Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Science and Technology

Minute of meeting of 8 May 2014

1. Attendance: MSPs – Dr Elaine Murray; Clare Adamson; Patrick Harvie; Iain Gray. External: Professor Muffy Calder (Scottish Government); Bristow Muldoon (RSE & RSC); Dr William Duncan (RSE); Clare Hicks (Scottish Government); Gail Millar (Institute of Physics); Alison McLure (IoP); Fred Young (SSERC); Liz Hemsley (RSE); Avril Manners (IoP); William MacPherson (IoP); Professor John Coggins (RSE & Society of Biology); Dr Stephen Benn (SB). (Patrick Harvie chaired the meeting as Elaine Murray was not available to attend from the start)

2. Presentation by Professor Muffy Calder, Chief Scientific Adviser to the Scottish Government

   Professor Calder gave some biographical information about herself. She is a computer scientist, and had studies at both Stirling and St. Andrews Universities. After gaining her PhD in 1988 she obtained a post at the University of Glasgow, where she had worked until 2012, reaching the position of Dean of Research for Science and Engineering. In 2012 took on her current role.

   She posed the question of why does the Scottish Government (SG) have an interest in science, to which she set out the following reasons:

   - There are a range of statutory and regulatory responsibilities
   - The contribution of science to the economy
   - As part of the dual funding mechanism the SG directly funds research
   - The NHS funds much of the medical research in Scotland
   - There are specialist research institutes such as the Hutton and Morden Institutes
   - Through the Scottish Funding Council the SG funds the universities and colleges
   - Through the school education system and campaigns the SG seeks to promote an interest in science among young people

   Professor Calder then went on to explain what her role entailed. This included:

   - Providing generic advice to Ministers and civil servants on scientific issues
   - Sourcing expert advice on particular issues where required, either through members of the Scottish Science Advisory Council, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, or through her network of experts in Scotland or further afield

   Recent and current topics had included:

   - A report on synthetic biology (Due to be published in July)
   - Submitting comments to a Department of Business Innovation and Skills consultation on science infrastructure
   - Big data – its application for society in general and science in particular
   - Consulting with scientific organisations on issues for science from the debate on independence
   - Glow – the online resource by which teachers can share ideas and resources to support school education
   - ICT in schools

- Cyber security
- Nuclear decomissioning

3. General discussion

The following issues were raised in the general discussion

- Glow – the issue was raised that scientific societies and organisations such as SSERC (which provides teacher CPD) did not have access to Glow
- Whether entry qualifications in science should be set for initial training of primary school teachers – currently there is no minimum requirement
- The question was asked as to whether the SG took on board the advice of the CSA, to which Professor Calder said that in specialist areas the answer was usually yes. One person raised his concern that in the field of Genetically Modified Organisms scientific advice was not being taken on board, while another person commented that science can inform policy, but not dictate it
- A question was raised as to whether the CSA had sufficient access to the First Minister and the Scottish Cabinet. As an example Professor Calder indicated that when the synthetic biology report was ready she would be meeting with a group of relevant Ministers
- In a discussion on engagement with Parliament, Professor Calder observed that she had never been asked to attend a Committee of the Parliament

  Patrick Harvie thanked Professor Calder for coming to the CPG and initiating an interesting and useful discussion. The meeting then closed.