

# Science Media Centre evidence to the consultation on the update of the Code of Practise for Scientific Advisory Committees

## Background and summary

The Science Media Centre understands that the primary objective of independent Scientific Advisory Committees is to deliver scientific advice to politicians and policy makers and ensure that policies are informed by the best scientific evidence and expertise available

However these SACs can also inform wider public and media debate on the most controversial science issues of our times.

The Science Media Centre believes that too often the focus of SACs has been exclusively on advising governments and that the media and society in general are missing out on opportunities to access the best scientific advice and evidence. If communicated effectively to the public through the mass media, the wonderful work of SACs could produce better informed public debates. It also gives the opportunity for improved public understanding of the rationale behind government policy and greater public trust in government.

The Science Media Centre believes that SACs could better achieve both objectives if the communication of their advice was managed by independent science press officers. At present the COPSAC allows Chairs of SACs to choose whether to use independent science press officers to communicate their key reports or leave this in the hands of press officers in government departments. For reasons elaborated on below the Science Media Centre recommends that the Code of Practise be amended to stipulate that SACs should routinely use independent science media relations and communications officers to publicise key reports and advice to the media.

## Key recommendations

1. The SMC recommends that COPSAC be amended to ensure that all independent SACS use science press officers from outside government to communicate key advice and reports to the media
2. The SMC recommends that Non disclosure agreements be abolished with the exception of cases of national security
3. the SMC recommends that COPSAC be revised to allow for SACs to play a dual role - of advising policy makers as well as informing media coverage

## Specific Points

4. The Science Media Centre believes that scientists who are appointed to committees set up to advise Government should be encouraged to use independent media relations support.
5. At present however, even when the science advisory committees are entirely independent in practise and produce important pieces of independent scientific advice, they are almost entirely dependent on government press officers from the relevant department to manage the communication of that advice to the media (and hence to the public). **This means that the norm is that government departments decide how, when and who communicates the findings of independent advisory groups to the press.** For obvious and understandable reasons political considerations often take priority over getting the evidence into the public domain and too often the scientific expertise and evidence get lost in the political melee.
6. Many of the UK's best scientists sit on these one-off or standing advisory committees and the work they do in gathering scientific evidence and using the best scientific expertise to help

inform advice to government is of critical importance to the country. The fact that too often this independent scientific advice does not get its day in the media spotlight means that the British public are losing out on expertise, science and evidence on some of the most pressing and important issues of our times.

7. Many of the best scientists in the UK are appointed to sit on SACs - often to provide advice on contentious issues or at times of national emergency (e.g. Swine flu, volcanic ash). We believe that the way SACs currently operate can result in the media and public losing access to that expertise - often when it is most needed!
8. Given that many arms length SACs are now to be brought into Government as departmental advisory bodies, independent communications and media relations support would be a good way of underlining the continued independence of these scientists.

### **The case for independent science press officers**

9. The SMC believes there are good and positive reasons to ensure that the media relations for key reports from SACS should be handled by independent science press officers rather than departmental press officers. These include
  - i) that specialist science press officers will have an understanding of the complex science issues being communicated
  - ii) that science press officers will have experience of dealing with scientists and the specific way they like to communicate their science to the media
  - iii) that science press officers have established relationships with specialist science reporters who are always more interested in reporting the scientific evidence than the political machinations
10. The SMC also believes there are disadvantages of not seeking independent press office support:
  - i) Many Departmental press officers do not have expertise in science and therefore do not have the same grasp of the complex scientific issues being communicated by many SACs (1)
  - ii) Departmental press officers are employed by government to provide a service to the Secretary of State, Ministers, junior ministers and senior civil servants in their respective departments
  - iii) As such their role in communicating independent science is compromised by having to support ministers, other departments and the political agenda
  - iv) With the possible exception of DH, DEFRA and BIS, Departmental press officers generally have established relationships with non science, health or environment correspondents. Political correspondents, Home affairs reporters or general news reporters have less interest in and grasp of the scientific evidence than science reporters
  - v) Government Science and health press releases have to be passed by civil servants whose job is to anticipate the political filter the story will be seen through and amend as appropriate. This does not always fit with the importance of communicating independent scientific advice to the public through the media.
  - vi) If handled by departmental press officers, media relations plans for the publication of reports of SACs must go via the "grid" where all departmental media activities have to be logged and is designed to ensure that political imperatives dictate the timing and nature of departmental press work.

- vii) If departments choose the timing of the press launches of SAC reports this can also lead to less coverage of the science. For example timing the media launch of SAC reports to coincide with the response from the Minister usually guarantees that the coverage is dominated by politics rather than science.
- viii) On the rare occasions where there is a conflict between the Department and the SAC there is a conflict of interest for the government press officers involved

### **Important caveat**

11. Arguing that independent scientific advisors should have access to independent media relations advice is not the same as arguing that Government must always follow the advice of its scientific advisers. Politicians rightly base their decisions on many factors and have to measure independent scientific advice against the concerns of consumers, business, politicians, the police, and so on. There is an opportunity here that is often missed; to clearly delineate and communicate the different steps that lead to changes in policy. Scientific advice is just one part of this process and this could be set in this wider context. Greater appreciation of the stages of policy making and the factors that determine policy could increase public trust in this process.
12. Nothing in the above is to undermine the work of government press officers, many of whom the SMC has successfully collaborated with for many years. Nor is it to suggest that the press officers working with scientific advisory groups should not work extremely closely with the press officers in the relevant government departments. However most science press officers we have liaised with in government would be the first to admit that there are problems with the current way of working.

### **This need not apply to all the work of SACS**

13. Not all SAC reports will be of media interest and not all reports will merit a big media launch or elaborate media relations strategy. Science press officers will be able to advise Chairs of SACs as to which reports need a media launch and which do not.

### **Use of Non-disclosure agreements on SACs**

14. The Science Media Centre is generally opposed to NDAs because we believe that they put scientists off talking to the media more generally (even if the NDA is only intended to cover sensitive aspects of their advice). We would recommend that the COPSAC do away with the use of NDAs except in exceptional matters of national security.
15. We have evidence that NDAs signed by scientists on SACs set up during national emergencies have had the effect of making scientists nervous to speak to the media on any aspect of the emergency - leaving the media and the public without access to some of the UK's leading experts at the time they most need them
16. We strongly believe that Chairs of SACs can ask scientists appointed to SACs like SAGE to keep the contents of those meetings confidential where necessary without the need for an NDA. If scientists cannot be trusted to keep confidential meetings confidential then they should not be appointed to SACs on national emergencies!

### **How SACs could access independent media relations support from science press officers**

The independent science media relations support could come from a variety of sources:

17. Institutional press officers, such as those employed by research funders or universities, connected to the Chair or members of the committee could provide media support (I have spoken to press officers at Wellcome Trust and Imperial College London and they have agreed that they would be happy to do this)
18. The Science Media Centre is an independent charity offering support when the scientific community needs to communicate complex, controversial science to the media. In this role we could work with SACs when on the occasions their work comes under our remit of controversial stories likely to hit the headlines (we already do this routinely for groups like the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, ACRE etc)
19. If neither of these was possible, SACs could use an accredited list of respected free-lance science press officers with considerable experience of handling these kinds of science stories. This last option is the only one with cost implications but since most SACs could be looked after by SMC or university press officers we do not envisage this would be a huge cost to Government.
20. Many of these advisory groups are made up of scientists and a mixture of other experts including social scientists, economists, consumer groups, etc. One option would be to make sure that each committee actually has one media relations or communications expert as part of the group.
21. At all stages the science press officer working for the SAC should communicate with the relevant Government department press officers.

### **Conclusion**

As a Centre established to improve the quality of public debate on science, the SMC is concerned that society is losing out on the views and expertise of some of the UK's leading academics on some of the most important issues of our time. The SMC believes the consultation process organised by the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser provides an opportunity to amend the COPSAC in a way which would enhance the role of independent scientific advisory committees and ensure that their expert advice is used to better inform public debate as well as advising politicians. We hope that this submission from the SMC will be useful in offering new ways to achieve that broader role.

Fiona Fox, Director, Science Media Centre - December 2011

*(1) In the past BIS press office has sought to specifically recruit press officers with a science background to work with the Science minister and the CSA but at present there are no specifically science press officers working in BIS.*