



Science and Technology Committee

Oral evidence: [GO–Science Review of Science Advisory Councils 2013](#), HC 1185

Wednesday 2 April 2014

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Members present: Mr Andrew Miller (Chair); Mr David Heath; Stephen Metcalfe; David Morris; Stephen Mosley; Graham Stringer; David Tredinnick

Questions 1-67

Witnesses: **Professor Sir Mark Walport**, Chief Scientific Adviser to HM Government and Head of the Government Office for Science, **Professor Les Iversen**, Chair, Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, Home Office, and **Professor Chris Gilligan**, Chair, Science Advisory Council, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Sir Mark, welcome to this morning's session. We have a series of factual questions to get a better understanding of science advisory councils. Before we start, as we have not been formally introduced to your colleagues, perhaps for the record they could introduce themselves.

Professor Iversen: I am Les Iversen, a pharmacologist and chairman of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs.

Professor Gilligan: I am Chris Gilligan. I am an epidemiologist and mathematical modeller from Cambridge, and I chair the Science Advisory Council for DEFRA.

Q2 Chair: Thank you very much. Sir Mark, can you explain to us how the science advisory councils and committees fit into the framework of science advice to Government, and the extent to which GO-Science maintains oversight of them?

Sir Mark Walport: They are, frankly, part of the patchwork or jigsaw that forms the network of scientific advice to Government. The councils and committees are very heterogeneous. I think you have seen a list of them in the past, but I have one that I can send to you if necessary. They are a mixture of expert committees that advise on particular topics, some of them very long standing. An example would be ACMD which advises on drugs. For example, a series of panels advise the Department for Transport on licensing matters for cars. There are things like the medical advisory committees on alcohol, drugs and substance misuse in driving; on disorders of the cardiovascular system; and on driving

vision disorders. They are quite narrow in their remit; they are there for a particular technical purpose. Most Government Departments have committees like that.

Then there are the more general advisory councils. In general, the term “council” is used for broad advice, and “committee” tends to be in narrow areas, but, frankly, the taxonomy gets a bit mixed up, so ACMD is a council rather than a committee. The councils have a broader advisory remit, and they tend to report either to the chief scientist or sometimes to a Minister, but there is no single structure. When my predecessor reviewed them just before I took up my appointment, he made the point, which I agree with, that different Departments legitimately utilise different models of council depending on their need, so they are quite heterogeneous. The CSA is usually a key point of contact.

Q3 Chair: I take it that the list to which you referred is an up-to-date one.

Sir Mark Walport: Yes, and I think it was sent to you a few months ago.

Q4 Chair: So the list we have is the most up to date?

Sir Mark Walport: The list I have is dated February 2014, and I am happy to let you have that.

Q5 Chair: Thank you. It is quite a long list.

Sir Mark Walport: Yes.

Q6 Chair: Are there too many? How do they interrelate?

Sir Mark Walport: As I have already said, a number of them are highly specialised and therefore do not particularly interrelate. They have very specific topics. I spoke to the chief medical officer about the quite large number in the Department of Health. Some are there because of European legislative requirements; others are there for more direct reasons. They are heterogeneous. They are reviewed, and from time to time one is even wound down; for example, the Home Office poisons board has recently been wound down. They are not immortal, but they are easier to start than to stop.

Q7 Chair: The poisons board was not immortal. In terms of process, are you confident that the advisory councils and committees are compliant with the code of practice for scientific advisory committees?

Sir Mark Walport: As far as I know, but, to be completely straightforward, I have not gone through every single committee and written to ask, “Do you strictly adhere to the ‘Principles of scientific advice to government’?” It is a well-distributed document, again one that you are familiar with, so there are some principles set out. I meet the chairs of the councils from time to time.

Q8 Chair: As a practical point, perhaps your two colleagues could illustrate how they ensure that they stick within that code.

Professor Gilligan: To answer from the DEFRA perspective, we do it in two ways. One is by routinely as a council reviewing what we do and how we do it. We have a very clear set of guidelines. We look at those and we also look at the impact of our work. We have an assiduous secretariat who assist with this, but we do it in those two ways: one as a council and the other as a council with a secretariat.

Professor Iversen: We are well aware of the principles, and, as far as I know, we adhere to them completely. We are governed largely by an agreed protocol between ourselves and the Home Secretary, which I could explain if you wish.

Chair: It would be helpful.

Professor Iversen: That has been a very valuable object for us. When I took over the chair in 2010, relations with Government were at a low point. We were often prejudged. Ministers would say what they thought about cannabis before we had advised. We did not have an opportunity to discuss with the Home Secretary when they did not agree with our recommendations. At that time, Ministers were receiving our reports two weeks ahead of their publication, giving them time to prejudge the issue and, sometimes, time to make a decision almost on the same day as we published the report, which gave the impression that our reports were not being properly considered.

Most of this has now been corrected by a protocol which says that Ministers will not receive our reports until the day they are published. If the Minister, Home Secretary or Department of Health Minister is minded not to take the advice, they will meet me and offer a written letter explaining why. We understand there are plenty of reasons why they may not agree with us. Advice is advice; it is not something we get disappointed about if it is not followed. The protocol also gives the Government three months to reply after publication, and we try to keep them to that timetable. With that protocol lodged in the House of Commons Library, and agreed by both sides, matters have much improved.

Q9 Chair: On the principle of writing to you, as for example Theresa May did recently on the issue of khat, clearly the Prime Minister endorses that practice, and presumably it leaves you freer to avoid getting involved in the political fray, as has happened in the past. Do you think that is working effectively now?

Professor Iversen: Yes. The example of khat is a good one to show how well this system is working. We were asked by a previous Home Secretary, in 2008 or 2009, to consider whether khat should be controlled. We came to the conclusion that it was not sufficiently harmful to be controlled, and the advice at that time was taken. The Home Secretary asked again more recently for the council to look at the question of khat. We did a very thorough review. Our working group members visited communities in London and other large cities where there are Somali or Ethiopian refugees and looked very carefully at the science and community views, including those of local MPs and local councils. They did a very thorough job. I think the report is a very nice piece of work documenting the situation. It recommended again that this was not a substance that should be controlled. The Home Secretary disagreed. I had a meeting with her in which she explained that she was not

going to accept the advice, and she wrote what I regard as a model letter, three or four pages long, outlining exactly her views on the khat situation. I thought that worked very well.

Q10 Chair: As a Labour Member, I find it difficult, but I absolutely agree that it was a model letter, and I have told her so.

Sir Mark Walport: The “Principles of scientific advice to government,” which are well distributed, make clear in the second bullet point that “scientific advisers should respect the democratic mandate of the government to take decisions based on a wide range of factors and recognise that science is only part of the evidence government must consider in developing policy.” Clearly, drugs is an area where there are multiple lenses through which politicians will look.

Chair: Indeed.

Q11 David Tredinnick: Sir Mark, you talked earlier about a heterogeneous landscape. Do the information technology systems of the science advisory councils have compatibility? Is there a way you can share information easily?

Sir Mark Walport: To be honest, most of the committees report through written documents; they do not hold large datasets, so it is a question of what word processor they use rather than any particular information technology system. They are not by and large handling big databases.

Q12 David Tredinnick: So there isn’t a need to share or collate data?

Sir Mark Walport: No. I cannot think of any examples where there would be a gigantic database that needed to be shared for analysis between committees.

Q13 David Tredinnick: What were the key findings of your recent review of the science advisory councils?

Sir Mark Walport: I have them here somewhere. The key recommendations were as follows. In terms of model of council, different Departments legitimately utilise different models of council depending on their need, so form follows function; clarity in reporting lines is important regardless of to whom the council reports, so some report to CSAs, others to senior departmental officials; and flexibility should be built into the council model. In terms of members, the broader each member’s experience, the better. In terms of interactions with Departments, councils need to identify appropriate links within their Department; they need to identify their key policy customers; the councils should publicise their presence within their Department, and it may be useful for council members to pair up with the relevant official; and councils should identify means to ensure that the relevant evidence is being obtained and utilised wherever it is relevant to the science-related policy formulation.

On identifying future issues, councils should spend some time proactively identifying upcoming science issues, and they could usefully engage with the new horizon scanning process being led by the Cabinet Office. On transparency, councils need to determine how they will meet current requirements for transparency and openness within Government, and approaches to openness need to reflect the purpose of and resources available to a specific council. On the benefits and evaluation of impact, councils need to have the means to evaluate their impact, or identify the benefits they offer their Department; and on cost and resources, those considering setting up a council need to be aware of the potential cost.

Q14 David Tredinnick: That is a long list.

Sir Mark Walport: There is only one more.

David Tredinnick: Fine.

Sir Mark Walport: To finish it, councils need to weigh up the pros and cons of remunerating members. I think that is a minority activity.

Q15 David Tredinnick: That is a reassuringly long list, but do you feel confident that councils are an effective source of external critique on a Department's use of science, or are they what the Chinese would call paper tigers?

Sir Mark Walport: No, I do not think they are paper tigers at all, but they have two roles. They have a role to bring in science advice to Departments. That is different from a role as a critic of whether the Department uses the science well. They have both functions, but some of them are more about bringing in the evidence. As I think this Committee knows, the Government Office for Science conducted a review of the effectiveness of scientific advice in each Government Department. That was completed before I took up my post. Rather than repeating each of those, I am focusing with chief scientists on individual Departments; I am trying to go where I think there are opportunities to add value, rather than being formulaic in approach.

Q16 David Tredinnick: Following on from that, have you put in place a structure for following up recommendations to see whether or not they have been implemented? Have you issued any instructions yet on follow-up?

Sir Mark Walport: We have distributed this and, as I have already said, I meet the chairs of the advisory councils. I met them once about six months ago, and I am meeting them again next week. I meet them regularly, but we have not put in place a formal monitoring structure.

Professor Gilligan: Perhaps I might comment from the DEFRA perspective as to how we deal with this. Some of the recommendations in the GO-Science review were from innovations that had come from DEFRA—for example, the pairing scheme between members of the advisory council and deputy directors within DEFRA to improve communication and also build trust while maintaining independence. On paper tigers,

within the DEFRA science advisory council we both support and challenge the chief scientific adviser. I think it is important we do that.

Q17 David Tredinnick: Can you give an example of when you challenged him?

Professor Gilligan: For example, in our report on the climate change risk assessment—the first one—the first thing we did was review and identify what was in it. We also set up a meeting with Lord Krebs from the adaptations committee, which is a sub-committee of the climate change committee. We invited him and another member to our council. We set up a sub-group. All our sub-groups, except for one on exotic diseases, are time-limited and have a clear task. The sub-group reported and made clear recommendations on how this should be done in the future. As a council, we checked and invited officials back to the SAC to say what they were doing, or to justify it if they decided they were not going to do something. That would be one example.

Q18 David Tredinnick: Following on from that, what changes will the DEFRA science advisory council be making as a result of the Government Office for Science’s recent review? What impact has this review had on your office, if any?

Professor Gilligan: If I may so, I think we had an impact on it, as well as its having an impact on us. Already we had a rather leaner and more flexible council, with a maximum of eight members.

Q19 David Tredinnick: You say “leaner.” Have you shed employees?

Professor Gilligan: No. This preceded that report, but I was about to say how we use that. I can pick two areas, but there are many. One is the relationship with the Department. I have mentioned the pairing scheme, which builds trust, but there are also meetings with Ministers and the permanent secretary. Indeed, David Heath attended one of our working dinner sessions not so long ago.

Mr Heath: It was one of the most stimulating sessions I have ever had.

Professor Gilligan: It was reciprocated. Those are very important sessions because they can last for two to three hours, and we can discuss a wide range of interactions between evidence and policy.

Another important area is to avoid the risk of science advisory councils parachuting in at three-monthly intervals and then maybe not thinking much in between about particular broad areas. We have instituted monthly teleconferences so that we can be flexible in response, and also have continuity. Those are some examples.

Sir Mark Walport: We are not complacent about any of these structures. Sir Alan Wilson, chairman of the Home Office science advisory committee, has recently completed a review of the Defence science advisory council, which is one of the oldest of the advisory councils. His report is still in draft form, but it is a rigorous review. I am confident that we keep an eye on all of these to make sure they are providing the best advice. With respect to DEFRA, the chief scientist, Ian Boyd, and I are doing a review at the moment on the

sources of scientific evidence across plant and animal health to DEFRA and looking at that structure. I think we will be reporting on that some time in the summer, so we look at all of this all the time.

Q20 Stephen Mosley: That follows on quite nicely to what I was going to ask. The GO-Science review last year identified four basic models of how Departments run their advisory councils. Within that report, it highlights DEFRA and DECC as having a model which provides challenge and support to the chief scientific adviser. Why is that the case in those Departments but not others?

Sir Mark Walport: I am not sure it is restricted to them. The Home Office science advisory committee does the same. DSAC has just undergone a change of chairman. Professor Ian Poll has recently retired, and Professor David Delpy, the recently retiring chief executive of EPSRC, will be taking over chairmanship of that council shortly. I think it is a general principle that they should provide advice and challenge.

Q21 Stephen Mosley: But there are some that don't, aren't there?

Sir Mark Walport: I think the main ones do, but they are very heterogeneous committees and not every Government Department has that sort of very broad scientific advisory council.

Q22 Stephen Mosley: Some do not have them at all, do they? I know the code of practice for scientific advisory committees suggests that if they are a user of science and have several expert scientific committees they should also maintain a scientific advisory council. The Department of Health do not. Should they?

Sir Mark Walport: There are different views. Some Departments feel that by focusing on particular topics they want to get specific expert advice on a case-by-case basis. Other Departments feel they want broader advice. I do not think there is a single right answer to this.

Professor Iversen: The ACMD reports to the Home Secretary but also our reports go to the Department of Health, in particular the public health Minister. In many cases, the recommendations have a lot to do with health rather than criminal offences. That works reasonably well. We are on the verge of completing a review on cocaine, as a self-engendered agenda item. We were concerned about the rise in cocaine use in the UK over the last decade—a threefold increase—and we were also concerned by the misconception that it is possibly a safe party drug for middle-class diners. Our report is basically a public health warning: this is a dangerous drug; it is an addictive drug and causes a lot of misery. It is also, nevertheless, the second most popular illegal recreational drug in this country. That report needs to be supported by the Department of Health, and we are working on that.

Sir Mark Walport: Coming back to Health, if you look at the scope of the activity that Health has to cover, some of those committees in Health are very broad indeed. The commission on human medicines, for example, covers a very wide spectrum of important

activity, as does the committee on the safety of devices. There are other bodies, such as NICE, that do not appear here but nevertheless are effectively extremely broad advisory committees across Health. It is not that Health is not covered; Health is very well covered.

Q23 Stephen Mosley: But there are all of these scientific advisory committees sitting above that to speak directly to Ministers, and to feed in to Ministers from all the committees underneath. I would have thought that the broader the range and the larger the Department, the more need there would be for an SAC.

Sir Mark Walport: Those are questions you would probably need to put directly to the Department. I accept that there is not a single size that fits all.

Q24 Stephen Mosley: The code of practice says they should have one, doesn't it, so does it mean the code of practice has no teeth?

Sir Mark Walport: I do not think that is true. It says that different Departments legitimately use different models of council depending on their need. There was no single best model. I do not think we have ever said that every Department should have one.

Q25 Stephen Mosley: DCMS did have one, did it not, until last year and then it wound it up?

Sir Mark Walport: Yes. DCMS is actively looking at that at the moment. The permanent secretary, Sue Owen, is working with Bernard Silverman, chief scientist at the Home Office, to look specifically at the requirements for DCMS. That Department does acknowledge that they have a need for stronger scientific advice than they are receiving at the moment, and they are reviewing how to achieve that.

Q26 Stephen Mosley: DCMS does not even have a CSA in place.

Sir Mark Walport: That is absolutely right, but, as I say, they are looking at that actively at the moment. I have had a meeting with the permanent secretary and Professor Silverman to talk about that. I think it is an acknowledged gap.

Q27 David Morris: Professor Gilligan, what outputs does DEFRA's scientific advisory council produce, and what is the audience for these outputs?

Professor Gilligan: There are a number of outputs. Historically, the science advisory council, before I took over and chaired this one, produced a number of quite significant reports. We are proceeding in a different way, in that we provide advice and challenge straight to the chief scientific adviser, and also to directors and deputy directors within the Department. As well as that, we produce very clear minutes explaining what has happened in the meeting. Those are understandable by somebody who has not been at the meetings, with very occasional redaction, if necessary, for confidentiality; and we produce from our working groups short, pithy documents with recommendations in them.

Q28 David Morris: What role has the council played in DEFRA's development of policies to tackle bovine TB? Do you consider DEFRA's position on this issue to be evidence based?

Professor Gilligan: I do consider DEFRA's position on this to be evidence based. The science advisory council has, in four quarterly meetings and six teleconferences, gone through evidence and how it is used, and it advised as to what should be done where evidence was lacking—for example, in modelling and quantification. We also had the chair of the independent expert panel at a meeting to explain, ahead of the pilot culls, how that panel would work. We have kept a very clear and careful eye on what is happening, and provided advice.

Q29 David Morris: Can you give us some examples of how you have, as described in your remit, challenged the DEFRA chief scientific adviser at any time?

Professor Gilligan: I have already indicated the CCRA example. If I look across the range of areas, we have looked at neonicotinoids. The phrase is “both challenge and support,” because it could be—and very often is—that the chief scientific adviser has already had the opportunity to look at evidence, and comes along to the science advisory council and gives his view of the evidence. We then assess whether or not we think that is correct. A useful list would certainly be badgers and TB, and neonicotinoids where we identified serious concerns about the statistical analysis of trials, which is outwith DEFRA's control; it is an EU perspective, but clearly work needs to be done. In that case, we invited representatives from the advisory committee on pesticides to come along and give a clear presentation on what the current position was, and made known our views as to what we thought should be done.

As to other areas, we reviewed tree health—ahead of chalara, I should say—and indicated the need to take a risk-based epidemiological approach. Within months, we as a country and community needed to do that in a hurry. We reviewed Schmallerberg. When we had Schmallerberg and ash dieback, we provided, first, advice and, secondly, sounding boards as to what might be done. There are a number of others, but I hope that gives you an idea.

Q30 David Morris: That's fine. On the subject of bovine TB and the cull, have you had any re-evaluations of the effects of the recent cull?

Professor Gilligan: We are continuing to discuss and engage with the chief scientific adviser on the likely results of the cull. As soon as the report is available, we will have a very rapid further discussion. That is the advantage of teleconferences. They are in the diaries; people are there, but in this case and other cases we have convened a small subset of the SAC at short notice if advice is required.

Q31 Graham Stringer: Professor Gilligan, I apologise for this because I think we are going from the obscure to the positively arcane. Can you explain the difference between the sub-committees of the councils and your specialist committees?

Professor Gilligan: We currently have a council of seven members. We form sub-committees of that council—for example, to look at climate change and report very quickly on that. We had one on marine conservation zones; we had another one on food, and we will meet on Thursday to challenge DEFRA on its policy across the whole food perspective. Those are sub-groups of the council and they are time-limited, with the exception of the exotic diseases sub-group. That is a standing sub-group that is available, first, for emergencies. It is chaired by a member of council and it co-opted individuals from outside council. Secondly, it has reviewed a simulated emergency in a recent exercise and reported on that.

In addition, there are a number of other committees within DEFRA—advisory committees on releases to the environment, and so on. We have invited a number of those; I have given you an indication of the advisory committee on pesticides. We have had the chair of the hazardous substances committee along. As DEFRA is considering its evidence investment strategy generally, we are also providing advice and thought as to co-ordination among the committees within DEFRA, so we make a distinction between the sub-committees of our own council and other committees, which usually have a statutory requirement in what they do, such as hazardous substances and the advisory committee on releases to the environment. We are looking at how those can interact and how we make best use of the information that comes from them. I am sorry that it took a while to separate the taxonomy, but I hope that is clear.

Q32 Graham Stringer: It is a pretty obscure question.

Professor Gilligan: I do not think it should be. The sub-groups are very clear; other groups are already standing.

Q33 Graham Stringer: Sir Mark, is that replicated in other Departments?

Sir Mark Walport: I am not sure which of the other Departments have sub-committee structures of their councils. I suspect that a minority do that. What I would say is that, in general, we are learning from best practice and disseminating that as appropriate. An example of a Department that has a new council is the Department for Transport. It has a scientific advisory council chaired by Professor Robert Mair, a very distinguished engineer from Cambridge. Again, I do not think that necessarily one size fits all.

Q34 Graham Stringer: Just one final question from me. You said that the structures are heterogeneous. Are there any areas that the Committee should look at for recommending improvements, or is there a satisfactory way of going about things at the moment?

Sir Mark Walport: There should always be challenge. I think that the most important thing about any of these committees, councils or whatever is the quality of their membership. The people and their expertise and ability to contribute wisely is the most important thing of all. It is paying attention to recruitment and making sure that it is an open process, that we recruit people with appropriate breadth and that, frankly, we are able to turn over membership where committees are not performing effectively. It is more about people than about structures, because good people will make bad structures work very effectively,

and vice versa. The challenge always is to make sure that we have the best and the broadest advice. It is an important principle that Departments are open to scientific advice wherever it makes sense to be so. Frankly, I think the general principles that came out in the review of scientific advisory councils are good ones, and we need to continue to push on them.

Q35 Stephen Mosley: Professor Iversen, I want to talk about the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. It was set up in 1971 under the Misuse of Drugs Act, and it describes itself as an independent expert body that advises Government on drug-related issues in the UK. GO-Science says that you are a scientific advisory committee. Would you agree with that definition?

Professor Iversen: That is the generic term, but it does not mean that we have all scientists on our council—by no means. We have a group of 25 or 26 experts covering a wide range of disciplines: we have lawyers, doctors, nurses, pharmacists, a scientist—a chemist—a couple of pharmacologists, police, and so on. It is a very diverse group. I would not call it necessarily a science group, although it is certainly committed to evidence-based recommendations. I would like to dispel the notion that we advise only on individual drugs. According to the 1971 Act, we were set up to advise Ministers on the harmfulness of drugs, but in recent years we have been asked about policy. We do not normally talk about policy, but we will do so if asked. In 2011, we came up with a report on various options Government might have to regulate the market in novel psychoactive substances or legal highs, as they are sometimes called. I think the document had a considerable impact on Home Office thinking on that.

We have also been asked to set up a special committee to look at recovery from addiction and advise Government on which methods of treatment work most effectively, and to look at that in an evidence-based manner, taking account of the large amount of work that has been done in the USA and elsewhere on those issues. That is a standing committee which will go on for quite some time. It has come up with two reports so far, and hopefully it will be influential in managing the way in which we treat addictions. A lot of money is going into this, and it is not always well spent.

Q36 Stephen Mosley: So the remit is a lot wider than just scientific advice?

Professor Iversen: Yes.

Q37 Stephen Mosley: Are there any other committees that have a number of non-scientific members?

Professor Iversen: We have a technology committee that is devoted to looking particularly at scientific or pharmacological matters. We have the recovery committee, to which I have already alluded. We thought initially that the novel psychoactive drugs phase would go away, but it has not gone away, so we have made that into a standing committee which meets five or six times a year. The difference with a committee is that you have selected a group of experts from council and you can co-opt from outside any other

experts who are willing to help. That is sometimes necessary, because we do not have all the expertise to tackle all the problems.

Sir Mark Walport: Many committees contain the full range of sciences, including the social sciences. I was looking at the national DNA database ethics group. You could probably argue the toss as to whether or not that was pure science, but ethics is part of the social sciences.

Q38 Stephen Mosley: I agree with that. Our Chairman, Andrew Miller, praised the way in which the Home Secretary considered and then rejected the advice you gave on the classification of khat. How do you—the ACMD—deal with scientific advice being rejected on social or political grounds?

Professor Iversen: It is part of the job as far as I am concerned. I think this was handled in an absolutely correct manner by the Home Secretary. We understand that there are political, economic and international factors that weigh on that decision, apart from the evidence base we were able to provide, so I was not surprised or particularly disturbed.

Sir Mark Walport: It seems to me that it was a model of good scientific advice in the first place, and an appropriate response in terms of courtesy to the committee in acknowledging that and setting out the reasons for the decision.

Q39 Stephen Mosley: Since the ACMD has more expertise on it than just scientific expertise, do you think it should be a bit more politically nuanced in its reports?

Professor Iversen: God forbid! We want to offer evidence-based information and recommendations on various issues related to the drugs themselves, the treatment of addicts and the policy issues concerning how inadequate some of the present regulations are in dealing with, for example, novel psychoactive substances which are emerging every week. A new one comes on the market and we are almost overwhelmed. I won't say we are overwhelmed because we have made a number of recommendations in this area, but what is needed is a generic solution to controlling that market somehow. The Minister, Norman Baker, has constituted an expert committee to advise him on that very issue, and I am pleased to be a member of it.

Q40 Chair: Your comment on the first part of Stephen's question was, "God forbid!" Does that reflect what you inherited, and you thought that in the past the committee had drifted that way?

Professor Iversen: I do not think I should comment on my predecessor's demise. I do not think politics played a huge role in it from his point of view, but I do not want to get into that. I am still a good friend of David Nutt.

Q41 Chair: That is not what I am asking. I am trying to tease out whether or not the breakdown that occurred, which moved away from the exemplar we have described in the case of khat, was simply a one-sided affair. Is it not fair to say that the committee drifted into

being politically nuanced, and equally the Minister tried to downplay the relevance of the science?

Professor Iversen: I do not see political bias in any of the ACMD reports or recommendations. What happened was a breakdown of the proper relationship between that advisory council and the Government Departments to which it reported. We were left with the impression that the Government were not taking adequate notice of any of the advice being given. That was a fundamental flaw, which I believe we are now putting right.

Q42 David Tredinnick: I want to ask about the GO-Science review. Before I do that, Sir Mark, may I take you back to what you were saying about the National Institute for Clinical Excellence? NICE is probably one of the most important bodies and is the gatekeeper that decides what drugs are provided in the health service. Recently, it decided that acupuncture should be used for lower back pain. Yesterday, in the Chamber the Health Secretary made an announcement, and a newspaper report today says, “Hunt calls for Chinese medicine on the NHS...Traditional Chinese medicine should be made available on the NHS where there is evidence it helps patients, Jeremy Hunt said yesterday. The Health Secretary told MPs that there should be no ideological bar to Chinese remedies in the NHS.” I imagine minds are whirling at NICE this morning, but is that not a good illustration of how important that committee is? What relationship do you have with NICE?

Sir Mark Walport: I do not have a formal relationship with NICE through my current role, but you will appreciate that, because of my history in medical science, I have a relationship with NICE. I would emphasise the important words in what you just quoted, which are “where there is evidence” that it will be of benefit. There are very well-established methods for developing evidence, and the role of NICE is to assess that evidence and see whether or not it stands up. It would be impossible to disagree with the statement that, where there is clear evidence that a therapy of any sort works, NICE and the NHS will consider it. Unfortunately, those standards of evidence are rarely met for some of the treatments you have been talking about.

Q43 David Tredinnick: The GO-Science review states that there may be issues which cannot be discussed openly, even in the Department within which a council is operating. What sort of issues might not be able to be discussed in this way? When do you have to go in camera?

Sir Mark Walport: Issues of national security.

Q44 David Tredinnick: Professor Gilligan, am I right in saying that you have introduced short closed sessions within quarterly meetings for council members, so they can raise issues of concern? Are those issues of national security?

Professor Gilligan: No, that is entirely different, but I am pleased to be able to make sure you understand what they are for. As you will have seen, I have indicated that our science advisory council has done a number of things to build trust and improve communication with the Department. As well as that, however, I felt, and we as a council feel, that it is

very important that we have short closed sessions so that we can set an agenda and respond to the agenda that is being presented by the Department without officials from the Department being present. That is to improve independent working. We as a council then immediately report to the chief scientific adviser and/or his colleagues what has been discussed while they and others were out of the room. I think this helps in the establishment of trust, but also independence in the committee. It is a very different issue from the one you were following.

Sir Mark Walport: It would be similar to the principle of non-executives on boards, where they have the opportunity to have a discussion among themselves to make sure any issues are brought out.

Q45 David Tredinnick: Is there not a danger of officials using this possibly as a way of influencing Ministers and saying, “We must do all this in secret.” It has been said very often in this place that there must be secrets; it is too dangerous to let the public know about it, and it is all done behind the scenes. It is a “Yes, Minister” situation.

Professor Gilligan: That is absolutely not the practice or the intention, nor has it happened.

Q46 David Tredinnick: Finally, may I take you back to what I said earlier about IT, and develop that? I find it very surprising that some councils and committees do not have any web presence. In this day and age, is this appropriate for bodies providing independent advice to the Government? Not to have a website seems rather old-fashioned.

Sir Mark Walport: To be honest, I cannot comment on that specifically. There is a general principle that minutes of these meetings are made publicly available. Whether they need their own website or whether they can be published specifically on departmental websites, I do not think matters.

Q47 David Tredinnick: I put it to you that it would be very simple to do. You just put up a page saying what they do. It does not have to be very complicated.

Sir Mark Walport: We will look at that.

Professor Gilligan: If I may comment from a DEFRA perspective, I reviewed the website prior to the last meeting, not for the temporary sub-committees but all the other committees in DEFRA. There has been some challenge in the new gov.uk website. It has teething problems, and there is a learning process in how to optimise the use of that.

Sir Mark Walport: I agree that it is a good principle that the minutes should be made readily available. The transition to the gov.uk website is just a transition of websites; it will impose some delay, but it will happen.

Professor Iversen: The ACMD has a website. Everything we do—reports and correspondence—is all there on the website. My only complaint about it is that it is part of the UK Government website and the casual reader might assume that we were part of Government, which we are not.

Q48 David Tredinnick: Is that not rather serious?

Professor Iversen: Since I do not have a budget, I cannot do much about it, can I?

Q49 David Tredinnick: To set up a website—to set up a webpage—is virtually costless; it is a few hundred pounds. I have done it myself. I cannot accept that argument.

Professor Gilligan: You have to maintain a website as well. A website that is set up without proper resource very soon becomes a waste of time, and is confusing.

Q50 David Tredinnick: You can even have a tombstone website which just says what you do. That is better than nothing, isn't it?

Sir Mark Walport: With respect, I agree that there should be a clear web presence for councils and committees. Indeed, the Council for Science and Technology, which I co-chair with Dame Nancy Rothwell, has a website on which we put absolutely everything. It is perfectly possible to make clear the status of a committee on a gov.uk website, so I do not think that is a problem.

Q51 Chair: Sir Mark, it would seem appropriate for you to make that recommendation to the relevant Ministers. Professor Iversen has a point. Independent advice is important, and the fact that it is independent should be labelled as such.

Sir Mark Walport: It should be clearly flagged, but it is a different debate as to whether it should be on the gov.uk website.

Q52 Chair: It could be flagged on the gov.uk site.

Sir Mark Walport: I would agree with you that the status of the body should be flagged and clearly identified, but I do not agree that it should not be on the gov.uk website.

Professor Iversen: I accept the present situation. One of the principles on which we operate is transparency, so everything we do should be available for public knowledge. The only bit that is confidential is when—rarely—we vote on an issue of whether to recommend or not to recommend. That happens very occasionally and is, I am told, protected from the Freedom of Information Act. It is very rarely used. However, transparency is important. We have public sessions at our council meetings. Half the day is open to the general public, and we have a question and answer session.

Q53 Chair: Following on from that, apart from issues of national security, is it the practice that all reports are published?

Sir Mark Walport: Yes. There are some clear principles. I cannot comment on every single report, but the guidance is very clear.

Q54 Chair: There is a presumption to publish.

Sir Mark Walport: Yes. In “Principles of scientific advice to government,” it says, under “Transparency and openness,” that “Scientific advice to government should be made publicly available unless there are over-riding reasons, such as national security or the facilitation of a crime, for not doing so.” That is the principle and it is set out clearly.

Q55 Mr Heath: I always have difficulty when DEFRA people are before the Committee. I was a little bit too close, but I would like to put on record how much I appreciated the work of Professor Gilligan and his colleagues’ work when I was with the Department. Sir Mark, can I pick up something Professor Gilligan said? It is about a bit of work that Ian Boyd was, and presumably still is, undertaking, which is the review of evidence gathering and commissioning in a very evidence-rich Department. I know some of the things we were thinking about were that perhaps we should concentrate more on better analysis of other published data rather than original commissioning and things like that. Irrespective of the outcome, is that process in place in other Departments and advisory councils?

Sir Mark Walport: This is a fairly big piece of work. I am conducting it in partnership with Ian Boyd. We will complete that piece of work and then look at other Departments and where that is appropriate. I know that Sir Alan Wilson, who reviewed DSAC, will be making recommendations which will cover similar issues, so we will take a bespoke approach to it. Rather than trying to do the whole of Government at once, we will look at the Departments where it is a major issue. As you have just said, so many of DEFRA’s decisions depend on good evidence. I do not want to anticipate what we say too much, but I do not think the issue is simply about better analysis; it is about the primary evidence.

Q56 Mr Heath: It is not confined to that, but I think that was one of the issues.

Sir Mark Walport: This is quite a big piece of work—rightly so, in my view. Chris Gilligan has been interviewed as part of the process of getting it under way, so we are keeping him in touch with it as well.

Q57 Mr Heath: I come now to what I intended to ask you about. You gave evidence fairly recently about horizon scanning, which is something the Committee has been looking at. I am interested to know what the read-across is between the work of the advisory councils and the committees and the Government’s horizon scanning programme, and to what extent they are plugged in and asked to do specific tasks within that overall programme. Is there a proper connection?

Sir Mark Walport: I think so. The horizon scanning centre has been working with a number of Departments and the advisory committees around horizon scanning. There is no question that the profile of horizon scanning across Government is going up at the moment. I am working closely with John Day on Government oversight of horizon scanning. Yes is the answer. Defence has done horizon scanning very well for a long time.

Q58 Mr Heath: Is the connection direct, or is the question asked of the scientific adviser to the Department and it is only by peer review of his or her work?

Sir Mark Walport: It is a process of diffusion rather than diktat, but there is no question that horizon scanning has a much higher profile across Government. That will reflect itself over time in the work of the advisory councils.

Q59 Mr Heath: The obvious thing to do now is to ask Professor Gilligan and Professor Iversen whether they feel plugged into that process, and what their contribution is.

Professor Gilligan: We do feel plugged into that process. We undertake horizon scanning, both formally and informally, on the science advisory council, by which I mean we have clear items on our agenda where we look at that. We also have working dinners where we look at horizon scanning. We look too, at the national risk register, for example. The response of DEFRA and the science advisory council to the recent request from the Treasury—this is a different aspect—in terms of models and their use, involved myself, the chair of the economic advisory panel and the chair of the DECC/DEFRA social science advisory panel running, with the staff of DEFRA, several workshops on the use of models across the whole field within DEFRA.

Q60 Mr Heath: Are you a member of the so-called community of interest? Am I using the right term?

Sir Mark Walport: The community of interest is for officials within Government.

Professor Gilligan: That was why I looked blankly.

Sir Mark Walport: To expand my answer, the horizon scanning centre presented to DEFRA's air quality expert group and ran a workshop for the hazardous substances advisory committee. There was work with DFT. Over the last year, the horizon scanning centre has supported DEFRA, MOD, Home Office, Cabinet Office, BIS, the Department for Work and Pensions and HMRC. We are working across Government, and it is increasingly joined up.

Q61 Mr Heath: Professor Iversen, do you feel plugged into this?

Professor Iversen: Very much so. The novel psychoactive substances, which remain high on our agenda, are a constantly changing scene. New substances emerge all the time. We are often asked to give advice on a substance that has only been around for 18 months, and it is very hard to do. The Home Office has what is called a forensic early warning system, which is admirable, and we make good use of that. It is a team of expert chemists who work out how to analyse the very complex drug molecules that are emerging. They also go to music festivals and pick up the discards.

Mr Heath: A fun job.

Professor Iversen: They buy from web dealers and so on, and let us know the results. Within a week of Glastonbury last summer I had on my screen the components that had been detected.

Q62 Mr Heath: You would be very welcome in my constituency.

Sir Mark Walport: It is a variation of horizon scanning.

Professor Iversen: It is very much part of our job.

Professor Gilligan: From the recent task force on tree health and plant biosecurity, which I happened to chair—it reported to SAC, among other areas—for the first time we now have a prioritised risk register for plant diseases for the UK. That is feeding into the review of plant and animal diseases.

Q63 David Tredinnick: Sir Mark, in his final evidence session with us, Sir John Beddington said that the science and engineering assurance reviews were moving on to a new stage. He said, “We have a problem that I have characterised as the Forth road bridge. By the time you finish one”—of these reviews—“you need to start on the other.” What are your plans for the next phase of the science and engineering assurance programme?

Sir Mark Walport: It is to take the different approach that I set out before, which is not continually to apply new coats of paint but to do a risk assessment on the structure, and focus on those parts of it that present weaknesses. That is why we are doing bespoke reviews of Departments. I have already cited two activities: one is the review, which we have just been discussing, by me and Ian Boyd of evidence-based sources, and the other is the specific review Sir Alan Wilson has done of DSAC. We are moving from a thin coat of paint over the whole thing to focusing on individual parts of the superstructure.

Q64 David Tredinnick: Listening to what you are saying, is it right to say that future reviews will include consideration of the work of a Department’s science advisory councils and committees?

Sir Mark Walport: Yes. As I said, we will conduct bespoke reviews looking at where we think the issues are. In some cases we will look at councils. I have strong relationships with the majority of the council chairs. As I said earlier, the most important thing is making sure that, as far as possible, they have the right people.

Q65 David Tredinnick: When do you expect the next phase of the programme to begin?

Sir Mark Walport: Like painting the Forth road bridge—I will use that metaphor again—I do not think it will ever finish; it is a continuous process of raising the game.

Professor Gilligan: Where a council is an NDPB, as is the DEFRA science advisory council, there is a triennial review, which is happening now.

Mr Heath: Chair, on a point of order, we need to correct the record. It is in all our reports. It is the Forth rail bridge that is constantly being painted, not the Forth road bridge. It is making me upset. I'm a pedant.

Q66 Chair: Sir Mark, before we finish, perhaps I may return to DCMS. I suppose most people would instantly think, "Why do they need science advice?" until you look at sport, sport science, conservation, crowd control, radio spectrum and all the major science issues that are their area of responsibility. Setting up a relevant body and recruiting the right person as chief scientist is quite challenging. How are you going to solve that?

Sir Mark Walport: You raise a very important point, which is why one size does not fit all. I would add to that heritage science and our national museums, some of which, such as the Natural History museum, conduct important research as well. It is very heterogeneous, and almost certainly a fairly broad advisory council would be needed to cover that diverse range of activities. At some level it is the same problem as for the Department of Health—the breadth is very great. It is about identifying individuals who have eclectic interests and are able to contribute over that wide range of activities. Some of the advice always has to be bespoke; it has to be on specific topics. Professor Bernard Silverman is conducting a review with the permanent secretary, Sue Owen, and I look forward to white smoke emerging in due course.

Q67 Chair: How long is due course?

Sir Mark Walport: I cannot answer that now, but this side of the recess, I hope.

Chair: Gentlemen, thank you very much for your attendance this morning. It has been extremely interesting.