

STRATEGIC EVIDENCE FUND

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1. Summary

1.1 In this paper we outline the strategic evidence delivery at the FSA, which is predominantly supported by the **Strategic Evidence Fund (SEF)**. The fund was created to aid the Chief Scientific Advisor and Science Director in the development of the FSA science capabilities. Unlike the Investment Board that supports current and near-term evidence essential to meet agency's everyday needs, the SEF enables the FSA to pump-prime new transformative frontier, sometime speculative, ideas. It aims to fund projects/initiatives with the overarching objective of enhancing science capabilities and preparing for the future by applying advances in food R&D and relevant disciplines, and by providing insights on future challenges and opportunities.

1.2 The Science Council is asked to:

- Comment on the SEF delivery to date,
- Consider and make recommendations on changes, which could improve the SEF coordination and management and could help to realise the impact of the FSA strategic investment;

2. Introduction

2.1 The SEF is the FSA strategic R&D investment of £1.5M per year and designed as a flexible funding source primarily focused on supporting and facilitating high-risk-high-impact ambitious interdisciplinary research projects that address some of the most important challenges facing the UK food system. The SEF provides funding to develop original and challenging ideas, to work collaboratively across disciplines, and to influence food regulations in a period of rapid change and uncertainty for the consumer and FBOs.

2.2 The scope of the SEF is broad but, generally, with focus on:

- **Emerging technologies, disruptive innovations and frontier research** (e.g. proof of concept, deployment of new technologies, adaptation of existing elsewhere approaches to change the way the FSA operates in future);
- **Emerging risks, horizon scanning and foresights** (e.g. tools to help the FSA to identify and understand underlying drivers, emerging risks and their impact on the UK food system, novel approaches to develop policies and regulations that are more resilient to different possible future scenarios),
- **Strategic collaborations and partnerships** (e.g. national and international engagements with key stakeholders, partners and funders to leverage R&D investments, evidence coordination across the government, access to expertise to bridge knowledge gaps).

2.3 Since 2017 the SEF invested £4,257,474 in 41 R&D projects (Annex 1 and 2). The projects range from small desk-studies and studentships (e.g. £10K over 3 months) to large R&D projects and fellowships (e.g. £625K over 5 years).

2.4 Since July 2019 the SEF is under a new management and **several changes** have already been implemented to address some delivery matters:

- The SEF Board now has a new structure and well-defined tasks: (i) evaluation of new proposals, (ii) performance review of the fund, (iii) strategic insight and guidance;
- The application form and approval of new projects were re-designed to simplify and streamline the process but, at the same time, to make it more robust and transparent;
- The review of individual project delivery is now incorporated in the wider SERD project review process;
- A new approach to monitor the investment was designed and now includes an overallocation component to facilitate meeting the financial target,
- A SEF projects' dashboard was developed to promptly identify and address any delivery issues.

2.5 Considering the SEF performance to date, the SEF Board recommended to submit a new business case to the FSA Investment Board for the 2020-22 strategic evidence delivery and to **increase the fund** from £1.5M in 2019 to £1.7M in 2020 to £1.9M in 2021, and to £2.1M in 2022.

2.6 The SEF Board recommended to apply the **theory of change** to realise the impact of the SEF investment. This work is in a progress at the moment and focuses on:

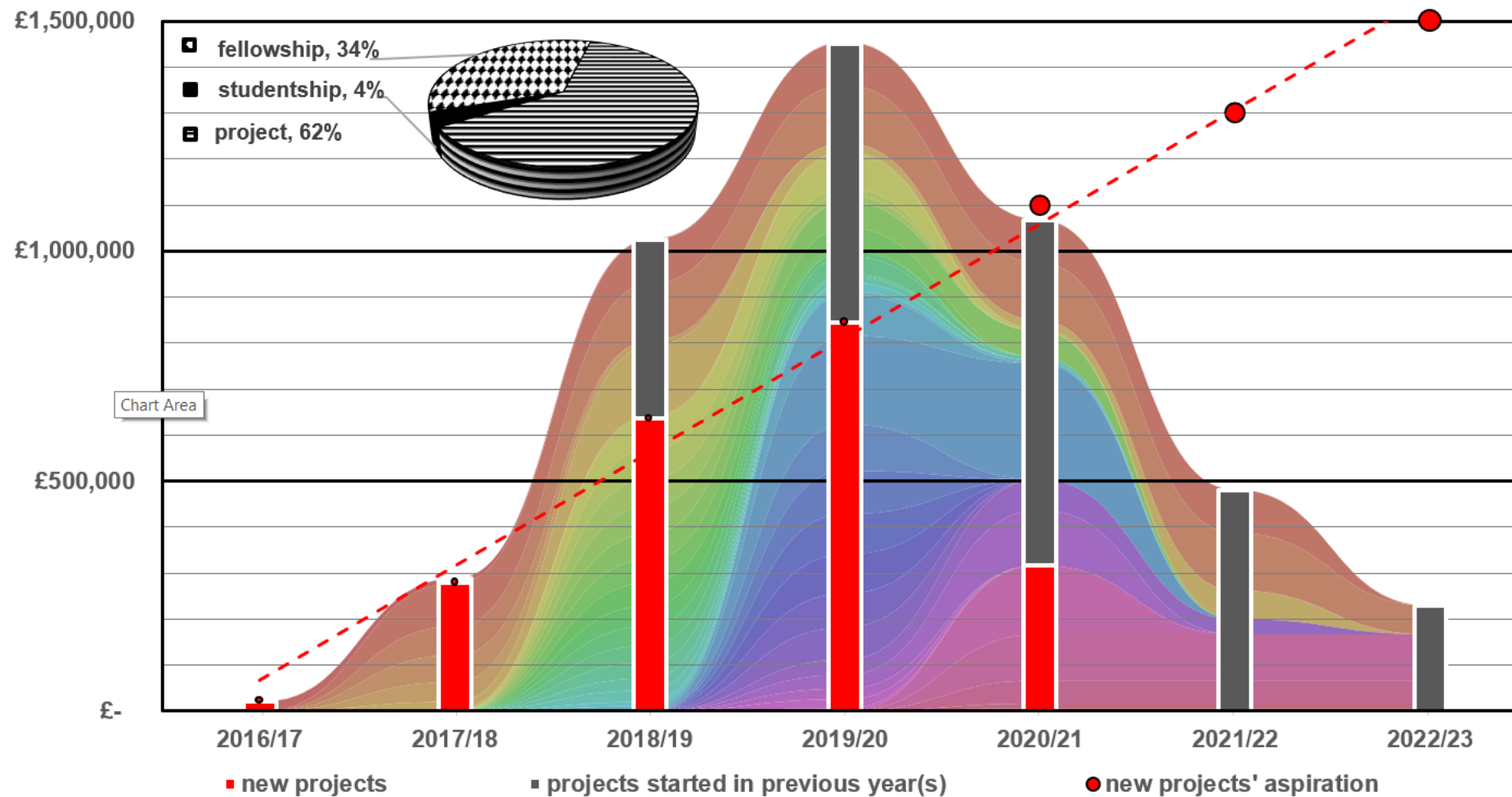
- Aligning the strategic investment to the ARIs (**Areas of Research Interests**)
- Capturing and disseminating SEF projects' **outputs**;
- Monitoring the use of SEF projects' outputs by the FSA staff and wider research community to apprise **outcomes** of the investment;
- Developing an approach to evaluate the SEF **impact**.

3. Discussion

3.1 Based upon the paper presented here, the Science Council is asked to:

- Comment and make recommendations on the overall SEF performance;
- Consider the following questions:
 - (a) Do the SEF criteria (re. 2.2) fulfil strategic evidence investment objectives?
 - (b) How can the SEF reach the best service providers?
 - (c) Does the SEF invest in right R&D areas and project types?
 - (d) What types of outputs does the SEF need to aim for?
 - (e) How can the SEF monitor the impact and estimate FSA's attribution to a change?

Annex 1: SEF project portfolio



Annex 2: SEF investments

