

## Briefing: CaSE reviews advisory network in Whitehall

17<sup>th</sup> October 2015

Today the House of Lords is debating the role of departmental Chief Scientific Advisors (DCSAs). The debate has been called by the Chair of the Lords Science and Technology Committee, Lord Krebs, following the Committee's report into the role and function of DCSAs, earlier this year.

Science and engineering impacts on the work of every government department, from climate change to transport infrastructure and military defence to school-age education. It is therefore crucial that independent scientific advice should be at the heart of government and that each department should have a CSA to deliver expert advice and oversee science policymaking.

Ahead of today's debate, CaSE has produced the following briefing - giving an up-to-date review of the DCSA network across government.

### Summary

- The scientific advisory network across Whitehall suffers from wildly inconsistent support mechanisms. Best practice is not shared across departments – perhaps deliberately.
- Both the Ministry of Defence (MOD) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) have recently taken retrograde steps and downgraded the role of their DCSA.
- While some DCSAs have excellent links with their host department, many post-holders do not have a place on the department's management board or have direct control over the department's R&D budget.

Eight Whitehall departments cut their R&D budgets disproportionately - despite suggestions from Government that such spending would be protected. A stronger role for DCSAs might have prevented this

### CSA Scorecard

Responding to a House of Lords Science and Technology Committee inquiry into the work of departmental Chief Scientific Advisors, CaSE compiled a scorecard to rate each department and their CSA role (see attached). **We recommend that all departmental CSAs should meet the following criteria:**

- CSA should be independently appointed from outside Whitehall, ideally with a concurrent placement in the science and engineering community.
- CSA should have expertise relevant to the department's mission.
- Secretaries of State and relevant Ministers must hold regular meetings with their departmental CSA and should publish relevant records.
- Every government department should create a Science Advisory Council to support the work of the departmental CSA.
- CSA should have a seat at their departmental board and have oversight over the department's R&D budget.

### The CSA Scorecard found that:

- Of the fifteen government departments featured on the scorecard, only five performed well in over half of the measured criteria. The best-performing departments were:
  - The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)
  - The Department of Health (DH)
  - Also scoring highly were the Department for International Development (DfID), Department for Energy and Climate Change (DECC), and Home Office (HO)[1]

### Major Issues

#### Sufficient Oversight Powers

In order to fulfil their duties and scrutinise policy thoroughly, CSAs need to have sufficient oversight powers. Eight government departments do not have a place on their management board for the CSA or allow them direct control over their department's science, research, or evidence budget. These departments are:

- Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS)
- Department for Transport (DFT)
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
- Ministry of Defence (MOD)
- Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)
- Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
- Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
- Home Office (HO)

This comes despite recommendations by GO Science that a senior analyst should sit on the executive board of each government department to ensure that decisions on strategy and resources are fully evidence-based, and that CSAs should be consulted by departmental strategy and finance teams on strategic and budget proposals[2].

#### Ministry of Defence (MOD)

The post of Departmental CSA at the Ministry of Defence is being downgraded from a 4\* post to a 3\*. In downgrading the status of the CSA, the MOD is reducing the influence and oversight of the CSA.

- The new CSA role will be a 'non-executive' one i.e. they will not be a member of any senior departmental boards and will no longer 'own' the research budget.
- A 3\* CSA will not have the ears of the people who make the most important decisions. When they travel to the USA, for example, they will not get to meet with Generals, Admirals, or their civilian equivalents.
- It is crucial that decisions on procurements and on the R&D that underpin them are based on the very best scientific thinking and advice. This is especially true since rather few senior officers tend to have a scientific or engineering background.
- **We recommend that the MOD upgrade the DCSA position so that it sits on the Defence Management Board once again - this would be in line with the best practice set by departments such as DH, DEFRA, and DECC.**

### **Department for Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS)**

Following the re-structuring of DCMS, the department has appointed a new Head of Analysis (at Civil Service Grade 5 level), “who will lead on issues of scientific advice and cover the principal functions of a CSA”[3].

- The downgrading of the role from a Grade 3 to a Grade 5 means the post-holder will not have a seat on the management board or control over the departmental R&D budget.
- The decision to appoint a civil servant in new role, rather than an independent scientist with relevant expertise as a DCSA, means that any scientific advisory responsibilities will be a small part of a much wider remit within DCMS.
- **DCMS should look to reinstate a genuine, full-time, externally-appointed DCSA, and as an interim measure look into sharing a full DCSA with another department.**

### **Departmental Research & Development (R&D) Budgets**

Analysis of budget changes between 2009/10 and 2010/11 by CaSE has found that many departments have cut their R&D budgets disproportionately[4]. This story was exclusively covered in the Financial Times. We identified eight departments that cut R&D spending harder than overall spending. They are:

- Department for Environment, Farming and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)
  - Department for Transport (DFT)
  - Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)
  - Department for Education (DFE)
  - Ministry of Defence (MOD)
  - Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG)
  - Ministry of Justice (MOJ)
  - Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)
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- R&D spending provides the evidence base for policy development, helping to develop new ideas as well as evaluate existing ones. It’s hard to see how this important research would take place without Government investment.
  - **We recommend that the Government pledge to protect R&D spending across Whitehall to support research and evidence-based policy.**

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[1] CaSE Evidence to Lords Inquiry into Departmental Scientific Advisers – CSA Scorecard (Appendix) 2011

[2] GO Science report, ‘Science and Engineering in Government’ (2008).

[3] DCMS response to FOI request, July 2012.

[4] ‘Government R&D hit by disproportionate cuts’, CaSE website, October 2012.

