

## Cross Party Group on Science and Technology

### Minutes of meeting 15 March 2016

**Attendance:** 32, including the following MSPs: Dr Elaine Murray; Clare Adamson; Dr Alasdair Allan; Murdo Fraser; Liam MacArthur; Mark Griffin and Drew Smith. Kirsten Robb represented the Scottish Green Party.

Dr Murray opened the meeting and then introduced Professor Lesley Yellowlees Vice Principal of the University of Edinburgh, who chaired the debate that followed, summarised below.

Asked “What commitment will your party make to ensure scientific advice is properly considered in policy decisions?” It was clear from the panel’s responses that the long standing vacancy for a Chief Scientific Adviser in Scotland was at the forefront of MSP’s minds. Mark Griffin (Labour) indicated his party’s manifesto would include a commitment to make an immediate CSA appointment and to provide them with direct access to Cabinet and the First Minister. Murdo Fraser (Conservative) noted that Scottish Science Advisory Committee had not met during 2015 and emphasised the need for science to more actively inform policy-making in Scotland with “scientists at the heart of government”.

Both Liam MacArthur (Liberal Democrats) and Kirsten Robb (Scottish Green Party) were keen that MSPs had increased opportunities to directly debate science with the former suggesting a parliamentary sub-committee for Science and Technology and the latter science training for MSPs. Dr Alasdair Allan MSP (SNP) and Minister for Learning, Science and Scotland’s Languages made clear the Government had been able to draw on other scientific advisers and its agencies in the period without a CSO and revealed that a shortlist of candidates for the CSO post was now with Ministers - an appointment is expected early in the new parliament.

Jenny Liddell of the Royal Society of Edinburgh asked “Should Scotland have a policy that embraces GM technology?” The Minister put the case that Scotland’s position on field trials mirrored that of two thirds of EU member states and had been informed by the need to protect Scotland’s reputation in food and drink. However Murdo Fraser cited some of the ‘emotive’ language used in government documents relating to GM crop research and, stressed the role parliamentarians have in hearing scientific advice and using it to lead public opinion where necessary. By contrast, Ms Robb cited the Green’s support for the field trials moratorium, but Mark Griffin referenced the global challenge around food production and asked, on behalf of Labour, whether Scotland should be “so insular” instead of contributing to scientific efforts to address a global problem.

The debate then turned to school education with William Hardie (RSE) and Gordon Doig (Institute of Physics) asking respectively whether the implementation of Curriculum for Excellence had limited pupils’ science choices in the senior phase and how demand for teacher education places in STEM subjects might be improved. Discussion points included the particular challenges facing rural schools,

the potential opportunities for specialisation by schools in urban areas, gender imbalances in science and computing subjects, incentives for STEM graduates to undertake teacher education and possible links to assistance with housing in more expensive areas.

Bristow Muldoon (RSC) asked how Scotland could best translate its excellence in research to economic growth. All panellists expressed unanimity in their keenness to increase the positive impact of STEM research on the Scottish economy and cited various policy measures which might encourage such collaboration, including the potential to build on the success of the established 'research pooling' in Scotland's Universities'.