



House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**Government Response
to the Committee's
Ninth Report, Session
2003–04: Director
General of the
Research Councils:
Introductory Hearing**

Ninth Special Report of Session 2003–04

*Ordered by The House of Commons
to be printed 15 September 2004*

HC 1059
Published on 27 September 2004
by authority of the House of Commons
London: The Stationery Office Limited
£0.00

The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration, and policy of the Office of Science and Technology and its associated public bodies

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Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Chris Shaw (Clerk); Emily Commander (Second Clerk); Alun Roberts (Committee Specialist); Hayaatun Sillem (Committee Specialist); Ana Ferreira (Committee Assistant); Robert Long (Senior Office Clerk); and Christine McGrane (Committee Secretary)

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Ninth Special Report

On 5 July 2004 the Science and Technology Committee published its Ninth Report of Session 2003–04, Director General of the Research Councils: Introductory Hearing. On 14 September 2004 the Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published without comment as an appendix to this Report.

Appendix

Introduction

The Government welcomes the Ninth Report of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee Director General of the Research Councils: Introductory Hearing.

The Government has considered carefully all the conclusions and recommendations. We have set out the Government response as shown below. The Committee's recommendations are included in the body of the responses and are highlighted in bold and cross-referenced to the body of the Committee's Report.

List of recommendations and Government responses

1. We believe that Sir Keith's experience, both in academia and at the MoD, should equip him well for his duties as DGRC and note that his appointment has been favourably received by many in the science community. However, we are disappointed that Sir Keith has not yet been able to fully commit to his new post. It is essential that the DGRC plays a full role in the development of the ten-year framework for science and investment and negotiations for the spending review. We are concerned that this is not possible whilst the DGRC is only in post for one day each week. We hope that in future the OST will ensure that appointments for major posts are ready to assume their positions as soon as the post becomes vacant. (Paragraph 3)

The Government welcomes the Committee's support for the appointment of Sir Keith O'Nions. The Government recognises the benefit of candidates being able to take up appointment quickly, or for satisfactory interim arrangements to be made. (In the event, Sir Keith was able to work closely and effectively with senior staff in OST and the DTI more widely prior to his full-time appointment on 12th July.) Most important, however, is to ensure that the right candidates are appointed to key positions.

Sir Keith played a full part in the development of the 10-Year Framework and the negotiations for what was a highly encouraging spending review settlement for science.

2. We welcome Sir Keith's recognition of the need to respect the independence of the Research Councils granted by their Royal Charters. We also endorse his view that RCUK strategy group meetings should not become mired in discussions over detail. However, Sir Keith's unwillingness to appear before the Committee on behalf of RCUK and to address cross-council issues signifies a notable departure from his predecessors'

interpretation of the role. If the DGRC cannot speak on behalf of the Research Councils, there is an obvious need to clarify the nature of his job, as well as to establish who should speak on behalf of RCUK. It is vital that the relationship between the DGRC and RCUK is clearly defined. We welcome the fact that Sir Keith appears to recognise this and look forward to exploring this issue further during our forthcoming scrutiny of RCUK. (Paragraph 6)

The main role of the Director General of the Research Councils is to advise the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on the allocation and strategic direction of the Science Budget. The Government shares the Committee's belief that the evolving nature of RCUK calls for the relationship between the DGRC and RCUK to be more clearly defined. To this end, it welcomes the contribution of the Ruffles Review of RCUK, the recommendations of which will be considered by Ministers in September.

3. We believe that the title DGRC is misleading and are pleased that Sir Keith is receptive to finding an alternative title that more accurately reflects his role. We suggest that 'Director General of the Research Base' better indicates the scope of his responsibilities. (Paragraph 8) &

4. We therefore recommend that Government revisit the responsibilities allocated to the DGRC and CSA to reflect better the priorities now associated with these posts. In particular, the designation of the CSA as Head of the OST is confusing and underplays the significance of the DGRC's role. At present, it is difficult for an observer to understand the reporting lines and responsibilities of the senior management in the OST. We believe that the OST should clarify these relationships, and announce the resulting organisational structure. (Paragraph 11)

The Government notes the Committee's recommendation on the responsibilities, designations, reporting lines and organisational structure of OST and its senior management. The DTI has an objective "to improve the relative performance of the UK science and engineering and its use by government and society", and it is important that this is led and delivered in a unified way. This is currently achieved by the CSA and DGRC (and their respective staff) working very closely together. While there are always different ways in which organisational charts can be drawn up, the Government believes that in practice the existing arrangements for OST have proved effective. It will nonetheless keep the issue the Committee has raised under review.

5. We believe that public engagement with science and technology is an issue of the utmost importance and are disappointed that the OST has taken so long to implement the recommendations of the British Association report on Science in Society. We hope that Sir Keith's involvement will give fresh impetus to efforts in this area and look forward to Sir Keith's return in a year's time to report on the progress he has made. (Paragraph 13)

The Government shares the belief of both the Committee and Sir Keith that public engagement with science and technology is a high priority. This is reflected in its Science and Innovation Framework 2004-2014.

Reflecting the Government's commitment in this area, OST has made good progress on implementing the majority of the BA's recommendations, for example:

The qualitative work for the national public survey is complete, the quantitative work will be carried out in the autumn and data will be available in early 2005. The survey will include "booster" samples of people from minority ethnic groups:

- Another round of Copus grants has been held with an increased budget. This is supporting high quality projects in areas that, we believe the Committee would agree, are priorities such as "science and society" and "widening participation". OST's new public engagement with science grant scheme, "Sciencewise", was launched by Lord Sainsbury at the BA Festival in September. We expect the budget for this scheme to increase further over the next couple of years;
- The joint OST/RCUK project on establishing good practice in evaluation of both science and society activities and programmes is also well advanced and should be completed in the autumn.

DGRC will also be establishing a forum of all those supported directly from the Science Budget to ensure coherence across public engagement activity.

6. We are pleased that Sir Keith intends to work hard at improving funding arrangements for interdisciplinary research. We believe that despite the progress already made towards this end by the Research Councils, further attention needs to be given to the ability of the Research Councils to handle proposals for interdisciplinary research. We also welcome Sir Keith's recognition of the Research Councils' role in supporting research for international development and hope that this will translate into greater consistency between the policies of the various Research Councils. (Paragraph 15)

The Government remains committed to research that is both interdisciplinary and responsive to wider economic and policy needs, including international development. The introduction of a new performance management system and increased emphasis on a strategic role for RCUK are intended to improve the responsiveness of Science Budget funded work, including that undertaken through the Research Council funded research.

7. We are encouraged by Sir Keith's conviction that the Treasury has successfully engaged with the scientific community in developing this framework and are pleased that he acknowledges the potential difficulties arising from the short consultation period. We intend to undertake a detailed examination of the ten-year framework in a forthcoming inquiry. (Paragraph 16)

The Government believes that the outcome of the recent spending review, in what is widely acknowledged as a very tight round, is a very positive one for science. It has been welcomed by stakeholders. The publication of the Science and Innovation Investment Framework 2004-14 reflects the Government's positive commitment both to long-term investment in science and innovation and to continued close working with a range of key stakeholders.

Reports from the Science and Technology Committee since 2001

Session 2003-04

First Report	Annual Report 2003	HC 169
Second Report	Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council: Introductory Hearing (<i>Reply HC 629</i>)	HC 55
Third Report	The Work of the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (<i>Reply HC 526</i>)	HC 6
Fourth Report	Office of Science and Technology: Scrutiny Report 2003 (<i>Reply HC 588</i>)	HC 316
Fifth Report	<i>Too Little too late?</i> Government Investment in Nanotechnology (<i>Reply HC 650</i>)	HC 56
Sixth Report	Within REACH: the EU's new chemicals strategy (<i>Reply HC 895</i>)	HC 172
Seventh Report	Director General for Higher Education: Introductory Hearing (<i>Reply HC 1015</i>)	HC 461
Eighth Report	The Work of the Council for the Central Laboratory of the Research Councils	HC 462
Ninth Report	Director General for the Research Councils: Introductory Hearing	HC 577
Tenth Report	Scientific Publications: Free for all?	HC 399
Eleventh Report	The Research Assessment Exercise: a re-assessment	HC 586

Session 2002-03

First Report	The Work of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council..(<i>Reply HC 507</i>)	HC 161
Second Report	Annual Report 2002	HC 260
Third Report	The Work of the Medical Research Council (<i>Reply Cm 5834</i>)	HC 132
Fourth Report	Towards a Non-Carbon Fuel Economy: Research, Development and Demonstration (<i>Reply HC 745</i>)	HC 55
Fifth Report	The Work of the Natural Environment Research Council (<i>Reply HC 1161</i>)	HC 674
Sixth Report	UK Science and Europe: Value for Money? (<i>Reply HC 1162</i>)	HC 386
Seventh Report	Light Pollution and Astronomy (<i>Reply HC 127, 2003-04</i>)	HC 747
Eighth Report	The Scientific Response to Terrorism (<i>Reply Cm 6108</i>)	HC 415
Ninth Report	The Work of the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (<i>Reply HC 169, 2003-04</i>)	HC 936

Session 2001-02

First Report	Cancer Research: A Follow-Up (<i>Reply Cm 5532</i>)	HC 444
Second Report	The Research Assessment Exercise (<i>Reply HC 995</i>)	HC 507
Third Report	Science Education from 14 to 19 (<i>Reply HC 1204</i>)	HC 508
Fourth Report	Developments in Human Genetics and Embryology (<i>Reply Cm 5693</i>)	HC 791
Fifth Report	Government Funding of the Scientific Learned Societies (<i>Reply HC 53</i>)	HC 774
Sixth Report	National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts: A Follow-Up (<i>Reply HC 276</i>)	HC 1064
Seventh Report	The Office of Science and Technology: Scrutiny Report 2002 (<i>Reply HC 293</i>)	HC 860
Eighth Report	Short-Term Research Contracts in Science and Engineering (<i>Reply HC 442</i>)	HC 1046