

Meeting Note: Policy Forum 8th June 2022

Attendees:

Jane Banks SC (Staff & Chair)
Ryan Mercer SC (Staff)
Lawrence Ambrose RCPod
Gavin Blackett ORS
Elizabeth Chamberlain IOP
Stephen French IFST
Joseph Lewis IES
Laura Marshall RSB

Robert Massey RAS
Arthur Nicholas IST
Lynda Rigby IBMS
Tanya Sheridan RSC
Andy Smith BASES
David Wells IBMS

Apologies:

Megan O'Donnell GSL
Caren Reid ASPiH

1) Welcome

- **Jane Banks** opened the meeting and welcomed first time attendees including **Lawrence Ambrose**, **Lynda Rigby** and **David Wells**.
- Due to technical issues **Ryan Mercer** chaired most of the meeting.

2) Current consultations/engagement

UKAS Consultation on Quality Assessments

- **David Wells** highlighted that UKAS are consulting around their customer agreement including quality assessments for all industries post-Brexit.

COVID-19 pandemic public enquiry

- **Andy Smith** highlighted that the consultation on the ToR for the public enquiry on COVID-19 has concluded. Suggested that when the full consultation process begins, there may be merit in a joint response from the Science Council and member organisations.

Party Conferences

- **Ryan Mercer** asked if member organisations were planning events or other activities around the party conferences in September.
- No member organisations present had plans to organise any events, with only a couple of policy forum members considering attending.
- The consensus view is that the opportunities for engagement with politicians at party conference are relatively low, particularly considering the high costs attached.

3) Civil Service cuts

- **Tanya Sheridan** introduced the discussion item, outlining how the Government's proposed civil service cuts may impact on science advice:
 - The Government has announced a planned reduction of 91 000 civil service jobs over the coming 3 years, to reduce the civil service workforce from 470 000 currently to 2016 level of 384 000.

- Government Departments have the challenge of drawing up plans for 20% reductions in their workforce, this is expected to extend to agencies including UK Research and Innovation, Environment Agency, Food Standards Agency.
- Some Government Departments have announced recruitment freezes eg. DEFRA and recruitment to the civil service graduate fast stream (1500 per year) won't happen in 2022-23.
- The Government Science and Engineering Profession has over 10 000 members (not clear all are civil servants – some armed forces engineers are included in the profession).
- The UK's exit from the EU means some Departments eg. BEIS, DEFRA needed to recruit more scientists to advise on product, chemicals and other policy matters where previously we adopted EU standards and regulatory processes. Scientific advice – and good scientists – are vital to policymaking on many topics, from environment to health to innovation.
- In the discussion policy forum members made the following points:
 - Direct impacts to science advice could include:
 - Cuts to the civil service may mean there are fewer points of contact for engagement with Government, though this is already difficult so we may not be notice the difference.
 - Amalgamation of roles may mean experts who have to cover a wider range of topics than their own specialism, leading to a loss of specialist expertise in some areas.
 - An undermining of the ability to access scientific risks, collect data to inform these risk assessments, prepare appropriate contingency measures and then respond to these risks when they arise (a particularly sensitive concern following the COVID-19 pandemic).
 - It's unclear what impact this might have on the Government's overall aim to achieve 2.4% of GDP for R&D.
 - The Government hasn't identified priorities for these cuts and is instead giving targets to departments and agencies.
 - Particular agencies have concerns, such as the Food Standards Agency's ability to conduct adequate inspections.
 - UKRI may also be affected by this, which may be particularly problematic if they also need to manage a Horizon Europe replacement scheme.
 - May impact on employability of some science graduates as cuts may disproportionately impact on entry level jobs into the civil service, though there is an overall shortage of STEM graduates.
 - The Office for Students are currently investigating the employability of various management courses at universities, which may be a sign of things to come.
- In considering how we engage with Government on this issue the policy forum concluded the following:
 - The Science Council will work with **Tanya Sheridan** and **Gavin Blackett** to engage with GO Science and GSEP in the first instance.
 - The Science Council will explore the possibility of inviting a GSEP representative to an upcoming policy forum to discuss this topic with the community.
 - We want to highlight that risk assessment and management is the key concern, but it is important that we ensure we have a better understanding of the implications as we raise this concern.

4) Science Council Events

- **Ryan Mercer** reminded policy forum members about the Science Council's International Collaboration Evening on the 15th June 2022.
- **Ryan Mercer** provided an update on the Science Council Climate Conference (29th September) preparations:
 - At least 10 member organisations will be directly providing content for the agenda.

- In addition to Patrick Vallance the UK GCSA as the keynote speaker, Paul Monks CSA BEIS will be a panellist for one of the plenary sessions.

5) Horizon Europe

Policy forum members noted that at the time of the meeting there had been no recent developments on the UK's association with Horizon Europe beyond that George Freeman (the Science Minister) is still negotiating with the EU.