



14th September 2010

CaSE response to House of Commons Select Committee Inquiry into Scientific Advice and Evidence in Emergencies.

1. The Campaign for Science & Engineering (CaSE) is a member organisation aiming to improve the scientific and engineering health of the UK. CaSE works to ensure that science and engineering are high on the political agenda and that the UK has world-leading research and education, skilled and responsible scientists and engineers, and successful innovative business. It is funded by around 750 individual members and 80 organisations including industries, universities, learned and professional organisations, and research charities.
2. We would like to restrict our comments to general points on the mechanics of scientific advice in emergencies, rather than the specific case studies.

Question 3. What are the obstacles to obtaining reliable, timely scientific advice and evidence to inform policy decisions in emergencies? Has the Government sufficient powers and resources to overcome the obstacles? For case studies (i) and (ii) was there sufficient and timely scientific evidence to inform policy decisions?

3. While the Government has access to scientific advisers, MPs have fewer resources with which to scrutinize the scientific basis of Government responses to emergencies. The Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) provides independent advice to parliament to inform parliamentary debate. Its work includes publishing short briefing notes and more lengthy reports on current issues, supporting select committees, and horizon scanning. However, it does not have the remit to provide information as a rapid response to an emergency.
4. The House of Commons library has a science and environment section that can respond to MPs' requests for information, briefings and analysis. The library also produces reports and standard notes on bills and other topics of public concern – but it did not publish anything on either the swine flu pandemic or the Icelandic volcanic ash eruptions. Responses to MPs requests are confidential so it may be that many requests for information were made regarding such emergencies, possibly with much duplication.
5. We recommend that a system is put in place to provide MPs with rapid independent scientific and expert briefings on emergencies or other rapidly-developing policy subjects. This should help to make sure that any relevant debates are suitably informed and reduce the possible duplication or overlap of requests submitted to the library.

Question 4. How effective is the strategic coordination between Government departments, public bodies, private bodies, sources of

scientific advice and the research base in preparing for and reacting to emergencies?

6. The government can seek scientific advice in an emergency through its Chief Scientific Adviser and network of departmental scientific advisers and scientific advisory committees. Unfortunately the Treasury has still failed to appoint a departmental scientific adviser, although all other Government departments now have one and will be able to gain from their insights and analysis.
7. Government departments fund research and development (R&D) out of their departmental budgets to support their policy analysis, evaluation and development. It is this capacity for research that is likely to be drawn upon in developing the scientific background to responses in an emergency. Unfortunately, this capacity has seriously diminished in recent years – with civil departments spending just £1.25 bn on R&D in 2007/08, compared to £2.08bn in 2003/4 – a decline of over a third.
8. Chapter 3 of the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee's Third Report of Session 2009-10, *Setting Priorities for Publicly Funded Research* (HL 104-I), further makes the point that such departmental spending could be evaluated better than it currently is. We are not aware that there is currently an agreed definition of what each department treats as its 'research budget'. Given that such spending forms an important part of the UK's national emergency response capability, this is a serious concern.
9. Because departments independently allocate their funds for R&D, there is no mechanism or oversight to guard against dramatic drops in R&D across the whole. It is a real risk that departments will see their R&D budgets as an 'easy cut' under the current financial pressures, leaving the UK vulnerable to future crises needing scientific input. There should be a mechanism to oversee government departmental R&D spending to make sure that its capacity does not fall below minimum levels – this would also help deal with the problem of research that does not fall directly into a specific departmental remit. The Government Office for Science, and in particular the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, should be given this role.
10. A possible mechanism would be a central governmental 'research budget', overseen by the Government Office for Science, which other departments would make bids for, for specific research projects. This would prevent duplication of research, raise research standards, allow for strategic planning and evaluation of research (including inter-departmental priorities), and provide a guaranteed capacity for research into an emergency response.

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