

16 June 2014

Dear Sir or Madam,

In January 2014, BBSRC commissioned a public dialogue around research in food, nutrition and health. We wanted to engage in a meaningful conversation with a small and diverse group about what key research challenges BBSRC should be focussing on, with the outputs helping to shape our developing strategic framework for food, nutrition and health research.

The dialogue was held in London over two evenings in March 2014. The report, published in May, brings together the thoughts of participants and represents an important platform for ongoing discussions around food, nutrition and health research. This letter is BBSRC's response to the comments, thoughts and concerns which the report raises.

The dialogue clearly demonstrated that people have a strong desire to understand how food and nutrition can play a role in disease prevention, and particularly how diets will affect individuals, their families and future generations. We were very pleased that participants saw food, nutrition and health as an important area of public research and they therefore felt that BBSRC's investment in it represents money well spent. The key research challenges developed by participants are largely consistent with those drafted by our advisory group, but we were interested to see three additional areas of focus proposed. Our consideration of these new areas is outlined below.

The dialogue also highlighted that participants felt they did not have, but would like, accurate, clear and objective information to enable them to make informed choices about their diet. There was a significant level of mistrust around the information available in the print and broadcast media, and provided through advertising and the food industry. The report calls on BBSRC to take a lead in clearly communicating research findings through channels which will reach the public.

Our actions and responses to the report's three main areas of recommendation are set-out in more detail below.

Research Challenges

The report compares the challenges in food, nutrition and health research identified and prioritised by participants with those previously drafted by BBSRC's advisory working group. There was much agreement between the two sets of independently derived research challenges, providing reassurance that the thinking of our advisory working group and the public are largely aligned.

Three areas of research were highlighted by participants but less well represented in BBSRC's draft strategy. These areas were carefully discussed by the working group at its meeting in April 2014, with the following actions resulting:

Mental health

Participants suggested that research might consider more carefully how nutrition relates to mental health. Our research framework takes account of the relationships between food and emotion, but we recognise that participants wanted research to address more specific effects on anxiety, depression and other mental health issues.

Research into mental illness is funded by the Medical Research Council (MRC) rather than BBSRC but it is clearly important for us to work together to ensure that this important science area is supported. We will make the relationship between nutrition and mental health a key element of the discussions between BBSRC and MRC (and other Research Councils) which will take place over the coming months.

The side effects of additives in food and other actions to improve nutrition

Participants were concerned about not fully understanding the long-term effects of food additives (including fluoride and folic acid) and actions which may be taken to improve public nutrition.

We are confident that many of these issues can be addressed through existing aspects of the research framework. For example, by fully understanding how various nutrients act in the body, researchers will be better able to predict the effects of altering the levels of those nutrients in foods. However, we recognise that it may be helpful to make more specific reference to issues around food additives as we develop our research strategy.

The pros and cons for health of genetically modified food and cloning

Many participants felt that research into genetically modified crops would form an important part of feeding the growing world population. However, concerns remained about possible long-term effects on health.

BBSRC is committed to funding research which can help to provide healthy food. Genetic modification is one technique among many which can help achieve this goal. GM foods have been eaten for many years in many parts of the world without any adverse health implications. We support and have confidence in the UK regulatory framework under which all new foods – including non-GM novel foods – are carefully assessed on a case-by-case basis for any ill health effects.

Communicating BBSRC's role

Many of the participants felt that they were unable to get good, clear information on nutritional advice. BBSRC works hard to ensure that the results of the work we fund are publicised and this dialogue has reinforced our position that we need to clearly communicate research outputs both through our own channels – such as YouTube, Twitter and the website – and through traditional media – such as printed and broadcast media.

Society and the individual

Participants, while happy to explore the societal context, were mainly concerned with the implications of food, nutrition and health research at an individual level – they wanted to know what they should do to eat well, to prevent disease and protect their families and future generations.

As well as communicating the results of research, the report recommends that BBSRC should “undertake work in public engagement to test the areas that have meaning for the public in their daily lives”. BBSRC will continue to actively look for opportunities where public engagement can be used to inform our strategies and we will carry on encouraging the researchers we fund to do likewise.

We would like to thank all of those involved in the dialogue, including the public participants and members of the expert working group, for a nuanced and informative discussion which has generated valuable recommendations and discussion points for BBSRC. We are committed to carefully considering the report’s findings as we develop and implement a new approach to food, nutrition and health research.

Yours sincerely,



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