

**Minutes of SSAC Strategic Meeting
17 March 2026
13.00-16.00**

**Meeting Room 2 D Bridge 1, 2nd Floor, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ
Hybrid**

Attendees:

Name	Position
Professor Julian Jones	SSAC Chair
Professor Calum Semple	Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) for Scotland (<i>ex-officio member</i>) online
Professor Linda Bauld	Chief Social Policy Adviser (<i>ex-officio member</i>)
Professor Mark Inall	CSA Marine (<i>ex-officio member</i>)
Professor Gareth Harrison	SSAC Member
Professor Graham Kerr	SSAC Member
Professor Ifor Samuel	SSAC Member online
Professor Julie Jacko	SSAC Member online
Professor Louise Horsfall	SSAC Member
Professor Martyn Pickersgill	SSAC Member
Professor Nick Owens	SSAC Member
Professor Simon Dobson	SSAC Member
Dr Evgenia Yakushina	SSAC Member
Dr Kate Donovan	SSAC Member
Dr Alex Browne	SSAC Associate Member
David Mallon	Head of Unit, Climate Change Division, Scottish Government (SG) (Agenda Items 4-5)
Dr Linda Galloway	Deputy CSA for Scotland, and Strategic Lead for Science and Research, Scottish Government (SG)
Joanne Ward	Head of Office of the Chief Scientific Adviser (OCSA) (SG)
Sam Cox	SSAC Secretariat, OCSA (SG)
Caroline Murray	SSAC Secretariat, OCSA (SG)

1. Welcome

The Chair welcomed all to the meeting and noted apologies below. Actions from previous meeting had been completed except for the Scottish Funding Council action relating to David Lott's value of research project.

Professor Dame Anna Dominiczak	Chief Scientist (Health) (<i>ex-officio member</i>)
Professor Mathew Williams	CSA Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture (ENRA) (<i>ex-officio member</i>)
Professor Deborah Williamson	SSAC Member
Professor Melanie Simms	SSAC Member
Professor Murray Roberts	SSAC Member
Professor Qammer Abbasi	SSAC Member
Professor Russell Morris	SSAC Member
Dr Kirsten Jenkins	SSAC Associate Member

2. Ex-officio hot topics discussion

a) CSA Scotland, Prof Calum Semple

- The ScotSCIENCE Strategic Board (SSSB) had their first meeting today and discussed how to improve science input into strategy documents going forward, including input from SSAC. He stressed that linkage on these was his greatest concern.
- The Chair advised that he and Prof Dobson will be attending the official AI Strategy launch on 20 March. He also noted that the AI working group were looking at the scoping document to take forward this project.

b) CSA Marine, Prof Mark Inall

- CSA Marine advised that a new Marine Science Advisory Board is being set up to support the provision of advice on all SG interests in marine issues. The Terms of Reference (ToRs) will be shared once agreed. For SSAC, there could be a project around the paradox of driving public service reform and the push for evidence informed policymaking. Dr Donovan agreed it was important to look at evidence for policy making in the current context.
- Prof Owens stated that it may be worth paying attention to the new National Research Organisations (NRO) group in UK on how that is working and their influence on how research flows into government (includes some SG-funded environment/agriculture research institutes).
- The Chair advised that Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) is working with Universities Scotland (US) on a report on Research Policy Exchange.. Professor Bauld advised that SSAC may wish to consider a response to the RPE report in due course.
- CSA (Marine) said that recommendations for biodiversity targets for 2030-2045 are due to be finalised and will be shared later in 2026 based mainly on indicators of the red list of threatened species.

Action 26/1 – CSA Marine to share TORs of new Marine Science Advisory Board and provide update at next SSAC meeting.

c) Chief Social Policy Adviser, Prof Linda Bauld

- CSPA highlighted that a new [drug and alcohol strategy](#) had been published on 10 March, and the latest [child poverty delivery plan](#) had also been published. It's possible that Areas of Research Interest may be developed and published in these areas.
- The Science Media Centre mis/disinformation session had been successful, and there is UK-wide interest in this area, with Dame Angela McLean (UKG CSA) choosing tackling misinformation for her theme for her work next year.

3. SG Update – Dr Linda Galloway

Dr Galloway advised that further ARIs had been published:

- [Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture Research: Strategy 2027 to 2032](#)
- [Justice Analytical Services: Areas of Research Interest](#)
- [Marine and freshwater: areas of research interest](#)
- [Scotland's Tax Strategy: Building on our Tax Principles](#)
- [Food Standards Scotland \(2025\)](#)

Further ARIs are in development and will be published in due course.

Dr Galloway added that the SG's SSSB mentioned earlier by CSA Scotland is set to meet quarterly and will engage across all Director General families and CSAs in SG and will then report to the Executive Team.

Dr Galloway advised of the significant changes to approach by UKRI and that SG officials continue to engage at various levels with UKRI, emphasising the need for clear engagement and highlighting sector concerns.

Dr Galloway reminded the Council that the pre-election period begins on 26 March and that SSAC work should continue as normal since no reports are due to be published. Members should seek advice from Secretariat if they have concerns or queries linked to the election guidance.

The Chair asked how best to strengthen relationships between Scottish ecosystem and UKRI, and Dr Galloway advised continuing to support engagement at all levels and across the devolved administrations (DAs). She said the UKG industrial strategy does not fully mirror SG priorities but there was a lot of overlap.

Dr Browne suggested that there may be a deeper dive needed in the innovation working group, linked to levels of innovation and how research funding is distributed. It may be useful to engage Dr Galloway's expertise on UKRI relationship moving forward.

4. SG Consultation – Climate Change Plan (CCP)

The Chair thanked Dr Donovan and the working group for their contributions to the briefing paper prepared in response to the draft Climate Change Plan consultation.

Dr Donovan advised that the SSAC's response advised where the role of research could add value and support by looking at opportunities rather than critiques.

A copy of the SSAC brief was circulated with the meeting papers, however, Dr Donovan outlined the five main takeaway points:

- Transparent communication of underpinning research is an important component in effective CCP delivery;
- Stronger monitoring, evaluation, and systems analysis are needed;
- Sector-specific research gaps risk undermining delivery;
- Assessment of energy system risks and technological dependencies would benefit from further research;

- Implementation of Just Transition principles would benefit from deeper integration and operationalisation.

Mr Mallon thanked SSAC for their input and advised that SG are in the process of updating the CCP for finalisation. He advised that SSAC input had added value, including in how analytical material was handled. He appreciated that he had benefitted from previous SSAC input on the draft and noted that having views across all the sectors was a very valuable part of the work to finalise the CCP before the end of this Parliament.

Dr Yakushina asked about principles of assessment for how innovation is tracked/developed. Mr Mallon advised that the plan is not a blueprint for every single step and will need to reflect and develop as things change. The Chair agreed the priorities of the CCP are likely to evolve but if specific issues arose reminded Mr Mallon to contact SSAC should he require further SSAC advice.

5. SSAC Current Projects Updates

a) Update on CXC Hydrogen reports

- Dr Donovan advised that two CXC hydrogen projects should be published by the end of March ahead of the pre-election period, one on the regulatory landscape for hydrogen derivatives and one on the low carbon hydrogen deployment model. These reports will build on a suite of CXC hydrogen projects (including two previous publications).
- Dr Donovan advised that there seemed to be a move away from an interest in hydrogen projects.
- Mr Mallon commented that the last climate change plan update had hydrogen front and centre but the UK Climate Change Committee has moved its focus to electrification and decarbonisation.
- The Chair advised that there is no need to revisit the earlier SSAC hydrogen briefing nor create a new hydrogen project at this time.

b) Energy Demand Management

- Professor Harrison advised that the next working group meeting will be 30 March. He has refined the scoping document to identify what needs to be done and by whom in the group. He considered it a useful grouping so far and had a conversation with Professor Simms about links with the Critical Technologies report. He advised that there was a need for some statistics and sought help to identify who in SG would hold this information.

Action 26/2 - Secretariat to engage SG policy colleagues regarding Energy Demand statistics request.

c) NHS Decarbonisation

- The Chair thanked Dr Jenkins and Professor Harrison for their work on this project.
- Professor Harrison advised that the key questions had been agreed and there had been useful engagements with Faraday Institute and NHS Assure, and a clear view of what information is required from them and others.

- The Chair mentioned that grid capacity at NHS sites is a limiting factor, however Professor Harrison advised that it is better in the north of Scotland, but the real issue is how to replace assets near houses.
- Mr Mallon added the CCP includes references to grid capacity expansion and the need for having right connections in the right places moving forward.
- Professor Horsfall raised a point on off-grid storage and Professor Harrison clarified that there is battery storage on site but it is not just batteries but also heat storage in various forms.

d) Near-term skills

- The Chair thanked Professor Simms for her work on the skills project and the update that was circulated with the meeting papers. He noted it was good to have Grace Dey return as the project research assistant and that work had already begun on reviewing skills recommendations from previous SSAC reports. Next stage is mapping recommendations to the policy landscape, identifying key stakeholders to interview and then compiling SSAC recommendations.

e) Artificial Intelligence

- Professor Dobson was aware of the launch of the AI Strategy. He noted that work had begun on identifying stakeholders for a roundtable that will be scheduled post-election.
- He advised that there was overlap with the energy demand project/climate change plan due to massive electricity use.
- Professor Samuel added that it would be helpful if members could suggest companies to include in the roundtable as aiming to extend the invitation list via Tech Scaler and CodeBase.
- Dr Yakushina advised that the NMIS programme on data in manufacturing engaged 200 companies across Scotland and would be happy to share this.
- Professor Dobson suggested Scottish focused companies but not necessarily Scottish based would be suitable as lots of provider companies are multinational.
- Professor Kerr advised of the EPSRC 'AI in Industry' event at Glasgow University on 27 March which may be of interest - <https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/ai-in-industry-networking-tickets-1984563589118>

Action 26/3 – Secretariat to circulate AI Strategy once published.

f) Innovation

- Professor Jacko shared a presentation to discuss the Innovation project. She stated the proposed scope will focus on healthcare, life sciences and advanced manufacturing but welcomed discussion as the original SG scoping document had mentioned other areas.
- Dr Yakushina advised there had discussion with the WG about what should be included in the scope but tried to narrow down priorities.

- Professor Jacko welcomed colleagues' views on the scope and slide pack and suggested responses by email by 27 March would be appreciated so the working group could discuss this further at the next meeting on 30 March.
- Dr Yakushina thanked the support and input from the working group in pulling the scoping document together.
- The Chair suggested that Professor Jacko/Dr Yakushina reflect on whether other individuals outwith SSAC may need to be included on the working group.
- The Chair advised that in principle the scope is approved, subject to any final details via correspondence.

Action 26/4 – SSAC members to provide feedback/suggestions on the innovation scoping document via email by 27 March 2026.

6. Feedback on past reports

a) Critical Technologies

The Chair advised that Professor Simms had produced a well received report. She had also provided feedback at the SG Teach-In event and attended the Scottish Technology Council meeting. The Chair mentioned that many topics in the Critical Technologies report are already appearing in government priorities across SG/UKG.

b) Engineering Biology

Professor Horsfall advised that she had a pre-meeting scheduled to discuss the upcoming SG Teach-In event on 24 March. She mentioned that she had met the Scottish Enterprise (SE) delegation at the recent IBioIC conference who said they had found the report useful.

7. Members' Updates

- In relation to the AI project, Professor Samuel mentioned that he was currently in China and electricity costs there were 5p/KwH which presents a challenge for implementation in Scotland.
- Professor Kerr advised that a new critical technology innovation fund was launched by the University of Glasgow to support various projects.
- Professor Horsfall advised that Scottish Enterprise have published a critical minerals report and some of her research is included: [Insights paper 2026 - Critical Minerals: Scotland's path to economic resilience](#)
- Dr Yakushina recently changed role to a devolution partner and is planning to have an all Scottish Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KPT) event in NMIS by end of this year.
- Professor Owens advised that a previously disbanded aquaculture group had now been re-established.
- Dr Donovan advised that CXC will receive funding this coming year. The European Geosciences Union (EGU) will be having sessions on policy/science interface and she is happy to feedback to SSAC on these.
- Professor Pickersgill is involved in organising an event on regulation of wellness with colleagues in Ghana.

- The Chair is attending an EPSRC event in London and highlighted that future research investment in defence is growing.

8. AOB

a) SSAC Recruitment

- The Chair encouraged colleagues to share the SSAC recruitment campaign and confirmed the aiming of having up to 8 new members and 3 new associate members inducted by the September meeting.

b) Register of Experts

- Jo Ward advised that the SG response to UK Covid Inquiry Module 2 was published today and outlined some of the recommendations for SSAC interest.

Action 26/5 – Jo Ward to issue formal request via email later in April for recommendations for leading experts for the GO-Science register, for consideration as SAGE attendees in future emergencies.

9. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be the online Operational Meeting on Tuesday 19 May 2026.