	Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body
Advisory Committee for the Microbiological Safety of Food	ACMSF	Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body
Advisory Committee for Animal Feedstuffs	ACAF	Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body
Joint Expert Group for Additives, Enzymes and other regulated products	AEJEG	Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body
Joint Expert Group for Food Contact Materials	FCMJEG	Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body

3. The two committees with the broadest remit are the Science Council (SC) and the Advisory Committee for Social Sciences (ACSS) which were both set up in 2017. Cabinet Office guidance states such committees should be reviewed every 3-5 years and accordingly the FSA commissioned this review in Q4 2022 to report in the first half of 2023 (a timeframe that was slightly delayed by the pandemic). The terms of reference for the review are given in Appendix 1.

4. The review was conducted by Charles Godfray (Oxford University) and Annette Boaz (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine) (the “review team”), respectively a natural scientist and a social scientist, both with experience of food sector policy and of science advice to government. They were supported by a small group at the FSA led by Natasha Gladstone.

5. A table of acronyms used in the report is given in Appendix 2.

How the review was conducted

6. In preparation for the review the FSA conducted a self-assessment of the SC and ACSS including their governance and operations which was made available to the review team. Past minutes of both committees and copies of SC reports were also provided, as was information about the running costs of the two committees.

7. The review team wrote to (i) all members of SC and ACSS; (ii) to senior members of the FSA with responsibilities including science and evidence; and (iii) to chairs of the FSA’s other SACs. The letters asked for examples of where the relevant committee had been particularly effective, and where in retrospective the committee might have better supported the FSA. It also requested suggestions for how the committee might evolve in the future to better serve the FSA’s mission.

9. The review team interviewed in person or remotely the following people:

- Susan Jebb, FSA Chair
- Emily Miles, FSA Chief Executive
- Robin May, FSA Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA)
- Senior officials with responsibilities including science and evidence
- Senior officials with responsibilities including policy
- Sandy Thomas, Chair of the SC

- Julie Hill, Chair of the ACSS
- Heather Hancock, previous FSA Chair
- Guy Poppy, previous FSA CSA

The team also attended a “Chairs of FSA SACs meeting” in January 2023.

9. Preliminary conclusions of the review were shown to the FSA and comments invited. These were helpful in finalising the review’s recommendation.

10. The review team would like to place on record their thanks to Natasha Gladstone, Antony Threadgould and their colleagues for their excellent support during the review.

How the SC and ACSS operate

11. The Terms of Reference (summarised in Appendix 1) for the review concentrate on the future and how the SC and ACSS might evolve to meet the changing needs of the FSA. In this section we briefly comment on how the SC and ACSS currently operates to provide context for our recommendations.

Science Council

12. The SC comprises a Chair, deputy chair and eight further members, all natural scientists, from a range of FSA-related disciplines and including one Lay member. It meets four times a year, twice in public and twice in closed session. On occasion, between these meetings, it convenes for a one-hour video call. Meetings are attended by the FSA CSA.

13. A major activity of the SC has been producing reports on food sector issues of relevance to the FSA. Topics have been chosen at the request of the past FSA Chair and by the SC itself in consultation with FSA officials. The reports are produced by a working group consisting of SC members. A list of reports written or in preparation is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Reports produced by the FSA Science Council

	Title of Report	Date Published
Working Group 1	FSA Science Council Working Group Capability and Assurance - Final Report	5 December 2018
Working Group 2	FSA Science Council Working Group on Risk and Uncertainty - Final Report and recommendations	5 December 2018
Working Group 3	Final Report: from the Science Council Working Group on Food System Risks and Horizon Scanning to the Food Standards Agency	19 June 2019
Working Group 4	Science Council Working Group on Data Usage and Digital Technology - Final Report	26 August 2020
Working Group 5	Review of the FSA's research programme on food hypersensitivity (Final Report)	16 June 2021
Working Group 6	Food Safety in the Net Zero Era - A Report by Working Group 6 of the Science Council	Ongoing
Rapid Evidence Review 1	The FSA Science Council's Rapid Evidence Review on the Critical Appraisal of Third-Party Evidence - Final Report and Recommendations	24 June 2021

14. In addition, the SC receives and comments on reports from the CSA and other FSA officials, provides advice on issues brought to it by the FSA, and uses its knowledge and networks to alert the FSA to emerging food issues of relevance to its remit. An example of the type work that FSA found very useful was SC's recent discussion on the principles underlying the use of non-peer-reviewed evidence.

15. Members of the SC attend meetings of the other FSA SACs on an observer basis.

16. In 2021-2022 the SC cost ~£147K to run. This breaks down into FSA staff time (50%); core committee member time (21%); committee time associated with report working groups (22%); and recruitment (7%).

Advisory Committee for Social Sciences

17. The ACSS comprises a Chair and nine further members, all social scientists from FSA-related disciplines. Annually, there are two open meetings held, one virtual and one in-person. The FSA Chair and CSA are invited to all ACSS meetings.

18. A major function of the ACSS is to provide advice to the FSA on the commissioning of research in the social sciences, and to provide a challenge function on the quality of the social science evidence base underlying policy making. ACSS sets up task and finish style working groups to look at social science topics of interest to the FSA. For example, a working group recently focused on assurance. It looked in particular at how well the FSA uses social science research. The committee also looks at individual pieces of social science work commissioned by the FSA. The work of ACSS was particularly valued by the relevant FSA staff.

19. The ACSS also provides advice on strategic issues concerning the social sciences.

20. In 2021-2022 the ACSS cost ~£72K to run. This breaks down into FSA staff time (55%); committee member time (36%); and recruitment (9%).

Conclusions

21. The review team found that both the SC and ACSS consisted of committed individuals very keen to assist the FSA in its work and to help develop the natural and social science evidence base to inform better policy making. The two committees had a strong and constructive culture and were led and supported by experienced and effective Chairs. The committees interacted and worked well with the CSA and the FSA's evidence and analysis groups, and both Chairs were active in engaging with different parts of the FSA.

Recommendations for the Science Council

Ways of working

22. The current mode of working places great emphasis on producing reports to inform the FSA. These take a considerable time to produce and are expensive in terms of Council members time and secretariat resources. We found that FSA staff usually found these reports interesting and helpful, but they felt that they did not always address the immediate operational needs of the Agency. When a report on a particular topic was required, the question was asked whether the SC was the best body to write it, as opposed to a bespoke group whose members all have relevant expertise. The current Chair told us she thought it was now time to review the role of major reports in the SC's activities.

23. A question that arose several times in discussion with officials is whether the SC provides, or can provide, advice to the FSA that it cannot, or cannot easily, obtain elsewhere. The review team believes that the SC can have a more important role in supporting the FSA if it emphasises its unique position vis a vis other sources of advice. This is based on (i) its broad composition covering multiple fields enabling it to take a holistic view of relevant topics; (ii) the detailed knowledge and understanding of the structure and functioning of the FSA and its evidence needs; (iii) its status as a trusted body where FSA officials can safely discuss problems at an early stage of evidence commissioning or policy formulation. A number of our recommendations below are designed to strengthen the unique basis of the SC in providing advice to the FSA.

24. We recommend that the SC shifts its focus from producing infrequent large reports to becoming more involved in helping the FSA deliver on its operational agenda. The SC does of course already contribute to the latter, but we are recommending this role has a much greater prominence and that before any activities are commenced an appraisal is made of FSA need and the comparative advantage of this need being met by the SC.

25. We do not wish to specify the precise type of work the SC should concentrate on, this should be co-developed with FSA customers, but we give a few possible examples based on our discussions with officials.

- Engagement at an early stage in evidence initiatives. While technical issues involving the commissioning and interpretation of evidence studies will typically go to specific SACs, the broad expertise of the SC (especially if expanded as we recommend in 39) can help SERD in developing its evidence strategy. We envisage SC inputting in “workshop mode” without detailed minuting in a setting where issues can be discussed sufficiently early that

they can still influence strategy development. We believe input at this stage is much more useful than commenting on final or penultimate draft documents.

- We found limited awareness of the SC in the policy and strategy divisions outside SERD but believe that the SC can have a valuable role in alerting FSA policy makers to science issues and to the workings of the science community that may influence policy development. Again, we envisage these discussions at an early stage and in workshop mode.
- The SC has a role in reviewing the FSA's science and evidence activities and providing assurance about quality and value-for-money. We believe this should be done as a lessons-learned exercise with recommendations for the future.
- The SC has been successful in raising the profile of horizon scanning in the FSA and was instrumental in the Agency creating its own in-house horizon scanning unit. We believe SC expertise will continue to be important in supporting these activities though ensuring no duplication of effort.
- The FSA internally assesses the implications of new and planned legislation, as well as conversations taking place in the press and civil society. The SC has a role in assisting the FSA in responding to these external policy drivers.
- The FSA periodically compiles Areas of Research Interest (ARI) to alert the wider community of research likely to be germane to the Agency. Other Departments have found it very helpful to engage their SC-equivalent at an early stage in helping draw up the document.

26. We emphasise the importance of providing timely advice to the FSA, fast enough to be helpful for current policymaking. For particularly time-sensitive issues, short virtual sessions might be convened between the main meetings.

27. All successful organisations develop a strong internal culture that is essential for their efficient operation. The best recognise that this can lead to groupthink and the possibility of missing alternative perspectives. We see the SC having a significant role in providing the constructive challenge to the FSA to ensure that

different approaches and views concerning science and evidence issues are not ignored.

Advice in times of emergency

28. The FSA has on occasion had to respond quickly to a rapidly evolving situation of great public interest. Major instances of food poisoning or meat adulteration are examples. In the immediate aftermath of an event the FSA has to quickly mobilise all its internal resources and involvement of the SC is likely to be a distraction. But if the incident continues in the public spotlight then after a week or so the SC may play a useful role as a critical friend (or “red team” in crisis planning terminology) bringing alternative insights and avoiding groupthink. DEFRA has detailed contingency planning for livestock epidemic preparedness and its equivalent of the SC has such a role in the second stage of a crisis response, working closely with the CSA.

29. We recommend that the FSA considers a role for the SC in planning its response to a major emergency or crisis.

Working with other SACs across government

10. While we understand the CSAs are well-linked across government and work together as an effective network, our impression from talking to the SC chair (and from our knowledge outside this review) is that there are fewer links between the SC and its equivalents in other departments. It is not clear to us that this is a problem, but suggest this should be discussed by the CSA, both with the incoming SC chair and incoming GCSA. We are aware of ongoing work at the Government Office for Science (GO-Science) for cross-government SAC coordination. One possibility to consider might be targeted links with Science Advisory Councils with overlapping interests (for example DHSC, HSE or DEFRA).

Embedding in FSA

31. We found different degrees of awareness of the SC and its work amongst the FSA officials we spoke to and heard from in the form of written submissions. Understandably, awareness was greater amongst officials with a more evidence rather than a policy focus. We recommend that all FSA units are made more aware of the SC with a clear articulation of how it can assist the Agency’s work.

32. This could be achieved in different ways including the following: (i) The CSA and the SC Chair expanding their role in promoting the work of the SC, talking to

relevant senior officials throughout the organisation; (ii) Individual members of the SC being paired with different FSA staff, virtually meeting on a regular basis to exchange information; (iii) As part of the SC annual cycle of work, regular meetings with officials from relevant areas of the FSA to explore where the SC can add value in the next 12 months; (iv) Discussion of the role of the SC is included in induction and training for relevant FSA staff.

33. We found evidence that the SC were not always fully informed about the major organisational and policy challenges facing the FSA. We recommend that the SC secretariat and the CSA takes a more proactive role reaching out to different parts of the FSA to identify areas where the SC might contribute to the FSA's mission, and to ensure members are fully briefed on FSA priorities.

34. Currently SC members sit as observers on other FSA scientific advisory committees. An advantage of this is that it gives the SC greater visibility of the work of these bodies. However, several people we talked to said these benefits were quite marginal, and that there were also resource implications. Without making a firm recommendation, we think the CSA and SC Chair should consider whether this is the best use of member's time and Council resources, tensioning against other ways in which they can interact more with the FSA. We observed that the meeting of SAC chairs with the CSA was an effective forum for exchanging information.

35. We were asked to comment on the SC's formal reporting to the FSA Executive and Board. We recommend that the SC chiefly engages with the Board and Senior Leadership Team through the CSA and through the submission of an Annual Report to the Board. In addition, the SC through its chair would have the right to meet with the CEO and/or Board Chair to discuss specific issues if they felt it necessary.

Composition and recruitment

36. The SC is composed of excellent natural scientists with deep expertise in their fields. However, the review team heard that there had been difficulty in recruiting members in certain areas, and the response to advertised vacancies was sometimes poor. We recommend a more proactive strategy of SC recruitment with targeted approaches made to potential candidates.

37. There are different ways this could be done including by existing Council members encouraging applicants through their networks. One approach is to follow UKRI practice for certain committees and for the CSA to convene a small

“outreach group”, separate from the interview panel, of internal and external people familiar with the field who can contact and actively encourage suitable people to apply. The recruitment of the Chair is particularly important; engagement of the FSA with the policy sections of the Royal Society and British Academy and other national bodies can help ensure applications from the very best qualified candidates (beyond just at present writing to these bodies).

38. The FSA has been considering doing more around the health and sustainability aspects of food. The CSA and the Agency might review whether the SC as currently constituted contains sufficient expertise in these fields. Because the FSA does not currently have substantial in-house resources in these areas, constructive challenge could be particularly valuable. More generally, the SC working with the CSA as part of its periodic self-reviews, should check it contains the right blend of expertise as the FSA’s remit evolves.

39. Many of the strategic issues discussed by the SC or which might be in the future would benefit from joint input by natural and social scientists. Most Science Advisory Councils in other Whitehall departments include social scientists. We recommend that SC membership is expanded to include social scientists.

40. The breadth of the social sciences would suggest that more than one person could helpfully be added to the SC. A specialised area of the social sciences of great relevance to the FSA is economics and consideration should be given to the inclusion of an economist.

41. As part of its work, the ACSS already discusses strategic issues involving the social sciences. We think it important that either through the shared secretariat, or possibly having members in common, that there is good interaction and coordination of the two committees in support of the FSA.

42. Increasing equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in SACs is a challenge across government. This is an issue for recruitment and also for the support given to members once they have joined the council. The FSA has already put in place measures to promote EDI as part of recruitment though we recommend keeping better records to monitor progress in this area. Other current approaches, such as paying members, are in line with a recommendation in a current CSAC report suggesting this is one measure that may address a barrier to participation. We also note the FSA pilot to introduce associate members to the SACs which may help to build capacity for future representation on the SC.

Structure of meetings

43. The SC currently holds four in-person meetings a year, two in closed sessions and two public sessions. The public sessions are not attended by many people but are an important signal of both the FSA's and SC's commitment to transparency and openness.

44. If our recommendations about new ways of working are accepted, then the SC will be spending more time in "workshop mode" discussing operational issues of evidence requirements and interpretation in preparation for their input into policy making. Such discussions need to take place in closed session to maximise their utility for FSA officials. Hence: We recommend that the Science Council moves from meeting twice to once a year in public session.

45. We believe this move can be made without reducing the amount of information that is made publicly available about the workings of the SC, and that there are opportunities for greater communication with a wider public. We also note that low attendance has been an issue at public sessions of equivalent bodies in other departments. We recommend that open sessions are held to coincide with a major meeting of a relevant society (though of course not restricted to those attending the meeting). An example is the Nutrition Society's annual meeting. This would both increase attendance as well as raise the profile of the SC.

Costs and Support

46. The review team were asked (Appendix 1) to recommend savings of at least 5% to the running of the SC. We believe that a move away from producing major reports (24) which have significant resource implications will produce savings in excess of 5% in accord with possible future (resource) department expenditure limits.

47. Currently SC members are paid by the hours they work, though the level of remuneration is some way below the market rate for equivalent consultancy work. Thus payment is in reality more a honorarium than a return for work done and Council member service contains a significant pro bono component. We believe that continuing to pay Council members is correct to signal the FSA's appreciation of their work and to help meet EDI goals (42). We recommend that SC members are paid a flat honorarium, rather than payment by the hour, with the Chair receiving a higher fee. This recommendation is not intended directly to save money – we suggest the level of honoraria is calculated given existing expenditure. However, we believe it will indirectly save money by removing the bureaucracy associated with time sheets.

Recommendations for the Advisory Committee for Social Sciences

48. The ACSS sits somewhat between the SC and the more technical SACs and works in ways that have similarities to both. A major part of the work of the ACSS is assisting the FSA in the commissioning and interpretation of research in the social sciences. We heard from FSA officials that they found this function important and helpful, and they were very positive about the contribution of the ACSS to the operational needs of the FSA. We found that the ACSS played an important role in supporting social science evidence commissioning and interpretation at the FSA and recommend it continues doing this good job in much its present form.

49. Several members of the ACSS told us that they did not always have a clear idea of exactly what would be helpful for the FSA. One wrote that the FSA should “feel free to give us clear steers about what helpful support looks like”. Against a background of a valued committee willing to do more: We recommend that FSA officials more clearly articulate where the ACSS can best help support the Agency’s work.

50. The social science expertise on the ACSS makes it a good body to explore strategic issues in this area of importance to the FSA. We have recommended above (39) that the SC should be expanded to include social scientists. In time, we envisage that the ACSS would transition to a more similar role to the technical SACs as the SC would have the capacity to pick up more of the strategic issues in need of both natural and social science advice. We recommend that the ACSS and SC work more closely together on strategic issues of importance to the FSA. We anticipate that there will remain some strategic social science issues where the contribution of the ACSS will continue to be valuable to FSA. We recommend that the way the SC and ACSS together provide social science expertise and support to the FSA is reviewed again once our recommendations, if implemented, have had time to settle in.

51. As the ACSS evolves its formal relationship with the FSA should follow the model of a SAC (as opposed to the SC) and for consistency the FSA should consider designating it an Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body rather than a Departmental Expert Committee.

52. In discussing the recruitment of social scientists to SC (40) we said economic expertise might be valuable. This applies even more strongly to ACSS and we are

aware the committee already includes economic expertise. We recommend during future recruitment that the ASCC retains its economic analytical function and supports the FSA in expanding capacity in this area.

53. Our comments about EDI for the SC (42) apply equally to the ACSS.

54. The review team were asked (Appendix 1) to recommend savings of at least 5% to the running of the ACSS. We believe this can be achieved by transferring some of its more strategic work that cuts across the natural and social sciences to the SC and by realising the indirect savings of switching to a flat fee payment model (see 47 for a description and rationale). We recommend that ACSS members are paid a flat honorarium, rather than payment by the hour, with the Chair receiving a higher fee.

Summary of Recommendations

Science Council

1. We recommend that the SC shifts its focus from producing infrequent large reports to becoming more involved in helping the FSA deliver on its operational agenda. 24
2. We recommend that the FSA considers a role for the SC in planning its response to a major emergency or crisis. 29
3. We recommend that all FSA units are made more aware of the SC with a clear articulation of how it can assist the Agency's work. 31
4. We recommend that the SC secretariat and the CSA takes a more proactive role reaching out to different parts of the FSA to identify areas where the SC might contribute to the FSA's mission, and to ensure members are fully briefed on FSA priorities. 33
5. We recommend that the SC chiefly engages with the Board and Senior Leadership Team through the CSA and through the submission of an Annual Report to the Board. In addition, the SC through its chair would have the right to meet with the CEO and/or Board Chair to discuss specific issues if they felt it necessary. 35
6. We recommend a more proactive strategy of SC recruitment with targeted approaches made to potential candidates. 36

7. We recommend that Science Council membership is expanded to include social scientists. 39

8. We recommend that the Science Council moves from meeting twice to once a year in public session. 44

9. We recommend that open sessions are held to coincide with a major meeting of a relevant society. 45

10. We recommend that SC members are paid a flat honorarium, rather than payment by the hour, with the Chair receiving a higher fee. 47

Advisory Council for Social Sciences

11. We found that the ACSS played an important role in supporting social science evidence commissioning and interpretation at the FSA and recommend it continues doing this good job in much its present form. 48

12. We recommend that FSA officials more clearly articulate where the ACSS can best help support the Agency's work. 49

13. We recommend that the way the SC and ACSS together provide social science expertise and support to the FSA is reviewed again once our recommendations, if implemented, have had time to settle in. 50

14. We recommend during future recruitment that the ASCC retains its economic analytical function and supports the FSA in expanding capacity in this area. 52

15. We recommend that ACSS members are paid a flat honorarium, rather than payment by the hour, with the Chair receiving a higher fee. 54

Appendix 1. Terms of Reference

The deep Review will evaluate how the Science Council and ACSS work (independently, with each other, and with other FSA SACs) and with other relevant bodies to achieve their objectives. The outcome will be recommendations for potential future ways of working, including relationships with stakeholders, opportunities for efficiencies and improved performance and governance.

The Lead Reviewer is required to identify where savings to Resource Departmental Expenditure Limits (RDEL) of at least 5% can be made. Actions to meet the efficiency target must be reflected in the review recommendations and recorded and quantified in the published review report. The target of at least 5% should be achieved by each SAC within 1-3 years. To note the FSA has had an increase in remit so these savings will be prospective not retrospective and take this increased remit into account. There should be thought given to an argument for efficiencies per capita of committee membership, the SACs are expanding and therefore a benchmark for spend per SAC member should be given instead of an overall reduction in spending.

Suggested questions that will be answered by the deep review, answers to which will be detailed in the final review and report include;

Form

- Which working model of the Science Council will deliver the best value for money?

What form would be most appropriate for future delivery of work?

Does the SC have an adequate support infrastructure in place to enable them to do their job?

- Which working model of the ACSS will deliver the best value for money?

What form would be most appropriate for future delivery of work?

Does the ACSS have an adequate support infrastructure in place to enable them to do their job?

- How does the FSA ensure an appropriate balance of skills and experience in the Science Council?

Has this been discussed in the annual reports, and board effectiveness reviews?

- How does the FSA ensure an appropriate balance of skills and experience in the ACSS?

Has this been discussed in the annual reports, and board effectiveness reviews?

Function

- Does the Science Council have a clear understanding of their own function and that of the other SACs?

Could the Science Council provide an early warning function to the Board when it comes to strategic risks and horizon scanning?

- How is the Science Council delivering what was set out from the FSA's 2016 Triennial Review recommendations?
- How best can the Science Council effectively connected into the work of the FSA such that the questions and the outputs are tailored to our needs in the best way they can be?
- In what way are the processes by which the Science Council quality assure the science outputs of the FSA effective?
- Does the ACSS have a clear understanding of their own function and that of the other SACs?
- How best can the ACSS be effectively connected into the work of the FSA such that the questions and the outputs are tailored to our needs in the best way they can be?
- How is the ACSS delivering what was set out from the FSA's 2016 Triennial Review recommendations?
- In what way are the processes by which the ACSS quality assure the science outputs of the FSA effective?

Outputs

- To what level are the outputs of the Science Council high in quality and impacting the work of the FSA?

Does the work of the SC arrive early enough to help inform the FSAs work and strategies?

- To what level are the outputs of the ACSS high in quality and impacting the work of the FSA?

Appendix 2. Table of Acronyms

ACSS Advisory Committee for Social Science

CSA Chief Scientific Advisor

CSAC Chairs of Science Advisory Committees

Defra Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs

DHSC Department for Health & Social Care

EDI Equality, Diversity & Inclusion

FSA Food Standards Agency

GCSA Government Chief Scientific Advisor

HSE Health & Safety Executive

RDEL Resource Departmental Expenditure Limits

SAC Science Advisory Committee

SC Science Council

UKRI United Kingdom Research & Innovation

