

## Review of the BBSRC Committee structure Questionnaire

Please complete as many questions as possible and of relevance to you and return to the BBSRC by email by **30<sup>th</sup> September**. You will need to save the document to your computer prior to completion and attachment to your e-mail. Completed forms should be sent to [committee.consultation@bbsrc.ac.uk](mailto:committee.consultation@bbsrc.ac.uk)

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### **General Information**

**If you are replying on behalf of a university department, professional body or other organisation,**

1. Please give the **organisation** and your **role** (if different from above).

Reply on behalf of the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC)

2. Please explain your organisation's principal area of interaction with, or interest in, the BBSRC.

The Royal Society of Chemistry has principally interacted with the BBSRC via the Chemical Biology Forum (CBF). The CBF comprises around 2,700 RSC members with an interest in research at the interface between chemistry and biology. The CBF is overseen by an Executive Committee, which is composed of researchers from a variety of academic and industrial research backgrounds, and includes the RSC Biosciences Manager. Part of the Forum's remit is to facilitate high quality research at the chemistry-biology interface, and this has been identified as a key RSC priority by the CBF.

RSC and BBSRC staff have met several times in the past few years to discuss areas of mutual interest and potential collaboration. Our main interaction with the BBSRC has been through CBF workshops that have been co-sponsored by the BBSRC and / or featured talks from BBSRC Programme Managers. These workshops aim to facilitate collaborations between chemists and biologists by bringing these communities together to exchange ideas. These workshops also aim to improve awareness of particular funding schemes relevant to interdisciplinary research between chemists and biologists (e.g. SCIBS) via presentations from BBSRC Programme Managers.

The RSC endorses BBSRC efforts to encourage interdisciplinary researchers to apply for responsive mode funding, in addition to setting up dedicated interdisciplinary initiatives (e.g. SCIBS), as this will help promote high-quality interdisciplinary research.

## Consultation questions

8. What are the strengths of the current BBSRC seven-Committee structure?
- The current structure includes several committees with broad “themes” (e.g. Biomolecular Sciences) and committees comprise members with a variety of expertise.

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

The UK research community needs a funding framework in which high-quality interdisciplinary research can compete fairly with single discipline projects, but certain aspects of the current seven-Committee structure place interdisciplinary research projects at a disadvantage.

- It is often unclear to researchers from the non-biological sciences which committee is most appropriate to consider their grant proposal.
  - Many researchers from the chemical sciences do not submit proposals for BBSRC responsive mode funding because they believe they will not succeed, which may account for poor submission rates in this area. The committee structure could be revised to make more explicit the support offered to interdisciplinary projects, for example those involving chemistry, physics, mathematics or computing.
  - Many committees are not appropriately balanced regarding representation from non-biological (e.g. physical, chemical, mathematical) sciences. The large number of committees may increase the likelihood that the most appropriate scientists to judge multidisciplinary proposals are distributed between committees, making it more difficult for proposals to be judged fairly and easier for proposals to “fall between the cracks”. This weakness may be addressed via committee structure or, more directly, by ensuring that all existing committees are well balanced and that non-biological sciences are not marginalised.
10. How might the structure be changed to address the challenges mentioned in the background to this questionnaire?
- Fewer (4-5) committees with names and compositions explicitly appealing to researchers at the interface between biological and non-biological sciences would encourage multi/interdisciplinary project applications. However, caution should be exercised to ensure

representation from non-biological sciences is not diluted if committees with broader remits are created.

- Committees with “problem-driven” titles and remits (e.g. sustainable agriculture and energy) might encourage applications from multidisciplinary teams, and enable multi- and single discipline proposals to be considered on a more equal footing.

11. Do you have any other comments about the BBSRC committee structure?

- We recommend that the BBSRC should reassess the relationship between its committees and the EPSRC Life Science Interface Programme, with the intention of optimising the complementarity of their respective remits. At present, the physical / biological science interface is supposed to be covered in part by the LSI panel. However, the attempt to avoid overlap between LSI and BBSRC has created a gap between the two councils, through which many chemistry-based grant proposals now fall. This is a very serious issue for chemistry departments at the moment. Many individuals from chemistry departments do not understand how, say, single molecule studies or systems analyses are managed at the two research councils and so cannot write their bids accordingly. For grants which have a heavy biological component this is more straightforward, but for grants which do not it is confusing.

The funding of chemistry in areas at the biological sciences interface has suffered because of the lack of harmonisation between BBSRC and EPSRC. This should be borne in mind during any restructuring of BBSRC committees. This issue was also described in the November 2005 EPSRC consultation entitled “Impact Study of the EPSRC Life Sciences Interface Programme”.

- The response here is mainly concerned with research at the interface between chemistry and biology, but many of the recommendations given here would also benefit many other types of interdisciplinary science more broadly.

Analysis of the results will be published in early 2007, responses will be anonymised prior to publication. The results of this consultation will be viewed in conjunction with the output from other cross-council peer review activities.