



House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**Science communication
and engagement:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Eleventh Report of
Session 2016–17**

**First Special Report of Session
2017–19**

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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 Government Office for Science and associated public bodies.

Current membership

[Rt Hon Norman Lamb MP](#) (*Liberal Democrat, North Norfolk*) (Chair)

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[Graham Stringer MP](#) (*Labour, Blackley and Broughton*)

[Martin Whitfield MP](#) (*Labour, East Lothian*)

Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 152. These are available on the internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

Committee reports are published on the Committee's website at www.parliament.uk/science and in print by Order of the House.

Evidence relating to this report is published on the relevant [inquiry page](#) of the Committee's website.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Simon Fiander (Clerk); Dr Harry Beeson (Committee Specialist); Dr Elizabeth Rough (Committee Specialist); Martin Smith (Committee Specialist); Sonia Draper (Senior Committee Assistant); Julie Storey (Committee Assistant); and Sean Kinsey (Media Officer).

Contacts

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First Special Report

On 29 March 2017 our predecessor Committee published its Eleventh Report of Session 2016–17, [Science communication and engagement](#) [HC 162]. On 19 July 2017 we received the Government's response to the Report, which is appended below.

Appendix: Government response

Introduction

The Government would like to thank the Committee for its report into Science Communication. The Government recognises the importance of engaging the public on science and technology issues, including to inform policy-making.

Making good use of the research produced in the UK, and elsewhere, is vital to our continued prosperity and good science communication can help ensure that this is achieved. It also provides transparency on how public money on research is spent. Engaging the public on new and emerging and at times controversial science and technological issues helps policy-makers and researchers draw on a wide range of views when considering future research direction and devising policy that includes an appropriate consideration of new technology.

Recommendation 1

There are encouraging signs of continuing improvement in the BBC's already excellent science coverage. The position is less encouraging in the print and other media, which often have an agenda which allows inadequate place for opposing evidence. The phone-hacking scandal and the subsequent Leveson inquiry, though about illegal media behaviour, will have done nothing to improve the previous mistrust of their science reporting. ***The Government should ensure that a robust redress mechanism is provided for when science is misreported.***

Response:

The Government is committed to a free and open press, and does not interfere with what the press does or does not publish, as long as the press abides by the law.

The industry has established two press self-regulators:

The Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) (<https://www.ipso.co.uk/>) handles complaints about breaches of the Editors' Code of Practice (http://www.editorscode.org.uk/the_code.php). The Code includes specific clauses on accuracy which member publications must adhere to. Anyone can make a complaint to IPSO if they believe a member publication has breached the Code. More details are available on its website: <https://www.ipso.co.uk/make-a-complaint/>.

The Independent Monitor for the Press (IMPRESS) (<http://impress.press/>) recently published its new Standards Code which comes into force on 24 July 2017. Anyone can make a complaint to IMPRESS if they believe a member publication has breached the Code. More details are available on its website: <http://impress.press/complaints/>.

If a complaint is upheld by a self-regulator, for example with regards to inaccurate reporting, they are able to impose appropriate and proportionate sanctions on their member publications.

In addition to this Government also provides support to the work of the Science Media Centre. The Centre's work is essential in ensuring that journalists have timely access to good quality information, from experts, on the science stories that are making the headlines thus improving the overall quality of science reporting. They also bring journalists and scientists together to familiarise scientists with working alongside the media.

Recommendation 2

The Government has the primary responsibility for fostering and facilitating science engagement in its policy-making. ***It should maintain and strengthen national programmes such as Sciencewise and the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement. Their programmes should be routinely used across all government departments, so that public opinion is fully captured in developing government policy where science is involved.***

Response

BEIS re-launched the Sciencewise Programme at the start of 2017. Sciencewise will continue to support Government departments and other public bodies in designing and running deliberative dialogue projects. These projects will help Government learn how the public might react to potentially controversial science issues, and new and emerging technologies. By developing an understanding of the public's aspirations and concerns around these technologies, Government is better placed to successfully formulate policy and where necessary regulation or legislation.

The Government is able to call on a wide variety of external expertise in carrying out its public engagement with science, science communication and STEM inspiration programmes activities. The National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) is one such source. Independent of Government and funded by the higher education funding councils, RCUK and The Wellcome Trust, NCCPE was created to enable universities to increase the quality and impact of their public engagement activity. NCCPE is instrumental in sharing expertise and good practice on engagement within the public sector both within higher education and more widely.

Government will continue to make use of the Sciencewise programme and draw on the experience and expertise of NCCPE, as well as others with relevant skills in the wider science and research communities. This will ensure that policy makers continue to have good access to, and understanding of, public views on science and technology issues when developing future programmes.

Recommendation 3

We recommend the Science Minister and the Government Chief Scientific Adviser should discuss with the Cabinet Office, and the Treasury as the sponsor of the policy evaluation ‘Green Book’, the scope for the consultation process to address the scientific issues separately from the political and other trade-off. This could, we believe, bring benefits for public engagement and reduce unnecessary disputes over the essential science. Such a separation in the consultation process could allow researchers, if they wished, to more readily confine their debate contributions to the science. If they also contributed to questions of policy implementation and the political trade-offs involved that would be more transparent.

Response

The government is clear that high quality scientific evidence forms an important part of the consultation process.

The use of stakeholder consultations and workshops is strongly recommended by the Green Book, while recognising that various forms of consultation will be appropriate in different circumstances and at different stages in the development of proposals. Standards for the use of objective evidence and for modelling are covered by the Aqua Book.

Green Book guidance including the supplementary guidance on the “five case model” provides a clear framework which facilitates transparency in consideration of objective evidence separately from assumptions and statements of preference and acceptability.

Recent consultations, such as the Industrial Strategy and Higher Education Green Papers, have continued the long tradition of attracting responses from highly respected scientific and technical organisations such as the Royal Society, the Research Councils and the Institute of Civil Engineers.

The Government Office for Science and the other analytical professions will continue to engage with the Treasury to ensure that guidance is fit for purpose.