

Summary of the RSC Roundtable on a Chemicals Agency

On 15 November 2024, the Royal Society of Chemistry hosted a Chatham House-style roundtable event on the state of UK chemicals strategy and regulation. Attendees included high-level representatives from chemical companies and industry organisations, the civil service, NGOs, learned societies, academia, and others.

In addition to discussing the new RSC position on [the case for a national Chemicals Agency](#), the day focused on the strategic approach of the UK chemical regulation system, principles for a chemicals strategy, and the links between chemicals and other government strategies.

This paper reports the broad themes of discussion from the day.

1. Objectives of UK Chemicals Regulation

Attendees discussed the principles needed for an effective chemicals regulation system in the UK. There was broad agreement on the importance of preventing harm to human health and the environment while enabling innovation and growth. New approaches, such as considering the full lifecycle of chemicals, incorporating circular economy concepts, sustainability, and achieving net-zero targets were also discussed. Some participants suggested a need for enhanced flexibility, transparency, and accountability through regular reviews of regulatory decisions, and the adoption of a risk-based approach with input from various stakeholders.

Supporting innovation within the regulatory framework was a key focus. It was agreed that outdated legislation should be streamlined to build agility in responding to new scientific developments and strategic priorities. Participants discussed the importance of understanding the risks and trade-offs associated with new technologies and advanced materials, with suggestions including the adoption of safe and sustainable by design principles and lifecycle approaches to avoid regrettable substitution.

The role of science in the regulatory framework was also a recurring theme. Attendees noted the opportunity to accelerate the adoption of new approach methods (NAMs) post-Brexit. Other suggestions for embedding science into the regulatory system included enhancing use and exposure data for better risk assessment, utilising expert science panels, and aligning guidelines internationally, such as through the OECD.

2. Achieving Objectives Differently

While participants generally believed that the objectives of the current regulatory system were on the right track, there was consensus that these could be achieved more effectively. Common suggestions included streamlining the engagement by making

information more accessible, improving coordination between government bodies, and clarifying responsibilities for managing and directing chemicals policies and enforcement.

Discussion also highlighted a significant skills gap across both the public and private sectors, particularly in regulatory sciences, which has been exacerbated by Brexit. Participants underscored the need for training not only in traditional science skills but also in areas such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and interdisciplinary skills at the science-policy interface. Early educational exposure to topics like risk and regulation and providing work placement and secondment opportunities were suggested. The challenge of retaining a skilled workforce within the public sector was also highlighted.

3. Opinions on a Chemicals Agency

The idea of establishing a UK chemicals agency elicited mixed reactions. Many participants felt that at present, a Chemicals Agency would not solve the immediate uncertainty in the system such as UK REACH, burdens on industry, and resourcing issues, and would pose a new challenge for funding allocations. However, proponents highlighted potential benefits such as the simplicity of having a single body tailored to UK needs, opportunities for international leadership, and improved coordination and learning across government departments. Concerns included the time required to build trust, the complexity of set-up process, costs, and the risk of creating new barriers without a comprehensive strategy.

4. Chemicals Strategy Principles and Goals

Participants suggested a number of principles and goals needed for a comprehensive chemicals strategy. These include sustainability, innovation, supply chain resilience, responsible environmental stewardship, human health protection, the use of NAMs, accountability, polluter pays, and endurance over time. The strategy should support domestic manufacturing, growth, and jobs. It could also integrate with global strategies, and chart areas of international leadership. Some attendees felt that the government should go further, by ensuring market stability and investment through strategic interventions.

Many participants felt that the chemicals sector needs to combat negative perceptions and promote a positive vision that highlights the importance of the industry. Clear strategic focus, leadership, and adequate funding were deemed necessary for success. There was a consensus that developing a chemicals strategy is a priority, especially as regulatory uncertainty is causing significant issues for industry.

5. Link Between Chemicals and Other Government Strategies

Attendees discussed the need for coordination of strategies across government departments, devolved nations, and with each other. The importance of a holistic, systems thinking approach was recognised. Other key points included emphasising the foundational role of chemicals in various sectors, embedding chemicals as a key aspect of

other strategies such as industrial and decarbonisation strategies, and ensuring policy certainty to support investment and innovation. Many also stressed the need to clarify the policy lead for each strategy.

6. International Considerations

Some representatives from industry, NGO, learned societies and academia shared thoughts about the UK's future relationship with the EU. This included views on regulatory compliance costs, on regulatory flexibility and on competitiveness.

Conclusions and next steps

The workshop concluded with a consensus on the need for a well-coordinated and adequately resourced approach to UK chemicals regulation that supports innovation, protects human health and the environment, and aligns with international standards while addressing unique UK needs. Participants agreed that a comprehensive chemicals strategy is needed to enact this vision. However, there was an acknowledgement that this may not be a high priority for Defra at the moment.

Everyone agreed that there is a need for ongoing cooperation across the sector. Short-term priorities include the collaborative development a vision for future chemicals policy for the UK, advocating for the inclusion of chemicals in the industrial strategy, and moving forward with a joint approach to skills development, including engagement across all stages of education and career pathways.

The RSC intends to take forward the outputs of this workshop to further build the case for investment in chemistry and sustainable practices in order to create a safe and prosperous future for the UK.

About us

With over 60,000 members in over 100 countries and a knowledge business that spans the globe, the Royal Society of Chemistry (RSC) is the UK's professional body for chemical scientists, supporting and representing our members and bringing together chemical scientists from all over the world. Our members include those working in large multinational companies and small to medium enterprises, researchers and students in universities, teachers and regulators.

This workshop summary was prepared by Stephanie Metzger of the RSC Policy & Evidence team. We would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this work in more detail. Any questions should be directed to the RSC Policy & Evidence Team at policy@rsc.org.