"SIP" gives science a taste of public opinion

Dr Jekyll or Mr Hyde? In the public's mind, scientific research sometimes has a split personality. While people often have huge, sometimes unrealistic, expectations of the benefits science can bring, many also maintain a fundamental unease about what scientists are "getting up to". To promote a healthier relationship between science and society in general, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) has set up a new advisory body called SIP (the Societal Issues Panel).

Chaired by Professor Robert Winston, SIP aims to help EPSRC take more account of public thinking when deciding how to spend the £575 million a year it invests in research. Comprising eight members from wide-ranging backgrounds, SIP will provide advice on how to identify emerging social and ethical issues relevant to engineering and the physical sciences. It will also help EPSRC pinpoint areas where it needs to engage with the public more effectively, suggesting ways of doing this and helping to identify areas where further research might be needed.

Identifying the opportunities and concerns

There are a large number of areas where public optimism and enthusiasm can help to identify issues and drive opportunities to help shape tomorrow's technology. These include energy efficiency and the use of renewables, protection of the environment and the responsible use of data.

But advancing technology also produces understandable concerns. "ID cards are a good example of an area where the public have worries about technology's impact on civil liberties, as well as a false impression of science's ability to deliver a complete solution," says Professor Gloria Laycock, Director of the Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science and a SIP member. "It's vital that the research community is aware of these views, takes them on board and works to address them."

Other fields SIP is likely to focus on include crime, Information and Communications Technologies (ICT), nanotechnology and energy. In recent years, the last of these has seen negative public opinion contributing to restricted use of technologies as diverse as wind energy and nuclear power. Now, new Government proposals to expand the role of renewables and nuclear power to help combat climate change look set to prompt a range of "pro" and "anti" responses from the public.

"Science and engineering don't exist in a vacuum," Professor Laycock comments. "It may be going too far to say that the public should set the agenda for research, but society does at least need to feed into debates about how technologies are exploited. The scientific community has an obligation to guard against the danger of public cynicism, which could result from perceptions that science is remote and uncaring."

A change of culture

Looking at the bigger picture, SIP's real value as a highly visible new forum could extend far beyond individual issues. "By setting up the panel, EPSRC has made a profound statement that it aspires to change its whole way of working," says Professor Kathy Sykes, a SIP member well known for her work in making science accessible to a wider audience on television and radio. "The ultimate goal is to ensure that a serious regard for a broad range of – sometimes challenging – views and perspectives becomes embedded across the organisation and the whole research community."

In this context, SIP complements and reinforces the work of two other independent panels already established by EPSRC – the Technical Opportunities Panel (TOP), whose main role is to advise on new research opportunities, and the User Panel (UP), which advises on research needs from the viewpoint of technology users. Together, these three bodies provide a conduit enabling EPSRC to take external perspectives on board and so increase the tangible benefits its research ultimately delivers.

When formulating its advice to EPSRC, SIP will not only draw on the knowledge, experience and views of its members, but will also build on relevant work already undertaken in the UK and abroad. A particular priority is to identify examples of "good practice" trying to change the culture in organisations to incorporate ways of valuing and using public thinking, as well as engaging with the public on potentially sensitive issues and building mutual understanding between the public and the research community. One requirement is for SIP to provide input on the future shape of EPSRC's research portfolio, which is currently under review so that potential impacts on society are factored in and promising opportunities identified.

"Science has a huge amount to offer society," says Professor Winston. "By providing the basis for a better understanding between the two, SIP can help ensure that the benefits of research are felt as widely as possible in the years and decades ahead."

The current membership of SIP is as follows:

- **Professor Lord Robert Winston** (Chair): human fertility researcher, life peer, and former member of EPSRC's Strategic Advisory Team on Public Engagement.
- **Dr Donald Bruce**: Church of Scotland - head of society, religion and technology project.
- **Professor Derek Burke**: retired Vice Chancellor of East Anglia University; chaired the advisory committee on novel foods and processes from 1988 to 1997.
- **Mr David Jordan**: EPSRC Council member; retired Chairman and Managing Director of Philips Electronics UK Ltd.
- **Professor Gloria Laycock**: Director of the Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science; previously worked in the Home Office for over 30 years.
- **Baroness Onora O'Neill**: prominent political philosopher; President of the British Academy, Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge and a crossbench peer.
- **Professor Judith Petts**: Head of the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences at the University of Birmingham.
- **Professor Kathy Sykes**: Collier Chair of Public Engagement at Bristol University; former member of EPSRC's Strategic Advisory Team on Public Engagement.