

The Science Communication Conference
22nd – 23rd May 2003

Session 2 – Science in Society Consultation.

Chair: **Professor Robert Worcester, Chair of MORI:**

Dr. Barbara Knowles, Office of Science and Technology – Science in Society – the OST's Perspective:

Thank you. This is supposed to be a dialogue opportunity, and an opportunity for me to listen to you, so I'm definitely not going to talk for more than 15 minutes and give you plenty of opportunity for you to give us some feedback. As Bob was just describing, this session has been conceived as an opportunity for you to contribute to a consultation that OST is carrying out which I will give you some background to in a moment. But I thought before I did that, it might be useful to give you a bit of background on why it is that the government is interested in this whole area of science in society, and what we are doing in OST.

I will start out with not an exhaustive list, but a summary of the various reasons why government might be interested in the whole issue of science in society. The government certainly has a huge interest in science because it recognises the benefits that science can bring to the economy, to people's quality of life, to science, to healthcare, to communications, and so on, and has been investing increasingly in scientific research. From this year, for the next three years, the research science budget will be increasing by 10% year on year, so within three years it will reach almost £3 billion. But the benefits of these investments in research will only be realised if some of the issues on my slide continue to be addressed and improved. So, in science education for example, it's recognised that the science education system should not only be educating the people who are going on to be the future scientists and engineers, but should equip all young people to become citizens in a scientific world.

The supply of scientists and engineers is absolutely vital, both for academia, for business and for industry. It is essential that knowledge gained from scientific

The Science Communication Conference
22nd – 23rd May 2003

research is transferred to industry and business and that innovation can flourish. It's important to government to get the governance of science and the scientific advisory system right. Obviously the government wants public confidence in those systems and recognises that in order to earn that confidence there needs to be more openness, more transparency and more inclusiveness.

The public awareness, public engagement, public dialogue in science is what I will go on to say a bit more about shortly. The final bullet points a cross-cutting issue for all of the above. It's important to increase the diversity in science and its governance. So that means diversity in the workforce, in the advisory systems and in engagement with science.

A quote from Lord Sainsbury. We heard earlier how the government is certainly using the rhetoric of dialogue, and I'm happy to discuss whether that rhetoric is backed-up in practice. But we know that the public is not anti-science. "In general, the UK public is very supportive of scientific research and recognises the benefits that it brings to the economy, healthcare and society, but we need today, in a period of rapid scientific advances, a more effective dialogue between scientists and the public".

Our name has recently changed. My team is now called the 'PEST' Team: Public Engagement with Science and Technology, and just for those of you who are not familiar with what we do I thought I'd just tell you quickly what we do. We are a team of three, the other two Rahimah and Paul are in the audience as well. Our aim is to improve mutual understanding between science, policy makers and the public, so there is a three-way process of communication that needs to go on through those three constituencies. Our external activities are mainly carried out through a £1.5 million programme budget, which we use to fund both directed and reactive grants and projects.

We for example provide core support for the British Association, for ECSITE-UK and for AlphaGalileo, and we offer small grants to science communicators

The Science Communication Conference
22nd – 23rd May 2003

through the Copus Grants Scheme. I recognise a number of you in the audience who have made good use of those grants.

So now to the subject of this afternoon's session: the consultation on what OST plans to do as a result of advice that it received from the British Association. The reason that we asked the British Association to give us advice in this area was to answer some very specific questions. What we did not ask them to do was to cover the entire range of science in society activities in the UK and in the government programme. We wanted to know how specifically OST could assess what is going on in the UK. We know there's a huge number of different organisations, bodies, individuals, now involved in science communication and in public engagement with science, in a whole range of different types of activity. We fund a small sub-set of that activity but we want to have a better picture of the entire range across the UK and how effective it is, both in terms of effectiveness in meeting the organisation's requirements, but also in meeting the public's needs.

We asked the BA to advise us also how we could best promote collaboration in this diverse and varied community and how we can disseminate best practice, and also how we can govern our own programme. So the British Association produced a report through a mechanism of consultation, which I know a number of you were involved in. That report and OST's response to it are both available on the website, and you have the details of those web addresses.

Dr. B.K: But I'm just going to quickly summarise what some of the activities are that OST proposes to do as a result of the BA's recommendations.

On your purple sheets you have a summary of the recommendations. I'm not going to talk about the detail of our response to that, I hope you've had the opportunity to look at that on the website. I'm happy to answer specific questions that you might have about it. But in general, what we are proposing to do is to carry out both a snapshot survey and a pilot database and website to

The Science Communication Conference
22nd – 23rd May 2003

gather information about what is going on across the UK, and what are the activities that all of you, and many others outside this room, are involved in to engage the public in science. We are proposing some national public survey work to better understand what the public needs, and we recognise that's not at all easy to answer that question, since there are not many expressed needs in this area. And a needs analysis to bring together results from these first two activities to find out where the gaps are, where there are overlaps or a great deal of activity. That will help both to inform OST where to direct its own funding, and hopefully inform many of you about where more activity might be needed.

We will carry out evaluations of some major activities. We are proposing to do a comparative evaluation as recommended by the BA of two exemplar activities with similar ambitions but rather different methodology: National Science week and the BA's own Annual Festival. We'd like some other ideas from you, either now in this room, or during the consultation, about whether there are other activities of similar scale, but carried out differently, that we could include in this comparative analysis.

We propose to carry out a media summary each year to reflect the fact that we know that most of the public get most of their information about science through the media. Although we are not monitoring media activity through the survey work we recognise that that is the background against which all the other science communication activities are carried on.

Dr. B.K: We will continue to support an Annual Conference of the sort that we are having here today. We propose to consolidate our grants scheme from two different funding modes to a single scheme and we will use ad-hoc advisory groups to advise us both on the results of this sort of activity and our own funding priorities.

The Science Communication Conference
22nd – 23rd May 2003

My last slide is on the proposed funding priorities, which is a specific sub-set of what we are consulting on. And I put that up as a specific area that I would welcome your views on, because that was not something that we asked the British Association to offer us advice on, so it has not already been subject to consultation.

If you think that these are completely the wrong areas for OST to be concentrating its funding on this is your opportunity to say so, and if you think there are areas that we could better be directing our money, we'd be really interested to hear what you think we should do instead. The science in society category would be for grants for public dialogue, engagement and consultation and particularly dialogue that feeds into and informs some decision-making process. We will continue to support grants which widen participation amongst groups of the public that are not normally represented in the traditional sorts of science communication activity. We want to fund collaboration and networking, building on what we already do in that area. We want to fund activities to identify good practice in science communication, and to support informed media coverage of science.

So I can flip you onto the summary slide of the BA's recommendations, or flip back to the specific funding areas if those are what you wish to focus on. I'm happy to answer questions, but I'd really prefer to do more listening than answering at this stage. So I'll hand over to Bob to chair that session.