



# The Save British Science Society

SUPPORTING SCIENCE & THE APPLICATIONS OF SCIENCE

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SBS 02/17

## **Genuinely independent advice on longer-term and medium-term science and technology issues**

### **SBS response to the consultation on the Quinquennial Review of the Council for Science & Technology**

1. SBS is pleased to submit views to the Quinquennial Review of the Council for Science & Technology. SBS is a voluntary organisation campaigning for the health of science and technology throughout UK society, and is supported by 1,500 individual members, and some 70 institutional members, including universities, learned societies, venture capitalists, financiers, industrial companies and publishers.

2. SBS has followed the questions set out in the consultation document.

#### **Q1. Does the Government need high-level independent advice in addition to what it can get from its own civil servants?**

3. Yes. One reason for this is the crucial independence of the science and engineering research base. Only an independent body can fully understand the problems and challenges of an independent science base, and offer the uncompromising high-level advice needed to ensure that the UK maintains a world-class presence in the fields of science, engineering and technology.

#### **Q2. How effectively has CST performed its function?**

4. The CST's reports are significant pieces of work that offer serious advice in a clear, well-argued way. SBS's only concern would be that, because the members of the CST are (inevitably) very busy, and because the Council has only a very small secretariat, it has only been possible for the CST to examine a very small number of policy issues.

#### **Q3. Is the role of CST clear within the overall advisory framework?**

5. Broadly, yes. The Chief Scientific Adviser and the various advisers within individual Departments have a clear role in advising the Government on specific scientific issues. Together with the Director General of the Research Councils and his colleagues, the Chief Scientific Adviser formulates advice on current strategy and funding issues.

6. The CST has a separate role in looking in more depth at medium term issues (as it is currently doing in relation to the European Research Area). This is a valuable role that, because of the constant pressures of immediate issues, other parts of the advisory system cannot guarantee to undertake.

#### **Executive Committee**

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J Cannon  
F E Close OBE  
R Dowler  
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**Q4. Does CST's work overlap with other bodies?**

7. The CST is obviously interested in many areas that are of concern to other bodies within the scientific community. If it were to choose only to work on areas that were of no interest to the community more generally, it would be doubtful whether it was focusing on the most important subjects.

8. However, the production of reports setting out authoritative, cross-disciplinary, longer-term thinking on areas of potential strategic importance, and which have the authority of being official advice from individuals appointed by the Prime Minister, is a role that is unique to the CST.

**Q5. Does CST have a role in relation to the devolved administrations?**

9. The provision of scientific advice to the devolved administrations remains an area that appears to be somewhat unclear. For example, officials representing the devolved bodies on the Chief Scientific Adviser's Committee must leave the room, and may not see relevant papers, when the Committee is discussing something that may become advice to the UK cabinet.<sup>i</sup>

10. However, in the case of the CST, it is for the independent members to define the issues of concern, and their advice is published in the form of reports. Thus, the members can choose to look at subjects that are of interest to some or all of the UK's various governments, and the various administrations can choose which parts of the CST's advice apply to them and which do not.

**Q6. Does CST provide a useful channel for communicating Government views to the rest of the science and engineering community?**

11. No, nor should it. The CST is there to offer high-level strategic advice *to* the Government, and ought to concern itself primarily with communicating the views of the science and engineering community to the Government. The Government has a plethora of official ways of communicating with various constituencies and does not need to use the CST in a way that would, inevitably, be seen as "spin".

12. It is not part of the CST's terms of reference to act as a mouthpiece for the Government's views.

**Q7. If the Government needs advice, are there better ways to get it?**

13. The Government has many ways of obtaining advice about scientific matters, primarily channelled through the Chief Scientific Adviser and his colleagues. However, on the issue of medium and longer-term strategy, there is clearly a need for an independent-minded body to engage in original thinking. While there may be better ways of obtaining advice on individual issues, they do not obviate the need for a group that defines its own priority areas, and can offer this advice on subjects other than those chosen by the Government.

**Q8. Is there a continuing need for CST?**

14. Yes. In a world where science, engineering and technology are increasingly important, mainstream political issues, it would be bizarre for the Government not to have ways of obtaining strong, independent advice in these fields.

**Q9. Do CST's terms of reference enable it to be effective?**

15. There is nothing in the terms of reference that appears to be a barrier to effectiveness.

**Q10. Does CST provide its advice in the most useful way?**

16. This is a matter for the Government. Since it is the Government that seeks advice, it is only the Government that really can comment on whether that the advice is presented in a useful way.

17. However, SBS would comment that, in general, the CST's reports contain clear Executive Summaries, are clearly argued, and, importantly, are backed by evidence.

**Q11. What sort of members does CST need?**

18. Those with independent minds who are not afraid to give unpopular advice and to justify it. In addition, it needs at least some members who are currently active in the field, not just the great and the good.

**Q12. Is it helpful that CST is normally chaired by a Minister and has the Chief Scientific Adviser as a member?**

19. In point of fact, the nominal Chair of the CST, the Secretary of State for Trade & Industry, has not actually attended any of the last nine meetings (according to the details on the CST's website), let alone chaired them. In the light of the many duties of a cabinet minister, this is hardly surprising. In the interests of openness and honesty, it might be more sensible to allow the Council to elect its own Chair, or for the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State to nominate a Chair from among the independent members.

20. There is, however, obvious merit in the fact that the CST reports to the Prime Minister via the Secretary of State. This ensures that the Cabinet Minister responsible for science can be held to account for ensuring that the CST's advice is properly considered.

21. In addition, there does not seem to be any harm, and potential significant benefit, in the Minister for Science, attending and contributing to the meetings. With his co-ordinating role in relation to Government science policy, he can no doubt make extremely valuable contributions.

22. The Chief Scientific Adviser is an entirely appropriate member of the CST. Chief Scientific Advisers are appointed because they have the same high-level experience, external to Government, as the independent members of the CST. For example, if he did not hold the post of Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor David King would be the sort of person who might be expected to be appointed to the CST in a personal capacity.

23. Moreover, it is the Chief Scientific Adviser and his staff and colleagues who will have to implement any of the CST's recommendations that are accepted.

**Q13. Would it be helpful for the CST to have a higher public profile?**

24. Possibly. What really matters is that the CST's advice is taken to heart by the Government, but it might be better if the advice were more broadly publicised.

**Q14. Should CST improve its links with other bodies?**

25. This is a matter for the members of the CST, who should consider what they need to do in order to fulfil their role of independent advisers. Such links would be a means not an end. Forcing links and partnerships for the sake of it would be pointless.

**Q15. How should CST's work programme be developed?**

26. The work programme should be defined by the CST's members, and it would be pointless to have prescriptive procedures set down as a result of this consultation. We should value the independence of the CST's members rather than trying to invent procedures and processes for the sake of it.

**Q.16 Does CST operate in an open and transparent way?**

27. It is possible to obtain most relevant information about the CST's work from its website.

28. However, SBS was very concerned when the *Mark Thomas* television programme earlier in the year uncovered the fact that some members of the Council had not properly registered their commercial interests in accordance with the appropriate regulations.<sup>ii</sup>

29. In addition, SBS has some concerns about the manner in which the Quinquennial Review of the CST is being undertaken. A single external reviewer has been appointed, but apparently no information has been given about how or why the reviewer was chosen. SBS has no doubt of the integrity and independence of the reviewer who was appointed and is concerned merely with the apparent lack of transparency on the part of the OST during the appointment process.

**Q.17 Does CST make the best use of technology? Is its website easy to find and useful?**

30. The website is easy to find and provides most information in a logical and useful way.

September, 2002

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<sup>i</sup> Terms of reference of the Chief Scientific Adviser's Committee.

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, *Minutes of Evidence taken before the Public Administration Select Committee 18 April 2002*, House of Commons, Question 293 [HC 686-iv].