



Context

In 2018, the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) commissioned Pye Tait Consulting to undertake its third biennial stakeholder engagement research. This research examines BBSRC's progress in relation to its *Corporate Communications and Engagement Strategy* (published in 2015) and gauges shifts in stakeholder perceptions relative to the two previous stakeholder engagement surveys (2016 and 2014). It also explores the potential influence of significant external events on stakeholders' perceptions, such as the UK's vote to leave the European Union and changes to the research funding landscape. On this latter point, from 1st April 2018, the seven Research Councils, Innovate UK and Research England will come together under a new organisation, UK Research and Innovation.

The 2018 stakeholder engagement research was undertaken through three strands of fieldwork:

- An online survey of BBSRC's stakeholders (748 responses);
- 35 in-depth telephone interviews with a sample of stakeholders
- Three focus group discussion forums.

The survey results distinguish between the views of BBSRC's main stakeholder groups, notably those from academia, industry, government/policy stakeholders and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)¹. Statistical significance tests have been carried out on key questions to assess whether differences in the distribution of results per stakeholder group are due to chance or whether they represent meaningful differences between the groups. The term 'significant' is therefore used throughout this report to denote statistically significant differences.

A summary of the main messages from the research are set out, below, under thematic headings. Each section begins with headline measures and trends from the survey, followed by qualitative insights and discussion.

¹ A non-governmental organisation (NGO) is any non-profit, voluntary citizens' group which is organised on a local, national or international level.

Awareness and understanding

Headline measure	% of respondents (or average ratings) – 2018	Change in 2018 from 2016 scores	Change in 2018 from 2014 scores
Stakeholders are knowledgeable about BBSRC	90%	+2	+6
BBSRC is associated with knowledge exchange and innovation	81%	+23	+17
BBSRC is associated with leadership and influence	42%	+22	N/A
BBSRC keeps stakeholders well informed	79%	+5	+6

The vast majority of surveyed stakeholders (90%) know a great deal or a fair amount about BBSRC and this has increased consistently since 2014. Academics and NGOs feel especially knowledgeable (98% and 90% respectively), although government/policy and industry stakeholders less so (79% and 76%, respectively). The differences between these stakeholder groups indicate that BBSRC could do more to better understand and respond to what each of these audiences need from their relationship with BBSRC, using targeted and tailored communications. This is discussed further under the section ‘Interactions and Communications’.

Almost all stakeholders associate BBSRC with research grants (97%), followed by knowledge exchange and innovation (81%). They identify least with BBSRC having a leadership and influence role (42%) although good progress has been made since 2016, with an increase of 22% associating BBSRC with this area. Stakeholders generally feel that BBSRC provides a strong voice for bioscience and been innovative in its approaches for creating impact and strengthening doctoral training. However, there is uncertainty around BBSRC’s ability to maintain autonomy and leadership within UK Research and Innovation, which is discussed further under the section ‘Future Priorities’.

More than three quarters of stakeholders (79%) believe that BBSRC keeps them very or fairly well informed about its work, with performance having consistently strengthened since 2014. Academics feel most informed (87%), compared with 66% of industry and 64% of government /policy stakeholders. While these percentages are still generally high, they once again suggest that BBSRC could find ways of engaging more successfully with specific groups of stakeholders.

Working relationships

Headline measure	% of respondents (or average ratings) – 2018	Change in 2018 from 2016 scores	Change in 2018 from 2014 scores
BBSRC is easy to work with	55%	-9	-1
Desire to work more closely with BBSRC in the future	60%	+4	+4
Extent to which BBSRC adds value (rating)	7.1	-0.3	+0.5

BBSRC manages a diverse portfolio of stakeholders that appears to have been growing in number over recent years (see Table 27). Stakeholders have different individual views on what they feel BBSRC's funding priorities should be (covered in more detail in the section 'Performance and Impact') and since 2014 an increasing proportion (now 60%) say they would like to work more closely with BBSRC. A minority of stakeholders mention having experienced decreasing levels of strategic contact with BBSRC, especially with senior BBSRC staff. Industry stakeholders tend to see BBSRC as being comparatively more supportive of academia and are of the view that, to ensure research has more tangible and meaningful benefits for industry, BBSRC should involve businesses more directly when shaping its strategic direction and funding priorities. These findings emphasise how BBSRC needs to remain as inclusive as possible, whilst at the same time managing stakeholder expectations.

Most stakeholders generally feel that BBSRC is easy to work with (55%). This is highest among academics (66%) and lowest among industry (39%) – a significant finding. BBSRC also adds value to stakeholders' organisations, with the survey returning an average added value rating of 7.1 out of 10. This is highest among academics (8.3) and lowest among industry stakeholders (5.0) – again a significant difference. Two thirds of stakeholders (66%) believe BBSRC could add more value to their organisation, for example by enabling and promoting more collaborative and cross-disciplinary research, especially at the interface between bioscience research and the physical and social sciences, as well as encouraging a more flexible portfolio of funded projects and being less risk averse.

Interactions and communications

Headline measure	% of respondents (or average ratings) – 2018	Change in 2018 from 2016 scores	Change in 2018 from 2014 scores
The frequency of BBSRC's communications are about right	71%	N/A	N/A
BBSRC communicates well	74%	N/A	N/A

Almost three quarters of surveyed stakeholders (74%) believe that BBSRC communicates well with their organisation. This is high across all stakeholder groups although there is a significant difference between academics (80%), government/policy stakeholders (64%) and industry (63%). Qualitative discussions reveal that stakeholders would welcome more targeted and tailored communications that chime with their organisation's needs and priorities. Furthermore, a minority commented that it can sometimes be difficult to reach the right person within BBSRC, or feel that changes to BBSRC staff has reduced levels of expert knowledge in some specialist areas. A fifth of industry stakeholders say that they interact with BBSRC less often than yearly or never.

Most stakeholders rate all forms of interaction with BBSRC to be generally effective. This is especially the case for face to face contact, with 91% of the view this is effective, although only 40% say that they currently interact with BBSRC in this way. Stakeholders value meetings that help to shape funding priorities (with particular praise for the 'Town Hall' meetings), which this ties in with a desire among most surveyed stakeholders for closer and more strategic engagement with BBSRC.

Performance and impact

Headline measure	% of respondents (or average ratings) – 2018	Change in 2018 from 2016 scores	Change in 2018 from 2014 scores
Stakeholders would speak highly of BBSRC unprompted	22%	-5	-2
BBSRC effectively communicates its impact	57%	+8	N/A

The qualitative research has revealed that BBSRC is perceived to have many strengths. Stakeholders acknowledge BBSRC's vital role in funding UK bioscience research and promoting collaboration between academia and industry. They are proud to be associated with BBSRC and recognise that it treads a difficult line in balancing the needs of government, universities, industry, the public and students. Stakeholders praise the impactful translational science emerging from institutes that have received funding from BBSRC, the value of Doctoral Training Partnerships (DTPs) in nurturing new talent, and support for entrepreneurship such as through BBSRC's Innovator of the Year Awards. Additionally, focus group participants remarked that BBSRC is open to having discussions with the research community to help them get a better understanding about funding calls and value the opportunity for dialogue with BBSRC.

Almost two thirds of surveyed stakeholders would speak highly of BBSRC to others (64%), including 22% without being asked. This has reduced slightly from 74% since 2016. Surveyed academics are BBSRC's strongest advocates, with 70% saying they would speak highly, compared with 51% of industry stakeholders – a significant difference. Qualitative discussions reveal that it can be harder for industry stakeholders to identify with the research that BBSRC funds, notably the extent to which it relates to their own work and how much direct value they believe it will bring to their part of the industry. Indeed, several industry stakeholders commented that they have a closer relationship with

Innovate UK than BBSRC. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but ties in with a desire among stakeholders for more joined up working between the Research Councils.

In terms of how BBSRC manages grant applications, there is some frustration, especially among academics, where proposals appear to “fall between the cracks” of Research Council remits. This is observed where applicants extend beyond BBSRC’s bioscience remit, for example into the medical sphere. Stakeholders would like to see a more integrative ‘cross-Council’ approach to research funding, with better recognition of interdisciplinary working as something to be encouraged. There is a strong opportunity here under UK Research and Innovation – discussed in more detail in the section ‘Future Priorities’.

Additionally, the focus groups generated substantial discussion regarding the balance that BBSRC strikes between funding fundamental exploratory research, alongside industry-applied research. Academics generally consider it vital that BBSRC does not lose sight of the former, making the point that without sufficient high-quality underpinning research then there will be insufficient pipeline to support future translational research. Industry stakeholders tend to place more value on applied research.

Finally, when asked the extent to which they feel BBSRC contributes to economic and social impact, surveyed stakeholders returned an average rating of 6.7 out of 10. This is highest among academics (7.1) although somewhat lower among industry stakeholders (6.0) and NGOs (5.0) – a significant difference. The majority of surveyed stakeholders believe BBSRC communicates its impact effectively (57%), which is a rise of 8% since 2016.

Vision and strategic direction

Headline measure	% of respondents (or average ratings) – 2018	Change in 2018 from 2016 scores	Change in 2018 from 2014 scores
Extent to which stakeholders are familiar with BBSRC’s Mission and Vision	6.0	-0.7	-0.3
Extent to which stakeholders think BBSRC achieves its Vision	6.5	0.0	+0.2
Extent to which stakeholders share BBSRC’s Vision	7.4	-0.6	-0.3
The UK has a world leading position in bioscience	83%	-5	-5
The UK’s international position in bioscience is due to BBSRC	76%	-3	-1

Stakeholders broadly share BBSRC’s Vision, especially as beneficiaries of funding for projects that are aligned to BBSRC’s priority areas of work. Several describe this Vision as “*compelling*” and “*inspirational*”, commenting that “*we are all striving for the same thing*”. Those less aligned with BBSRC’s Vision tend to identify less with high level Vision statements and find it easier to understand

and relate to more specific objectives that their organisations work to, for example relating to providing industry-led advice, products and services.

Most surveyed stakeholders (83%) agree that the UK has a world-leading position in bioscience, with consistently favourable views across the stakeholder groups. More than three quarters (76%) agree that the UK's international position in relation to bioscience is due to the BBSRC, especially among academics (80%) compared with a significantly lower 68% of industry stakeholders.

Future priorities

To ensure UK bioscience continues to be prosperous and world-leading, BBSRC and the research community need to respond to a number of priority changes and developments. Surveyed stakeholders were asked to what extent they think that a more strategic approach to tackling science challenges, such as through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) and the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (ISC), will support BBSRC's influence in bioscience. The majority (59%) believe that this would be the right approach to take. In contrast to other results, academics are comparatively less favourable here, with 53% supporting this approach, compared with 61% of government/policy stakeholders, 64% of industry stakeholders and 80% of NGOs.

While some stakeholders are complimentary about BBSRC's efforts to align itself with government and the industrial strategy, saying that "*there seems to be a good synergy*", academic stakeholders in particular wish to avoid a perceived risk of BBSRC being "*pressured*" by government to tip the balance too strongly in favour of strategic and applied research at the expense of fundamental research.

The UK's impending exit from the European Union is one of the foremost concerns for BBSRC's stakeholders. Whilst offering potential opportunities in terms of collaboration beyond Europe, stakeholders have identified three main risks that they believe must be overcome: 1) continued access to EU funding; 2) being able to attract and retain high quality research scientists from the EU; and 3) sustaining EU partnerships.

Survey respondents and focus group participants tended to use the term "*uncertainty*" in the context of BBSRC's forthcoming role under the auspices of UK Research and Innovation². Several anticipate a "*business as usual*" environment for the foreseeable future, with change expected to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. The launch of UK Research and Innovation is seen by many as a positive opportunity for enabling more joined-up working and cross-Council collaboration, although noting that BBSRC must ensure it maintains a strong voice for bioscience to attract sufficient funding on which UK bioscience is heavily dependent.

² From April 2018, the seven Research Councils, Innovate UK and Research England will come together under a new organisation, UK Research and Innovation, to provide a strong voice internationally on behalf of UK research. Source: UKRI Official Narrative.

Finally, technological change is viewed as a key driver for the future of UK bioscience, such as the increasing use of Digital Data Analytics (DDA), genetic science, artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and mechanisation. These changes, it is argued, are blurring the boundaries between the Research Councils and stakeholders emphasise once again the need for much more cross-Council collaboration.

Emerging themes

Based on the findings of the research, several key themes have emerged which are summarised below. Further details (including specific actions that BBSRC could take) are set out in chapter 8.

1. Continuing to raise awareness about BBSRC's role, its work, and the economic and social outcomes of the research it funds, using tailored communications for different stakeholder groups
2. Strengthening cross-Council working to better respond to the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of bioscience research for the benefit of society
3. Maximising the benefit of a more strategic approach to funding UK bioscience whilst ensuring that an appropriate balance is retained between fundamental and applied research
4. Working hard to ensure a strong and prosperous future for UK bioscience following the UK's exit from the European Union, through good access to funding and collaboration opportunities
5. Establishing BBSRC's role in the new funding landscape under UK Research and Innovation and clearly communicating this to stakeholders
6. Ensuring that academia and industry can draw on the knowledge and skills needed to exploit new technologies for the benefit of UK bioscience
7. Helping to stimulate and strengthen collaboration opportunities between academia and industry
8. Continuing to review and improve operational processes in areas that would help to improve stakeholder satisfaction and confidence
9. Being visible, open and communicative, whilst managing stakeholder expectations.

The strategic aims and objectives of BBSRC's 2015-17 *Corporate Communications and Engagement Strategy* remain valid, notably that BBSRC needs to continue to secure and maintain the best possible environment for UK bioscience, raise awareness of the value of its work, and strengthen its reputation as being a trusted and open organisation.