

8 October 2021

Submission to the Government Office for Science's consultation on the code of practice for scientific advisory committees and councils

Summary:

- We believe that the existing Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees guidance provides a comprehensive overview. However, the demands that the pandemic has put on the Government's science advisory apparatus have revealed areas which we think could be prioritised and strengthened. In particular, in order to improve the public policy value generated from interactions between advisory committees and policy secretariats, the role of the secretariat needs highlighting and bolstering, whilst the advisory committees should work to improve understanding between the science and policy worlds, including clarifying reporting structures. This can be achieved through improving the diversity in advisory committees and ensuring members have access to the key data they need and the appropriate training to undertake their duties as effectively as possible, especially the role of Chair.

Introduction:

- The Royal Society welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Government Office for Science's consultation on the code of practice for scientific advisory committees and councils. The Society is the National Academy of Science for the UK and the Commonwealth. It is a self-governing Fellowship of many of the world's most distinguished scientists working across a broad range of disciplines in academia and industry. The Society draws on the expertise of its Fellows and Foreign Members to provide independent and authoritative scientific advice to UK, European and international decision makers.

Developing the Relationship between Advisory Committees and Policy Secretariats

Training and development for AC members

Advisory Committees (ACs) are one of the primary interfaces between the science community and policy makers. However, there remain some common misconceptions between these two communities which, if systematically addressed through training of both AC members and policy secretariats, could provide a channel to improve the mutual understanding between these communities and generate greater public policy value from these interactions.

We therefore suggest that GO-Science examine these training requirements, in particular how policy decisions are made - acknowledging that scientific evidence feeds into a complex decision making process that must take account of: the practicalities of policy delivery, societal acceptance, risk, cost/benefit and opportunity cost; falsifiability and the scientific method; the nature of how science conclusions change as fields advance and new evidence emerges; and the concept of statistical significance and how it informs the confidence with which conclusions can be expressed.

In addition, as representatives of their specialised fields, ACs should feel confident giving pro-active advice where they feel appropriate, without being asked. As a matter of course, members should undertake Horizon Scanning in their areas of expertise in order to proactively anticipate and advise on issues that may affect public policy, particularly risks.

Furthermore, as we have seen during the pandemic, and during other events of national significance, AC members may sometimes be called upon to give advice in an emergency and should therefore anticipate how to handle this, and periodically practice for such eventualities. For example, guidance and training should be crystal clear with respect to public communications of committee members, and in which capacity they act.

Emergency training considerations should also include surge capacity, handling the media, sustained action (and the impact this has on AC members' day jobs), sourcing additional expertise that might affect the nature of the required science advice, and how to give rapid advice based on limited data – including caveats and requirements for improving the quality of advice.

Finally, GO-Science and individual Departments have a duty of care for safeguarding AC members who, through their role, are potentially exposed to cyber and physical risks, as well as negative social media attention. Induction for AC members should therefore include awareness raising of these issues, training and establishment of clarity on responsibility for duty of care and safeguarding – including consideration of support for mental health and risk management escalation procedures.

Developing the role of ACs in the science community

As well as working as closely and effectively as possible with policy secretariats, it is also important that ACs maintain and deepen their relationships within the science communities they have come from.

The exposure of AC members to policy makers and their role giving advice also creates valuable knowledge and experience. We therefore suggest that GO-Science consider how ACs themselves interact with their relevant science communities as a matter of deliberate business planning, in order to further support good understanding between scientists and policy makers and promote the role of science advisers as part of being a good science citizen. The Government might also want to consider how scientists can be incentivised to serve on committees and are rewarded for doing so.

Fostering excellence in the policy secretariat

The policy secretariats are the main channel through which science advice lands and has policy effect, with the power to effectively render committees impotent or change the world. We therefore suggest that a greater emphasis in CoPSAC be placed on highlighting the role the secretariat plays and the skills and responsibilities required of the secretariat. For example, creating trusting relationships, problem solving with respect to access to secure government data, and supporting the Chair in framing advice in order to maximise impact and support to decision makers.

There is a high degree of competence in analytical ability, communication and relationship management needed in order to support liaison between the two different communities and maintain a high degree of trust with both. The Government could therefore promote secretariat roles as highly sought-after positions on the career trajectory of high-flying civil servants.

It is also hugely important that the secretariats ensure that AC members have access to the key data that they need in order to undertake their role effectively. It has been noticeable that, due to AC members not being given appropriate security clearance, they have been unable to access vital secure data which can be critical to their work and conclusions. Moving forward, secretariats should act as the mediators between government departments and ACs to ensure that their members are given full, but controlled, access to relevant data, including official sensitive data - even if that means arranging temporary security clearances.

Diversity

Science advances through challenge and, as such, is promoted through exchange from diverse viewpoints. Improving diversity in science and policy professions is an existing goal, however, we believe that improving diversity (particularly of age, gender, and social and ethnic background) in advisory committees in particular will support high quality challenge and advice, as well as engendering confidence in the general public. This, in turn, will generate better public policy value from the interactions between advisory committees and policy secretariats.

Diversity of thought is also crucial to the effective functioning of advisory committees, and it is therefore important that committees should have the discretion to formulate their own questions, drawn from a diversity of disciplines, and advise policy makers accordingly. At the same time, secretariats should be equally diligent in supporting the effective landing of such advice.

The Role of the Chairs and Senior Advisory Committees

The skills of the Advisory Council (AC) Chair cannot be underestimated. The Government should consider which training is required in order to best support the Chairs in delivering their role – for example, training sessions in policymaking, conflict resolution, media training, etc. Policy secretariats should also support the development of high-quality, trusting relationships between Chairs and Ministers and senior officials.

It is also vital that Chairs be given crystal clear and consistent guidance across ACs on handling diverse views, reaching consensus or, if not, public communication of the level of consensus and minority views. Guidance should be similarly robust on communicating levels of confidence in the conclusions. As part of this, Chairs should be encouraged to overtly consider with their committees the value of specific inter-disciplinary approaches in improving the range and quality of advice given.

In addition, Government Departments with substantial science interests should have a Senior Advisory Committees (SAC), which should advise on the range of ACs that would support good policymaking across the Department.

Chairs also need to take on greater responsibility in clarifying reporting structures. This includes making clear from the start who will be commissioning reports and who will be receiving them, in order to make sure that these lines of responsibility are made clear to committees from the start of the process.

Finally, both AC and SAC Chairs develop valuable skills, understanding and insight. It would therefore be useful to also consider how a periodic meeting of such Chairs across different committees and departments could add value to public policy discourse and decision making.

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