
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM - UNITED KINGDOM

The biotechnology sector has already been considered in this respect with an *Action Plan for Biotechnology Clusters* having been announced and a *Genome Valley* report published - both documents highlight the challenges that the UK needs to address in the new millennium, if it is to continue to lead Europe in biotechnology.

Scientific Advice and Restoring Public Confidence in Science

In addition to maintaining excellence in the science base and improving the exploitation of scientific knowledge for competitive advantage, the Government also considers the effective use of scientific advice to be a major priority. Developments in science, particularly in biological sciences, often raise safety, ethical and environmental questions, and therefore the Government needs the best advice available when addressing these issues. Safety is the major concern and regulatory procedures need to be guided by science and reason rather than emotions or pressure groups. The Government attach a great deal of importance to scientific advice - the Chief Scientific Adviser has issued *Guidelines on the Use of Scientific Advice in Policy Making* and a Ministerial Science Group has been established to ensure that these guidelines are adhered to across the board. A Cabinet Sub-Committee on Biotechnology and Genetic Modification has also been set-up, reflecting the importance of scientific advances in this field, and the UK's advisory and regulatory framework for overseeing developments in biotechnology has recently undergone a major review which led to the creation of two new bodies: a *Human Genetics Commission* and an *Agricultural and Environment Biotechnology Commission* to take a broader, long-term view of developments in, and acceptability of, the technology. These bodies will work alongside the soon-to-be established *Food Standards Agency* which will have responsibility for GM food. Openness, transparency, and vigorous debate are considered essential in the scientific advisory process, especially if the public's confidence in science and the regulatory system (which is currently at an all time low in the UK as a result of the recent BSE crisis and GM food scare) is to be restored.

The Government is also increasingly looking at issues related to the public understanding of science and the public perception of new technology. Building on recent consultative exercises on issues such as radioactive waste and developments in the biosciences, the Government is now addressing the role of science, and the scientist, in society and looking at the most efficient ways for both policy makers and scientists to communicate science. Finally, the Council for Science and Technology is currently focusing on methods for helping schools and science teachers improve the quality of, and interest in, science education.

3. Future S&T Directions

To help guide longer-term S&T policy directions the Government is able to call upon its Foresight exercise. Foresight is an interactive, inclusive process which uses vision and partnership to anticipate potential market opportunities and technological trends of the future, and how they will influence the prosperity and cohesion of society. It helps to inform current decisions, and delivers a process for embedding it's findings into areas of policy, education, regulation and legislation. Foresight made good progress in its first five years (94-98) and the new round, launched in April 1999, aims to be even more effective by broadening its focus of activity and participation.