

# Scientific Advice Mechanism

# Communications

# strategy 2022-2024

## Background and scope

This document is the communications strategy for the European Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism (hereafter 'the SAM').

This is a product of the project Scientific Advice for Policy by European Academies (hereafter 'SAPEA'), which is Horizon Europe project 101070776. It is deliverable 3.1 ('Plan for D&E&C activities') mentioned in the SAPEA grant agreement.

Although this is formally a SAPEA deliverable, the scope of this document is the entirety of the SAM, including both SAPEA and the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors (hereafter 'the Advisors'). This is because the SAPEA grant agreement requires SAPEA to "disseminate and promote the work of the Group" as well as to communicate about the work of its own working groups, and in doing so, to work "in coordination with the secretariat supporting the Group", namely Unit RTD.03 Science Policy, Advice and Ethics, hereafter 'the Unit'. The contents of this document are therefore endorsed by both the SAPEA Board and the Advisors, and the tasks described in it are carried out by staff (primarily communications staff) in both SAPEA and the Unit. Hence, in this document, the terms "communications staff" and "communications team" are used interchangeably to refer to all team members responsible for communications across both the Unit and SAPEA.

SAPEA is funded under the European Union's Horizon programme. The first round of funding under Horizon 2020 was 2016–2022; the second round of funding under Horizon Europe is from 1 May 2022 until 31 December 2024. In the present document, these two periods of SAPEA's existence are referred to as 'SAPEA 1' and 'SAPEA 2' respectively. The period covered by this document is 2022–2024, which coincides with SAPEA 2.

## Key concepts

As a communications strategy, this document lays out a hierarchy of objectives, audiences, messages and activities. These are defined, and structured in relationship to each other, as follows:

0. *[General objectives: The overall impact that the SAM wants to have, not just in communications. — Defined in the SAPEA grant agreement, in the work of the Advisors and the Unit.]*
1. **Communications objectives:** The impact that SAM wants to achieve in its communications; a subset and elaboration of the above.
2. **Audiences:** The people and organisations with whom SAM will communicate in order to achieve the objectives.
3. **Messages:** The information, concepts and attitudes that SAM wants the audiences to acquire, to contribute to the objectives.
4. **Activities:** The individual pieces of work that SAM will undertake in order for the audiences to acquire the messages.

# Authors and contributors

This document was drafted by **Toby Wardman**, based on input and ideas from many people.

Special thanks are due to **Cécile Maréchal** for preparing the draft strategy for RTD.03 which substantially influenced this document. Other contributors who have improved this draft both in writing and through discussion include (in alphabetical order):

- **Alessandro Allegra** (Policy Officer, European Commission)
- **Nicole Grobert** (Chair, Group of Chief Scientific Advisors)
- **Rudi Hielscher** (Coordinator, SAPEA)
- **Gilles Laroche** (Head of Unit, RTD.03)
- **Antonio Loprieno** (Chair of SAPEA board, President of ALLEA)
- **Maarja Kruusma** (Group of Chief Scientific Advisors)
- **Nebojsa Nakicenovic** (Deputy Chair, Group of Chief Scientific Advisors)
- **Agnieszka Pietruczuk** (Communications Manager, SAPEA)
- **Jacques Verraes** (Deputy Head of Unit, RTD.03)
- **Sarah Via** (Digital Communications Officer, SAPEA)

# Table of contents

Background and scope.....	1
Key concepts.....	1
Authors and contributors.....	2
<b>Objectives.....</b>	<b>4</b>
List of objectives.....	4
A note on policy impact.....	4
<b>Audiences.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Messages.....</b>	<b>7</b>
Topic-based communications.....	7
Non-topic-based communications.....	7
Understanding messages.....	8
<b>Prioritisation of activities.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Resources.....</b>	<b>10</b>
Staff.....	10
Budget.....	10
<b>List of activities and indicators.....</b>	<b>11</b>
SAM events.....	11
Third-party events.....	11
Website.....	12
Social media.....	12
Editorial media.....	12
Newsletter.....	12
Podcast.....	13
Publications.....	13
<b>Brand.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Voice.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Strategic approach and conceptual issues.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Quality.....	16
Timing and the ‘big bang’.....	16
Serve audiences, not ourselves.....	17
Geography and language.....	17
Expert leadership.....	17
Uncertainties and limitations.....	18
Advocacy, controversy and political positions.....	18
Disagreement between SAM outputs.....	19
<b>Operational relationship between the Unit and SAPEA.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Appendix: Definitions and conceptual clarifications.....</b>	<b>22</b>

# Objectives

## List of objectives

The SAM has five broad communications objectives:

1. To disseminate the SAM's outputs<sup>1</sup>
2. To strengthen the impact of the SAM's work on policymaking
3. To raise awareness and understanding of the SAM
4. To improve the quality of debate on the role of scientific evidence in policy and society
5. To raise awareness that EU policy is underpinned by robust evidence

The varied nature of these objectives illustrates the breadth of the challenge that the SAM communications team faces. They incorporate:

- traditional science communication activities, communicating and disseminating the SAM's scientific outputs (Objective 1)
- fostering policy uptake, a task which in other organisations is usually in the remit of a policy or advocacy team rather than communications (Objective 2)
- traditional public engagement activities, improving public awareness of science-for-policy (Objective 4)
- traditional PR activities, promoting positive perceptions among target audiences (Objectives 3 and 5)

## A note on policy impact

Objective 2 is focused on policy impact. This objective is not unique to communications; it is also shared by other parts of the SAM, especially:

- SAPEA's work package 2, through producing high-quality and timely evidence review reports
- the work of the Advisors, through producing high-quality and timely scientific opinions
- the work of the Unit, facilitating the dissemination of scientific opinions and the associated evidence review reports within the Commission

On the SAPEA side, while policy impact is clearly a major dimension of work which is extensively described in the grant agreement, this work is actually not allocated to the communications team (work package 3). The only mention of policy impact under work package 3 is a mention of "policymakers" as one possible audience for general outreach activities.

By contrast, this strategy — which covers the entire SAM, not just SAPEA — specifically allocates policy impact work to the communications teams, and strongly emphasises the value of communications activities in strengthening policy impact. This corresponds in particular to the work of the Unit, for which this is one of the central objectives of communications activities.

---

<sup>1</sup> The SAM's 'outputs' are primarily evidence review reports and scientific opinions. See the appendix to this document for a more careful definition.

# Audiences

The table below describes how to prioritise among the SAM's audiences, and which audiences relate to each of the objectives. For each objective, 'core' audiences are those for which communication activities are essential to achieving that objective, while 'further' audiences are those for which communication activities may help to achieve the objective indirectly or in a less pronounced way.

Objectives \ Audiences	1. To disseminate the SAM's outputs	2. To strengthen the impact of the SAM's work on EU policymaking	3. To raise awareness and understanding of the SAM	4. To improve the quality of debate on the role of scientific evidence in policy and society	5. To raise awareness that EU policy is underpinned by robust evidence
<b>Commissioners and cabinets</b>	<b>Core:</b> awareness and access to outputs among Commission audiences is essential to maximise policy uptake				
<b>Staff in Commission directorates-general</b>					
<b>MEPs and intergroups</b>	<b>Further:</b> MEPs (especially committees and rapporteurs) and ministers (especially in the Council) are co-legislators in the EU legislative process and can therefore benefit from access to SAM outputs, but they also have their own sources of science advice and are not our main target			<b>Further:</b> MEPs can be champions of evidence-informed policymaking and provide a possible route to interacting with citizens	
<b>Council working parties</b>					
<b>Member state ministers</b>					
<b>Other policymakers (regional, municipal, global)</b>	<b>Further:</b> although these policymakers can benefit from SAM outputs in their own work, they are not our main target				
<b>Academies</b>	<b>Core:</b> access of the scientific community to SAM outputs is essential for these to contribute to ongoing research and scholarship		<b>Core:</b> awareness from academies is essential to success of SAPEA and hence the SAM	<b>Further:</b> the scientific community rarely needs convincing of the importance of evidence-informed policymaking, but it can be a useful champion among citizens and policymakers at member state level, as well as important strategic partners for SAM communications	
<b>Scientific community</b>					
<b>Science advice community</b>			<b>Further:</b> positioning the SAM as an important player in the science advice community is strategically important		
<b>Other stakeholders</b>	<b>Core:</b> some stakeholders can be an important secondary route to disseminate the SAM's outputs to citizens and other stakeholders	<b>Core:</b> stakeholders can be an important secondary route to promote the SAM's outputs and strengths to relevant policymakers		<b>Further:</b> stakeholders can be influential advocates of the role of scientific evidence with other audiences	
<b>Citizens</b>	<b>Further:</b> awareness of topics and evidence is a valuable end in itself		<b>Further:</b> specific knowledge of the SAM among citizens is not strategically important but can support other objectives	<b>Core:</b> raising the quality of debate among citizens is a valuable end in itself	<b>Core:</b> citizens who are well informed about policy processes are a requirement for a healthy democracy

In the table, 'other stakeholders' means any organisations whose activities overlap with any part of the SAM's work, whether on a specific scientific topic or more generally. This includes, for instance, civil society organisations, industry and business groups, advocacy and lobby organisations, and professional associations.

To summarise the content of the table above:

- **Communications with policymakers** should focus on raising awareness of the SAM and its work, and strengthening the impact of the SAM's work on policymaking. All policy audiences are valid, but Commission audiences (including staff at all levels as well as Commissioners themselves) are a specific priority in order to achieve the SAM's objectives.
- **Communications with the scientific community** should focus on disseminating the SAM's outputs, and (for academies) raising awareness of the SAM itself to maintain awareness and participation in SAPEA. Academies are also an important partner for activities and can bring debates about the role of evidence into member states.
- **Communications with the science advice community** should focus on building awareness and relationships with the SAM as a prominent actor at the science-policy interface, and as a contributor to the cutting edge of debates and best practice in science advice.
- **Communications with other stakeholders and citizens** should focus on the role of evidence in society and raising awareness of the role of scientific evidence in EU policymaking. Topic-specific communications activities can also target relevant civil society organisations as an end in itself or as a route to citizens.

# Messages

Messages are the facts and impressions that we want our audience to retain after they are exposed to our communications.

The various ways in which messages are communicated through specific activities are described in part 3 of this strategy. They divide broadly into topic-based and non-topic-based communications (although many activities which are primarily focused on communicating topic messages can also provide an opportunity to communicate non-topic-based messages).

## Topic-based communications

For the SAM's topic-based communications (which form large parts of Objectives 1 and 2), messages will be defined per topic. For this purpose, for each topic the SAM will:

- collectively consult with experts (Advisors, working group members) and colleagues in academy networks to understand the messages that are most relevant for the topic, differentiating where necessary by audience
- generate a bank of messages, approved by the experts, which can be used in a variety of communications activities without constant recourse to the experts
- working with the experts and colleagues in academy networks, proactively identify risks and potential controversies in communicating the topic, and agree our responses ('lines to take') if these arise
- continue to involve the experts themselves in communications activities wherever possible, so they can communicate the messages directly (providing advice and training on doing this when requested)

For guidance in the event that a common set of key messages is impossible, see 'Disagreement between SAM outputs', later in this document.

## Non-topic-based communications

For the SAM's non-topic-based communications, a stable set of messages will be used, corresponding to all five objectives.

Beyond this, key messages are differentiated by audience. For EU policymakers, the key messages are:

- Science and evidence matter in EU policymaking.
- The SAM provides a high-quality and useful evidence base to support democratic debate, which is a key European value.
- The SAM's advice is based on the best available scientific evidence.
- The Advisors and SAPEA are independent.
- The SAM's advice engages with major global challenges, especially on complex systemic issues relevant to the EU's long-term strategic goals.
- The SAM's advice has an impact.

For other policymakers (national, regional, local, global):

- Science and evidence matter at all levels of policymaking.
- The SAM provides a high-quality and useful evidence base to support democratic debate.
- The SAM's advice engages with major global challenges, especially on complex systemic issues which are faced at every level of political decision-making.
- The SAM's advice is based on the best available scientific evidence.
- The Advisors and SAPEA are independent.

For academia:

- The SAM produces high-quality, academically rigorous evidence review reports and scientific opinions reflecting the best available scientific evidence.
- The whole scientific community is involved in the work of the SAM, via academy-nominated experts in SAPEA working groups and via SAPEA's thorough review of academic literature.

For the science advice community:

- The SAM is an established and significant player in the European and global science advice community.
- The SAM is at the cutting edge of debates and best practice in science advice.
- The SAM is a positive and prestigious partner for global science advice activities.

For civil society and citizens:

- Science and evidence matter in policymaking.
- Scientific advice can inform and improve the quality of public debates, especially on controversial issues and those that are pressing in society.
- The EU's policymaking process is strengthened by the fact that it is informed by high-quality scientific advice.
- The advice that informs EU policymaking is based on the best available scientific evidence.
- The Advisors and SAPEA are independent.

## Understanding messages

Many of the messages defined above refer to a particular attitude towards the work of the SAM in the minds of audiences. The aim is for this attitude to be both well-informed and positive, in support of the general work of the SAM, which relies on a positive view from key stakeholders.

However, it is important to understand that defining a message does not necessarily mean that we are defining the *content* of our communications, only their intended *outcome* in the minds of the audience. Sometimes these two coincide, as with topic-based communications: for instance, if one of our messages for a particular topic is "Many biodegradable plastics only bring environmental benefits as part of a well-managed industrial composting system", then we might include exactly those words in a press release or brochure, paraphrase them for a social media post, or use them to inform an image or infographic.

But on other occasions, these two do not coincide. This is also the case with non-topic-related messages, where it is generally better to *demonstrate* the message than to *state* it. For instance, if one message is "the SAM is an established and significant player in the European and global science advice community", simply boasting to an audience about SAM's importance is unlikely to be very effective in bringing about that attitude in the audience's minds. It is likely to be more effective to communicate that message implicitly: to organise and advertise high-quality events, to attract and interact with high-level contributors and partners, to provide services that are useful to audiences, to prominently discuss current issues in science advice, and so on. This way, audiences acquire an accurate and positive impression organically through their own judgement, without having their attention drawn to the message's obviously self-serving nature.

In other words, messages which express positive sentiments about the SAM will usually be implicit in the SAM's communications, and rarely stated explicitly.



# Prioritisation of activities

SAM communications resources are limited, and its ambitions as laid out in this strategy are considerable. Many options and opportunities for effective communications activities will continue to present themselves. Therefore, in both topic-based and non-topic-based activities, we must be realistic about what we can achieve, and prioritise very carefully.

Prioritising activities must be done topic by topic and period by period, in consultation not only with communications colleagues but with our experts and other colleagues in the SAM. Therefore the role of this strategy is simply to specify the criteria which should be used, namely:

- **Fit to objectives.** Which activities align more closely with objectives? And which should be disregarded because they are not closely enough aligned?
- **Capacity for quality.** Which activities can be delivered best, to the highest standards? And which should be disregarded because there are insufficient resources or time to deliver them to a high enough standard?
- **Audience breadth.** What spread of activities on this topic or in this period will reach the broadest range of relevant audiences? And which others should be disregarded because they re-target the same or similar audiences as others?

In making these decisions, communications staff will apply the following principles:

- **Zoom out.** Don't consider each activity in isolation, because every candidate will probably target at least one relevant audience or meet one relevant objective. Instead, take the wider view: across all our planned activities, have the planned activities ticked every box at least once (for both audiences and objectives)? Which audiences or objectives are under- or over-represented? This wider view might be across a single topic or even multiple topics: for instance, if one topic lends itself to a lot of internal policy communication, another should emphasise civil society and citizens.
- **Kill your darlings.** Prioritising means not only selecting some activities but discarding others. The activities that are discarded might be extremely interesting, but they are not pursued in the end because others better meet the criteria.

The prioritisation process — with its direct reference to objectives and its zoomed-out view across topics — must be done strategically and not case-by-case. For this reason, prioritisation decisions must be made at the appropriate organisational level. For communications activities, this means at the level of the combined communications team, including both Unit and SAPEA representatives.

# Resources

## Staff

SAPEA has a team of three full-time staff dedicated to communications:

- **Head of Communications:** overseeing team management, strategy, external relations and non-topic-related communications)
- **Communications Manager:** overseeing topic-based communications
- **Communications Officer:** responsible for digital communications and work with the editorial media

Additionally, each academy network in SAPEA has one full-time Scientific Policy Officer who manages all aspects of the delivery of each topic allocated to that network on the SAPEA side. This includes contributing to both planning and delivering topic-related communications activities.

The Unit has two part-time staff dedicated to communications. In addition to these resources, colleagues in the Commission (RTD.02) can provide web, graphic design, audiovisual, social media, editorial and translation services as well as coordinating press releases and media relations. The communication unit also provides internal communication services that can be used to represent the SAM inside the Commission.

## Budget

SAPEA allocates a budget of around 15 000€ for all communications activities related to a particular topic. For non-topic-related communications activities, an overall budget of 68 000€ is allocated for the duration of SAPEA 2, which is also required to cover all eligible ongoing non-staff costs related to communications activities (work package 3).

The Unit's budget (under administrative expenditures) covers the organisation of high-level conferences on the science advice ecosystem (not more than one every two years) for a budget of up to 200 000€ per conference. It also covers sending experts to external conferences for around 15 000€ per year. The costs of the services provided by RTD.02 are separately covered.

# List of activities and indicators

The range of communication activities open to the SAM is very wide, and there is no doubt that new types of activities will arise in the future and old ones will become obsolete, as technologies and priorities shift, or as the result of evaluation and improvement.

For these reasons, it is not the purpose of this strategy to provide a definitive list of all possible activity types. Instead, the list below simply reviews the kinds of activities which have been used to date and which are mentioned in the SAPEA grant agreement, and lists impact indicators relative to the objectives and audiences defined in this strategy.

## SAM events

Events organised by the SAM, or co-organised by SAM with academies and other partners, have always been a cornerstone of its communications work and should continue to be so.

Quantitative indicators	Target 2022–2024
Number of events we organise	Reporting only
Number of events we co-organise with academies	
Number of events we co-organise with other parts of the scientific community	
Number of speakers broken down by audience category, gender, geographical origin and EMCR status	
Audience size and categories ( <i>recorded only where possible, e.g. where resources allow</i> )	Policymakers: 30% Academia: 30% Science advice community: 20% Civil society and citizens: 20%

Qualitative indicators
Description of event
Evidence that non-SAM speakers value or use SAM outputs
Quality (measured via structured evaluation e.g. participant testimonials; otherwise via assessment of colleagues) ( <i>recorded only where possible, e.g. where resources allow</i> )

## Third-party events

Beyond our own events, the SAM seeks out opportunities for its speakers to participate in events organised by others. These may include policy and stakeholder events, academic conferences, industry events, political events, and others.

Quantitative indicators	Target 2022–2024
Number of events we participate in	Reporting only
Audience size and categories ( <i>recorded only where possible, e.g. where resources allow</i> )	Reporting only

Qualitative indicators
Description of event
Nature of our participation
Evidence that non-SAM speakers value or use SAM outputs

## Website

For clarity of communication, search engine optimisation, and ease of maintenance, the SAM will have a single public website.

Where parts of the SAM have their own web presences elsewhere, such as a page on the Commission site or a separate SAPEA page, these will be minimal and always provide both a prominent explanation of the role of the part in the SAM as a whole, and a prominent link to the main the SAM website.

Quantitative indicators	Target 2022–2024
Number of unique visitors	100 000
Average time spent on site	Reporting only
Google ranking for a range of relevant search terms	Reporting only

## Social media

The SAM's social media is a very important part of its communications activities. Social media makes it possible to reach broader audiences, respond at short notice to developments, monitor and participate in conversations among relevant communities, and record a range of statistics about the impact of our communications.

Quantitative indicators	Target 2022–2024
Number of posts	Twitter: 1000 tweets LinkedIn: 350 posts Youtube: 100 new videos
Reach	Twitter: not recorded LinkedIn: 60 000 impressions YouTube: ~16 000 views
Audience engagement	Twitter: 23 000 engagements LinkedIn: 2500 clicks YouTube: not recorded
Number of followers/subscribers	Twitter: 1000 followers LinkedIn: 1000 followers YouTube: 250 subscribers

Qualitative indicators
Type of content shared

## Editorial media

To date, the SAM has had limited structured engagement with the editorial media (a category that includes printed newspapers and magazines of all kinds, as well as online outlets). The period 2022–2024 is a relatively short one, and developing editorial media engagement is a long process. On the other hand, science and science advice are likely to remain prominent in the public debate, topics on which we have a strong offering and authoritative voice. Therefore, the SAM will begin to develop and expand its editorial media engagement in the period 2022–2024.

Quantitative indicators	Target 2022–2024
Number of mentions of the SAM	Reporting only
Reach ( <i>recorded only where possible, e.g. where resources allow</i> )	Reporting only
Type of publications	Reporting only

Qualitative indicators
Tone of mentions
Topic/area of interest of mentions

## Newsletter

The SAM will have a single newsletter combining both the Advisors and SAPEA.

Quantitative indicators	Target 2022–2024
Number of subscribers	2200
Percentage opened	50%

## Podcast

The Science for Policy podcast targets a specific audience of science advice professionals, science advice researchers and interested amateurs.

Quantitative indicators	Target 2022–2024
Number of downloads/listens/subscriptions	Podcast platforms: 9000 YouTube: 2000
Number of guests	none
Professional role of guests	Policymakers: 5% Advisors or officials: 30% Academics: 50% Others: 15%
Country of origin of guests	Non-widening EU: 35% Widening EU: 20% Non-EU Europe: 20% US: 15% Other: 10%
Location of audience	Non-widening EU: 35% Widening EU: 5% Non-EU Europe: 20% US: 15% Other: 25%

Qualitative indicators
Responsiveness of prospective guests to approach
Familiarity of relevant audiences with podcast
Testimonials from listeners/reviewers

## Publications

To date, the SAM has published various documents:

- **Science advice products:** primarily scientific opinions and evidence review reports, but also systematic literature reviews, policy landscape reviews and so on
- **SAM promotional materials:** for instance, the SAPEA leaflet
- **Topic promotional materials:** leaflets, factsheets, ‘citizen summaries’
- **Custom promotional materials:** for instance, colouring sheets linked to specific topics
- **Reports and procedural documents:** for instance, SAPEA QA guidelines, Advisors’ review of impact

Quantitative indicators	Target 2022–2024
Number of downloads or copies taken	Reporting only

# Brand

During the period of 2023–2024, we will combine the SAPEA and Advisors' brands into one common 'Scientific Advice Mechanism' brand. The details of the rebranding process will be planned and delivered by the communications team, which will produce a separate plan laying out the steps to achieve this.

Once the transition to a common brand is complete, SAM communications in the first instance will no longer use the separate brands of SAPEA and the Advisors, but instead adopt a common brand, 'Scientific Advice Mechanism to the European Commission'. This common brand will be co-owned by SAPEA and the Unit.

Concretely, adopting a common brand will lead to the following changes:

- a single SAM website which describes our work holistically, explaining the respective roles of evidence synthesis by SAPEA and policy recommendations by the Advisors
- a single SAM brand on social media, replacing the existing SAPEA channels
- communications with the editorial media branded SAM (and not SAPEA, Advisors or European Commission in the first instance)
- signage and display materials branded SAM (and not SAPEA, Advisors or European Commission in the first instance)
- the visual appearance of SAM publications to include a common graphical or textual element indicating that they are a product of the SAM (the publications themselves will not change, and their independence from one another will be emphasised by other elements of the visual design)
- when staff and experts interact with external organisations or speak in public, they present themselves as representing the SAM in the first instance
- when we are asked to contribute a logo or acknowledgement to third-party events, this will be a SAM visual device and not a SAPEA, Advisors or European Commission one
- the Science for Policy podcast will become a the SAM production rather than a SAPEA one

The phrase "in the first instance" means that the *headline* brand will be SAM (and not SAPEA, Advisors or European Commission): in other words, the SAM will have one name, one unified voice and one visual identity. But this does not mean that the existence of its parts will be concealed or glossed over. On the contrary, when explaining the SAM, the different roles of the various parts will continue to be a prominent part of the explanation.

Additionally, for some audiences which are already familiar with our work, communications activities may continue to give more prominence to one of the parts of the SAM above the other. In these cases, the relationship between the part and the whole will be specified. These decisions can be made on a case-by-case basis by agreement between colleagues on both sides. For instance:

- when SAPEA communicates with academies and networks, the brand 'SAPEA' might still be used, augmented with 'part of the European Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism' in formal contexts
- when the Unit or the Advisors communicate with policymakers inside the European Commission, the brand 'Group of Chief Scientific Advisors' might still be used, again augmented with 'part of the European Commission's Scientific Advice Mechanism' in formal contexts

# Voice

Voice is not what is said, but how it is said — the style and register of language.

The SAM's voice should be:

1. **clear and direct**, to convey messages effectively. Note that what counts as 'clear' will be different for different audiences; one man's jargon is another man's vernacular. However, the aim is always to communicate messages, never to teach people jargon; terms unfamiliar to the audience are avoided unless they are vital to communicate a concept
2. **friendly and neutral**, rather than combative or polemical, to reflect the SAM's independence and appeal to audiences
3. **confident and assured**, to convey the SAM's position as a source of high-quality scientific evidence
4. **never formal and stuffy**, no matter what the audience. Even when communicating with experts and policymakers, we can stand out from many other voices they are exposed to by making an effort to speak directly and informally

The above four principles are presented in rough order of priority. In other words, communications will always be clear and direct, no matter what; they will be friendly and neutral so far as this is consistent with the demands of clarity and directness; and so on.

# Strategic approach and conceptual issues

## Quality

The high quality of the SAM's scientific outputs is an important element of its key messages to all audiences.

However, many audiences will not closely study the SAM's scientific outputs, and instead interact with the SAM largely through communications activities. So it is vital that communications activities are also of high quality, so as to convey directly the overall quality of our work.

## Timing and the 'big bang'

In topic-based communications, it appears easiest to focus efforts on the moment when the SAM's advice is published (and handed over to the European Commission), and the weeks and months immediately following it, in a so-called 'big bang' of publicity which then subsides after some months. This is unavoidable for several reasons:

- **Launch prominence.** The launch and publication of a piece of advice is newsworthy in itself, providing an opportunity to promote it especially to the editorial media. Scientific advice is often most relevant to external audiences when it is first delivered.
- **Best-before dates.** In some domains, scientific evidence dates quickly: what was cutting edge one year might be out-of-date a year or two later.
- **Resource limitations.** The more past topics are included in communications activities, the smaller the share of finite resources (both financial and staff) that can be dedicated to each topic.
- **Attention limitations and cumulative weight.** Communications staff have to turn their attention to each new topic that arises, and cannot continue to monitor and contribute to ongoing public debates on an ever-growing list of topics that never die.
- **Availability of experts.** Past working group members and former Advisors cannot be expected to make themselves available indefinitely for communications activities.

So there will inevitably be a burst of activity following the launch of a new topic, and this will inevitably lessen as time passes. But the big disadvantage of this is that it expects audiences to be receptive to messages at a time that suits the sender, rather than at a time that suits the audience. In fact, in order to achieve its objectives, the SAM's communications should try align with to audience needs and interests, rather than being guided entirely by its own. (See also the next section, 'Serve audiences, not ourselves'.) Therefore, communications staff will try to address these disadvantages in the following ways:

- **Horizon scanning.** When planning communications activities for a topic, staff will work to identify opportunities in the more distant future to communicate about it, for instance by looking at upcoming policy proposals and cycles of third-party events, and plan accordingly, deferring activities and reserving budget if necessary.
- **Topic packages.** Over time, the SAM will develop communications activities which are not specific to a single topic, but which rather package together several topics on related themes. Not only will this allow the SAM to extract extra value from past topics, but it will also help to develop a narrative about ongoing work in broader areas such as sustainability, food, and so on.
- **Reserve fund.** Communications staff will set aside part of the communications budget for each topic to be spent in response to opportunities that arise after the 'big bang' period, for instance to attend major events or pay for social media advertising in response to developments in the public debate.
- **Self-propelled communications.** Communications staff will seek ways to give topics a life of their own, including by building long-term relationships with (and providing initial support to) organisations who have a permanent focus on these topics, and can continue to use the SAM's outputs beyond the period when the SAM itself can actively promote them. This approach will form an important part of our planning on each topic.



# Serve audiences, not ourselves

As in every organisation, the SAM's communications activities are fundamentally self-interested. The SAM is the 'sender': it has identified the objectives it wants to achieve, the audiences it wants to target, and the messages it wants them to receive.

However, audiences have their own needs and priorities, their own preferred means of communication and their own ongoing conversations on relevant topics. They will be receptive to our messages only if they see the relevance and value for them. Therefore, when planning activities, it is important for the sender to think not only 'what do we want to communicate?' but 'how can we contribute this communication into our audience's ongoing conversation', and 'how can we make it demonstrably of value to them?'

Sometimes the answer will be clear. The SAM's messages on a particular scientific topic are likely to be valuable in themselves, for instance, to an audience of academics who work on that area, or to the policymaking staff who requested the SAM's input in the first place. For other audiences, such as MEPs, careful consideration of their current agenda is needed to identify the best timing and relevance, and the expertise of the Unit is vital here.

## Geography and language

Some of the SAM's audiences are clearly localised: for instance, the best place to address EU policymakers is usually Brussels (or one of a small list of other options) and the best language is generally English. However, other audiences are spread across Europe, with no single privileged location or language. This is especially true for civil society audiences and citizens, but academic audiences are also geographically widely spread, even where English is a more convenient language.

SAPEA and the Unit do not have staff or financial resources to undertake communications directly with audiences in every member state and every language for every activity, or even every topic. Instead, the following approaches will be adopted:

- **Overall spread.** In common with SAPEA's strategy of diversity, the SAM will ensure a good spread of geographical locations for events and other localised activities, paying particular attention to widening countries as defined in Horizon Europe, to counterbalance the tendency towards non-widening countries. Success will be evaluated across all our work during the period 2022–2024, rather than per activity or per topic.
- **Ad-hoc translations.** For specific activities targeting audiences for whom English is not a convenient language (especially civil society and citizens), and on the occasions that it is practically possible, communications staff will arrange ad-hoc translations of some materials.
- **Partners and intermediaries.** Wherever possible, communications activities will involve partners who are geographically closer to our audiences and can potentially help with translation. On the SAPEA side, individual academics are valuable partners. For relations with the editorial media, international and national press agencies (which work in English) are valuable, and for specific topics it can be productive to collaborate with the press offices of universities and institutes where SAPEA working group members are employed.

## Expert leadership

The SAM's topic-related communications have always benefited greatly when experts — both Advisors and working group members — play an active role in planning and delivering them. This is not just because they offer expertise on the content, but also because it is of great value to have a human face for a communications activity, rather than speaking as an abstract entity. Experts are also free to respond to challenges and develop arguments beyond the strict confines of the SAM's outputs, where the SAM as an entity is not able to do so.

For these reasons, while the SAM communications team will lead on the delivery of our communications activities, it will continue to be expert-led in its content and (whenever possible) in the faces it presents to the outside world. The communications team will provide opportunities for experts to jointly prepare their communications approaches for each topic.

# Uncertainties and limitations

Uncertainty is an intrinsic feature of scientific endeavour. As a result, the topic-related scientific messages that feature in the SAM's scientific outputs will always incorporate a degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty is particularly marked for communications for topics where:

- the evidence base is limited or has not yet been well researched
- there is disagreement among experts about what the evidence means
- there is controversy in wider society, making even small uncertainties highly relevant to communication

Because of the nature of the SAM's work at the boundary of emerging science and realtime policymaking, uncertainty is a central feature of many of its topics, and indeed uncertainties are always described in detail in SAPEA evidence review reports.

Somewhat ironically, there is no general consensus among science communication professionals about how to communicate scientific uncertainty and associated limitations most effectively. However, some key principles are consistently featured in recent work on the topic, including in SAPEA's own work.<sup>2</sup> Most importantly, science communicators have a fundamental duty to be transparent about the strength and reliability of what is being communicated. This means that it is essential at least to indicate where scientific uncertainty is relevant, even if this makes some communication activities less clear or less impactful than they might otherwise have been. There are many techniques to make scientific messages clearer and more understandable for non-expert audiences, but glossing over important uncertainties is not one of them.

SAM communications staff will handle these situations with reference to the following guidelines:

- **Contextualise and normalise.** The bare fact of uncertainty is rarely useful for audiences. Instead, explain why uncertainties arise, what they imply, and how they can be understood in context (for instance, by comparing them to the intrinsic uncertainties in other areas of science which may be more familiar). Communications should clearly indicate which messages are subject to high levels of uncertainty and which are more reliable, otherwise there is a danger that audiences will misunderstand and reject or challenge even highly reliable findings.
- **Customise explanations to audiences.** Not every audience needs all the details: for instance, an audience of researchers might find value in understanding all the details of uncertainty, while an audience of citizens may only need to focus on the 'bottom line' in order to apply the information to their own lives. Science communication must strike a balance between clearly communicating the relevant uncertainties, and avoiding excessive detail about processes when these are not relevant to the audience.
- **Provide background instead of front-loading.** Being clear about uncertainties does not mean allowing key messages to be crowded out by caveats and details. When communications are concise, relevant uncertainties should always be mentioned, but they can be further explained in detail later or elsewhere.
- **Say how uncertainties might be reduced.** Pointing to ongoing work or possible future research can help audiences to maintain trust even when information is highly uncertain.

## Advocacy, controversy and political positions

The role of science advice is fundamentally different from that of advocacy. This is true in public communications as well as interactions with policymakers: the SAM's reputation as an independent source of scientific evidence depends in particular on our strict neutrality on political matters.

Therefore, the SAM does not take positions on any political issues, even when these are closely linked to a scientific topic on which it has worked. It is especially careful to steer clear of policy-for-science issues: it does not take any position on questions of research policy or funding. Of course, individual Advisors, academics and academy networks are free to do so in their own names.

At the same time, it is the SAM's role to communicate what its scientific outputs actually say, even when this might be controversial in parts of wider society (or indeed in the academic community, though in general this controversy should be limited since the SAM products by their nature tend to reflect areas of academic consensus). For this reason, sometimes there is a fine line between communicating the content of SAM products and asserting a

---

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Cochrane (2022), *Preparing for and responding to global health emergencies* <https://convenes.cochrane.org/report>; Han et al (2021), *Communicating scientific uncertainty about the COVID-19 pandemic*, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33769947/>; SAPEA (2019), *Making sense of science for policy under conditions of complexity and uncertainty* <https://www.sapea.info/topic/making-sense-of-science/>; EFSA (2019), *Guidance on communication of uncertainty in scientific assessments*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7292191/#!po=0.505051>.

political position. Situations like this should be treated with care by communications staff, where necessary in consultation with working group members, Advisors, and the SAPEA board.

Each situation is different, but the following principles can be helpful, both to guide conduct and to explain it if challenged:

- The SAM is a conduit for the evidence, not an advocate of it. This is a fine distinction, but an important one. It means that the SAM hosts conversations in which experts may present evidence and recommendations, stakeholders may present and defend their views, and representatives of the SAM may promote its work and describe the contents of its products. But the SAM does not publicly advocate or campaign for any particular political conclusion beyond that. If the SAM's scientific outputs are challenged, either on their content or on the process by which they were created, the correct response is to clarify and describe, but never explicitly to argue or defend. Calm, fact-based engagement is better suited to the SAM's role than polemical defence, which we leave to others.
- When the SAM contributes scientific evidence to a policymaking process or a public conversation, it is sanguine about the uses others may make of it. Representatives of the SAM strive to present the evidence accurately (and can clarify when they perceive that it is being misinterpreted or misrepresented), but do not publicly comment on how others interpret it or how it is incorporated into the policymaking process.
- When SAM experts (Advisors or working group members) speak, they always speak freely as individual academics, rather than as SAM representatives, even at SAM events or via SAM platforms. This is important to protect both the integrity of the SAM and the freedom of experts. Experts (Advisors or working group members) can take positions that the SAM may not: for example, they may comment on the political response to scientific evidence, or on its implications for broader society. Therefore, although the fact that an expert has an association with the SAM is important, it does not imply that they represent the SAM itself, or speak on its behalf. It may sometimes be necessary to clarify this fact explicitly, for instance, in a public conversation in which there are many contributors and evidence, interpretations and political views are interwoven. This also implies a responsibility for experts themselves to clarify when they are representing a common position and when they are going beyond it.
- The SAM does not advocate directly for public behaviour change. It is focused on informing policy. Where SAM products do refer to public behaviour change (for instance, making more sustainable lifestyle decisions), these are to be interpreted in SAM communications activities as advice to policymakers about the evidence-based effects of particular hypothetical behaviour changes, not as advice from the SAM or the scientists to the public themselves.

These principles are not just a constraint, but also a benefit. They mean that the SAM needs not be afraid of disagreement. Indeed, in many cases, the predictable effect of contributing scientific evidence to a prominent public debate can be to provoke lively discussion or to contest its meaning. By stimulating these discussions, the SAM is achieving its objectives. It should not shy away from provoking and hosting such discussions, any more than it should take a polemical position in them.

Exceptionally, the SAM as a public organisation *does* take and defend positions on the two related political issues where it is specifically mandated to do so, namely:

- It advocates for the importance of scientific evidence (and the role of scientists) in policymaking.
- It argues that policymaking is strengthened insofar as it is informed by scientific evidence, including the SAM's own evidence.

## Disagreement between SAM outputs

The mutual independence of the SAM's experts, both Advisors and working group members, makes it possible for the SAM's different scientific outputs to conflict with one another. For instance, a future evidence review report might propose a policy option which is not rejected in the policy recommendations of the corresponding scientific opinion, or the two documents may approach issues in different ways. It would even be possible in principle for the working group and the Advisors to take completely contradictory positions on a particular question.

Such dramatic disagreements are unlikely. But the SAM's approach to communications, which unites all parts of the Scientific Advice Mechanism under a single brand and with a single operational approach, must not in any way constrain the freedom of its experts to express their own judgements, including to disagree with one another if they see fit. For this reason, nothing in this communications strategy should be interpreted as requiring the different elements of the SAM to commit to a common set of messages or a common scientific position.

In practice:

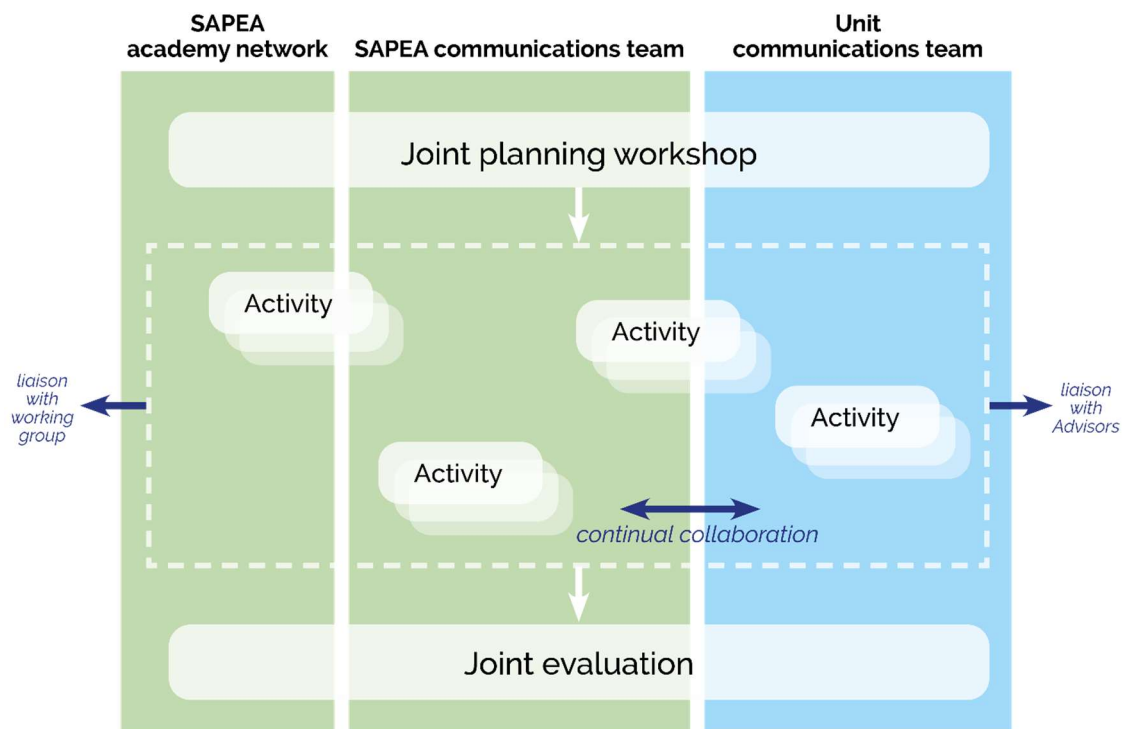
- Scientific differences are not an embarrassment but a natural product of a fruitful collaboration between independent experts. Where differences exist and are relevant, they can be presented and explained in context alongside areas of agreement.
- For some audiences, explaining differences will also provide an opportunity to illustrate the nature of the scientific process and the importance of mutual independence of the different parts of the SAM, and thus can be considered a strength rather than a weakness of the process.
- Attempts to derive a single set of key messages covering all SAM outputs on a particular topic will succeed only to the extent that the different outputs are either in agreement or complementary. Areas of disagreement that cannot be summarised in a single set of key messages will naturally give rise to different key messages.
- Disagreements should not be exaggerated. The degree of emphasis that communications activities place on the disagreement should correspond to the extent of actual disagreement. For instance, if two outputs are broadly aligned and differ only in one or two areas, then the disagreement need only be highlighted when those areas are discussed, and then only to the extent justified by the outputs themselves.
- If the Advisors and the working group disagree in their topic-related outputs, it remains the joint responsibility of the entire SAM communications team – including both the Unit and SAPEA colleagues – to communicate the views of both.

# Operational relationship between the Unit and SAPEA

SAPEA and the Unit have two distinct communications teams, made up of individuals with different backgrounds, working in different organisational contexts, with different management structures and institutional cultures.

But a close collaboration between these two teams is essential for several reasons. Firstly, SAPEA and the Unit are both parts of the SAM, which has a single set of communications objectives described in this strategy. Secondly, both teams are small, and their respective strengths complement each other, meaning that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Lastly, the adoption of a unified brand means that the distinction between these two parts of the organisation ought to be (as far as possible) invisible to external audiences, because when it is not, the achievement of objectives suffers. It is therefore strongly in the presumption of this strategy that the two communications teams will continue to work closely together.

The diagram below summarises the working model for the two sides.



# Appendix: Definitions and conceptual clarifications

The separate worlds of Horizon grants, corporate communications and traditional science communication each have their own ways to use particular terminology. This strategy draws on all three worlds, which brings together a large number of terms whose meaning is ambiguous or overlapping. The list below tries to clarify how terms are used in this strategy, and highlights differences in meaning or scope from other contexts.

- **activity:** In this strategy, any discrete piece of work (broadly understood) which is undertaken as part of communications work. For instance, each of the following would be an activity: an event; a publication; a webpage; a podcast episode; a press release. Some communications strategies use the term 'channel' to cover a subset of these. (Compare 'output'.)
- **channel:** In some communications strategies, a method of communication such as social media, website, etc. This strategy uses the more process-focused term 'activity' instead.
- **communication** (*Horizon Europe version*): Activities distinct from dissemination and exploitation, whose purpose is to solely promote the project and its results.  
[https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/grant-management/communication\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/grant-management/communication_en.htm)
- **communications** (*version used in this strategy*): The set of all activities whose aim is to promote, inform, encourage uptake or encourage conversation among its audiences: in other words, to achieve all the objectives defined in this strategy. In SAPEA 1, the scope of 'communications' specifically excluded interaction with policymakers, but in SAPEA 2 (informed by the priorities of the SAM and the emphasis on exploitation under the Horizon programme) all policy interactions are now included, except for the formally-defined process of delivering the science advice to Commissioners in the first place.
- **dissemination:** In Horizon grant jargon, communication of project outputs to its potential users, including both academic and non-academic audiences. [https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/grant-management/dissemination-of-results\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/grant-management/dissemination-of-results_en.htm)
- **editorial media:** Roughly, media in which the content is controlled by an editor (or journalist). This includes newspapers and magazines (both in print and online), trade and specialist journals, academic journals, blogs, and third-party websites. The old term was 'press', from the days when such publications were made from pigments pressed onto flattened dead trees.
- **engagement:** In science communication jargon, a two-way dialogue between 'science' and other audiences.
- **expert:** In this strategy, either a member of a SAPEA working group or a member of the Group of Chief Scientific Advisors.
- **exploitation:** In Horizon grant jargon, the use of project outputs by non-scientific actors such as industry or policymakers. (Use of outputs by the scientific community does not count as exploitation.) In the logic of the Horizon grant, 'promoting exploitation' is grouped together with dissemination and communication as activities that are complementary to, and flow from, the research itself. This model fits most research projects, but it is complicated for SAPEA, since by the nature of the science advice process, nearly everything the SAM does is focused on exploitation. Strictly following the logic of Horizon would imply that all of SAPEA's outputs are the responsibility of the communications team, which would be inappropriate. Instead, SAPEA divides responsibility for exploitation between the formally-defined process of delivering science advice to Commissioners (work package 2 in SAPEA), and further interactions to promote exploitation and awareness among policymakers and other actors (work package 3 in SAPEA).  
[https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/grant-management/dissemination-of-results\\_en.htm](https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/docs/h2020-funding-guide/grants/grant-management/dissemination-of-results_en.htm)
- **Horizon:** The EU's primary programme for funding scientific research projects, coordination and support actions. SAPEA 1 was funded under Horizon 2020, while SAPEA 2 is funded under Horizon Europe.
- **message:** The key information, concepts and attitudes that an organisation wants its audiences to acquire as a result of communications activities. Messages sometimes feature explicitly in communications activities, especially in science communication; but they can also be implicit and subtle, as long as the audience 'gets the message'. (Consider advertising for aftershave: the intended message may be 'Using our aftershave will make you more attractive', but instead of explicitly saying this, advertisers show images

of attractive people alongside their logo or a photo of their product. The tobacco advertising of the 80s and 90s was an even more extreme example of implicit messaging, where sometimes even the logo was missing.)

- **output:** In communications jargon, something created by an organisation whose creation is part of the purpose of the organisation, and that is intended for use beyond the organisation itself. So the output of a research project is its research results, and the output of a chocolate manufacturer is chocolate. The SAM's outputs are primarily science advice publications (evidence review reports and scientific opinions), but can in principle include other kinds of publications too. Note that communications activities such as videos and websites (see 'activity') are not products, because their creation is not part of the purpose of the organisation; they are instead created to promote the products. In many communications strategies, the preferred term is 'product', but this strategy avoids that term because of its commercial-sounding overtones.
- **outreach:** In science communication jargon, activities done to encourage public understanding of science. Distinct from 'engagement' in that outreach is usually envisaged as a one-way process. <https://www.palast.ps/en/what-we-do/science-outreach>
- **press:** See 'editorial media'.
- **science advice, scientific advice:** Scientific information designed to support or influence policymaking. Advice encompasses both evidence reviews and policy recommendations. The terms 'science' and 'scientific' are regarded as interchangeable in this strategy. (We use both even in our own names: Chief Scientific Advisors, but Science Advice for Policy by European Academies.)
- **science communication:** Broadly, the activity (and profession) of communicating scientific information to non-scientists, especially the public. <https://www.palast.ps/en/what-we-do/science-outreach>
- **voice:** The language register and style used in an organisation's communications.
- **WP3, work package 3:** The part of SAPEA which leads on communications activities. The staff assigned to work package 3 are the 'SAPEA communications team' or 'SAPEA communications staff'.