



## Office of Science and Technology

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*From the Chief Scientific Adviser to HM Government and Head of the Office of Science and Technology  
Professor Sir David King KB ScD FRS*

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Sir Tom Blundell  
Chairman  
Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution  
5-8 The Sanctuary  
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London  
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16 April 2003

Dear Tom,

### **RE: RCEP reaction to the GM Science Review**

Thank you for your letter of 19 March letting me know of the Commission's concern that the GM science review is in danger of not responding to public interests and concerns as part of the GM Dialogue process because of its timing relative to that of the Public Debate.

From the time of the initial announcement by Margaret Beckett, the three strands have developed their way forward in close consultation with each other, recognising that good interaction is essential for success. The Public Debate Steering Board, the Science Review Panel and the Strategy Unit have always been clear that their work should be open and transparent, allowing anyone who wishes to be able to make an input.

From the beginning, the science review has publicly recognised the need to take on board public interests and concerns on GM that have a science element which we can address. The science review strongly recognises that the GM public debate is a very deliberative means of engagement with the public, which will enable us to confirm that we are looking at the right issues from the public's point of view. The public debate may well provide additional issues for our consideration or change our scope and emphasis.

The GM Science Review Panel was deliberately constituted with an element of cross membership and Philip Dale sits on both the Science Review Panel and the Public Debate Steering Board. Mechanisms to incorporate public concerns were in place early on in the Panel's activities and an informal working sub group of the Panel comprising Andy Stirling, Phil Dale, Julie Hill (who is of course also Deputy Chair of the AEBC), Michael Reiss and Jules Pretty, was established to take this forward. This has been a key area for discussion by the Panel, as is clear from our papers and minutes. The work published by Corr Willbourn on the outcome of the public debate foundation discussion workshops to assess grass roots concerns has played a central role in the science review process. Our three drafting groups, which feed into the main Panel's deliberations, are working to agreed procedures that include checking against relevant results from the Corr Willbourn work.

The science review was well underway when it became clear that the main elements of the public debate needed to be held later, in the middle of the year, to accommodate the elections in the Devolved Administrations. It was not appropriate to put the review on hold; we would have lost all momentum having issued the invitations, launched the website and scheduled our open meetings. The Science Review Panel therefore agreed that we should propose to opt for the course which you recognise in your letter and, following a first report in June, reconvene the Panel in the autumn to consider the outcomes of the public debate, and their import for the science review. This proposal has now been put to Ministers.

In view of your comments I think it is important to emphasise that the Panel's views will not have been cast. Indeed that is not how I see the science review; we can only take a 'snapshot' at a point in time of what the science is saying, and of what public interests are with a science element to address, and bring them together. By explicitly returning in the

autumn to consider the public debate results, I would hope that we could allay concern that public views are in any way being discounted from the equation. We would of course keep the Panel informed over the summer of developments, including public response to our June report.

The interested public also has the opportunity to engage directly with the science review via the website and the Science Review Panel has been very active in responding to the issues raised by such contributions - bringing lay concerns to expert opinion. This is captured in the minutes and papers of Panel meetings. A series of science review open meetings has provided opportunities for experts and public to enter into public dialogue. Verbatim transcripts of meetings held in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales are available on the website.

Turning to the Strategy Unit study, I know also that the Strategy Unit has reported on a regular basis to the Public Debate Steering Board, and has made considerable use of the Corr Willbourn work in its analysis to date. This has ensured a comprehensive two-way flow of information. For our part, we have been working closely with the Strategy Unit, especially in those areas where there are direct linkages between our work and theirs. Several members of the Science Review Panel also have roles in the Strategy Unit's "expert groups", and others have contributed to seminars hosted by the Strategy Unit as part of their work.

You mentioned the Memorandum of Understanding regarding the interaction of the three strands. I understand the intention is shortly to update this working document and I will ensure this is sent to you as soon as it becomes available.

I am tabling your letter and my response for the Science Review Panel. I also intend to publish our correspondence on the GM science review website. I understand that the Secretary to the Commission is content with this.

I am copying this letter to Malcolm Grant, and also to Ian Coates at the Strategy Unit.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Dave". The letter 'D' is large and loops around the start of the word.

**Professor Sir David King**