HOUSE OF COMMONS

Science and Technology Committee

Oral evidence: GO-Science Annual Report 2013-14, HC 641

Monday 10 November 2014

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Andrew Miller (Chair); Jim Dowd; Stephen Mosley; Pamela Nash

Questions 1-75

Witness: **Professor Sir Mark Walport,** Chief Scientific Adviser, HM Government, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Sir Mark, welcome to the Committee for the third or fourth time, I think. I have already forgotten. You have now been a year in office.

Sir Mark Walport: It is a year and a half.

Q2 Chair: What do you think have been your three principal achievements?

Sir Mark Walport: That is an interesting question. Probably the first one is providing advice to the Government in two very different consecutive emergencies. On flooding, when SAGE was convened, we organised an independent peer review of the response, which was very positive and helpful. We had Dutch hydrologists and an American engineer. I am now very busy on the Ebola crisis.

The second area is our work on horizon scanning, where we have broadened out. We are now working in very close collaboration, essentially as a single unit, with the horizon scanning team in the Cabinet Office. That is working extremely well. We are conducting some major projects, particularly on future cities and on ageing.

I suppose the third area would be around the CST work, where the letter to the Prime Minister on algorithms resulted in the creation of the Alan Turing Institute, which is being implemented at the moment, following the announcement of £42 million of funding by the Government. I would pick those three areas.

Q3 Chair: You mentioned CST. I understand that the triennial review has just been published.

Sir Mark Walport: It has literally just been published.

Q4 Chair: Can you tell us very briefly the highlights?

Sir Mark Walport: The first recommendation was that CST "is providing a valuable and valued input and should continue to exist as an advisory NDPB." There is a recommendation that the terms of reference should be revised "to refer explicitly to its provision of independent advice, and aligned with the role it has been playing", which I think is not a change in our role but a change in our terms of reference to reflect what we are actually doing. It was suggested that the CST "should not increase further in size. However, the introduction of greater business representation has been well received and could be further enhanced." In fact I have to confess that I think we have increased it by one member. We made five new appointments to the CST, following the departure of four members last year. They are excellent members: Professor Philip Bond, a computer scientist; Anne Glover, chief executive of Amadeus Capital; Sarah Harper, professor of gerontology at Oxford; Dervilla Mitchell, a director of Arup; and Fiona Murray, professor of entrepreneurship at MIT.

The fourth recommendation was to "create a systematic approach to allow Ministers, Departmental CSAs and senior policy officials to propose issues for CST to consider. Whether the CST takes them forward would remain at its discretion as now." We welcome the recommendation, and actually we meet regularly permanent secretaries and departmental CSAs as part of our meetings.

The fifth one is that the CST "should routinely follow up with policy officials and Ministers if necessary on the implementation of their reports." Again we welcome that, and we do. The CST should increase the transparency of our work programme "where it can do so without jeopardising its ability to give rapid independent advice, to enable those who may wish to contribute to projects and/or disseminate the findings to do so more effectively. This would enable the CST to harness the willingness of other organisations to act as a multiplier for its work." Frankly, this is what we have been doing. In particular, we work with the national academies—for example, the Royal Academy of Engineering on energy projects—and with Professor David Baulcombe on GM.

Finally, we are asked to consider how more attention could be brought to our reports, bearing in mind current resourcing levels. Those were the seven recommendations.

Q5 Chair: No doubt we will come back to you about that in due course. Changing the subject, how long has the vacancy for the CSA in Transport existed, and why were proper succession arrangements not in place to avoid a gap?

Sir Mark Walport: The incumbent left slightly earlier than he might have done. I need notice to answer precisely about the vacancy, but it has been there for about six or seven months. It may be longer, but it is of that order. Since then we have been working extremely hard on refining the job description. We had a seminar in the Department for Transport attended by the permanent secretary, with Robert Mair as an independent and Frank Kelly, who was a previous CSA, so we had a good session to define the important research questions. The advert will be coming out very soon, so there has been due progess.

Q6 Chair: Would you agree that in future we ought to strive for succession arrangements that are planned a bit more effectively?

Sir Mark Walport: I think so, but when people leave early it is not always predictable. The previous CSA did not stay his full term.

Q7 Chair: Another subject that comes indirectly under your bailiwick is the whole place of national institutions, and those at arm's length from NERC and so on. Clearly, they are valued institutions, some of which have commercial potential and some do not. What do you see the future of those being?

Sir Mark Walport: As you know, Chair, the future of organisations such as the British Geological Survey and NOC—the National Oceanography Centre—are under review at the moment. As I think I have said here before, form should follow function and not the other way round. There is no absolutely right structure, but it is right that the review is occurring. From my perspective, it is absolutely critical that these organisations need to be able to provide the advice to Government that they need. For example, the British Geological Survey's work was indispensable during the flooding, as was the work of the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology. My role is to ensure that at the end of the review process, whatever it is, the Government are still getting the advice they need.

Q8 Chair: While there might be aspects where you can see a commercial application—

Sir Mark Walport: They need the freedom to be able to deliver the best they possibly can for the country, and that involves the potential for them to do some commercial work. From my perspective, the critical thing is that the Government continue to receive the advice that they need in the domains over which they have expertise.

Q9 Chair: Whatever decision is taken, you see that as an essential prerequisite.

Sir Mark Walport: Yes, I do see it as an essential prerequisite, and the Government do too.

Q10 Chair: According to the GO-Science annual report, the programme spend fell from £2.6 million to £1.7 million last year. Did you defer any programmes when you took over from your predecessor?

Sir Mark Walport: No. I knew this question was coming, but I think you are getting more for less. My perspective is that we are working extremely hard at the moment; we are getting a lot of the outside scientific community to do work for us pro bono.

Q11 Chair: The annual report says "as a result of a project being deferred to reflect new priorities of the incoming GCSA".

Sir Mark Walport: This was not a specific project that had been identified. There was money for a project that had not been pre-identified when I arrived.

Q12 Chair: So it was a sum of money that was up there.

Sir Mark Walport: Yes, absolutely. No specific project was identified and cancelled. Indeed, I do not honestly think that we could work any harder than we are at the moment.

Q13 Jim Dowd: If we can get more for less, how much more can we get for nothing?

Sir Mark Walport: You get nothing for nothing.

Q14 Jim Dowd: There is a crossover point that we'll need to examine.

Sir Mark Walport: There is.

Q15 Jim Dowd: Can I look briefly at the role of departmental CSAs? What role, if any, did you play in the recruitment of the CSA to the Department for Education?

Sir Mark Walport: I was on the appointment panel.

Q16 Jim Dowd: Just on the panel.

***Sir Mark Walport*:** And I was involved in the pre-discussions.

Q17 Jim Dowd: And short-listing.

Sir Mark Walport: Yes.

Q18 Jim Dowd: In your view, should CSAs be independent of the Department or should they simply be a mirror of departmental priorities and policies?

Sir Mark Walport: They clearly need the independence to do the CSA role. That does not mean that they cannot have another role in the Department. In the case of Tim Leunig, when he was appointed he had two additional roles; he was a ministerial adviser and a chief analyst, but he has given up the role as ministerial adviser, and I think it is entirely compatible that the chief scientist should have an analytical role in the Department.

Q19 Jim Dowd: Is somebody else now performing the role of ministerial adviser?

Sir Mark Walport: You are seeing Tim Leunig in a minute. I do not know the answer to that.

Q20 Jim Dowd: If somebody is involved in the formulation of policy, it is very difficult for them to be an objective monitor of it.

Sir Mark Walport: Being an analyst is part of the key work that a scientific adviser should legitimately be involved with. Analysis and policy formation are not exactly the same thing, so I do not see a conflict of interest there. As I say, he is here so he will be able to answer all these questions.

Q21 Jim Dowd: Indeed, but as somebody who was involved in the appointment I am trying to get your view on that, and what you had in mind when he was appointed.

Sir Mark Walport: My view is that it is entirely satisfactory to have the role of an analyst and chief scientist in the one person. It was acknowledged, I think, that being a ministerial adviser as well was not appropriate, so he has given up that role.

Q22 Jim Dowd: The logical extension of that is that you do not think they should speak on behalf of the Government.

Sir Mark Walport: The job of the chief scientist is to provide advice on all aspects of science as it affects the Department.

Q23 Jim Dowd: I accept that, but what if they reach a point where they cannot agree on the science and they are in conflict, rather like the position of the chief medical officer a few years ago over the smoking ban?

Sir Mark Walport: The answer is that from time to time CSAs may not be in personal agreement with the policy as it is taken up. Our job is as civil servants, so we would not be publicly critical of the Government, but part of the job of the chief scientist is to speak truth to power. There may be frequent occasions when a chief scientist ultimately does not agree personally with a policy position, but the other point I have always made clear is that science is one of the lenses through which policy makers make policy. There are other lenses as well. It would be a brave person who, given advice that a volcanic ash cloud was likely to turn off jet engines, did not take that advice, but there are other circumstances when, as we know, the science is part of the advice, and that is something we have discussed here before.

Q24 Pamela Nash: At an earlier appearance before this Committee you indicated to us that DCMS was at that time reviewing their scientific capacity. Could you update us on that?

Sir Mark Walport: Yes. Progress is slow, but there is progress. There is one specific area of their work, which is around telecommunications and spectrum, where they recognise that they need more scientific input, and they are creating a scientific advisory committee to deal with that. They are still considering the role of the individual chief scientist.

Q25 Chair: Is that free-standing—just dealing with DCMS issues—or will it cover spectrum in its broader sense?

Sir Mark Walport: It would cover it from a DCMS perspective, but DCMS have responsibility for quite a lot of that.

Q26 Chair: So would the MOD, of course.

Sir Mark Walport: Yes. That committee probably would not have a specific remit for the MOD.

Q27 Pamela Nash: To be clear, the review you referred to previously has not yet been concluded.

Sir Mark Walport: The review has been concluded, and the Department is still considering its response to it.

Q28 Pamela Nash: Has that review been made public?

Sir Mark Walport: No. I am not sure that it was a formal review with a formal written report, but I have regular meetings with Sue Owen, the permanent secretary, on this subject, and she knows that I am keen that there should be a chief scientist.

Q29 Pamela Nash: There are no plans to put the findings of that review in the public domain.

Sir Mark Walport: I think it is for that Department to decide what to do with it.

Q30 Pamela Nash: But as far as you are aware—I am not asking your opinion—that is not the plan.

Sir Mark Walport: The answer is that I do not know.

Q31 Pamela Nash: Our understanding is that a principal scientific adviser or officer has already been appointed within the Department. Is that right?

Sir Mark Walport: No. They have been doing some informal work with Professor Bernard Silverman, the CSA at the Home Office, and he has been providing support.

Q32 Pamela Nash: I should have said "scientific officer", not CSA. Has a scientific officer been appointed?

Sir Mark Walport: I am not sure of the answer to that.

Q33 Pamela Nash: It is our understanding that the scientific officer has been asked to set up a committee to assess whether it is within a Department's requirements to have a CSA. Is it

your understanding that there is going to be another review within the Department to look at the possibility of a chief scientific adviser?

Sir Mark Walport: The DCMS are basically still assessing the feasibility of a CSA for the Department.

Q34 Chair: Feasibility or necessity.

Sir Mark Walport: I think it is a necessity, but you would need to ask the permanent secretary.

Q35 Chair: It is the chief scientist's view that it is a necessity.

Sir Mark Walport: It is the chief scientist's view, as you know, that all Departments ideally should have a chief scientific adviser, but ultimately it is not something that I have authority over.

Q36 Pamela Nash: I take it that you probably share my view that yet another review is not required.

Sir Mark Walport: I think it is appropriate—that was why I supported the Department for Transport—that when there is an interim period, for whatever reason, it is a good thing to look at the key issues facing the Department in order to try to get the job description right. One size does not fit all. One of the challenges for DCMS is the enormous breadth of the areas it covers—everything from conservation science to telecommunications. Whether you can encapsulate that in one individual is an interesting question.

Q37 Pamela Nash: I appreciate that, but that is quite different from saying whether there should be a chief scientific adviser.

Sir Mark Walport: It is my view that there should be a chief scientist. You may want to quiz the permanent secretary.

Chair: We might just do that.

Q38 Stephen Mosley: When we saw you in April you told us that you had introduced a new system for reviewing departmental use of scientific evidence. You described it in terms of the Forth rail bridge—instead of covering it all over with a thin coat of paint, you were going to focus on specific key parts of the infrastructure. How do you go about identifying the key areas to look at?

Sir Mark Walport: Ian Boyd, the chief scientist at DEFRA, and I have been doing a review over the last few months of scientific evidence and its availability to DEFRA, because that is obviously an important area. We have done a review, which is reaching its end and should be published, I hope, some time in the next month or so.

Q39 Stephen Mosley: When we saw you in April you told us that it would be reporting some time in the summer.

Sir Mark Walport: It is an extended summer—the autumn.

Chair: Global warming.

Q40 Stephen Mosley: That work is ongoing.

Sir Mark Walport: It is virtually completed.

Q41 Stephen Mosley: I was going to ask you a bit more about that and about the outcome. Is there anything you can tell us about how the review has been progressing?

Sir Mark Walport: The review is virtually complete. I do not think it would be appropriate for me to tell you all the conclusions before it is published. Let's just say that I think every organisation can raise its game, and there is probably a role for greater co-ordination of the advice that comes to DEFRA.

Q42 Stephen Mosley: I can understand your position—not wanting to go too much into the details—but, from a systematic point of view, is there anything you have learned that might be relevant across other Departments?

Sir Mark Walport: I think each Department is sui generis. What I learned was that it was an appropriate approach—that doing exactly the same review of each Department is not appropriate. You need to look at the questions and the issues they face and work out how they are getting the best advice, and whether they are using it most effectively.

Q43 Stephen Mosley: When we saw you in April you said that you were doing the DEFRA one and you were also doing a review of the Defence Science Advisory Council. What projects do you have coming forward in the pipeline?

Sir Mark Walport: I am continuing to work with Defence. I have not worked out which Department for sure we are going to do next.

Q44 Stephen Mosley: When we were investigating Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, GO-Science told us that the Department of Health's Rapid Review Panel was an SAC. When the Government came to respond to our inquiry they turned round and said it was not an SAC. Is it or isn't it?

Sir Mark Walport: The short answer is that the Department of Health do not believe it is an SAC. It is a rapid review panel, as you know, and some of the things they consider are commercially sensitive, so they behave in a slightly different way. As we have also discussed in the past, I do not think there is a single size that fits all, but the Department of Health have themselves changed their mind about the taxonomy of this particular committee, and who am I to argue with them? They say it is not an SAC, but it does abide

by the general principles. I understand they are following the principles of scientific advice of the Government and the code of practice as closely as possible, but their argument is that for reasons of commercial confidentiality they cannot publish all the details of their work.

Q45 Stephen Mosley: Who is responsible for the overview of the operation of the scientific advisory committees and the quasi-committees that exist?

Sir Mark Walport: Ultimately, each Department has responsibility and accountability for doing that. I maintain an oversight, but I do not have either statutory or administrative authority over them. I meet the chairs of scientific advisory committees approximately twice a year. You have had a list of them before. It is a very large list. Some of them are highly technical—for example, providing advice on fitness to drive. There is no single size or definition of what a scientific advisory committee is. This one, because of the argument about commercial confidentiality, does not publish all its work. They have decided that it does not quite fit the category, and I have to accept their view.

Q46 Stephen Mosley: The SACs are all meant to be compliant with the code of practice.

Sir Mark Walport: Yes.

Q47 Stephen Mosley: It sounds a bit of a cop-out if you are saying that, if they are not complying with the code of practice, they are not actually an SAC. Who is responsible for making sure that they are?

Sir Mark Walport: I do not think there is any biblical authority that decides whether or not something is an SAC. These are questions that I have to take DH's advice on, and again this would be something you could explore with the Department.

Q48 Stephen Mosley: You are confident that all the ones you recognise as SACs are compliant.

Sir Mark Walport: I expect that SACs will follow the code, and the very fact that this one does not follow the code means that the Department of Health have reviewed it and decided that it does not fit the criteria.

Q49 Chair: You said earlier that science is merely one of the lenses that policy makers need to look through. That is undoubtedly the case. Do you think that current drug policy has looked sufficiently through the lens of the science?

Sir Mark Walport: As we have discussed before, the current drugs policy is one where there is a protocol when the Minister disagrees with the committee, and the protocol was followed rather strictly with khat. It is quite clear that drug policy is one where science is important, but there are other factors—it bears on criminal justice and other issues as well—so politicians will inevitably take a view through other lenses. I would not use the

expression "merely one of the lenses"; it is one of the important lenses, but it is not the only lens, and there is a protocol that has worked recently around drug legislation.

Q50 Chair: I very much agree with you in terms of the example you give—the letter Theresa May published on khat. I have said publicly that I think that was an exemplar of how a Minister should handle these situations.

Sir Mark Walport: I agree.

Q51 Chair: What involvement have you had, along with the relevant departmental CSAs, in developing the policy approach in this field?

Sir Mark Walport: I think the policy approach was agreed before I took up the post, but I was involved in ensuring that the policy was followed when the issue of khat was discussed, working in support of and in partnership with Bernard Silverman, the Home Office CSA. As I think you know, two new reports have been published on the Home Office website: one a review of the evidence on new psychoactive substances in England, and the second one on international comparators. The Home Office are doing quite careful work looking at this and they are publishing what they found.

Q52 Chair: On the report on psychoactive substances, why was it necessary to convene a separate panel rather than the existing advisory committee?

Sir Mark Walport: I do not know because I was not involved in that, but I think it was looking at it in a slightly narrower way than the ACMD does in general. The ACMD is very broadly constituted, and this was a slightly narrower expert panel looking specifically at new psychoactive substances, which requires quite a lot of additional specialist expertise.

Q53 Chair: As this evolves, because of the seemingly different approach that has been adopted, from the outside it has a tendency to be an example of policy being determined first rather than a serious search for the evidence.

Sir Mark Walport: I do not think that is a fair conclusion. This is a review of the evidence. It is from two people from the policing analysis unit. I have not read more than the executive summary, which I have here. It seems to me to be a careful piece of work.

Q54 Jim Dowd: The innovation you have announced is the themed report which, coincidentally, is to be on risk and innovation. First, how far away is it?

Sir Mark Walport: It should be published within the next two weeks, so it is imminent.

Q55 Jim Dowd: When you decided to move to an annual themed report how does it differ from other reports produced occasionally, whether annually or not, by the Government Office for Science?

Sir Mark Walport: It is not something the Government Office for Science has done, and, frankly, it is taking an idea that our chief medical officer, Dame Sally Davies, has implemented extremely effectively. She has responsibility for a statutory health of the nation report. I produce this, which is a dryish account of all of the work we do, but it seemed there was also an opportunity to take on a theme and attack it in some depth. I have used a very similar methodology to the one Sally Davies used, which is to assemble a group of experts to work with. We have held a number of seminars to scope out the project itself. They have contributed chapters, and Claire Craig, my deputy, and I have written an overarching summary chapter which contains recommendations. The topic, which is around innovation and risk, is one that I have encountered from virtually the first day I started the job. Many of the issues that policy makers face are around innovation. Sometimes innovation is viewed as something that increases risk, whereas we need innovation to reduce risk in many of our activities. The sorts of issues I have had to deal with—genetically modified organisms, neonicotinoid pesticides, flooding—raise issues about how we manage and assess risk, and that has formed the basis of the report.

Q56 Jim Dowd: Indeed, you mentioned it to the Committee on a previous occasion; I think you said we live in a world where there is danger of being regulated by hazard rather than risk. It is obviously an issue about which you have strong feelings, and, as you say, something you encountered from day one. Is that why you chose this particular topic?

Sir Mark Walport: Yes, because I think it is extremely important. It is important economically. It is important for how we work in Europe. Many scientific issues arise around risk. I spent a lot of my time working on, for example, the national risk assessment, so it is an important topic. As part of the work, we have also held international seminars. We have had seminars in Paris, Berlin, and Copenhagen. I was on a trip to Brazil working for the Newton Fund and we did one there, so we have done a lot of international work around this as well.

Q57 Jim Dowd: We have to wait a fortnight for the report to be produced, but I presume it will address the conflict between risk and the so-called precautionary principle.

Sir Mark Walport: The precautionary principle will be discussed.

Q58 Jim Dowd: What do you hope the report will achieve overall?

Sir Mark Walport: I hope that it will stimulate a clearer debate about risk, where we actually understand, because sometimes we have cross-conversations. Sometimes we are talking about scientific issues on the one hand and values on the other, so it is about clarity. We need to distinguish terms such as "risk", "hazard", "vulnerability", "uncertainty" and "threat". All of these are important terms that quite often are used rather loosely, so I hope it will encourage higher quality discussion and debate.

Jim Dowd: I look forward to it.

Q59 Pamela Nash: Recently, three projects have been announced by Foresight, including the future demographic of change. It is my understanding that the set-up of that project was slightly different from the others, and from other projects in the past. Could you explain those differences to the Committee?

Sir Mark Walport: I inherited a system in which Foresight projects typically took about 18 months to do. There was another variant of Foresight horizon scanning, called Blackett reviews, named after Patrick Blackett, Lord Blackett, who founded operational research during the last war. Those are shorter; we are basically introducing much more flexibility. The demography report was a relatively short piece of work. I hope that it will be published as part of the suite of reviews that have been done between us and the Cabinet Office jointly. The work was done in close collaboration with the ONS. It is a fairly brief report and is about the thickness of this.

Q60 Pamela Nash: Is the intention that future projects will follow this model?

Sir Mark Walport: There is no one size fits all. The important thing is that they have as much impact as possible. Another piece of work we have done—again, it will probably come out at about the time of the autumn statement—is the report on the internet of things. That was commissioned by the Prime Minister at the CeBIT fair at Hanover in March. It will be a relatively short report but with important recommendations in it. We are just starting a piece of work on financial technologies at the request of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

The answer is that sometimes we do long pieces of work, sometimes shorter ones. Even the longer ones we do in slightly different ways. For example, we have already published a lot of the outputs from the future cities project, and we are starting to publish the outputs of the ageing project. We have a much more open process in doing them as well. For the cities, we held seminars in about 15 cities around the UK. These in turn stimulated a number of Foresight projects in individual cities. For the ageing work, we had two seminars recently in Sunderland, one with an expert on a particular set of concerns around housing, pensions, age of retirement and those issues, and the other, in an afternoon session, with people who had experience of ageing. They were more concerned with the personal experience of ageing, and again we are publishing reports of that. We commissioned three papers, and all of that will be published in the next few weeks.

Q61 Chair: Can we have your explanations for the difference between a Foresight report and a horizon scanning programme report? Are they the same thing? If there is a difference, what is it?

Sir Mark Walport: I cannot remember whether or not I said it to this Committee, but the metaphor I use is bird watching. Horizon scanning is scanning the horizon with a pair of binoculars. From time to time you see something interesting. You see a little brown bird there, at which point you get out a telescope to look at it in detail. That is Foresight. I think horizon scanning projects tend to be quite broad; Foresight projects tend to be a bit more detailed, so one is looking through binoculars, the other through a telescope. I am not sure it is a metaphor that works, but it seemed to me to be a suitable explanation.

Chair: It might come back and haunt you.

Q62 Pamela Nash: Following on from that, can I ask how your work and your relationship with the Cabinet Office has changed with the appointment of the new Minister, with his background and views?

Sir Mark Walport: Do you mean the Science Minister?

Pamela Nash: Yes.

Sir Mark Walport: I do not think it has changed. I would say that overall the relationship between the Government Office for Science and the Cabinet Office has got stronger and stronger. I started with a very close working relationship with the Cabinet Secretary, to whom I report, as well as the Prime Minister. Our relations are closer and closer, because horizon scanning is now done as a joint piece of work. The new Science Minister continues his responsibility for cities, and he is indeed the sponsoring Minister for the future of cities project. We had already worked with him closely, and I continue to work very closely with the new Science Minister. I would say relations are strengthening all the time.

Q63 Pamela Nash: Is there still room for improvement? You will be aware that it was a recommendation of this Committee that GO-Science be put into the Cabinet Office. That did not happen, but other changes have been made.

Sir Mark Walport: It goes back to the form and function question. It is for others to judge, but I believe the function of the Government Office for Science is effective. I believe we work very effectively across Government. I hope that it is a sign of the usefulness of the work we do inside Government that others want to work more closely with us. We do more with the Cabinet Office, but it has always been a good relationship. I think it is six of one and half a dozen of the other. Being closer to the Science Minister and the research and innovation base is useful on a day-to-day basis, and it isn't exactly far to walk round the corner to the Cabinet Office.

Q64 Chair: When is your next meeting with the Prime Minister?

Sir Mark Walport: My next meeting will be tomorrow morning, because he is chairing Cobra. I have seen him three times this year directly—twice in one-to-ones and in a meeting of CST—and I see him regularly at other meetings.

Q65 Chair: In your annual report there is no mention of the What Works network, which was set up last year. What has been GO-Science's involvement in that initiative?

Sir Mark Walport: We work closely with them. Claire Craig, my deputy, attends the What Works Advisory Council of the What Works centres. I see David Halpern regularly. We are working with them in particular on the Future of Ageing project, so for reasons you will appreciate I am strongly supportive of a series of What Works centres that look at evidence; so GO-Science has a strong relationship with them.

Q66 Chair: Why is this initiative led by the Cabinet Office when responsibilities for ensuring Government policies are informed by evidence rest with GO-Science?

Sir Mark Walport: The progenitor of the What Works centres is NICE, which is in the Department of Health. It makes sense for the evidence centres to be allied with the key delivery partners.

Q67 Chair: Does that mean it could be anywhere?

Sir Mark Walport: The short answer is that it goes back to the form and function question again. As long as they function well and are well led, I do not think there is any particular reason they should be in any single locus. I am satisfied that they are doing well. Increasingly, they have a relationship with the parent Department, which is the most important thing. In a minute you can ask Tim Leunig about education, for example, where there is a What Works centre, and it makes sense for that to be strongly associated with DFE.

Q68 Chair: You say that the actual location does not matter. Does that apply to other bodies? I am reflecting on evidence from John Day in the work we did on horizon scanning. He was very clear that he still has concerns about the silo mentality of the Government machine.

Sir Mark Walport: But the important thing is that it has impact in the Departments that have the policy responsibilities. One of the things John and I are doing is making sure—as part of our horizon scanning work, a lot of which we chair jointly, or we take it in turns—that we have very good representation from the relevant Government Departments. One of the things we are doing around the future cities project, for example, is that I go to a departmental directors' meeting which brings together all the Departments that have an interest in cities, which as you can imagine is most of them. Similarly, we have set up a group around ageing, because it is very important that we connect the work of horizon scanning to the individual Government Departments. Whether it is in the Cabinet Office or GO-Science I do not think is material. What I think would be much more material is if the work was located there and did not have a transmission mechanism to the Departments that need the evidence.

Q69 Chair: In the two examples you have just given, how do you take into account the different national assemblies, and the regions of England as well?

Sir Mark Walport: In the case of both pieces of work, we are taking that into account by travelling to those parts of the country and having meetings. For example, on cities we had seminars in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Cardiff.

Q70 Chair: In a conversation I had with Greg Clark, he was very clear about how he saw the synergy between the cities project, for which he is responsible, and his new function. That

is going to put considerable pressure on the GO-Science machinery if it is to help deliver a more effective devolved mechanism. Do you have resources to do that?

Sir Mark Walport: We are working very—

Q71 Chair: You recognise that there is a problem.

Sir Mark Walport: I do not think it is a problem, but the opportunity cost of doing a lot of work outside London is significant for both me and my team. On the other hand, it also offers an opportunity for a much broader conversation and scientific leadership from the Government Office for Science.

There is one other thing I might have said in my three things at the beginning. One of the other things we are doing is to start this year a Government science and engineering fast stream. In fact, we are really relaunching it. I am conscious that we do not have as many scientific, engineering and technology-trained civil servants as we might.

Q72 Chair: That is something of an understatement, isn't it?

Sir Mark Walport: Well—yes. We have relaunched that, and the applications have just closed for this year. One of the things I have been doing while I have been out and about is to give, effectively, career talks on the opportunities for scientists in the civil service. The cup three-quarters full version is that there are at least 12,000 to 13,000-plus scientists employed in and by Government, many in specialist agencies, organisations like Public Health England, Dstl, GCHQ and CAST, the Home Office Department. There are an awful lot of world-class scientists employed by Government, but part of my role is to increase their voice in terms of the different policy issues that relevant Departments face.

Q73 Chair: At the delivery end.

Sir Mark Walport: Yes, but getting out of London and getting around the country and advertising what Government do in science is another important part of my role. Whether it has been an ageing seminar or a cities seminar, the opportunity has always been taken. Last year, as you know, I did a series of talks around the country on climate change. We manage to package quite a lot together during trips out of London, and I think it is a good thing to do. Is it a significant work load for my team? It is, and it refers to your question about whether you can get everything for nothing. The answer is no.

Q74 Jim Dowd: You said—the Chair agreed with you—that there is a dearth of scientists and technologists in Government generally and in the civil service. Is that not because Government employment packages just do not appeal in the way either the groves of academe do, or the commercial sector?

Sir Mark Walport: I am not sure it is as simple as that; 12,000 or 13,000 is not a trivial number. There are an awful lot of scientists working as scientists for Government, and they are doing fascinating jobs—really fascinating jobs. It is not as well known as it might be that there are opportunities out there.

Q75 Jim Dowd: Are you including those involved in research?

Sir Mark Walport: Absolutely. In organisations like Dstl a lot of what they do is R and D. It is not basic science; it is applied science, but a lot of applied science is done in Government-funded organisations. The National Institute for Biological Standards and Control would be another example where scientists are employed on applied work. Their work is important policy. I do not want to give the impression that there are no scientists employed by Government because there are quite a lot.

Chair: Sir Mark, thank you very much for your time this afternoon. That was extremely interesting. We have covered a number of issues on which we may well come back to you in due course. Thank you very much for your attendance.