

Refreshing Defra's Expert Evidence Advisory Committee Structure

Report by Defra's Science Advisory Council

17 March 2016

A. Introduction

In September 2015 Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) and the Minister of State for Farming, Food and the Marine Environment called for a review to consider the shape and structure of expert evidence groups that Defra uses to ensure a robust evidence base for policy making.

The review was asked to consider:

- Whether the current structure of the expert evidence groups meets Defra's evolving needs
- Whether there are novel and different ways of providing this function
- Whether there are gaps or areas of overlap in the current committee structure
- Whether communication between the different groups and their governance arrangements are appropriate for their effective functioning and Defra's needs.
- Whether Defra is obtaining good value for money from its expert evidence groups

The review consists of two parts. First, a high-level examination of these questions by Defra's Science Advisory Council (SAC) that concentrated on strategic issues and principles. Second, a survey of Defra's expert evidence groups, their structure, remit and working practices, carried out by Defra officials reporting to the CSA. This paper is the report of the first part, authored by the SAC.

SAC carried out this work by reviewing material provided by the Defra Secretariat, in discussions at its regular meetings and at a one-day meeting devoted to this topic, by consulting with the CSA and other Defra senior officials, and through a meeting with the chairs of the current expert advisory bodies.

B. The current situation

SAC received from Defra officials a draft annotated list of the current expert evidence groups (see second part of the review). SAC found it useful to group the bodies into four functional types:

Strategic evidence advisory committees. These are high-level bodies asked to provide strategic advice and challenge across a broad area. They are committees of individuals who have expertise in different subjects (rather than committees of experts in a particular area). SAC itself is of this type as is the Social Science Expert Panel (SSEP; a joint panel with the Department of Energy & Climate Change) and the Economics Advisory Panel (EAP). SAC, but not the other two committees, is an advisory NDPB.

Groups advising on specific evidence areas. Bodies set up to provide detailed advice on a particular area of science. Some carry out specific statutory roles such as the Advisory Committee of Releases into the Environment (ACRE). Most are classified as Expert Scientific Committees or Expert Advisory Groups but others are NDPBs (including ACRE). Groups also differ in their involvement with the devolved administrations.

Groups advising in specific policy areas. Typically bodies set up to provide advice in policy formulation in a particular area; they may contain evidence professionals (a few to a majority) but also include representatives from stakeholder and interest groups. Most are classified as Expert Policy Groups though some are NDPBs. This type of group was excluded from further consideration in this Review as they are not concerned primarily with advising on evidence. In some cases exactly whether a body had a primarily policy or evidence role was not always clear.

Evidence programme and project steering groups. Bodies set up to provide advice on particular time-limited evidence based programme and projects.

In addition there are:

- *Cross-departmental expert evidence advisory bodies*
- *Expert evidence groups set up by organisations in the broader Defra Community*

This review comments only tangentially on these last two types of bodies.

C. Review and Recommendations

a. General

The set of committees providing expert evidence advice to core Defra has evolved over the years in response to the Department's changing evidence requirements and without strategic oversight of need. Before this review there was no central registry of the groups that exist and there still is no comprehensive registry across all of the Defra organisations¹. The groups vary enormously in their remit and range and in the extent to which they are tasked with advising primarily on evidence as opposed to having a greater policy development role, including bringing together different stakeholders in open policy-making. We found that bodies could be unclear about their relationship to other expert evidence groups, and how they fit into the broader workings of the Department beyond their immediate hosting part.

SAC's view is that a diversity of committees is inevitable given Defra's broad and heterogeneous responsibilities, and that being overly prescriptive about committee structure is likely to be counterproductive. However, within those groups whose primary function is advising upon the collection, use and interpretation of evidence (as opposed to those whose primary function is advising on policy development), some coordination and commonality of approach is likely to be helpful.

¹ A list of all the Defra organisations can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations#department-for-environment-food-rural-affairs>. Not all of these will have expert evidence groups.

Specifically we recommend:

- 1. A clear distinction is made between committees and groups whose main purpose is advising on evidence as opposed to other more policy-oriented bodies (the latter not considered further here).**
- 2. The CSA's office maintains a register of these expert evidence groups that is updated and visible on the Defra website.**
- 3. The register is extended as soon as possible to equivalent groups and committees across Defra organisations.**
- 4. Defra should explore whether a common model should be adopted for the recruitment and administration of the bulk of expert evidence groups including production of annual reports.**
- 5. SAC receives the annual reports of all expert evidence committees and groups, and offers constructive, high-level challenge on the evolving committee landscape in Defra as part of its remit.**

b. Strategic Evidence Advisory Committees.

It is not SAC's place to advise Defra on whether it (SAC) should exist or not and for the purpose of this review we have assumed that the conclusion of the 2014 triennial review that recommended SAC's continued existence as a NDPB pertains.

SAC heard strong endorsement from Defra officials (including the Heads of the Social Science and Economics professions) of the value of the Social Science Expert Panel (SSEP) and Economics Advisory Panel (EAP). SAC takes a broad view of "science" and has for many years included social scientists and economists in its membership. SAC considers this important but it is not a substitute for SSEP & EAP which are able to examine issues in their specialist areas in greater depth than is SAC.

SAC recommends:

- 6. That Defra retains in some form the Social Science Expert Panel (SSEP) and the Economics Advisory Panel (EAP) as strategic committees**
- 7. To ensure more coordination amongst Defra's strategic evidence advisory groups the chairs of SSEP and EAP should attend SAC meetings, either as observers or members.**

c. Groups Advising in Specific Evidence Areas.

The diversity of groups advising in different areas of Defra's evidence needs makes it difficult to provide general recommendations that apply in all cases. SAC noted that the distribution of committees across Defra activities was very uneven which might reflect differing evidence needs but might also represent varying cultures in different parts of Defra, and also the availability of advice through Defra organisations. It is clear that some committees have overlapping or related remits and, we believe, Defra should give careful consideration to the scope for some degree of rationalisation.

Defra is currently undergoing reorganisation that will result in new policy and evidence clusters. When the new structure is established we suggest that the appropriate Directors lead a review of their evidence needs and existing committees to identify both gaps and overlaps in coverage. SAC itself has not performed an in-depth gap analysis but has identified the broad topic of applied data science as one in which Defra may benefit from more external advice and input. SAC strongly endorses the Department's ambition to make more of its data available in accessible form to stimulate numerous activities while recognising there are substantial challenges to achieving this goal.

Once a committee is set up it can be hard to dissolve, not least because it might appear to be a negative comment on the past work of the people involved. In general SAC believes that the default assumption when a committee is set up is that it should be time-limited (or that a major review should occur with no presumption of continuation). Exceptions to this might be new committees with statutory functions.

The remit of this review was to look at core Defra expert evidence groups. However, as part of the continuing structural reforms at Defra we see opportunities for the expert evidence groups across Defra organisations to provide support for Defra's central evidence functions and recommend that this be explored. Such a study might also find examples of redundancy or duplication allowing rationalisation, or that the evidence type or need has evolved requiring a different advisory model.

The remit also did not include a detailed examination of the role of expert advisory committees and the devolved administrations which would need to take into account the different natures of the current devolution settlements.

SAC was specifically asked to consider more radical options that might be alternatives to the current committee structure. In the next section we describe such an option, a Defra Evidence College that would consist of a group of external evidence experts in different areas of Defra's remit that would contribute to the Department's need for evidence advice. In that section we debate its pros and cons and acknowledge that there are both advantages and disadvantages. A College might replace the work of a larger or smaller number of existing committees, but setting the College up and maintaining it would have administrative consequences for Defra. SAC recommends that Defra should consider this option at the present time in the light of its strategic evidence needs and the current financial and administrative context.

The pace of technological advance in video conferencing and associated technologies is rapid. SAC advises that Defra makes full use of these expanding technologies to facilitate better interaction with its experts, to increase the efficiency of time spent on committee work, to reduce costs, and to set an example of new work practices that avoid the need for travel and associated GHG emissions.

The Centre of Expertise approach taken in Scotland that enables the Scottish Government to draw on expertise embedded in the research community has had a promising start. However, SAC recognised that the demands made by Defra on the research community, and its relationship with its research community, differ from those in Scotland and was concerned that the Scottish model might not scale up for England. At present SAC recommends that the Department monitors how the programme develops in Scotland and what lessons might be learned.

SAC recommends:

8. Defra explores the overlap of existing expert evidence groups and whether there is the opportunity for rationalisation, as well as better alignment with the new Department structure.

9. Defra should consider an expert evidence advisory group in the area of applied data science to help it achieve its target of promoting innovation through the provision of information resources.

10. The assumption should be made that when new expert evidence groups or committees are set up they should be time-limited unless a strong case is made otherwise.

11. Defra should explore whether existing expert evidence committees and other groups serving Defra organisations might provide support to central evidence functions, and whether there is any current redundancy.

12. Defra should consider the advantages and disadvantages of other ways of accessing external expert advice, specifically the “Evidence College” model described in the following section.

13. Defra should invest in web-based video-conferencing and associated technologies to reduce the costs and externalities of engaging with its expert community.

d. Evidence Programme Steering Groups.

These are currently set up to support specific evidence programmes and are time-limited. SAC has no specific recommendations about this type of group beyond noting that many of the recommendations also apply here and were a Defra Evidence College to be set up it might also provide a pool of experts for such bodies.

D. A Defra Evidence College

Part of our remit was to consider novel ways of providing evidence advice and support to Defra that might replace some of the existing committees. In this section we describe the concept of a Defra Evidence College and list what we see as its advantages and disadvantages.

A Defra Evidence College (or Knowledge Co-operative or a better name) would be a group of people from academic and related research institutions who agree to provide Defra with advice on evidence issues either as individuals or through time-limited groups set up to explore a particular question for the Department. On joining the College an individual would receive induction and an introduction to the Department and its needs, and the College itself would meet once a year (making use of remote conferencing technology to avoid travel costs). Membership of the College would be for a fixed time period, but an emeritus College – a pool of people who understand the Department and have experience working with it – would provide a supplementary reservoir of expertise upon which Defra could call. Membership of the College would be unremunerated but Defra would work to ensure membership of the College was a respected aspect of public service with which universities and other organisations would want their staff to be engaged.

Were an Evidence College to be set up, transitional arrangements could be designed to avoid lack of continuity in advice to the Department. For example, the initial College or a substantial fraction

of it might consist of people already engaged in Defra committees so that the new system evolves from the present rather than risking a radical break.

SAC has not performed a detailed study of the optimum size and shape of such a College but considered a body of 50 people appointed for five years. It also noted that work would be required to ensure that the College also addressed the needs of the Devolved Administrations.

Advantages:

- Provide the Department with a larger pool of expertise (both directly and through their network of contacts) than at present that it could call upon to assist with the complex evidence challenges that Defra faces.
- Increase the flexibility and agility of the way the Department can access expert advice including ad hoc consultation with individuals.
- Provide an immediate source of advice in times of emergency.
- Increase the number of external experts who have a knowledge and understanding of the way a government department works and who are thus better able to both contribute to Defra's specific needs and act as ambassadors for the Department in evidence communities.
- Could be asked to horizon-scan and inform Defra of emerging issues of which they should be aware.
- Help substitute for any evidence expertise lost in a slimmer Department.
- Offers the prospect of novel engagement with the Department's expert community using social media and other technologies.

Disadvantages

- The administrative overhead of running the College, appointing its members and managing membership turnover.
- Loss of deliberative working and constructive challenge amongst a group of experts who gain confidence and trust in working closely together over time.
- Costs involved with College meetings and in developing software and other means of engagement.
- Were Defra to keep a substantial fraction of its existing committees in their present form then the College might be seen as adding complexity rather than reducing it.
- The risk of lack of continuity in advice while transitioning to a new and untested structure.
- The risk of building a new structure at a time of great pressure on the Department's human resources.

E. Acknowledgement

SAC is very grateful to the Defra secretariat for support in this work.