

Engineering Biology Public Dialogue Oversight Group - Meeting #1

Date of meeting: 11 February 2026, 13:30 – 16:00

Location: online via Microsoft Teams

Attendance

OG Attendance: Professor Anne Osbourn (John Innes Centre), Professor Joy Zhang (University of Kent), Rowan McKibbin (BBSRC), Rebecca Asher (Jobshare with Emily Jesper-Mir - Wellcome Trust), Sophia McCully (Nuffield Council on Bioethics), Dr Florence Young (Campaign for Science and Engineering - CaSE), Pat Thomas (Beyond GM/A Bigger Conversation), Philip Simister (OBN), Linda Bedenik (BIA), Leslie Galloway (Ethical Medicines Industrial Group - EMIG)

Chair: Dr Rob Smith (University of Edinburgh, currently part-time seconded to Go-Science)

Apologies: Professor Sarah Hartley (University of Exeter, currently part-time seconded to Go-Science and Co-Chairing the OG), Dr Jen Vanderhoven (BBIA)

Also in attendance: Henrietta Hopkins (Hopkins Van Mil), Hally Ingram (Hopkins Van Mil), Pauline Harris (Hopkins Van Mil), Dom McDonald (Navigator Consulting), Ben Johnson (Graphic Science), Trupti Patel (Sciencewise), Stephen Robinson (Sciencewise), Scott Allen (DSIT), Emmet McCallion (DSIT), Sabirun Ullah (DSIT, also OG Secretary)

Readout

On 11 February 2026, the UK Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) hosted the Engineering Biology (EB) Public Dialogue Oversight Group's (OG) first meeting. The OG brings together relevant experts from academia, industry, civil society and trade associations. The OG will add value to the dialogue by bringing diverse expertise to advise on the design and delivery of the dialogue and help to maximise its impact.

Agenda item 1: Welcome and Introductions

- The Chair opened the meeting and welcomed attendees. They thanked members for joining the OG and highlighted the importance of the OG's diverse expertise in informing this public dialogue and maximising its impact.
- The Chair informed that this OG is being Co-Chaired. The other Co-chair (Sarah Hartley) was unable to join today's meeting. Going forward Chairing will likely rotate each meeting between Co-Chairs, but this will be confirmed prior to future OG meetings.
- Members of the OG and representatives from DSIT, Sciencewise, Hopkins Van Mil, Navigator Consulting and Graphic Science introduced themselves, their area of expertise and their interest in this dialogue.

Agenda item 2: Agenda Review

- The agenda was agreed with no additional items added.
- The Chair informed OG members that in future meetings attendees will have the opportunity to suggest agenda items. These items will then be considered by the Secretariat considering time available in the agenda.

Agenda item 3: Introduction to Sciencewise

- Trupti Patel (Sciencewise) introduced Sciencewise, deliberative public dialogues and Sciencewise's goals of making research and policy more impactful and inclusive in order to strengthen trust in science and technology.

Agenda item 4: DSIT's Dialogue Objectives and Draft Scope – DSIT

- DSIT described the commissioning of this dialogue as part of its commitment to Responsible Innovation (RI) in EB. DSIT seeks to ensure that unintended negative impacts of EB are avoided, that barriers to dissemination, adoption and diffusion of research and innovation are reduced, and that the positive societal and economic benefits of research and innovation are fully realised. Public engagement is key to delivering this.
- DSIT introduced its objectives for the dialogue. These include identifying and understanding public perception of EB, understanding the drivers that underlie public perspectives, informing government policy on EB and ensuring well integrated stakeholder engagement throughout the dialogue. DSIT emphasised that the dialogue has significant potential to influence government policy given that EB is a Frontier Technology in the UK's Modern Industrial Strategy and that DSIT announced £644m for EB in November 2025.
- DSIT introduced the draft questions that the dialogue will seek to answer, noting that these are informed by the findings of [DSIT's 2024 EB Public Trust Survey](#). DSIT invited OG members' comments on its approach to the dialogue, with a particular focus on the dialogue's scope.
- DSIT also invited OG for any additional written comments.

OG members provided questions and advice on the dialogue's scope:

- **Definition of EB** – the dialogue intends to use HMG's working definition of EB but other institutions (for example UKRI) use other definitions. The dialogue should be mindful of different definitions and consider the limitations of some definitions.
- **Clarifying Terminology** – EB can sometime be referred to as synthetic biology or biotechnology in different countries. Give that terminology varies and that definitions are not always clear, it's important that sufficient time is given to exploring terminology with dialogue participants.
- **Focus on governance, adoption and communication** – the current scope of the dialogue is focused on the governance of EB, the adoption of EB products and processes and communications surrounding EB. Whilst this is understandable given that DSIT is the commissioning body, the dialogue should also give participants the opportunity to communicate their views on when they do not think EB should be used. The dialogue should consider who benefits from EB innovation and what the risks of that innovation are. The dialogue should also

consider the role of non-government actors in governing EB, including researchers and industry.

- **Be clear on what the dialogue is and is not** – given the limited number of dialogue workshops and the dialogue’s significant potential to influence policy, the dialogue should also be clear on what it does not intend to do. Being clear on what’s outside of the scope of the dialogue can help to refine its scope and maximise its impact. The dialogue’s name should be reviewed to ensure that it accurately reflects its purpose.
- **EB tools and services** – the dialogue intends to consider EB at the platform level and then in five key application areas: health, chemicals and materials, low carbon fuels, agriculture and food and waste and environment. It’s important that the dialogue considers the use of EB in tools and services along supply chains.
- **Considering the ‘public’** – while the general public will be a key audience for EB, it may also be helpful to reflect on who else might use EB products and processes. For instance, industry could play a role, and including their perspective may support responsible innovation.

Agenda item 5: Dialogue Programme – Hopkins Van Mil (HVM)

- Henrietta Hopkins (HVM) explained that HVM specialises in designing and delivering public participation and deliberative processes to help people engage in decisions that affect them. HVM noted that they have worked on Sciencewise dialogues in the past, including the dialogue on early human embryo research.
- HVM noted that for this dialogue 56 participants will be recruited across the four UK nations to broadly reflect the UK population. The recruitment criteria are being developed to ensure the sample is broadly reflective, but this will consider their views on technology, their geography and their protected characteristics.
- HVM noted that participant workshops will take place online and in-person, with one in-person workshop in each of the four locations. HVM explained workshop planning and design, including creating stimulus materials will be bought to the second OG meeting for discussion. HVM invited OG members’ questions and comments on the programme.
- HVM invited the OG to participate in both the design workshop and distributed workshops, noting attendance is optional and not a requirement of the OG.

OG members provided questions and advice on the dialogue programme:

- **Translational process** – it’s vital that the translation of the dialogue into impact is considered throughout the design process. This should be a key focus of future OG meetings to ensure that workshops are being designed to translate into impact.
- **Recruitment criteria** – the OG noted the importance of a robust recruitment criteria and selection process. Suggestion that participants political views could be considered in the criteria.
- **Sample size** – the OG asked whether there were ways to boost the statistical significance of the findings. A follow-up Delphi survey was suggested to engage a wider group. HVM emphasised the dialogue is a method to generate deeper insights with a small group and that unfortunately a Delphi survey is beyond the constraints of this project.

Agenda item 6: Approach to evaluation – Navigator Consulting and Graphic Science

- Dom McDonald (Navigator Consulting) introduced the evaluation framework for the dialogue, breaking it down into four stages. This entails a baseline review of internal documents and stakeholder interviews; observation during workshops; participant and stakeholder questionnaires and interviews after the workshops; and working with stakeholders and the project team to assess the dialogue's impact six months after the final report's publication. The evaluation team will develop their framework based on a theory of change, mapping the short-term outputs and potential longer-term outcomes.
- Ben Johnson (Graphic Science) noted that the evaluation will take a realist approach. This will focus on how the process works for participants in different contexts. They highlighted the importance of capturing diverse voices and ensuring that participants can recognise their contributions in outputs and in the dialogue's impact.

OG members provided questions and advice on the evaluation process:

- **Translating the dialogue's findings into impact** – it is important that the evaluation facilitates accountability and learning. The dialogue should learn from the evaluation of other Sciencewise dialogues to maximise the dialogue's impact.
- **Demonstrating participants' contributions** – the OG praised the emphasis being put on this. Suggestion that participants could be contacted six months after the dialogue report publication to evaluate the extent to which they feel heard and have had impact.
- **Creative approaches** – can creative arts be brought into the dialogue process as a meeting place to support participants to feel immersed and heard?
- **Dominant voices and participant's occupations** – can certain occupations or expertise be excluded from participation given that their prior knowledge may mean they are better informed and dominate discussion. This may help to ensure that all participants feel heard. It was noted that this was an issue for the project team's recruitment of participants as much as for the evaluation team.

Agenda item 7: The OG's Role and Terms of Reference

- The Chair referenced the OG's Terms of Reference (ToR), noting that the OG serves as an independent body to advise the dialogue process and design, whilst also championing the dialogue's impact. They noted that the OG's role is advisory and it is not a decision-making body.
- The OG will meet four times during the dialogue with additional opportunities for input between meetings including ad hoc written input and participation in workshops.
- OG members did not provide any suggested edits to the ToR but were informed that the ToR can be discussed again and reviewed during the dialogue if needed.

Agenda item 8: AOB and Next Steps

- The Chair summarised actions points and next steps. OG members were informed that if at any point they think they have not been heard during the process they should raise this with the Co-chairs.
- The Chair explained that given their role as OG Secretariat DSIT will circulate a meeting readout and OG members will be invited to comment on the readout. OG members will also be invited to provide written input between meetings, including on the dialogue's scope, method and speakers for workshops.
- The Chair explained that the next meeting will be in the Spring.

Action Table

Action No.	Owner	Action
1	HVM	Issue OG invites for representatives to join 23 March Stakeholder Design Workshop
2	OG Members	Note forthcoming invitations to join & observe in person & online workshops (noting Observer spaces are limited)
3	OG Members	Provide any additional comments in writing on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Dialogue's Scope and questions
3	OG Members	Note & respond as necessary to calls for Agenda Items for future OG meetings
4	OG Members	Continue to consider ways to promote awareness of the dialogue and signpost to its outputs to maximise its impact
5	All	Forward any suggestions to HVM for workshop speakers and panellists, especially any with experience of communicating EngBio to those unfamiliar with the subject
6	DSIT	Circulate meeting readout and invite comments