

DIUS Science and Society Consultation

A vision for science and society

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Department's consultation into the strategy and priorities for its Science and Society programme. The vision for the strategy is to achieve a society that is excited by science; values its importance to our social and economic wellbeing; feels confident in its use, and supports a representative well-qualified scientific workforce.

We welcome the focus of the strategy on the role of Government in establishing well informed science policy, securing public support for science, and in establishing the skilled manpower base to enable the UK to address the crucial issues facing society today.

A definition of science

The Science Council has discussed the definition of science put forward within the strategy within our own project to establish a working definition of science. We believe that it is important to explain what we mean by 'science' and 'scientific methodology' alongside our policy work. We agreed that we would not define science by the content of the subject and that within every area of endeavour science could be practiced: it was scientific method that defined science across disciplines. The definition of science we have come to is:

Science is the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence.

Section 1: Our Challenge

One of the changes in this strategy, which we very much welcome, is the strong link throughout between public engagement and the need to recruit more people to STEM careers. The Science Council recognises the importance of creating the right kind of engaging dialogue around science both within and outside education is an important element in establishing an environment in which young people will want to study science for longer, and perhaps also to aspire to careers in STEM.

The Science Council welcomes the strategy's move beyond basic scientific literacy towards a deeper understanding and a more mature relationship across scientists and users of applications of science.

We have some concerns about the breadth of the three audience groups of Science; Society and Policy that have been identified. In terms of the delivery of the strategy we consider that it will be important to sub-divide these sectors to ensure that key audiences are not overlooked. For example, within both Science and Policy there will be producers of science and users of science. These groups are likely to have different priorities and agendas and crucially, work with, and interface with, science and scientists in different way. For example, one scientists may have a particular view of an issue but their own expertise as a scientist may be in another completely unrelated field. All are 'scientists' to the media in communications terms and will be presented to the public as 'scientists' but their particular area of expertise within science may not be apparent. Issues can arise in areas where there is public concern, such as the incidence of leukaemia or cancers near nuclear power sites, use of animals in medical research, health and communications masts and with MMR, where a wide range of different positions may be presented by scientists.