

## SEAC REVIEW 2008

### RESPONSE FROM THE SEAC SECRETARIAT AND SPONSORING DEPARTMENTS

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#### Introduction

In 2007, the Secretariat and sponsoring departments commissioned a 'light touch' review of SEAC which reported in March 2008. The review was carried out by Mr Edmund Waterhouse, an independent consultant. His report is available on the SEAC website, alongside this response.

Overall, we welcome the report. Despite being a 'light touch' review, it has been thorough and has examined all the main aspects of SEAC's work. The broadly positive conclusions are encouraging.

#### Recommendations

The review makes a number of specific recommendations and we address these below in the order they are presented in paragraph 7 of the review.

***a) SEAC's status as a non-Departmental public body should remain unchanged.***

We agree. It is important that SEAC's advice be seen as independent and that the Committee and its Secretariat can operate independently of Government departments. This is best achieved by maintaining SEAC's NDPB status.

***b) Its remit should remain focused on risk assessment, not risk management.***

We agree. This is an important aspect of SEAC's remit, and the Secretariat is reviewing its guidance to members to ensure they are clear about the importance of maintaining a clear focus on risk assessment.

***c) Recognising the low level of risk from TSEs, sponsor Departments should develop criteria for determining the point at which the Committee should be wound up (it is unlikely to be within the next five years) and its residual functions allocated to another body. This should ensure there is an orderly transition with clarity about the appropriate successor arrangements.***

We agree that SEAC's activities need to be proportional to need, as with any such committee. We will continue to monitor developments closely and will

keep under review both the activities of the committee and the continuing need for advice on TSEs. As the demands on the Committee reduce over time, Departments will consider appropriate changes to its make-up and operation, as well as to the resources needed to maintain the secretariat functions. If it is agreed that the time is right to disband SEAC as a standing committee, Departments will introduce an alternative mechanism by which ministers can obtain the highest quality scientific advice on TSE issues as and when they arise.

***d) A “wiring diagram” should be produced showing how the variety of bodies with responsibility for different aspects of TSEs fit together, in order to identify any areas of overlap and ensuring clarity of lines of accountability.***

The Secretariat has prepared a document setting out clearly the constitution and remit of the various committees and advisory bodies whose work relates to that of SEAC, and showing how these relate to each other. This is on the SEAC website.

***e) Better, more formal international links, especially with Europe and the EFSA – possibly involving cross membership between the two bodies – should be established to ensure that SEAC has the widest view on TSEs.***

The Secretariat has begun to establish more regular contact with colleagues in EFSA, and will take advantage of the opportunities afforded by attendance at meetings arranged by EFSA to establish links with key individuals and bodies in other EU Member States. More generally, the Secretariat will seek out opportunities to forge links with other relevant international bodies.

***f) As the Committee’s business declines, a reduction to four meetings a year is recommended.***

We agree that the current level of business being brought to the Committee justifies a reduction in the number of scheduled meetings per year from five to four. Two meetings were cancelled during 2008 (February and July) and just four meetings have been scheduled for 2009. This will be kept under review to ensure that the committee has adequate opportunity to examine issues put to them.

***g) The practice of holding meetings in the devolved administrations should be reviewed, with a presumption that more modern means of communication should be substituted for them.***

SEAC's three sponsoring departments and the devolved administrations have agreed that SEAC meetings will no longer be held in the devolved administrations.

***h) Sponsor Departments should review the criteria for determining how much each contributes towards the costs of funding SEAC; unless there are good grounds for not doing so (for example because the three Departments benefit unequally from SEAC's work programme), the presumption should be that the shares would be equal, and plans for moving to the agreed shares should be drawn up.***

It is most important that the Government and the taxpayer obtain the best value for money from SEAC. The current contributions to the overall SEAC budget are based on the amount of the committee's time spent on discussion items proposed by each department. This remained relatively stable over several years, but will be kept under review to see if recent changes are maintained. Sponsoring Departments are agreed that it is not necessary to undertake frequent adjustments to the budget shares, but if a sustained change is seen to the proportions in which each Department draws on the Committee's time, then suitable adjustments to the budget contributions will be considered.

***i) For self-employed members, the costs of undertaking SEAC business should be recognised and appropriate remuneration made (including an economic cost for employment of a locum). For members who are academics, the arguments are less clear cut, but consideration should be given to basing their remuneration on the new full economic costing model introduced by universities. This is however an issue which has implications far beyond the remit of SEAC and should be addressed within that wider perspective.***

We agree that self-employed members should be adequately remunerated for the time and effort they give to committee business. Where appropriate this could include an element to account for unavoidable expenses such as locum fees. We agree that this recommendation has implications far beyond SEAC and the Secretariat will play a full part in Whitehall-wide discussions about remuneration policy for government advisory committees.

***j) Clear objectives should be drawn up and there should be an annual appraisal of each Committee member by the chairman and of the chairman by the sponsor departments, including a 360 degree assessment.***

The Secretariat will examine the appraisal procedures used by other similar committees across Government and will prepare a report for consideration by the Secretariat Steering Group which will examine whether any change to the current system of appraisal for SEAC would be beneficial.

**SEAC Secretariat**  
**Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs**  
**Department of Health**  
**Food Standards Agency**  
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