

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **New public dialogue to explore views on genome editing in farmed animals**

The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC – part of UK Research and Innovation, UKRI) and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, with the support of UKRI's Sciencewise programme, are delighted to announce a new public dialogue on genome editing in farmed animals. The dialogue will be run by Basis Social, a social research consultancy.

Genome editing - known commonly as 'gene editing' - is the precise, targeted, alteration of a DNA sequence in a living cell. It enables changes to the genome - which aim to secure certain physical traits in new generations of farmed animals - to be made much faster and with greater precision than other types of genetic technologies, or through traditional breeding methods.

In the UK, genome editing techniques are not currently used in breeding animals that are sold for food, but research in this area is well advanced, and some genome edited animals have already been approved for consumption in other parts of the world. Several research groups have successfully demonstrated the use of the techniques to make functional changes to animals' genomes, without any apparent adverse effects.

This public dialogue has been commissioned jointly by BBSRC, Nuffield Council on Bioethics and Sciencewise. It will be overseen by an advisory group chaired by Sarah Mukherjee MBE, CEO of the Institute of Environmental Management & Assessment, and former BBC Environment Correspondent. The dialogue follows the publication of a major Nuffield Council on Bioethics report on the social and ethical issues associated with genome editing and farmed animal breeding in December 2021. Given the strong public interest in food technologies, this report strongly recommended early, open, and informed dialogue with the public in anticipation of genome editing being introduced into the food and farming system. It is expected that the outcomes of this summer's public dialogue will help to shape responsible research and innovation pathways as the technologies develop.

Basis Social have been appointed to deliver this public dialogue following a competitive tender process. The dialogue is expected to involve around 80 members of the public and will take place between May and July. A report of the findings will be published in September.

**Professor Melanie Welham, Executive Director at BBSRC, said:**

*"BBSRC is pleased to be supporting new public dialogue in this crucial policy area. The UK has outstanding expertise in animal bioscience, and we welcome the opportunity to have a wide-ranging public dialogue which will enable a deeper exploration of views and help inform associated policies."*

**Danielle Hamm, Director, Nuffield Council on Bioethics, said:**

*"As the Government considers next steps for regulation of genetic breeding technologies, there is a real opportunity now to ensure that policy making in this area is aligned with public interests. Last year, Basis Social worked with us on a rapid dialogue to help identify public hopes and fears about these technologies, which fed into our influential report 'Genome editing and farmed animal breeding: ethical and social issues'. We are pleased to be taking forward this debate with UKRI-BBSRC and Sciencewise, and working with Basis Social again, to further explore public perspectives on the future of our food and farming system."*

**Tom Saunders, Head of Public Engagement, UKRI, said:**

*“Gene editing technology has the potential to transform food production and food security, but there are important trade-offs to consider if it is to be widely used. This Sciencewise public dialogue is an important opportunity for diverse groups to engage with and influence this area of policy, and to ensure the direction of travel aligns with public, as well as stakeholder priorities.”*

**Darren Bhattachary, CEO, Basis Social, said:**

*“People have a keen interest in food and farming, and the values that underpin it. Understanding the potential role of genome editing in farmed animals is a rich and fascinating area for public debate. We’re really looking forward to working with BBSRC, Nuffield Council on Bioethics and Sciencewise on this next stage in the dialogue process, to help shape future policy in this area”.*

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## **NOTES TO EDITORS**

### **1. Media contact**

#### **Nuffield Council on Bioethics**

Sarah Walker-Robson

Senior Communications Manager

[swalker-robson@nuffieldbioethics.org](mailto:swalker-robson@nuffieldbioethics.org)

Tel: 07821 449 725

### **2. Public dialogue: commissioning organisations**

- The [Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council](#) is a major funder of world-leading bioscience in the UK, which builds and supports a vibrant, dynamic, and inclusive community that delivers ground-breaking discoveries and develops bio-based solutions, contributing to tackling global challenges such as sustainable food production, climate change, and healthy ageing.

- The [Nuffield Council on Bioethics](#) examines ethical issues raised by new developments in biology and medicine and provides advice to policymakers. It is an independent body, funded jointly by the Nuffield Foundation, the Medical Research Council, and Wellcome.
- UKRI's [Sciencewise](#) programme helps to ensure policy is informed by the views and aspirations of the public. The programme is led and funded by UKRI with support from the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS). Involve, the UK's leading public participation charity, provides expert advice, assurance, and support to the programme.

### 3. UK Government proposals for regulatory reform of genome edited organisms

In 2021 the UK Government's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) [consulted on plans](#) to amend the regulation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), to take some genome edited organisms out of the scope of retained EU regulatory requirements for GMOs. This will be given effect under the proposed Precision Breeding Bill announced in the Queens speech. The Government indicated it would give careful consideration to the distinctive ethical questions that arise in relation to animal welfare before changes affecting animal breeding are made. It is expected that the outcomes of this public dialogue will help to inform and shape the debate around regulatory reform.

### 4. Previous rapid online dialogue

A previous [rapid online dialogue](#) - commissioned by the Nuffield Council on Bioethics and completed in summer 2021 - indicated that there are a number of outstanding questions which must be explored with members of the public, including:

- **Assumptions underlying public responses to new breeding technologies:** including understandings of current husbandry practices, food systems, and food standards regulation.

- **The role of breeding technologies in the future UK food system:** including an exploration of what is a desirable future for the UK food system, and the role of breeding technologies such as GEFA in this.
- **Alternatives to genome editing:** including consideration of whether problems or opportunities with respect to the UK's food system can and should be met by alternatives to genome editing.
- **The socially desirable aims for genome editing:** for example, to eliminate routine surgical mutilations, address threats of veterinary or zoonotic disease, or to improve food quality and quantity.
- **Conditions under which genome editing might be used:** for example, in specific husbandry conditions, subject to specific controls.