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From the Physical Secretary and Vice-President Professor Martin Taylor FRS

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Dear Dr Butt

The Government's outline programme for public engagement on nanotechnologies

I am writing to welcome the Government's outline programme for public engagement on nanotechnologies. I am pleased that the Government has recognised the importance of public engagement on this subject. The outline programme is a promising start and I would like to commend the efforts of OST and Defra. However, I would like to comment on few issues, which I hope can be taken into account when producing the detailed programme later this year.

Firstly, the outline does not clearly explain how the results of the public engagement activities will be used in the policy-making process. The Government's approach of 'learn by doing' is reasonable given that this is a relatively new area for the Government. However, to ensure that maximum value is derived from these activities it should be clearly stated from the start how the activities will be incorporated into the decision making process. Currently there is too much reliance on a few members of staff to provide a cross link between the engagement activities and the Government's work in this area. In addition the use of a grants rather than a commissioning model to specify the dialogue activities in relation nanotechnologies will not facilitate the integration of public dialogue into science policy.

Another key area which needs clarification is the Government's plans for the evaluation of the public engagement activities it funds. There is expertise available in the UK which the Government should draw upon to provide useful evaluation of the schemes currently underway. In the future, Sciencewise research grant applications could be required to explain how they will evaluate their projects. Although the Nanotechnologies Engagement Group will provide some evaluation of projects, there is a danger of overburdening this group at an early stage.

I very much welcome the purposes of public engagement which are set out in the document, however, it is notable that there is no mention of the social and ethical dimension of nanotechnologies which engagement activities should address. The importance of social and ethical issues was highlighted in chapter six of the Royal Society – Royal Academy of Engineering report, and engagement around human enhancement and human identity will clearly require us to tackle fundamental social and ethical questions.

Yours sincerely

Martin Taylor