

meant it was more challenging for SAGE participants and the secretariat to hold an oversight of the areas where SAGE might expect to be asked for advice.

20. There was a consensus that the establishment of a dedicated commissioning team within the SAGE secretariat, and a single interface point in the C-19 group, improved the coordination of commissions across the SAGE landscape. A further step that might be useful would be to provide induction training and support to policy customers of SAGE to help familiarise themselves with SAGE processes and become 'smarter' customers.

21. The model of policy customers asking specific questions of SAGE through a structured commissioning process was felt to be a clear one. It was noted that that this should not be an overly prescriptive process – the best questions come from close dialogue between policymakers, SAGE participants and the secretariat to set clear expectations on the science and to manage out any unhelpful ambiguities. Self-commissioning was also noted as an important aspect of the SAGE process. There is significant value in SAGE being able to identify issues or concerns and bring them to the attention of policy customers.

Science versus operational questions

22. Across policy customers and SAGE participants, there was consensus that the line between science advice and advice on operational issues had sometimes become blurred. This led to SAGE sometimes being asked to advise on matters that were more operational in scope, for example, in relation to environmental transmission and the science behind mitigating risks.

Feedback loops

23. In the initial phase of the response, there was a clear mechanism for feedback between policy customers and SAGE on how advice had been acted upon. The GCSA and CMO were able to feedback to the group directly through twice weekly SAGE meetings.

24. As the response grew in complexity, both in terms of Whitehall structures and the numbers of academic experts involved in SAGE and its subgroups, feedback became harder to cascade through the system. Clear feedback on how their advice was used did not always reach the academic experts. This made it more challenging for them to provide science advice that was based on a full understanding of the context. It also impacted motivation as SAGE and subgroup participants were not seeing the impact of their work.

25. There is a balance to be struck. While policy is in development it may not always be appropriate to provide feedback to external experts. It is also the case that not every piece of advice SAGE produced was used in ministerial decision points but may have been used for wider situational awareness. Nonetheless, there was a clear point about the value of regular and timely feedback to support SAGE and subgroup participants to give the best advice and feel that they are having an impact.