



House of Commons  
Science and Technology  
Committee

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**Chairman of the Medical  
Research Council:  
Introductory Hearing:  
Government Response to  
the Committee's Eighth  
Report of Session 2006–07**

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**Sixth Special Report of Session  
2006–07**

*Ordered by The House of Commons  
to be printed 9 October 2007*

## The Science and Technology Committee

The Science and Technology Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Office of Science and Innovation and its associated public bodies.

### Current membership

Mr Phil Willis MP (*Liberal Democrat, Harrogate and Knaresborough*)(Chairman)

Adam Afriyie MP (*Conservative, Windsor*)

Mrs Nadine Dorries MP (*Conservative, Mid Bedfordshire*)

Mr Robert Ffello MP (*Labour, Stoke-on-Trent South*)

Linda Gilroy MP (*Labour, Plymouth Sutton*)

Dr Evan Harris MP (*Liberal Democrat, Oxford West & Abingdon*)

Dr Brian Iddon MP (*Labour, Bolton South East*)

Chris Mole MP (*Labour/Co-op, Ipswich*)

Dr Bob Spink MP (*Conservative, Castle Point*)

Graham Stringer MP (*Labour, Manchester, Blackley*)

Dr Desmond Turner MP (*Labour, Brighton Kemptown*)

### Powers

The Committee is one of the departmental Select Committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No.152. These are available on the Internet via [www.parliament.uk](http://www.parliament.uk)

### Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at [www.parliament.uk/s&tcom](http://www.parliament.uk/s&tcom)

A list of Reports from the Committee in this Parliament is included at the back of this volume.

### Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee are: Dr Lynn Gardner (Clerk); Dr Celia Blacklock (Second Clerk); Mr Edward Waller (Assistant Clerk); Dr Christopher Tyler (Committee Specialist); Dr Joanna Dally (Committee Specialist); Ana Ferreira (Committee Assistant); Christine McGrane (Committee Secretary); and Jonathan Olivier Wright (Senior Office Clerk).

### Contacts

All correspondence should be addressed to the Clerk of the Science and Technology Committee, Committee Office, 7 Millbank, London SW1P 3JA. The telephone number for general inquiries is: 020 7219 2793; the Committee's e-mail address is: [scitechcom@parliament](mailto:scitechcom@parliament).

# Sixth Special Report

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On 31 July 2007 the Science and Technology Committee published its Eighth Report of Session 2006–07, *Chairman of the Medical Research Council: Introductory Hearing* [HC 746]. On 20 September 2007 the Committee received a memorandum from the Government which contained a response to the Report. The memorandum is published as an appendix to this Report.

## Appendix: Government response

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The Government is disappointed by, and does not share, the comments made by the Committee about Sir John Chisholm's appointment. Sir John has a first class background in business, and has all the qualities and the perspective needed to chair the MRC Council successfully through this period of change.

**Recommendation 1. The processes involved in making major public appointments should be transparent and open to scrutiny. We regret that Sir John was unable to give the Committee a clear account of the process by which he was appointed. (Paragraph 4)**

### Government response

2. The recruitment process for Research Council chairs is the responsibility of the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, which has taken on this responsibility from the former Department of Trade and Industry. The Government is surprised therefore that it was not asked by the Committee to clarify the process by which Sir John was appointed.

3. As is the case for all Research Council Chairs, the recruitment of a new Chair for MRC was conducted by DTI in accordance with the Code of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA). The Department sought assistance from recruitment consultants. The appointment of Sir John was made by Ministers after considering advice from a panel chaired by the Director General for Science and Innovation which included OCPA-recognised independent membership.

4. Sir John Chisholm was recruited as the Chair for the MRC through an open process regulated under the Code of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. The Code contains safeguards to ensure that the process is fair and that candidates are selected on merit. The OCPA independent member on the recruitment panel confirmed that in their view the process was conducted in accordance with the Code.

**Recommendation 2. We are concerned about the informal way in which Ernst & Young was appointed to conduct the Joint Review. Tight timeframes should not preclude proper assessment and clarity about how public money is spent. The MRC should ensure that all such appointments of consultants are conducted more formally and follow existing best practice of open and transparent competition. (Paragraph 6)**

## MRC response

5. The Research Councils are permitted to appoint consultants without an open competition where an applicable framework agreement exists. Such a framework agreement was in place with Ernst & Young. However the MRC will continue to appoint consultants through open and transparent competition; nevertheless, there may continue to be rare occasions when speed is of the essence. In any such instances, as indeed was the case with Ernst & Young, the MRC will negotiate a rigorous agreement with the proposed consultants to ensure good value for public money.

**Recommendation 3. We are concerned that the Joint Review did not provide evidence, nor could Sir John produce any evidence when challenged, that the 17-strong Council had been ‘ineffective at decision-making’. (Paragraph 10)**

and

**Recommendation 4. We welcome Sir John’s confirmation that the ratio of scientists to non-scientists will remain 50:50, ensuring that the relative quantity of scientific input into the decision making processes remains the same. However, we are concerned that the removal of two scientists from the Council could result in a reduction in the absolute quantity of scientific input. There will still be the same range of scientific and medical issues to cover, and it is imperative that the loss of two scientists does not reduce the Council’s breadth of scientific expertise. (Paragraph 11)**

## Government response

6. The MRC Charter specifies that membership of Council shall consist of not less than 10 and not more than 18 members at least half of whom shall be appointed by reason of their qualifications in science. This has not changed. A final decision on the future size of the MRC’s Council has not yet been taken.

## MRC response

7. Sir John did not claim that the 17-member Council had been ineffective at decision-making. His point was that a smaller (but not too small) Council could be at least as effective at decision-making, and that the dynamics of smaller boards is generally better. At Q55 of the transcript, he said that the dynamics of meetings involving large numbers of members and long agendas may result in many people around the table having insufficient opportunity to engage fruitfully in the discussion.

8. There will be no loss of overall breadth of scientific input to Council. Much of the more detailed decision-making on individual scientific programmes is, and will continue to be, delegated to the Research Boards. Furthermore, the MRC has established a Planning and Strategy Group which provides scientific advice to Council.

**Recommendation 5. We note that Sir John assured us that “I am [...] very much a non-executive chairman”. We expect the Chairman to fulfil this undertaking, and the MRC Council to ensure that he does. (Paragraph 13)**

## Government response

9. Chairs of Research Councils are appointed in a non-executive capacity, and the Government has every expectation that Sir John will continue to meet that specification.

**Recommendation 6. For the reasons set out in this paragraph, we have serious reservations as to whether Sir John is the right person to guide the MRC Executive through the coming period of change. (Paragraph 14)**

## Government response

10. The Government disagrees with the Committee's reservations. The Government, the MRC Council and the MRC senior executive have every confidence in Sir John Chisholm and believe that the skills and experience he can bring as chair will be invaluable through this period of change.

**Recommendation 7. We are pleased that the Government is taking steps to involve select committees more fully in the scrutiny of public appointments. We believe that pre-appointment hearings with the relevant Select Committee will improve accountability and help ensure that the right people are appointed to key positions. We recommend that Chairpersons and Chief Executives of the Research Councils be included in the proposed list of appointments that should be subject to these hearings. (Paragraph 15)**

## Government response

11. The Government notes this recommendation. Its position on pre-appointment scrutiny of public appointments is as set out in CM 7170, The Governance of Britain, published on 3 July 2007, which states that there should be a role for Parliament, through its select committees, in scrutinising a number of key appointments that are not subject to oversight by the Commissioner for Public Appointments or other form of independent scrutiny. This scrutiny should take the form of non-binding, pre-appointment hearings. The Government, in consultation with the Liaison Committee, will prepare a list of such appointments for which these hearings will apply.

*September 2007*

## List of Reports from the Committee during the current Parliament

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The reference number of the Government's response to each Report is printed in brackets after the HC printing number.

### Session 2006–07

First Report	Work of the Committee in 2005–06	HC 202
Second Report	Human Enhancement Technologies in Sport	HC 67–I (Cm 7088)
Third Report	The Cooksey Review	HC 204 (HC 978)
Fourth Report	Research Council Institutes	HC 68–I (HC 979)
Fifth Report	Government Proposals for the Regulation of Hybrid and Chimera Embryos	HC 272–I (Cm 7139)
Sixth Report	Office of Science and Innovation: Scrutiny Report 2005 and 2006	HC 203 (HC 635)
Seventh Report	2007: A Space Policy	HC 66–I (HC 1042)
Eighth Report	Chairman of the Medical Research Council: Introductory Hearing	HC 746
Ninth Report	International Policies and Activities of the Research Councils	HC 472–I
Tenth Report	Investigating the Oceans	HC 470–I
Eleventh Report	The Funding of Science and Discovery Centres	HC 903–I
First Special Report	Scientific Advice, Risk and Evidence Based Policy Making: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2005–06	HC 307

### Session 2005–06

First Report	Meeting UK Energy and Climate Needs: The Role of Carbon Capture and Storage	HC 578–I (HC 1036)
Second Report	Strategic Science Provision in English Universities: A Follow-up	HC 1011 (HC 1382)
Third Report	Research Council Support for Knowledge Transfer	HC 995–I (HC 1653)
Fourth Report	Watching the Directives: Scientific Advice on the EU Physical Agents (Electromagnetic Fields) Directive	HC 1030 (HC 1654)
Fifth Report	Drug classification: making a hash of it?	HC 1031 (Cm 6941)
Sixth Report	Identity Card Technologies: Scientific Advice, Risk and	HC 1032 (Cm 6942)
Seventh Report	Scientific Advice, Risk and Evidence Based Policy Making	HC 900–I HC (2006-07) 307
First Special Report	Forensic Science on Trial: Government Response to the Committee's Seventh Report of Session 2004–05	HC 427
Second Special Report	Strategic Science Provision in English Universities: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2004–05	HC 428