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# The challenge of chairing the Science Advisory Council

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## **Introduction**

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) spends over £325 million a year on science (including research, monitoring, surveillance and evaluation) underpinning a wide range of policies including those covering environmental

protection, farming and food, animal and plant health, and sustainable energy. It is one of the broadest science-based agendas of any government department and Defra is committed to ensuring that its science is robust.

The Science Advisory Council (SAC), which I chair, is a

relatively new body established (February 2004) to provide Professor Howard Dalton FRS, Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), with independent, expert, strategic advice on science underpinning the Department's policies, and through the CSA to Ministers.

## How does SAC work?

SAC's role ranges from scrutinising Defra's science peer review and quality assurance processes, to commenting on strategic science priorities and looking in-depth at the science aspects of its various contingency plans. In our work there is an emphasis on openness and transparency. We want Defra, other key stakeholders and the public to see that the work we do is robust and independent and that the Council will both publicly challenge or endorse the science underpinning Defra policy.

SAC needs to be able to perform a broad array of functions, not least being able to offer science advice at short notice in the event of an emergency. We can do this because the SAC membership covers a considerable range of expertise, including the natural and social sciences, and a lay member to help bring a wider perspective into our work. Observers from the devolved administrations and the chief executives of the key research councils also participate. The Council works through sub-groups, which have the capacity to co-opt additional expertise relevant to their activity.

While the advice we provide may, in some cases, challenge the status quo, I hope this will be seen as a constructive contribution to shaping the evolution of Defra science.

## SAC's activities

During its first year, SAC has developed its awareness of current Defra activities while starting to examine the underpinning process of science in Defra (risk management, governance of science advisory bodies etc). Our most extensive input to date has been on Defra's contingency plan for Foot and Mouth Disease. My challenge will be to help take this forward, building on the foundations laid by the first Chair, Professor Roy Anderson FRS. I am keen to develop a work programme that

makes the best use of the expertise both within the Council and within the wider academic community. Two new pieces of work that are already under way will focus on Defra's science quality assurance processes and on the science that underpins Defra's contingency plan for Avian Influenza.

## My role as Chair

As Chair, I have responsibility for the operation and output of the committee, including assessing the workload and ensuring the rigour of our discussions is not compromised. In the public arena, I am also the SAC's "figurehead" and one of my first actions as Chair was to commit to at least one open meeting a year to enhance the transparency of our activities and help build our public profile. Our function is to provide independent advice to the CSA – we are guided by requests from him. However, we can identify our own strategic agenda where we see the need and welcome suggestions for topics from Defra and elsewhere. Defra science supports a diverse range of policy areas but we are a strategic body. Unless we set ourselves clear priorities, we risk getting too involved in the detail, losing the opportunity to add real value to what is already being undertaken by Defra.

## Diverse experience, diverse views

As Chair, I ensure that every member has the opportunity to be heard and that no view is ignored or overlooked. Our diverse range of expertise and experience gives us a unique perspective from which to scrutinise Defra science and all members are encouraged to contribute to work outside their area of immediate specialism to ensure that alternative views and experience are considered.

Alongside this I ensure that any significant diversity of opinion among SAC members is explored

and discussed and, if it cannot be reconciled, is accurately reflected in our report to the CSA. Harnessing such a broad array of expertise is often a challenge in its own right!

## Ambiguity and uncertainty

A particular challenge is to ensure that the full range of scientific opinion, including unorthodox and contrary scientific views, are appropriately taken into account. In any field, views on what constitutes "sound science" may be divergent. Both the evidence base and its interpretation to inform policy may be challenged. SAC can play a powerful role in identifying such divergence of opinion as part of its role to challenge Defra constructively. Similarly, SAC can also draw on the wider scientific community to support the CSA, particularly where the body of evidence may point towards a controversial policy decision.

## Relationship with Defra

The organisational structure of Defra continues to evolve and we aim to keep a clear focus on the strategic priorities to which science contributes, while also developing good working relationships with key Defra people. However, like any good auditor, we must maintain the integrity of our independent position and avoid "going native".

## Conclusion

The SAC is just starting out. Its role as Defra's senior non-departmental public body offering robust, independent, expert science advice is developing well and we have provided advice to the CSA on a number of issues. Our challenge now is to ensure that the SAC remains a vital support for the CSA and, through him, can improve the contribution that science makes in Defra's approach to its policy responsibilities.