Strategic Research Programme

Is the approach to funding effective in supporting sustained research in priority areas?

FSS interests in this programme relate primarily to Theme 3 of the programme (Food, Health and Wellbeing), with particular aspects of work packages 2.2 and 2.3 of Theme 2 relating to public health implications associated with disease control in livestock production and land management also of relevance to our policy remit. The aims of these research programmes align to a number of our strategic objectives (http://www.foodstandards.gov.scot/downloads/FSS_Strategy_Doc_Final_2.pdf), and in this regard, we consider the funding approach to be partially effective in supporting sustained research in priority areas. FSS recognises the significant scientific expertise that exists within the SEFARI research institutes and the potential value of this resource in protecting the reputation of Scotland’s food and drink industry and supporting Scottish Government aims for improving diet and public health. We would therefore strongly support on-going investment in the programme and research institutes to ensure existing laboratory infrastructure and skills are maintained and developed into the future. However we believe there is considerable scope to target the funding more effectively to ensure that future research and the expertise which supports it, addresses policy priorities relating to food chain protection, and the Scottish Government’s new obesity strategy – ‘A Healthier Future’. Through our recent experience in working with the SRP, we have noted that public health nutrition expertise has diminished in preference to more mechanistic research approaches. Public health nutrition expertise may now be more easily accessed from scientists working in the UK than SAFARI institutes.

It is our view that stronger emphasis should be placed on innovation and policy impact when funding decisions are made. With regard to public health nutrition, the funding needs to be more targeted to applied science, and in particular the testing and evaluation of population level interventions to address diet and obesity.

Over all of the themes, there is also a need to review the direction of the research and balance of funding on an on-going basis throughout the lifetime of the programme to ensure the outputs continue to have demonstrable relevance to the development of food and drink policy and interventions.

Does the research programme contribute effectively to the delivery of the National Outcomes and the Scottish Government’s Purpose?

The SRP and the SEFARI institutes clearly have a critical role to play in delivering Scottish Government’s ambition to foster a culture of innovation in
research and development and on-going investment will be important in ensuring the skills, expertise and infrastructure are maintained and that there is scope to augment the quality of the science into the future. FSS considers the research programme to make a valuable contribution to the delivery of Scottish Government National Outcomes, and Scotland’s reputation for research and innovation. However, as noted in the answer above, there is a need to properly align the work to strategic policy relating to food protection and public health. This is particularly important with regard to public health nutrition in light of Scottish Government’s new obesity strategy – ‘A Healthier Future’. It is also the view of FSS that the SRP should place greater focus on applied research which is able to demonstrate clear policy application and is sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing priorities.

Centres of Expertise

Is the approach to promoting centres of expertise effective in linking with Scottish Government policy priority and the needs of end users?

In the experience of FSS, the approach to promoting centres of expertise is currently only partially effective in linking with the needs of end users. With regard to our interests in Theme 3 of the Strategic Programme, FSS would welcome greater involvement in steering the direction of the research to ensure it is more effectively targeted to our strategic priorities in relation to the safety and standards of the Scottish food chain and public health improvement. FSS recognises the breadth and quality of scientific expertise that exists within the SEFARI institutes and has developed good working relationships with the research groups responsible for delivering under Theme 3. However, despite being a key end user of the research, there is currently limited opportunity for FSS to contribute to its direction and to review progress and outputs. It would be beneficial to increase opportunities for enabling FSS to engage with scientists on an on-going basis and review research findings as the work progresses. At present, the research objectives set at the start of the programme are not often articulated in a way which allows them to be linked explicitly to FSS strategy on food and health, which can make it difficult for us to provide constructive advice on the development of projects and to ensure the value of the outputs is maximised.

Does the output of the work contribute to the National Performance Framework?

In broad terms the work contributes to the National Performance Framework targets with regard to research and development, although as noted above there is a need to consider how it could be better targeted to policy needs in relation to public health, consumer protection and business interests relating to food production. There is also scope for the SRP to place greater focus on the performance indicator to improve knowledge exchange by strengthening links between SEFARI institutes, Universities and the wider public health science community.

Innovation Funding
Has the approach to innovation funding supported collaborative working and what have the outcomes been?

FSS has been involved in three innovation projects (and provided funding for two of these), and has found this mechanism to provide a route for FSS to strengthen engagement with scientists across the Institutes and improve understanding of our policy needs. However, the value of the outputs has been variable, and we would suggest that this could be improved through more strategic engagement with FSS at the project inception stage and that deliverables are defined more clearly in order to ensure the work remains aligned to objectives and best value is achieved.

Underpinning Capacity

What activities are supported by funding to underpin capacity and what are the expected outcomes?

FSS has no experience in this area.

Scottish Environment, Food and Agriculture Research Institute

What additional benefit does SEFARI bring?

FSS considers SEFARI to have the potential to add significant benefit to the SRP, by providing end users with a central mechanism for strategic engagement across the institutes.

Contract Funding

The funds available through the contract research budget have declined significantly. What has been the impact of this decline?

FSS is unable to comment on the impact of the decline in contract research budget. However, it is worth noting that we were successful this year in taking forward a new Contract Research Fund (CRF) project in an area which is of direct relevance to current policy on microbiological food safety. This is the first time FSS has commissioned work through the CRF route, and it has been a very positive experience. The opportunity to co-fund the research has represented good value for FSS and has fostered a very productive collaboration between multidisciplinary partners (including FSS, SNH, the Forestry Commission, the Moredun, the Scottish E. coli reference laboratory, the Roslin and the Scottish venison industry). The funding mechanism promoted focussed engagement between government agencies to identify evidence gaps and allowed a quick turn-around time for commissioning the work.
Additional issues

What are the key challenges for the research community in Scotland and research funding in the next 10 years?

Clearly reductions in the funding available from research councils and government presents a key challenge for the scientific community in Scotland, and on-going budget pressures will make it increasingly important for resources to be more effectively targeted. Further, whether EU funding and the existing levels of collaboration will continue over the coming years is unclear and is a key concern. Many of the challenges being faced in the food safety and diet/obesity areas are common across Europe and hence ensuring collaboration with the best researchers across Europe is a key challenge. The Scottish food and drink industry faces a number of significant challenges, particularly with regard to the impacts of Brexit and how changes in climate and agricultural practice will affect the sustainability and integrity of our food supply chain. Maintaining the necessary scientific expertise and infrastructure and ensuring research efforts are effectively targeted will be critical in ensuring our food and drink industry is resilient to these challenges.

Specifically what is the estimated impact of withdrawal from Europe on the research community and funding available to rural, food and environment research in Scotland?

Resilient and sustainable scientific capability for verifying the provenance of foods produced in Scotland and ensuring their compliance with regulatory safety standards will be critical in protecting the Scottish food and drink industry and supporting targets laid out in Ambition 2030. This will become increasingly important in the post Brexit landscape as Scotland strives to exploit new export markets where provenance and safety are likely to play a prominent role in trade agreements.

What steps do the Scottish Government and research organisations need to take to address those challenges?

As noted above, FSS considers the SRP and its institutes to represent a highly valuable resource for Scottish Government. Strong scientific expertise is critical to Scotland’s ambition to be a land of food and drink, and needs to be prioritised in light of the challenges facing the sector in relation to EU Exit, the impacts of changing climate and the health and dietary needs of the population. However the research, and the funding which supports it, needs to be more effectively targeted to promote multidisciplinary approaches aimed at enhancing horizon scanning capability, improved engagement with end users and stronger collaboration both between institutes and with the wider research community. In particular there should be a focus to ensure that there is the expertise and infrastructure available to generate the scientific data and knowledge that can underpin policy development to promote innovation in the sector, improved food safety and diet and nutrition.