

Science Advice Mechanism must bring the right people together

The European Academies Science Advisory Council aims to bridge the gap between scientists and policymakers by addressing policy questions with a substantial science component in a way that is understandable and accessible to policymakers. Since its inception in 2001, Easac has provided this service for the European Parliament and the European Commission, and has been particularly successful at providing long-term advice without being restricted by political, ideological or commercial interests.

In December 2011, when Anne Glover was appointed chief scientific adviser (CSA) to the president of the Commission, Easac saw an opportunity to improve its engagement with the Commission, which can be a complex and opaque body even for those who work there, let alone for scientists seeking to provide policy advice. Although Commission officials were always receptive to independent evidence, it was often difficult to identify and contact the right people, especially in relation to complex files involving different departments.

On the question of biofuels, for instance, we discovered that we needed to talk not only to the Directorates-General for Energy and for Climate Action, but also to those for the Environment and for Agriculture and Rural Development. This was a complex and time-consuming process.

As CSA, Glover was able to open some doors for Easac, helping to facilitate interactions that had been difficult to establish. She also helped to promote our work, increasing the uptake of our advice in the Commission and making us more visible, both there and to the wider public. On top of this, she offered intelligence on upcoming priorities.

So when the CSA post was abolished in November, we were disappointed. The debate that has followed, though, on how to institutionalise scientific evidence for policy, has offered hope for the future.

In May, the Commission announced that the CSA post would be replaced with a Science Advice Mechanism consisting of seven high-level advisers and dedicated support staff. Last week, the members of the three-person panel who will help to appoint the seven advisers were announced.

This shows that the Commission does indeed take evidence for policy seriously and intends to professionalise the ways in which it procures such evidence. Easac is

open to this new approach and happy to work with the new mechanism—but there are still many questions and details to work out.

The best role for the high-level group and its secretariat would be as a link between the Commission's services and the various evidence providers. While it is difficult for scientists to find their way in the complex policy environment, it can be equally difficult for policymakers to identify those scientists who have the right expertise and scientific credibility.

The group's job should be to facilitate this process by linking the right people to each other. To achieve this, it will need staff who are well connected to different Commission services and to the wider scientific community. It will need not just scientific experts but experts on the mechanisms for providing evidence for policy and on the dialogue between science and policy.

The Commission already has a wealth of evidence and evidence-gathering procedures. The high-level group must be careful not to weaken or confuse what is already there, but to add to and improve it where necessary. Particularly important will be the group's relationship with the Joint Research Centre—a long-term Easac collaborator—which offers scientific evidence in many areas and has excellent links with academies and other evidence providers.

What Easac and other evidence providers have been missing in their interaction with the Commission is feedback. We fully understand that, beyond the evidence, there is still a political debate to be had on most of the important policy issues and that, in a final legislative proposal, it is not always easy to see where the evidence has played a role and made a difference. However, regular feedback on how and by whom the scientific evidence is used would help us to focus on providing the most useful and relevant forms of evidence and advice in the future.

Easac welcomes the recent developments in science advice, and looks forward to being part of a new chapter in the development and realisation of evidence-based policy. We believe that the Commission has taken an important step in the right direction with this initiative, and we are ready to provide our full support to help make it a success.

Something to add? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

Sofie Vanthournout works for the European Academies Science Advisory Council (www.easac.eu) in Brussels.

'It's difficult for scientists to find their way in the complex policy environment, and for policymakers to identify the right scientists.'