Report

Royal Geographical Society with IBG

Advancing geography and geographical learning

Making the case for geography

The Society working effectively to influence policy

Advocacy for geography is an essential part of the Society's work as the learned society and professional body for the discipline. We do this in many ways, from working quietly with key contacts behind the scenes to lobbying more overtly.

With the current pressure on public funds, especially cuts in higher education funding, combined with a new approach to education and curriculum review from the coalition government, we anticipate that 2011 will be as busy as 2010 has been.

The importance of geography at school needs to be continually reinforced to head teachers and policy-makers – all young people should understand the changing world around them and be aware of how geography helps prepare them for work and life. Similarly we want to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to be inspired and enthused through fieldwork, hopefully triggering a life-long interest in learning through first-hand experience of places and landscapes.

In 2010, the Society's Vice-President for Education, Barnaby Lenon, and Director have been involved in discussions with the Schools Minister and the Secretary of State for Education. We were delighted to see our call for a renewed focus on the importance of up-to-date subject knowledge being incorporated into the new Ofsted inspection framework for school geography and our dialogue with government about the geography curriculum and fieldwork at school is ongoing.

In higher education and research we work hard to make the case for geography to be properly supported with funding and opportunity. This is to ensure that geographical knowledge of our world continues to advance and that the UK produces graduates with the geographical skills and knowledge needed by the UK and sought by employers, including those in geographic information systems (GIS).

In early 2010 the Society made a successful case to the Higher Education Funding Council for England for geography to be classed as a part-STEM subject, recognising the scientific nature of physical geography. Some additional funds were made available as a result. In the coming months, funding for both teaching at university and for research will again be evaluated, for geography along with all other subjects, as resources are squeezed.

The Society's first response to the current round of pressures in higher education, aside from maintaining its regular dialogue with decision-makers, has been to demonstrate the impact of contemporary geographical research. This impact, detailed through case studies, shows how geographers are helping to address some key environmental, social, and economic challenges faced by the UK, while also saving public money, improving quality of life, and shaping government policy. Geographers have provided research evidence to government that has led to the development of more cost-efficient solutions.

The case studies include Professor John Thornes, University of Birmingham, who developed new technologies for monitoring ice on roads which are making roads and transport safer, while also saving money for councils and tax payers by helping to better target road salting. A second, featuring the work of Professor Brian Robson, University of Manchester, demonstrates how he has shaped the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG)'s 'Regeneration Framework', helping local

authorities to identify more accurately which particular areas are in greatest need of financial assistance or different types of intervention and make better use of their scarce financial resources.

Other case studies show how geographers have provided research evidence to government that has led to the development of more cost-efficient approaches to flood management, reducing the human and financial cost of future flood events; developed systematic information about local areas from census data, thereby assisting central government, local authorities, businesses and communities to make more informed decisions and policies on matters relating to population numbers, distributions and characteristics; developed more accurate ways to measure the internal migration of ethnic minorities, assisting planners and policy makers in decision making about the delivery of services and promoting integration and addressing social tensions; and have aided urban regeneration and improved local environmental quality by providing river managers and the Environment Agency with new techniques for the restoration of urban rivers.