As you may be aware, as part of our ongoing scrutiny of the role of science in government, the Science and Technology Committee recently took evidence from Dr Tim Leunig, the recently appointed Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) to the Department for Education. This session raised some concerns that I wanted to bring to your attention.

Dr Leunig, as you know, currently has two roles at the Department: that of CSA and that of Chief Analyst, a job he shares with a second civil servant. In addition, he told us that he spent approximately two and a half days a week at the London School of Economics, where he is an Associate Professor in Economic History.

Many departmental CSAs split their time between academia and their department, and this arrangement is often very synergistic. However, based on Dr Leunig’s testimony, it would appear that he is able to devote little more than a day a week to his role as CSA. This is at significant variance with the recommendation of the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee that departmental CSAs “should work exclusively in their role as CSA for the equivalent of at least three days a week”. Indeed, Dr Leunig himself acknowledged that the CSA role had proved to be “more time consuming” than he had expected.

Given the various demands on his time, we question whether Dr Leunig will be able to fully meet his responsibilities as departmental CSA. We also worry that this arrangement reflects a failure by the Department to adequately prioritise the role and the provision of scientific advice more generally.

We also have concerns about the way in which Dr Leunig was appointed to the post of CSA. In Dr Leunig’s own words:

When the job of Chief Analyst was advertised, there was a piece in the advert saying, ‘If you would like to be the Chief Scientific Adviser, please say in your application’. I very much wanted to do that, so I ticked the box, so to speak.
We appreciate that there may be parallels between the respective skill sets required for a Chief Analyst and a Chief Scientific Adviser. However, there are also important differences, and the best person for one job will not necessarily be the best person for the other. These roles will also likely appeal to very different audiences, not least because the Chief Analyst role is a full-time Civil Service post and is therefore unlikely to attract working academics.

In effect, therefore, it appears that the role of Chief Scientific Adviser was never openly advertised. We can consequently have little confidence that the person appointed was the “best available person, as judged against the essential criteria for the role”, as required by the Civil Service Commission.

Finally, we have concerns about Dr Leunig’s ability to provide independent policy advice, given his previous role in the Department. As you know, Dr Leunig was, until recently, a senior ministerial adviser; a role in which he would have been closely involved in the policy formation process. As CSA, his core responsibility is to “ensure that departmental policies and decisions are informed by the best science and engineering evidence“. In some cases, this may involve challenging pre-existing policies and, as Sir Mark Walport, the Government CSA, acknowledged, this requires a degree of independence.

According to Sir Mark, it was recognised at the time of Dr Leunig’s appointment that “being a ministerial adviser as well [as CSA] was not appropriate” and Dr Leunig has now given up this former role. However, many of the policies on which he advised are presumably still in place. We therefore question his ability to offer independent challenge to these policies. We are also disappointed to note that Dr Leunig appears to have continued in this policy role for several months following his appointment as CSA in March.

The role of departmental CSA is an extremely demanding and important one. In light of our comments, I hope that you will reassess whether or not the Department is being best-served by current arrangements and will ensure that a more appropriate recruitment process is in place for future appointments.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Miller  
Chair