

Independent Scientific Advice to the Scottish Government: Review of the Scottish Science Advisory Council – Findings and Recommendations

Science is fundamental to Scotland's future success and wellbeing. Science activity and advice is well established and supported in the Scottish Government and is an important part of the evidence base for effective policy making. The Scottish Government has a recognised network of Chief Scientific Advisers whose work is supported by internal science advisers and a number of independent science advisory bodies including the Scottish Science Advisory Council. At a time when scientific advice is under increasing review and scrutiny internationally it seemed a timely opportunity to review the Scottish Government's arrangements for scientific advice to ensure that the body that supports the Chief Scientific Adviser for Scotland has maximum impact.

The purpose of this review was therefore to look at existing models for Scientific Advisory Council (SAC) across the UK and internationally and to propose mechanisms which would maximise the effectiveness and impact of the Scottish Science Advisory Council in providing informed, relevant and timely independent advice to the Scottish Government. The review was conducted between May and June 2015 and information was gathered through an extensive literature review and through speaking to a number of Science Advisory Council Secretariats, policy officials in Scottish Government and the Government Office for Science and the current Co-Chair of SSAC.

The review has highlighted that Science Advisory Councils (SAC) are a widely used and effective method for providing independent science advice to Governments both in the UK and internationally. In Scotland, it is clear that the SSAC has a key role to play in enabling Ministers and policy officials to access expert independent scientific advice on a breadth of issues. While SSAC has a number of strengths including access to high quality independent scientific advice and links to valuable networks, there are a number of ways its impact and potential could be increased by linking into Scottish Government more effectively. Based on the outputs of the review it is recommended that the SSAC continue to deliver under its current broad Terms of Reference but that the ToR are reviewed periodically in advance of recruitment of new members. It is further recommended that Scottish Government look at implementing a number of changes to SSAC's structure and ways of working which would ensure its impact, enhance its effectiveness and would increase its dialogue with and visibility within Scottish Government in the future. These include:

1. Membership – Reduce the size of SSAC from 16-18 to eight to ten members and appoint members for their breadth of expertise, connectivity to the wider community and for their ability to offer good strategic cross cutting advice rather than advice on their particular scientific specialism. The review has also highlighted that it might be useful to appoint a number of additional ex officio members to the council for example the Scottish Funding Council, Director of Research and Innovation, the SG Chief Social Policy Adviser and the President of the RSE.
2. Chair – Replace the current chairing arrangements where the Chief Scientific Adviser co-Chairs the Council alongside a Co-Chair elected by the membership, with an independent Chair recruited specifically to the role. The Chief Scientific Adviser would continue to attend SSAC meetings and the Chair and CSA should meet with the Science Minister quarterly.
3. Work Programme – The Council should set priorities for the year linked to Scottish Government priorities and should take a more proactive role in Horizon Scanning activity. While the

Council should continue to decide the approach to each area of work on a case-by-case basis and how it will deliver its advice, it is recommended that the Council places a greater emphasis on short concise papers, letters and statements rather than lengthy reports.

4. Ways of working – The Council should convene sub groups as appropriate to draw in a wider range of knowledge and expertise. It is envisaged that these groups would be chaired by an SSAC member with the SSAC temporarily appointing external experts to join the sub-group for a set time period to answer the question posed. The SSAC member chairing the group would be responsible for reporting back to Council.

5. Policy Engagement – It is important for SSAC members to have a clear understanding of the policy process and links into the policy environment. The Review proposes a package of measures to increase interaction and engagement between SSAC, Ministers and senior policy officials including: a formal comprehensive induction programme, regular presentations from policy officials at SSAC meetings, scheduled periodic engagement with Ministers and a buddy scheme pairing Council members with senior policy officials.

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