

Royal Society response to the Office of Science and Innovation's consultation on the use of science by the Home Office

The Society welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Office of Science and Innovation's (OSI) consultation on the use of science by the Home Office. Our most extensive involvement with the Home Office has been through our work on international security and the use of animals in research. A number of Fellows and experts involved in the Society's work have also been directly involved with the Department's activities.

Science and Technology in the Home Office

The Home Office's Science and Innovation Strategy (2005-08) outlines how science and technology will be used to help fight crime. In undertaking the review of the use of science by the Home Office, OSI should evaluate how well the current strategy (eg the principles underpinning the Home Office's use of science) has been implemented across the Department and what mechanisms are in place for independent review of this implementation. OSI should also examine the extent to which the update to the strategy beyond 2008 will be informed by leading scientists and scientific organisations as well as other stakeholders.

Departmental Chief Scientific Advisors (CSAs) have an essential role to play in developing a clear strategy for science. In its review, OSI should examine how the role of CSA is integrated into the broad Home Office management structure. The CSA is also responsible for implementing the Government's Chief Scientific advisor's Guidelines on scientific advice in policy making, and OSI should examine the extent to which the Guidelines, which were updated in 2005, are followed within the Department.

The Home Office Science and Technology Reference Group, an advisory group that covers all aspects of science and technology in the remit of the Home Office, is chaired by the Permanent Secretary rather than the CSA. In most other Government Departments this group is chaired by the CSA and OSI should examine whether this structure has any disadvantages. To be effective, the Reference Group must be involved in all major policy issues involving scientific evidence in both the natural and social sciences. The Reference Group should include a sufficient number of internationally recognised scientists covering an appropriate range of disciplines, including social scientists, in addition to other stakeholders.

Commissioning of research

OSI should examine how the Home Office commissions external research. Within the process of commissioning external research there is a need to ensure that there is an explicit mechanism to incorporate independent scientific expertise external to the Home Office, for example in the peer review of research proposals. OSI should also consider if there are any processes or examples of best practice used by other Government Departments and Agencies, such as the Health and Safety Executive, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Ministry of Defence that may be of relevance to the Home Office's commissioning of research.

When considering the Home Office's research portfolio OSI should examine how gaps in knowledge are identified and the approaches taken to commission new research to fill these gaps. In particular OSI should consider how external scientific expertise is sought. In this context it is important that a wide range of sources are consulted, particularly experts who may not appear to be directly related to the work of the Home Office.

A significant amount of research is also conducted internally within the Home Office and the review may wish to consider the internal standards set to guide scientists, particularly in providing judgement for the application of research to policy. In regard to the Home Office regulation of the use of animals in research as laid down in the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986, it is recognised that primary research is not a core function. It is unclear how and if new research is commissioned and managed in a systematic way within the Department.

Maintenance of scientific expertise and capacity

OSI should examine how issues with a significant scientific content are addressed by staff in the Home Office and if the Department has access to a sufficiently broad range of scientific advisers to enable it to react to existing and emerging policy issues with a scientific component. This may also include accessing external networks and sources of advice.

Peer review, openness and transparency

The publication of the science and innovation strategy by the Home Office's Science and Research Group is a welcome development. However, we remain concerned that there is still a lack of transparency around the commissioning of external research and the quality assurance procedures that internally commissioned research undergoes. Also we suggest that the Home Office could make better use of consultations with the scientific community.

Whilst we accept there are some issues in the remit of the Home Office where caution has to be exercised this should be carefully assessed against the value of engaging with the academic community. For example, issues of national security should not be a reason not to seek peer review. A number of independent scientists have security-clearance and could be used by Departments for peer review where needed, although these situations may restrict the nature and range of the external review that can be undertaken. It would also be worth investigating attempts to engage with the wider scientific community and the independent review processes used for the Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) science and technology research programme. Such an investigation will uncover lessons that could be applied to other areas with similar security concerns.

Publication of the scientific evidence used in policy decisions is vital. Subject to issues of national security, the Home Office needs to have a very clear data availability policy. For example, the APC publishes its advice in relation to policy decisions, however there is often considerable delay between the decision being made and the publication of the related evidence.

Any inquiries about this document should be sent to:

Dr Simon Edwards, The Royal Society, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace, London SW1Y 5AG
*E-mail:*simon.edwards@royalsoc.ac.uk *Tel:*020 7451 2530 *Fax:*020 7451 2592