

**Council for Science and Technology report, *Policy through Dialogue*, published March 2005**

**Government response**

1. The Council for Science and Technology (CST) report, *Policy through Dialogue*, is timely and welcome, and is a valuable contribution to shaping the Government's thinking about how to increase the scale and impact of public dialogue in science and technology. While this response addresses the specific recommendations directly, we acknowledge the wider scope of the report.
2. The CST's report made a number of recommendations on how Government can shift towards a culture where "*non-expert and non-partisan perspectives are used effectively to inform the development of policies that are based on science and technology*" as a normal part of the process. This response addresses these recommendations and represents the consolidated views from across the UK Government and Devolved Administrations. We are also grateful for the views of the Research Councils in helping to develop this response.
3. We agree with the recommendations in the report, and seek to build on the useful suggestions that the CST has made. In particular, we will take forward the recommendation to develop a "corporate memory of past experience that will enable collective learning" with regard to public dialogue on science and technology.

***Recommendation 1:***

*Government at the highest level should adopt an explicit framework for the use of public dialogue to inform science and technology related policies.*

4. The Government agrees that public dialogue on science and technology must be driven forward within an explicit framework with top-level commitment. We will embed our work in this area within government policies on: science and innovation; consultation; public participation in policy-making; and evidence-based policy (Box 1).
5. The overarching framework recommended by the CST is a sensible one, and reflects the requirements of Cabinet Office guidance on consultation. In particular, this stresses the importance of top-level commitment, the need for clear objectives, adequate resources and on-going learning. Based on such guidance, in February 2005, the Office of Science and Technology published its guiding principles for public dialogue on science and technology<sup>1</sup>, and the CST, the Royal Society and the Economic and Social Research Council have endorsed these.
6. These principles set down good practice for undertaking dialogue on science and technology. They cover the elements set out in the CST's proposed framework, but more work is needed to embed the principles across government. Good practice in dialogue is developing all the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ost.gov.uk/society/public\\_dialogue.htm](http://www.ost.gov.uk/society/public_dialogue.htm)

time, and we will continue to review and revise the guiding principles accordingly, and will be flexible in their application.

### **Box 1 The broader context**

#### ***Science and innovation***

The Government is committed to maximising the benefits of science and innovation to underpin our economic prosperity and to tackle policy challenges, such as climate change. To achieve these goals, it is essential that we make substantial and sustained progress towards building a society that is confident about the governance, regulation and use of science and technology. Public dialogue will form a key element in achieving this goal.<sup>2</sup>

#### ***Consultation***

The Cabinet Office Better Regulation Executive has responsibility for government policy on consultation. This is embedded in the process of regulatory impact assessment (RIA), which is the key driver in the formulation and adoption of policy and regulation. RIA guidance states that “*consultation is an integral part of the RIA process and therefore of policy development*” and so departments “*should carry out a full public consultation, as outlined in the Code of Practice on Consultation, whenever options are being considered for a new policy or if new regulation is planned.*” Any such consultation must follow Cabinet Office guidance.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***Public participation in policy and decision-making***

The Government is working to ensure that public bodies are receptive to, and capable of adopting public dialogue as a mainstream part of policy and decision-making across a wide range of policy areas. The Government’s recently launched action plan for civil renewal (*Together We Can*<sup>4</sup>) makes this point clearly, calling on all public bodies to be more open and responsive to the needs of the citizens they serve.

#### ***Evidence-based policy***

The regulatory impact assessment process requires that policies and regulations are developed on the basis of robust evidence. The Government is improving the coordination of research and analyses from across a range of professional areas, such as science, economics and social research. Consultation and public dialogue processes are important routes for enhancing the evidence base for policy.

### **Recommendation 2:**

*The purpose of dialogue is not to determine but to inform policy. It does this by challenging the thinking of policymakers and scientists who contribute to policy making, as well as that of the public, stakeholders and special interest groups. Government must retain responsibility for decision-making.*

<sup>2</sup> Science and innovation investment framework 2004-2014, July 2004, HM Treasury, DTI, DfES

<sup>3</sup> [www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation-guidance/content/introduction/index.asp](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/regulation/consultation-guidance/content/introduction/index.asp)

<sup>4</sup> [www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/civil/index.html#twc](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/comrace/civil/index.html#twc)

7. We agree, and are taking steps to open up the process of developing policy to a wider range of voices. Nevertheless, it is for Government (and others empowered to do so) to take the final decisions relating to policy and regulation.

**Recommendation 3:**

*Government should establish clear criteria for identifying and prioritising areas that could usefully be explored through dialogue processes. These will range from longstanding areas of controversy to new, emerging issues. This role could be taken on by the new Centre of Excellence in science and technology horizon scanning.*

8. We welcome the initial list of criteria provided by the CST and agree that there must be clear ways to identify where dialogue can inform policy and decision-making on science and technology. The Horizon Scanning Centre, the Science and Society and Science in Government Directorates in the Office of Science and Technology (OST) and other government departments and agencies, will work together to develop a more comprehensive basis on which to define priorities for public dialogue to inform policy and decisions on science and technology-related issues. We have recently consulted on a revision of the Chief Scientific Adviser's guidelines for the use of science in policy-making. This included reference to the CST criteria, and responses will help shape how the criteria are developed further.
9. We will consider carefully the specific health, safety, environmental, ethical and regulatory issues arising when determining the priority given to public dialogue on specific topics. We will also explore the possibility of developing more generic advice for identifying when to adopt dialogue and will examine the scope for using a range of tools (including qualitative and quantitative social research) to provide robust gauges of public views.

**Recommendation 4:**

*Each instance of dialogue should have clear governance arrangements with three specific roles: sponsor (responsible for setting objectives and using the outcomes of the dialogue process); directors (to oversee the process) and contractors (to manage the process).*

10. We agree that public dialogue should be undertaken within a clear governance structure, and the CST's elaboration of the roles of sponsor, director and contractor is a useful aid to thinking. We agree that the specific context of each issue will determine the most appropriate configuration, and so a flexible approach is necessary. We agree that, whatever governance arrangements are put in place, these should be communicated clearly within and outside the sponsoring organisation.

**Recommendation 5:**

*The sponsor of any dialogue process should state publicly:*

- *the purpose of the process;*
- *when and how they will publish a report of the process;*
- *how the results of the process have informed government thinking and been taken into account in any resultant policy decisions.*

11. We agree. In March 2005, research by MORI for the Office of Science and Technology showed clearly that many people want to participate in public consultation exercises on science-based issues. However, people have made clear that consultation must be on topics relevant to their lives and that Government must demonstrate that it has listened to the public's views and taken them seriously. Therefore, early statements of the purpose and objectives of dialogue, and clarity over how such dialogue will be taken forward into policy and decision-making will be essential.

**Recommendation 6:**

*The revised Guidelines 2000: scientific advice and policy making should reflect OST's guiding principles for the government's approach to public dialogue on science and technology.*

12. We will ensure that the Government's guiding principles for public dialogue on science and technology are reflected in the Chief Scientific Adviser's guidelines for the use of science in policy-making, and will explore how they might be incorporated into the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees when they are next updated.

**Recommendation 7:**

*Sufficient resources (funding, staff expertise and time) must be in place before government commits to any dialogue process.*

13. We agree that 'resources' include expertise and time as well as funding, and that these should be in place before embarking on a programme of public dialogue. However, in some circumstances (e.g. where the full scope of issues around a topic has not been defined), flexibility and on-going learning will be essential.

14. The *Sciencewise* programme operated by the OST is assisting departments and agencies to build their capacity to engage in public dialogue on scientific developments. It provides access to knowledge and expertise and to funding, where appropriate.

**Recommendation 8 and 9 taken together****Recommendation 8:**

*Government should work with others, including research councils, universities, professional bodies and industry, to build a wider capacity to engage with the public through dialogue.*

**Recommendation 9:**

Government should create a mechanism that enables:

- *development of a corporate memory based on formal and informal evaluations of dialogue processes that have been used to inform science and technology policy;*
- *sharing of this information across government and its non-departmental public bodies;*
- *generation of a change in culture where dialogue is seen as a normal part of government's policy development processes on science and technology related issues.*

15. We agree that it is essential to build the capacity for engaging with the public through dialogue on science and technology-related issues. As stated earlier, efforts in this area must be embedded firmly within the broader context of the wider use of public dialogue to inform policy development more generally.
16. Public dialogue must be delivered by individuals and groups with the necessary skills to plan, organise, deliver and evaluate participatory process of public dialogue. Such skills are widely held, for example in voluntary and community groups, among academic researchers, and within private businesses. We will ensure that departments and agencies seeking to embark on public dialogue on science and technology-related issues are able to access these skills.
17. Further, we agree with the CST that *"if government is to develop the capacity to use dialogue effectively it needs to develop a corporate memory of past experience that will enable collective learning."* As part of the Government's wider agenda for better policy making, this is applicable across the range of public policy areas and not unique to science and technology.
18. We see a strong case for seeking to establish a shared system to enable policy and decision-makers across government to understand the value of public dialogue in informing policy. We will build on current guidance and advice (such as the Cabinet Office Guide to Consultation and the OST's guiding principles for public dialogue on science and technology), and explore options for developing the *"corporate memory"* called for by the CST. We foresee this primarily as a cross-government information centre on public dialogue. The primary purpose of a centre would be to assist all parts of government in obtaining advice and information on dialogue processes to inform policy and decision-making. We envisage a centre having the following functions:
  - acting as a focus for the work of the numerous government organisations seeking to develop and deliver public dialogue
  - working across government to prioritise areas for public dialogue
  - providing advice and skills to help design, commission, manage and interpret public dialogue processes
  - providing information regarding access to funding (e.g. through the *Sciencewise* programme for dialogue on science and technology)

- working across government, and with others, to capture and share good practice and build appreciation of public dialogue in policy development.
  - dissemination and sharing of knowledge and the outputs of dialogue, so that others can access information of both generic and issue-specific interest.
19. The current *Sciencewise* programme is already some way towards delivering these functions, and will be further developed, working closely with others across government, agencies and Research Councils. We will undertake a scoping and pilot exercise to create an information centre that focuses initially on science and technology, but which will also explore options for how such a resource could be more widely applied. This will report by June 2006.
20. We will also continue to increase the impact, coherence and value for money of our investments in public engagement in science and technology more widely, particularly through our support for the Research Councils. Here, under the umbrella of Research Councils UK<sup>5</sup>, a central Science in Society Unit has been established to “*foster debate that will enable public contribution to Councils’ policies and research strategies*” and to “*identify public attitudes and views that should be considered in the conduct of research and in the use of its outputs by business and policymakers.*” An example of recent work in this area includes dialogue and consultation on animal health research.
21. We will also continue our support for other organisations involved in engaging the public with science and technology, and encourage them to collaborate closely to develop their capabilities for fostering public dialogue around policy-relevant issues. Key roles will be fulfilled by:
- National Academies and learned societies particularly the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the British Academy
  - National museums and science centres - especially the Natural History Museum and National Museum of Science and Industry
  - the British Association for the Advancement of Science, SETNET and the UK Resource Centre for Women in Science, Engineering and Technology.
22. The Science and Society Directorate within the Office of Science and Technology will retain the overall responsibility for the implementation of the actions set out in this response. We invite the CST to conduct a thorough review within 3 years.

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<sup>5</sup> RCUK is the strategic partnership through which the UK’s 8 Research Councils work together to champion the research, training and innovation they support.