

# Making an Impact

*Jim Cousins MP*

In the Spring 2002 edition of Science in Parliament the Royal Society reported on the first year of its MP-Scientist Pairing Scheme, established to build bridges between bright young scientists and members of the UK Parliament. The scheme has flourished and has attracted nearly 200 MP and scientist participants. It brings added value to both MPs and young scientists; it provides MPs with an opportunity to gain an understanding of how science is done and create new links with local universities or research institutes. It also gives scientists an insight into political issues and the science policy making process. But the scheme is not just about building bridges. It can also bear directly on practical issues. In 2004, I was paired with Dr Hayley Fowler from the School of Civil

Engineering and Geosciences at the University of Newcastle. Hayley's research has shown that extreme rainfall events in the northeast region increased in magnitude by a factor of two during the 1990s. We discussed this in the context of local flooding and drainage capacity problems. With future climate change, it is projected that extreme rainfall events and flooding will increase further. Flooding and drainage issues hold considerable importance for local planning issues; and are often not well explained to the public.

I know that other pairings have also proved fruitful. A number of scientists have gone on to have an active involvement in policy making as Dr Joanne Baker, another participant from 2004 explains:

"Since taking part in the scheme, I have had a lot of involvement with Parliament and parliamentary bodies. I have contributed to POST notes for a project on Horizon Scanning and a study of Parliamentary Questions on science topics."

Going back further Dr Rachel Flecker of the University of Bristol took part in 2001. She has since

gone on a secondment to the Environmental Technologies Unit at DEFRA where she helped get the Unit up and running, and organised a high profile UK-Sweden workshop on Environmental Technologies. She played a central role in shaping discussions between Ministers, officials, academics, industry and NGOs.

*Dr Hayley Fowler, Senior Research Associate in the Water Resource Systems Research Laboratory, School of Civil Engineering and Geosciences at Newcastle University:*

The scheme really opened my eyes to what politicians do. I was amazed by how hard they work and how much they care about their constituencies. What really surprised me was the breadth of knowledge that politicians are expected to have. It was great to get a sense of how we as scientists can become players in the political process and can try to influence science policy making.

I am now much more interested in being involved in communicating science to politicians and getting the results of scientific investigations into the public domain. I was therefore pleased to bring to Jim's attention work that we are doing on issues like sediment accumulation and changing patterns of extreme rainfall and their potential impact on flooding and water quality issues.

I also attended an international climate change meeting in Switzerland last November aimed at producing recommendations for politicians in terms of combating or adapting to climate change. The final position of the workshop was brought together in a manifesto on climate change.



*Dr Hayley Fowler and Jim Cousins MP*

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The MP-Scientist Pairing Scheme forms part of the Royal Society's Science in Society programme, which is celebrating the completion of its first five year phase this year, funded by the Kohn Foundation. If you are interested in finding out more about the scheme or the work of the programme please contact Chloe Sheppard at the Royal Society, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AG. Alternatively, email [chloe.sheppard@royalsoc.ac.uk](mailto:chloe.sheppard@royalsoc.ac.uk), telephone 020 7451 2573 or visit our website at [www.royalsoc.ac.uk](http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk)