

REPORT OF REVIEW ON COMMITTEE STRUCTURE

This consultation closed on 30th September 2006. Sixty-four responses were received from both institutions and individuals. A synthesis of the key messages arising from answers to each question can be found in the [Summary of Responses section](#). The synthesis was prepared by independent external facilitators, People Science and Policy (PSP), who were provided with all the responses received.

In order to ensure quality and transparency, PSP was commissioned to support the consultation by providing an independent overview of the process and facilitation of a stakeholder workshop. A wide cross-section of BBSRC stakeholders were invited to attend the workshop. The aims of the workshop were to:

- identify stakeholder perceptions on the strengths and weaknesses of BBSRC's existing committee structures;
- allow stakeholders to consider, discuss and advise on possible committee structures;
- consider the principles that BBSRC should adhere to when considering the structure of its committees; and
- provide recommendations to BBSRC if an appropriate consensus was achieved.

The [PSP summary report](#) was presented to BBSRC Council in December 2006.

Next Steps

BBSRC Council discussed the outputs from this external consultation and a parallel consultation undertaken within BBSRC Executive. Council approved a number of recommendations including:

- a revision to the number and remits of Research Committees to better support areas such as basic and applied plant and microbial sciences, and interdisciplinary research
- the introduction of a hybrid Committee/Pool system which maintains a core of standing Committee members supported by a wider approved pool
- a review of how Research Committees assess applications of different sizes and complexity

The recommendations agreed by Council are currently being developed for implementation in late 2007-early 2008.

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SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

What are the strengths of the current BBSRC seven-Committee structure?

- The BBSRC has delivered world-class science.
- The BBSRC remit is broad with individual Committee remits being quite well explained and recognised. The seven Committee structure enables each Committee to focus on a specific, relatively coherent subject area.
- A number of the remits of the Committees overlap which allows PIs to tailor their applications to different Committees. In addition, it facilitates flexibility and representation of minority subjects.
- The rolling membership of the Committees allows consistency, transparency, 'corporate memory', and prevents stagnation. The number of members on each Committee provides a breadth of expertise and experience, which is essential particularly when assessing multidisciplinary applications.
- The Committee members are considered experts in their respective fields and as a result the standard of assessment is high. The opportunity for non-IMs to contribute to general discussions results in collective, and fair, decisions.
- Committee Members have a sense of belonging and believe their decisions have a real impact on the direction of biosciences. As a result Committee members are motivated and committed.
- The peer-review process has weaknesses but is the best possible way of initially assessing applications and as it allows applicants to recommend referees it is considered relatively transparent.

What are the weaknesses of the current BBSRC seven-Committee structure?

- The current Committee structure compartmentalises biosciences putting in place artificial and unhelpful boundaries. Committee structures imply priorities and thus suggest constraints. As a result some PIs may feel pressure to tailor their applications, and hence their research, to fit within the Committee structure.
- There is no obvious and consistent structure for assessing interdisciplinary applications, with different Committees approving disparate levels of funding in this area. The same problem exists between Research Councils.
- In places the remits of some Committees overlap and applications may be submitted to the wrong panel and so not be considered by the most appropriate people.
- Some Committees have a broad remit which can lead to comparisons between disparate applications.

- Committees deal with applications for projects of widely varying scales, which can make comparisons difficult.
- Committees can lack breadth and depth of expertise. A Committee lacking of expertise within in a specific area may give signals to the scientific community and the Committee that this area is a low priority.
- There is the perception that the Committee structure leads to 'conservative' decisions and that speculative and innovative research is less likely to get funding.
- The increasing number of applications submitted creates greater work for Committee members. This may result in applications not being thoroughly reviewed.
- The strategic and user relevance of an application may be considered more seriously by some Committees than others.
- Links between the Committees and Strategy Panels are not strong enough.
- Changes in scientific fields are not reflected in the Committee structure. The BBSRC is slow to react to developments in new areas and techniques.

How might the structure be changed to address the challenges mentioned in the background questionnaire?

- Change for changes sake is not a sensible option, the current structure works for the majority of proposals. Regardless of the structure, interdisciplinary proposals will always pose a challenge in terms of good quality assessment.
- Consideration could be given to improving the existing structure by refining the current committee remits. BBSRC could restructure the present Committees to sharpen the boundaries and give a balance of work load. There could be more movement of members between Committees and a greater use of ad hoc members. The Committee network group system should be re-evaluated as a way in which to increase the flexibility and widen expertise on Committees.
- Moving to a smaller number of Committees has potential advantages in that fewer larger Committees would provide broader expertise and reduce the number of boundaries.
- A smaller number of Committees could result in a large and unwieldy Committees and lead to a loss of collegiate spirit. Fewer larger Committees would provide broader expertise but individual members would have less interest in the overall Committee business.
- A smaller number of Committees would increase Committee members work loads.

- More Committees could provide more focused and expert assessment and reduce the potential for gaps between committees.
- BBSRC could adopt a system similar to NERC or EPSRC colleges and make up panels that reflect the proposals being assessed.
- Multidisciplinary proposals could be reviewed by adhoc panels in the way that Cross-Committee initiatives have been dealt with. This would improve flexibility and responsiveness to new scientific directions. BBSRC could form a similar body to EPSRCs Life Sciences Interface to work across the committees.
- Committees with problem driven titles and remits e.g. Sustainable Agriculture and Energy. Might encourage applications from multi disciplinary teams and enable multi and single disciplinary teams to be considered on a more equal footing.

Do you have any other comments about BBSRC structure?

- The current structure has worked well to date, but it is always worth reviewing such arrangements and consulting with stakeholders. The system is imperfect but delivers good science assessment very well. The Committee structure is one of the main strong points of BBSRC therefore only small changes should be considered.
- The structure influences the types of grants that are submitted. A more flexible and researcher driven system would result in higher quality science being funded. As boundaries blur a quick responding flexible structure will be more appropriate than a number of closely defined Committees.
- The more people who read and assess applications, the better it works. Quality science should be the main criterion by which proposals are assessed. With smaller numbers of assessors for each proposal this could be put at risk. Bigger broader Committees may not be cost effective; they would increase Committee member and administrative work load.
- BBSRC should reassess the relationship between its Committees and the EPSRC Life Sciences Interface. In order to avoid overlap, a gap has been created through which many chemistry based proposals now fall.
- Peer review is the prime role of Committees. Strategically important research should be dealt with through the strategy panels. It is important that those who are shaping strategy are not involved in the detailed assessment of applications and do not stand to benefit directly from the new areas being identified. With the introduction of Strategy Panels, there is no need for responsive mode Committees to be configured to reflect strategic priorities.
- Although multidisciplinary and collaborative research is important and should be provided for, history indicates that it is individual insight and perseverance that has generated many of the significant breakthroughs in scientific understanding.

- A thorough analysis is required to establish whether the committees still cover the areas of strategic importance.

PEOPLE, SCIENCE AND POLICY SUMMARY REPORT

1 Background

The current BBSRC committee structure was established in 1994. In the last 12 years, however, the way that science is conducted has changed resulting in changes in both the numbers of applications received by each committee and the number of applications which are multi- or inter-disciplinary. BBSRC Council has therefore decided that the current structure should be reviewed to ensure that all applications are assessed as effectively and fairly as possible.

A web-based consultation was launched in early June 2006, closing for responses on 30 September 2006. The responses were synthesised by BBSRC and the key messages were presented to a group of BBSRC stakeholders attending a workshop on 3 November 2006. The outputs from the workshop discussions are to assist BBSRC staff in formulating options for the Council. Final decisions on any revised committee structure will be taken by BBSRC Council, taking into account not only the stakeholder consultation but an internal BBSRC office consultation and the possible impact of other internal and external initiatives.

2 The role of People Science and Policy

People Science and Policy (PSP) was commissioned to support the consultation by providing an independent overview of the process and facilitating the November workshop. The web-based consultation was advertised through a variety of avenues including an announcement by the Science and Technology Group Director at the BBSRC's Heads of University Departments meeting, targeted requests for responses, and being highlighted in *BBSRC business* and in emails from the BBSRC. BBSRC received a total of 64 responses. A substantial proportion of these were institutional responses. PSP reviewed the responses and the summary prepared by BBSRC.

Our conclusion is that the consultation period was of sufficient length and sufficiently well marketed to ensure that interested parties were aware of the process and had time to assemble and submit considered responses. Our view is that the response level is entirely acceptable for a consultation of this type. It is clear that in some institutions, the aim of stimulating wider local consultation was achieved. Some minor drafting suggestions were made on the summary, but our conclusion was that the summary was a fair reflection of the responses.

A wide cross-section of BBSRC stakeholders were invited to attend the workshop. They were given approximately three weeks notice of the workshop and only one date was offered. The workshop was held in London, which was a sensible location given the geographic dispersal of the invitees.

We were concerned that the invitation gave rather short notice. Forty one people were invited with the aim of 20 being able to attend the event. Given the short notice, only eight were able to attend in person, although a number nominated representatives. The final 18 attendees covered most of the stakeholder groups invited. Although the invitees were selected to be representatives of a wider stakeholder group, it was made clear that their input on the day was purely personal and that they were not expected to act as spokespeople for wider groups, which was entirely appropriate for this type of workshop.

3 The workshop

3.1 Aims

The aims of the workshop were to:

- identify stakeholder perceptions on the strengths and weaknesses of BBSRC's existing committee structures;
- allow stakeholders to consider, discuss and advise on possible committee structures;
- to consider the principles that BBSRC should adhere to when considering the structure of its committees; and
- if an appropriate consensus was achieved, to provide recommendations to BBSRC.

3.2 Introduction

Firstly, participants were asked why they had attended the event; there were a variety of reasons given which related to:

- Concern, e.g. about possible major changes.
- Understanding the system, e.g. how to assess or write applications appropriately.
- Understanding the fit with wider issues in science.
- "Duty", i.e. it was felt important for users of the system to contribute.
- Participants also wanted to explore the drivers for change.

Participants were asked what they felt about the summary of responses. They felt the summary showed that while there were contradictions within and between the responses they were not strongly polarised or passionate. There was also no significant dissatisfaction with the current system. It was noted that there were no easy solutions offered and that some respondents feared of loss of responsive mode funding.

3.3 SWOT analysis

Attendees were asked to carry out a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of the current structure and three models offered by BBSRC as potential alternates. There was a lack of enthusiasm for the alternate models suggested. It was generally believed that the problems that had been identified were not committee dependent, although some suggested that the existing structure was too compartmentalised (i.e. it does not offer the same opportunities to all applicants). In general, it was thought that making minor amendments to the committee structure left most weaknesses in place, although there was a view that these weaknesses could be ameliorated by better working practices. In some models, the number of applicants were distributed more evenly but not in others. Changing the numbers in this way, however, was thought to be superficial and that issues such as the review process needed to be considered as a priority. The SWOT analysis did, however, provide a platform for further debate and highlighted various issues that might not otherwise have been brought to the fore.

4 Principles

At the end of the workshop a number of guiding principles were suggested. These principles form the structure under which the concluding discussions at the workshop are summarised below.

4.1 Quality

The quality of science funded by the BBSRC needs to remain high. Quality encompasses meeting the needs of stakeholders as well as meeting academic demands for “excellence”. There was believed to be a role for strategically funded science, but most participants were concerned that this should not be at the cost of inquiry-driven basic science.

4.2 Transparency

It was widely believed that there is need for accountability and transparency with regard to the way that funding decisions are reached. The possibility of having observers on committees was suggested as one way to provide transparency. However, there was concern that a move to more transparency would be labour intensive, especially if coupled with an obligation to provide detailed feedback.

4.4 Communication and ownership

It was believed that improved communication between BBSRC and universities, applicants and end users was essential. It was suggested that links to the other Research Councils could also be improved. The ideal scenario is that all of these stakeholders should feel that they have some ownership of and input to the grant-making process. This applies both to establishing the operating framework and its subsequent operation.

4.3 Consistency

To ensure confidence there needs to be common or standard practices and processes across all committees. The BBSRC needs consistently fair approaches to very disparate applications and ones that don't fit the remit of any committee. The need for consistency was often expressed in the context of the workload of committees, which acted as an indicator of whether it was logistically practical for all applications to receive equal treatment.

Rather than focusing on structures it was suggested that a priority should be to assemble a bigger pool from which to draw committee members to provide greater flexibility of resources. However, it was reported that there is a limited pool of people from which to draw both committee members and referees. There were a number of other suggestions to overcome the issue of workload, these included a sifting process, reducing what is assessed and the amount/quality of feedback, time limits on discussions for each application, and the research council “buying” academics time from universities.

4.5 Equity

Equity of treatment for all applicants was another underpinning principle for many participants. Applicants need to know where they fit in the system and that their application will be fairly treated. It was also emphasised that any grants system needs to allow new as well as established researchers access to funding in order to supply the community with bioscience researchers for the future.

4.6 Flexibility

Flexibility was a high priority and is needed to ensure that applications of differing scale and from multiple disciplines can be considered in a consistent and fair fashion and in order to reduce individuals' workload. This highlights the need to build a structure that will be responsive to future (unknown) developments, for example, changing themes based on priorities. Such flexibility in a system should also allow for variability in the expertise of committee members. The pros and cons of a College system could be considered in light of this need for flexibility and whether it would be applicable to BBSRC.

It was thought that improved flexibility might go some way to overcoming the current structure's difficulties in assessing multi- and interdisciplinary applications. The system used by the Wellcome Trust was also suggested as a useful model.

4.7 Refreshment

In order for BBSRC to meet its mission it needs to be responsive to new ideas and to have new people to refresh committees and other bodies. The current system was believed to be reliant on the good will of relatively few individuals, which is a high risk position.

4.8 Balance

BBSRC needs to respond to all relevant drivers and stakeholders. This means that a balanced approach, which is not necessarily driven by a single stakeholder, is necessary if the BBSRC is to fund high quality science across a wide base as well as supporting innovation.

5 Process

5.1 Referees

Feedback from referees on certain aspects of applications is sometimes lacking leading to a reliance on responses from nominated referees. The referees' input is particularly important where there is not the full spectrum of necessary expertise on the committee to judge a specific element of an application. Possible solutions suggested included: an obligation on applicants/grant holders to review the applications of a certain number of other proposals; using more international referees; and paying referees.

5.2 Function of committees

Participants sought clarification on BBSRC's perception of the function of the committees. Are they moderators or decision makers? Are they purely concerned with funding or do they support strategy development as well?

5.3 Distortion of funding

It was widely accepted that a key driver behind the consultation was the need to be able to deal with large and inter-disciplinary grants. However, it was feared that more of these larger applications could lead to over specialisation and a reduction in single author grants (thereby reducing "equity").

5.4 Industrial members

Many participants believed that industrial representatives played an extremely useful role and that BBSRC should seek to maximise their involvement as they were perceived to have a broad perspective with “no axe to grind”. However, it was recognised that they are hard to recruit and their breadth of expertise can vary.

5.5 International collaboration

Joint international grants were mooted as a good idea. It was reported that although BBSRC had not yet been successful in attempts to work in partnership with NIH and NSF (US funders), there was no institutional opposition to funding the UK part of international collaborations.