

Strengthening the bond between policy and science

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One only has to be reminded of the BSE crisis and the MMR vaccine scare to recognise the importance of having policy informed by the best available science. Now, a collaboration of over fifty academics and policy makers from around the world have come together to agree a new research agenda on the role of science in public policy. The findings appear today Friday, 09 March in *PLoS ONE*, a leading interdisciplinary open-access journal.

The importance of using science for [public policy](#) has long been recognised, but recent years have seen a growing debate over how this is best achieved. 'Evidence-based policy' has become the desired norm, and this has led to a greater embedding of scientists alongside other specialists in public policy. In many governments, scientists are engaged at a senior level. For example, in the UK, in addition to the Government Chief Scientific Adviser, all government departments have a dedicated Chief Scientific Adviser post.

In spite of their acknowledged importance, however, relations between science and policy are sometimes troubled, and periodically erupt into controversy. Prominent examples include the acrimonious debate over scientific understandings of [climate change](#) and the continuing disputes over the use of genetically modified crops and foods.

The aim of this project was to identify key questions which, if addressed through focused research, could both address important theoretical challenges and also improve the mutual understanding and effectiveness

of those who work at the interface of science and policy.

To address these issues, Professor William Sutherland, from the University of Cambridge, working with the University's Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP), convened a unique workshop which brought together 52 leading scientists and policy makers to agree a new research agenda. They came from a wide range of academic disciplines (including the physical, biological, environmental, medical, and social sciences) as well as government, NGOs and industry. Initially, each participant was invited to produce a list of questions; through a process of voting, deliberation and further voting, the initial list was distilled into a final set of 40 questions.

Explaining the significance of the research, Professor Sutherland said: "When public policy is supported by scientifically-sound evidence, it is to the benefit of all of society. In order to strengthen the relationship between science and policy, we have, for the first time, compiled a clear set of research questions on scientific advice to governments."

The final questions include an examination of how the design of scientific advisory systems affects policy outcomes (Q18), whether making science advice more transparent has improved its quality (Q35) and how to ensure early identification of policy issues that require scientific advice (Q10).

Others, for example, include:

- What is the effectiveness of different techniques for anticipating future policy issues requiring science input? (Q17)
- How and why does the role of scientific advice in policy-making differ among local, regional, national and international levels of governance? (Q19)

- How do policy makers understand and respond to scientific uncertainties and expert disagreements? (Q29)

Dr Miles Parker, Director of Science, Defra, said: "As a science adviser to government, I want to know 'what works' when it comes to ensuring that sound evidence informs public policy. This collaborative, multidisciplinary approach to devising a research agenda was very worthwhile. Understanding the relationship between science and policy is an area of research that needs more attention."

Dr Robert Doubleday, Head of Research, Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP) at the University of Cambridge, said: "For the first time scientific advisers, [policy makers](#), and academics who study science policy have come together through a structured process to agree a common research agenda. This is a critically important step as too often in the past there has been a serious disconnect between the theory and practice of science [policy](#). This paper will help overcome this gap. At CSaP we are committed to assessing progress made towards addressing these questions."

More information: The paper 'A collaboratively-derived science policy research agenda' will be published in the 09 March 2012 edition of *PLoS ONE*. After the embargo lifts, the paper can be viewed at dx.plos.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0031824

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