

SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Light-touch review

Summary and recommendations

1. The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee (SEAC) has played an outstanding role in evaluating the scientific evidence relating to Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathies (TSEs), assessing the risk they represent for human health and responding to the concerns of the public.
2. The Committee works well and is well supported by a highly efficient and effective secretariat. While there are several changes of detail that could be made to improve current arrangements, there is a clear consensus that they are broadly about right.
3. As required in any Cabinet Office review, the options of winding up the Committee and of providing its functions in a different way have been investigated. No sensible alternative arrangements have been identified.
4. That said, it is now clear that the risks from TSEs are low, although further work is needed in some areas. Most who gave evidence to this review could see a time in the not far distant future when SEAC would no longer be needed.
5. Better relations with European institutions are needed, especially with the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA); and greater clarity about the roles and accountabilities of the different bodies is needed.
6. It is heartening to see that virtually all the recommendations from the previous review have been implemented. The Committee has made a strong commitment to openness and has followed it through with rigour. It is

essential however to retain the facility of closed sessions where pre-publication material can be considered confidentially.

Recommendations

7. This review's recommendations flow from these findings. They are :
- a. SEAC's status as a non-Departmental public body (NDPB) should remain unchanged.
 - b. Its remit should remain focused on risk assessment, not risk management.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - 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.
 - f. As the Committee's business declines, a reduction to four meetings a year is recommended.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

Background:

Transmissible spongiform encephalopathies

- 8. TSEs are a family of diseases characterised by a degeneration of brain tissue. They include such diseases as Creutzfeldt Jakob Disease (CJD) in humans, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in cattle and scrapie in sheep and goats. BSE was first diagnosed in the UK in 1986, and reached epidemic proportions because of the inclusion in animal feed of meat and bone meal produced from animal carcasses. Public concern arose because of the evidence

that variant CJD (vCJD) in humans was linked with the consumption of meat from BSE-infected cattle.

The role and functions of the Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee

9. Against this background SEAC was set up in 1990 by Government to provide “independent scientific advice” to Government “on matters relating to spongiform encephalopathies, taking account of the remits of other bodies with related responsibilities”. The Committee’s remit therefore encompasses animal health, the safety of food, and the protection of the public’s health. Its core function is the assessment of risk- it is clear that the management of risk is for its sponsor Departments.

10. The Committee stands at arm’s length from Government. In common with many other NDPBs, its Chairman and members are appointed by Ministers. It is sponsored jointly by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Department of Health (DH) and the Food Standards Agency (FSA). Its resources come from these three Departments. The devolved administrations (the Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and the Northern Ireland Executive) do not formally provide funding (except for the regional meetings) but are represented at meetings and receive advice from the Committee.

11. Although BSE and vCJD are perhaps still seen as diseases which have had greatest impact in the UK, involvement in scientific and medical research into TSEs is now world-wide. Regulations have been introduced internationally to minimise the risk of transmission of TSEs. In the European Union, controls relating to animal health and the safety of food are now in place, and similar regulatory controls exist in many other countries. These controls are kept under regular review and updated as necessary to reflect the latest evidence from research. SEAC fulfils a crucial role in reviewing the latest research, including at the pre-publication stage, and assessing risk.

Review: methodology

12. In common with all other NDPBs, SEAC is subject to regular review. The purpose of each review is to question whether the body continues to meet the wider objectives of Government; if so, whether a different model of organisation might be more appropriate; and whether services and functions could be provided more effectively in future. The terms of reference for this review are at Annex A.
13. Accordingly a short questionnaire was developed in consultation with representatives of the sponsoring Departments and issued to a wide group of stakeholders. A copy is at Annex B. In parallel a number of people were interviewed with a view to obtaining a broad spectrum of informed opinion on the issues set out in the questionnaire.
14. Eleven written responses to the questionnaire were received, thirteen people were interviewed and two meetings were attended – SEAC’s plenary meeting in Cardiff in December 2007 and the meeting of the SEAC Sheep Subgroup in October 2007. A list of those responding whether orally or in writing is at Annex C.

Review findings:

15. This section follows the order of the themes set out in the questionnaire, and reflects the findings from the written responses and the interviews.

Meeting the wider objectives of Government

16. Those who commented on this point were clear that SEAC continues to meet the wider objectives of Government by contributing to the aims and objectives of sponsor Departments, by responding to public concern (for some, the principal driver for SEAC membership, with members acting as informed members of the public) and by informing Government policy – although some saw SEAC’s influence on Government policy decreasing.

17. One respondent noted the high frequency with which changes of policy had been linked with SEAC's consideration of the issue. Defra pointed to its Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets relating to the eradication of BSE and the reduction in prevalence of scrapie, and the impact of the Committee's assessment of risk on the need for, and achievability of, specific Government targets. DH pointed to its objective of improving the health of the population and the key role played by SEAC in informing policy in relation to, for example, minimising the risk of transmission of vCJD. FSA saw SEAC's role as essential in learning the lessons of the BSE crisis and the delivery of its science governance arrangements, based on its core values; the Agency valued SEAC's horizon-scanning role and the willingness of the Chair and Deputy Chair to attend and present information at meetings of the FSA Board.
18. Through its assessment of risk, SEAC's contribution to Government policy is evident. A quick glance through the scientific literature on TSEs reveals the influence and standing of the Committee, and the way in which its outputs have been used to manage risk. A current example would be SEAC's role in assessing the risk of transmission of vCJD via the reuse of certain dental instruments.
19. Many said that typically SEAC was reactive, responding to the issues raised with it rather than itself bringing new issues to the table. There were however exceptions, mainly where the preliminary findings from unpublished research were shared with the Committee.

Evidence of a joined-up approach

20. Written and oral responses were consistent in endorsing the effectiveness of SEAC's joined-up approach. One respondent said "there is evidence that SEAC has provided independent advice across Departmental boundaries to Defra, DH and FSA as well as to their agencies (eg National Blood Service for DH, Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) for Defra) and devolved agriculture departments (eg advice to the Welsh Assembly Government)." Links with the devolved administrations on health issues were less common

however, chiefly because of the leadership role exercised by the DH through for example the commissioning of research and the management of risk.

21. SEAC's joined-up approach is sustained not only through its committee meetings (plenaries and subgroups) but also through the Steering Group and the shared secretariat. Steering Group membership comprises representatives of all three sponsor Departments and of the devolved administrations: SEAC's chairman and secretary also attend *ex officio*. SEAC's secretariat includes secondees from all three sponsor Departments; this arrangement helps to ensure that where an issue cuts across Departmental boundaries a joined-up approach can be co-ordinated.
22. One respondent commented that the SEAC secretariat is "careful to manage the various interests of sponsoring departments, a job which can be very tricky on occasions and require a lot of tact and diplomacy!" Another said there were "many examples of officials from these four [the main sponsor Departments plus the Veterinary Laboratories Agency] exchanging information and being forced to co-operate." Nevertheless, some room for improvement was identified: the secretariat "could play more of a diplomatic role in encouraging joined-up Government" and SEAC's work with the devolved administrations was seen as less effective than with the main sponsors.
23. In terms of links with "Europe and beyond", there was limited evidence of a joined-up approach. One respondent said "As far as I am aware, SEAC has no relationship with Europe, other than tentative links with EFSA via its secretariat. In many respects, certainly on issues that have impacts beyond the boundaries of the UK, SEAC has been superseded by EFSA...the debate at EFSA is better, and more likely to involve scientists actively working in the field."
24. SEAC's remit is of course wider than EFSA's; SEAC has become more aware of the benefits of closer links with Europe, especially the EFSA, but closer links need to be forged. This could be achieved by including in SEAC's membership an EFSA representative, either as an addition to the Committee or

– taking account of concerns at the size of the Committee – by taking the opportunity to make the change when the present overseas member’s term of office is up for renewal.

25. Other countries – eg France and Germany - have national risk assessment bodies, though not necessarily independent of their governments. It would be helpful to explore the value of building closer links between SEAC and its counterparts in other countries.
26. These links do however exist between individuals. From time to time, experts from outside the UK are asked to participate in SEAC’s meetings. There is however a perception that this happens more often in relation to animal rather than human health.

Is SEAC sufficiently “professional”?

27. Following recent changes to its membership, for example the inclusion from last year of additional specialists in human health, there is now a consensus that the right specialisms and expertise are represented on the Committee.
28. Lay representation, which is well supported by the chairman and other members, is intrinsic to the Committee’s work and acts as a valuable counterbalance to the complexity of scientific debate. It is always important to remember the realities of life which may have a greater impact on risk than the scientific analysis.
29. Where required, individuals with additional expertise or specialist knowledge are invited to attend the relevant meeting of SEAC and participate in the discussion. Some saw this system working well, although others felt there was room for improvement, particularly in clarifying for outside experts what was expected of them: often they see themselves as technical advisers and do not join in discussion, especially if they disagree with the views of Committee members. One respondent was concerned that outside experts were identified by word of mouth, and a more rigorous (and objective) mechanism for

identifying appropriate experts would be useful. Such experts – especially those from overseas - may not always be clear about their role at SEAC meetings, and it would be helpful for the future to produce guidance on this point.

30. One respondent observed that there was “a tendency for the Government Departments to lead the secretariat who lead the expert members who lead the remaining members”, and “to ask the question for which the expected answer is flagged” – although adding that the Committee’s membership was sufficiently independent not to be led.
31. Some respondents commented on the occasional lack of debate on agenda items: “there are sometimes too many people at the table who do not actually contribute anything to the debate”. While it was understandable that members would not feel competent to engage in expert discussion of a particular specialism, there was an impression that they could offer more than they do in the way of informed opinions. One respondent commented on less robust debate on specific issues than in the past “apparently driven by the lack of willingness of individuals to contribute beyond their own comfort zone. As a result, it is not infrequent for debate to involve the chair and no more than two other members of the Committee.”

Could SEAC’s functions be achieved via other organisational options?

32. Of those who commented on this question, none saw a viable alternative to the present arm’s length arrangement. The option of bringing SEAC’s functions into one or more Government Departments was ruled out because of the importance of the principle of independence. The arm’s length relationship enabled SEAC to assess risk free from political interference, and the conclusions it reached were accepted as impartial and objective – and were valued accordingly.
33. There were however some anomalies. Although in the UK there was an assumption that experts employed by Government could not be impartial or

independent, the same was not true in Europe where there was a greater willingness to engage with such experts.

34. Because many of SEAC's members are leading academics, another option raised was locating SEAC within an academic environment. Opinion differed on this point. On one hand, the intellectual rigour of SEAC's role might be thought to be strengthened through closer academic ties; on the other hand, academic institutions had their own objectives to meet, and SEAC's independence might therefore not be above suspicion. One respondent said "nothing useful comes from academics behaving like academics": the saving grace for SEAC was the secretariat, chair and organisation.
35. The option of locating SEAC's secretariat in another organisation (whether an academic institution, a professional body or another arm's length body) was suggested as a viable option. There were precedents: the Health Protection Agency had taken over the secretariats of a number of DH expert advisory committees. Again, respondents considered that no single or joint professional organisations could assemble the range of expertise or the degree of independence which are available under the existing arrangement.
36. On the face of it viable alternatives might exist, but would need to be subjected to far more detailed scrutiny before being given realistic consideration. No persuasive argument for changing the present arrangements was identified – and there was no issue with the present arrangements, which were judged to be working well.

How effectively does SEAC operate now?

37. In the previous quinquennial review of SEAC a number of recommendations had been made aimed at improving the effective operation of the Committee. In the questionnaire used for the current review, views were sought on the changes made in response to the earlier recommendations.

38. In terms of **size**, the balance was thought to be about right. The Committee was just small enough to allow all members to express their views yet large enough to incorporate the necessary range of expertise. Several thought that any increase would make it unmanageable.
39. SEAC's two **subgroups** - on sheep and on epidemiology – fulfilled useful functions. They helped to expand the breadth of expertise available to the Committee, and discussion was often more robust scientifically than in the plenary sessions. It was noted however that on a couple of recent occasions the absence of a key expert had limited the quality of discussion and of output.
40. The use of sub-groups could be extended further, especially in an ad hoc capacity. For example, a hefty Defra paper (running to around 250 pages) on the relaxation of total feed ban was circulated for the Committee's meeting in December last year might have been discussed by an ad hoc group, in camera, before coming to the main Committee. New subgroups dealing for example with animal feed or medical and surgical issues would be worth considering.
41. **Overseas membership**: the previous review noted that there could be practical difficulties in appointing members from outside Europe, and suggested that it might be better to ask such experts to offer advice on an ad hoc basis.
42. Comments received in this review suggested that opinion was divided on this issue. For some, the opportunity to include overseas members was seen as valuable in extending the range and quality of expertise of the Committee. For others, the case was not proven. "Overseas membership does not guarantee high quality commitment to the Committee. At times it is just an expensive overhead". There was some concern too that overseas scientists gain access to UK pre-publication data when the reverse is not possible, providing them with an unfair advantage. If there continued to be overseas membership, it should be used to reinforce links between SEAC and EFSA.

43. SEAC needs a “serious challenge function”. The key is to ensure that through its members SEAC had available to it the right expertise. With tightening budget constraints it would be advisable to consider more sustainable ways of involving experts from overseas. (SEAC’s current overseas member was on maternity leave during the course of this review, and was not available for interview).
44. **Frequency of meetings:** SEAC currently expects to meet five times a year. Last year however the October meeting was cancelled, and at the time of writing the February 2008 meeting has also been cancelled.
45. Several respondents commented that the Committee’s workload was gradually reducing, and that it was “clearly struggling at times to find sufficient items for agendas”. Several respondents suggested that four meetings a year might be sufficient – provided that there was provision to convene an extraordinary meeting should one be necessary. A reduction in the frequency of meetings would help alleviate pressure on budgets. Recognising that the workload of SEAC is gradually reducing, consideration should be given to reducing the number of meetings to four per year rather than five.
46. **Openness:** in the previous review, SEAC’s decision to hold meetings in public was welcomed, so long as there was provision for some issues to be discussed in closed session. SEAC’s website was described as “an under-used resource”; and the need for annual reports to be produced more promptly was noted.
47. The Committee currently has a strong commitment to openness. It recently experimented with live webcasts of meetings, but discontinued them chiefly on grounds of cost and very low user rates. Its plenary meetings are open to the public although very few now attend (none were present at the December meeting in Cardiff last year) and audio transcripts are also available..
48. Respondents welcomed the Committee’s openness, but emphasised the value of closed sessions in which pre-publication data could be considered.

49. The website has been revamped. It is informative, comprehensive up-to-date and easy to use. It includes copies of recent annual reports including that for 2006 (published in February 2007).

50. **Operation of the secretariat:** The secretariat is widely seen as operating well. One respondent said “it delivers the meeting papers in sufficient time before each meeting, communicates effectively with its sponsor Departments and delivers summaries and minutes quickly after each meeting”. The secretariat plays an important role in facilitating communication between the Committee and the sponsor Departments – and between the different sponsor Departments. As noted earlier, this can call for high-level diplomatic skills. No criticism was made of the working of the secretariat and it should take much satisfaction from that.

51. **Implementation of previous review’s recommendations**

52. Many of the recommendations from the previous review have been referred to above. Most have been implemented. Only in a minority of instances is further work necessary, for example in building stronger working links with Europe and in particular with EFSA; and in apportioning SEAC’s running costs more equitably between the sponsor Departments. This is discussed further in the next section.

53. Resources and headcount

54. At present SEAC’s costs (about £0.5m pa) are met by the three sponsoring Departments, though in unequal shares: Defra contributing the largest share 47%, FSA the least 20%. The last review commented that this arrangement was inequitable, and sat uncomfortably with the principle that SEAC served the three Departments equally.

55. In the five years since the last review some progress has been made towards equalising sponsor Departments’ shares. Defra continues to provide the

greatest share, an arrangement which it still considers inequitable, especially as it sees SEAC's business "moving away" from Defra. All sponsor Departments were under increasing budgetary pressure. One said that greater interest in the day-to-day costs of the Committee could be expected as a result: use of seconded staff, efficiencies in administration and frequency of meetings might all come in for closer scrutiny. The size of the secretariat – which has reduced steadily in recent times – has been affected by targets for reducing the headcount in Defra. This has not, however, appeared to affect the secretariat's performance.

56. Unequal funding by the three main sponsors could be defended on the grounds that they benefit from SEAC's outputs unequally. In a review of this kind it is difficult to judge the extent to which that is so. The principle of equal contributions is easier to justify, although at a time of tightening financial controls it will in practice be harder to achieve.

57. The funding question links of course to SEAC's future, which is discussed below (paras 75 – 78). In the short-term, it is suggested that funding should, so far as possible, reflect the level of benefit which each Department receives from SEAC's outputs. Should this prove difficult to assess, the principle of equal funding shares should be the objective; and sponsor Departments should seek to reach agreement on the timescale for doing so, subject to what follows; that the secretariat should seek to identify the scope for reducing expenditure in support of the Committee's work; and that where reductions in spend are identified, they should be apportioned between the three sponsors in such a way as serves to equalise their funding shares.

Remuneration of members

58. In interview concern was raised that members' remuneration should be reasonable. Members gave of their time not simply through attendance at meetings but also in meeting preparation. In determining levels of remuneration, reading time needed to be factored in as well as the costs of printing out lengthy documents at home. For self-employed people it was

important to be able to claim an appropriate locum allowance – although this matter had not yet been satisfactorily resolved by Government, and this could inhibit self-employed people from participating. For those employed in universities, it would be more open and transparent if members' time was costed and paid for by SEAC, using the new full economic costing model introduced by universities.

Key themes

59. During discussions with interviewees, a number of additional important themes emerged.

Risk management

60. SEAC's members draw a clear distinction between risk assessment and risk management. SEAC is concerned with the former, not the latter. This is widely accepted and understood. For the sponsor Departments, the management of risk is a political process involving decisions about resources, timescales and relative priorities as well as the assessment of risk.

61. At times however it can be frustrating when a risk is identified and assessed, yet action is not taken – or is not taken sufficiently speedily - to remove or minimise the risk even when there is a clear remedy at hand. In such instances, SEAC (typically through its chairman) might communicate directly with Ministers or senior officials in the appropriate arm of Government with a view to understanding the reasons or emphasising the consequences of ignoring the risk.

62. It is clear however that SEAC's strength lies in remaining outside the political process; it does not have the expertise to take on responsibility for risk management, nor does it wish to do so. There is unanimous support for maintaining the distinction between risk assessment and risk management, and for SEAC having responsibility for the former and not the latter.

A wiring diagram

63. The organisations in the UK which are concerned with aspects of TSEs is quite numerous. They include:
- a. The Medical Research Council
 - b. The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council
 - c. The Advisory Committee on Dangerous Pathogens Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy Working Group
 - d. The Institute for Animal Health
 - e. The Veterinary Laboratories Agency
 - f. The Institute for Food Research
 - g. The Health Protection Agency
 - h. The National CJD Surveillance Unit
 - i. The CJD Incidents Panel
 - j. The UK Zoonoses Group
 - k. The Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs
64. Some are UK-wide, others relate to England and Wales, others relate only to England (or to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland). The picture is further complicated beyond the UK. The European Commission's Health and Consumer Protection Directorate General has policy responsibility for food safety, public health and consumer affairs in the European Union (including animal health and welfare); and the European Food Safety Authority is responsible for providing independent scientific advice to the European Commission in relation to food and feed safety, and for risk communication.
65. On the face of it, there is scope for their responsibilities to overlap. Topics discussed in one forum from one perspective may then be discussed in another forum from a different perspective. That is fine so long as there is clarity about each organisation's distinctive role.
66. To avoid duplication of effort it is important that these roles are mapped and understood, and in particular that there is a clear structure of accountability

which is rational from a national and international perspective. From time to time, it is understood, a “wiring diagram” has been produced for that purpose. But the picture is a dynamic one, and things change.

67. It would be helpful for the sponsor Departments to update the wiring diagram; and to review the lines of accountability of those bodies operating within the public sector, both within the UK and in Europe, so as to ensure that they are coherent and consistent.

Appraisal of members

68. The previous review identified some weaknesses in terms of the induction of new members. Since then the secretariat has produced a useful induction pack.
69. In interviews with some members a degree of uncertainty was voiced about the precise nature of the contribution sought from members. To help clarify the roles of individual members within the Committee, it is suggested that the chairman should give guidance to each on his or her role (the sponsor Departments would do so for the chairman). This process should be matched with regular – probably annual – appraisal of each member’s performance in contributing to the work of the Committee (in the case of the chairman this would need to be done by the sponsor Departments). In keeping with developing practice across other arm’s length bodies, this appraisal process should include “360 degree” assessment of the individual.

Meetings outside London

70. An issue which attracted much comment was SEAC’s practice of holding one meeting each year in one of the devolved administrations. This is greatly valued by the devolved administrations because it reflects SEAC’s UK-wide remit and enables people in the devolved administrations to see the Committee in action. The devolved administrations help meet the extra costs of these meetings as their contribution to SEAC sponsorship.

71. It is fair to say that this arrangement is not popular with the Committee members interviewed for this review. One respondent called the arrangement “an unnecessary expensive luxury”. While most people can get to London easily enough, the same is not consistently true of Cardiff, Edinburgh or Belfast; travel takes longer and costs, borne by SEAC, are often higher. Fewer people from London-based organisations (including the sponsor Departments) usually attend. And attendance by the media and members of the public is declining, especially at SEAC meetings outside London – for example none was present at the meeting in Cardiff on 14 December 2007.
72. There is a difficult balance to strike here. The desire to foster and maintain links between SEAC and each of the countries of the UK is both understandable and laudable. On the other hand, the impact on the functioning of the Committee has to be taken into account. If meetings were attended by members of the public who could not be expected to travel to London, there would be grounds for maintaining the status quo. If however that ceases to be the case, it must be questionable whether to continue the arrangement.
73. It is interesting to note that the FSA has video-conferencing facilities in each of the UK’s four countries. SEAC might consider making similar arrangements – or indeed investigating the feasibility of sharing such facilities with the FSA. In the first instance it is suggested that members of the Steering Group should review the arrangements for meeting outside London, so as to clarify the costs and benefits (eg for the public) of continuing the present arrangement. At present the presumption is that the practice should come to an end, and reliance placed on video-conferencing or other form of electronic communications.
74. Another possibility might be for the chairman, supported by the secretary, to visit each of the devolved administrations with a view to discussing the Committee’s work and answering questions on it. This of course increases the burden on the chair; but would be less resource-intensive overall. Essentially this would be a diplomatic exercise: whether it would be of use must be for the devolved administrations to consider.

75. If the devolved administrations no longer incur the costs associated with SEAC's regional meetings, it is suggested that they be asked to consider contributing joining with Defra, DH and the FSA in funding SEAC. Such contributions need not be large; but some form of contribution would strengthen the relationship between the devolved administrations and the Committee; and facilitate the consideration of issues any which may arise only in respect of Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Future of SEAC

76. The decline in the incidence of BSE in the UK, the low numbers of BSE cases elsewhere in Europe, the prevalence of BSE in sheep in the UK probably being zero, and the decline in the incidence of probable and possible cases of variant CJD, are all welcome evidence of a diminished risk to humans from TSEs – although atypical scrapie remains of concern, and more needs to be done to determine the prevalence of sub-clinical vCJD. Over the past four years, one respondent commented, there has been relatively little in terms of new scientific breakthroughs.

77. During this review respondents said that the risks being assessed by SEAC were low; political and public concern over TSEs had ebbed away; and the opportunity cost of maintaining SEAC was therefore growing. How far was it reasonable for Government to go on funding SEAC to explore “unknowns”? One respondent suggested that “at the end of the current term SEAC is wound down and meetings held once a year to review any developments. Surveillance, however, should continue unabated and if a new situation arises SEAC can be reformed rapidly.” This comment captured the sense of several other respondents.

78. There was a consensus that it would be reasonable to bring SEAC's role to an end before too long. Opinions differed on the timescale, although most

thought that the Committee's role would be justified for at least five more years (until the next review).

79. It is of course always difficult to decide to wind up a committee, especially one which is so widely respected nationally and internationally, and where there will be some level of risk for the foreseeable future. To help inform future consideration of this matter, it is suggested that sponsor Departments, with the other members of the Steering Group (including the Committee Chairman), develop some criteria which would provide an objective basis on which such a decision could safely be made. These might involve the setting of defined objectives for SEAC, measurable where possible. Factors to be taken into account might include: extent to which the assessment of risk can be further refined; alternative mechanisms for obtaining expert independent risk assessment in relation to TSEs; cost – perhaps a cost-benefit analysis; and political and public impact.

Conclusion

80. SEAC has made an outstanding contribution to the understanding of science in relation to TSEs, and the appreciation of risk in relation to animal health, food safety and human health. It has been an exemplar of how the relationship between Government and an arm's length expert and independent body can work co-operatively together. And it has provided powerful glue in joining up policy across and between different Government Departments.

81. The fact that by common consent it is nearing the end of its useful life does not detract from its fine record of achievement to date, nor from the exceptionally high standing it continues to enjoy in scientific and academic circles, both nationally and internationally.

ANNEX A: Terms of reference

To examine the Committee, its methods of operation and effectiveness, including its terms of reference and composition, the openness and transparency of its procedures and the relationships between the Committee and other bodies with related responsibilities. To assess the implementation of the 2002 review recommendations and the current governance structure.

ANNEX B: Questionnaire

Review of SEAC

The purpose of the Review is to decide whether SEAC continues to meet the wider objectives of Government; if so, whether a different model of organisation might be more appropriate; and whether services and functions could be provided more effectively in future.

Questions for interviews

1. In what way does SEAC meet the wider objectives of Government?
 - PSAs, targets
 - Responses to public concern
 - Informing policy
 - Bringing new issues to the table

2. In serving Government what evidence is there of a joined up approach from SEAC?
 - Managing relations across Departmental boundaries (and NDPB/Agency boundaries)
 - Working with the devolved administrations
 - Europe and beyond

3. Is SEAC sufficiently “professional”?
 - Are the right specialisms represented among the membership?
 - Is there scope – and are there mechanisms - for securing expertise from other specialisms not represented among the membership?
 - Do SEAC’s members have sufficient understanding of different specialisms to ensure there is informed debate?

4. Could SEAC's functions be achieved via other organisational options?
 - From within Government
 - From an academic perspective
 - By one or more professional organisations
 - Other

5. How effectively does SEAC operate now?
 - Size of committee
 - Use of subgroups
 - Overseas membership
 - Frequency of meetings
 - Openness
 - Operation of secretariat
 - Implementation of previous review's recommendations
 - Resources and headcount (including shared funding arrangements)

6. Are there ways in which SEAC could fulfil its functions more effectively in future?

7. Any comments on matters not covered above?

ANNEX C: List of those giving evidence (orally or in writing)

Tom Barlow	SEAC Secretariat
Patrick Burke	Defra
Graham Cadwallader	Medical Research Council
Peter Christie	Scottish Government Health Directorate
Adrienne Conroy	FSA
Alison Gleadle	FSA
Peter Grimley	Secretary, SEAC
Professor Chris Higgins	Chair, SEAC & Chair Sheep Subgroup
Professor Nigel Hooper	SEAC member
Peter Jinman	Deputy Chair, SEAC
Fred Landeg	Acting Chief Veterinary Officer, Defra
Diane McCrea	SEAC member
Dr Danny Matthews	VLA
Professor Graham Medley	SEAC member & Chair of CJD Epidemiology Subgroup
Mark Noterman	Department of Health
David Pryer	Chair, CJD Incidents Panel
Kate Richards	Former Secretary, SEAC
Dr John Stephenson	Director of Research and Development, Department of Health
Ailsa Wight	Department of Health
Liz Woodeson	Department of Health