The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee published its report on 2nd March into studies of last year’s volcanic ash occurrence which limited air traffic over much of north west Europe. Entitled *Too little, too late* it is apparent that the British Government left scientific advice to last minute in the volcanic ash emergency, it was concluded by the Members of Parliament who comprised the Committee.

In the report concerning the use of scientific advice and evidence in emergencies, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee said the Government left it too late to prepare for the disruption to aviation caused by the volcanic eruption in April 2010.

It says, had the concerns of the scientific community been heard and the risks properly assessed then the British Government would have been better able to cope with a situation that eventually cost the national economy hundreds of millions of pounds. Evidence to the Committee suggested that the earth sciences community was not surprised by the Icelandic eruption but that the “message had not got through to the Government.”

The Committee concluded that there may have been a breakdown of communication between the earth sciences community and government and recommends that the Government Chief Scientific Adviser assesses whether this was the case, and improves the mechanisms by which scientists can engage with the Cabinet Office.

Clarification should also be provided on why the risk of disruption to aviation caused by a natural disaster was dropped from the National Risk Assessment – the key process of risk evaluation carried out by the Cabinet Office – in 2009.

Andrew Miller MP, Committee Chairman, said, “The Government, and others, were taken completely by surprise by the volcanic ash emergency and as a result the response was messy. This was a situation where something clearly went wrong in the risk assessment and, while we cannot be 100% ready for all emergencies, the lack of prior risk assessment and contingency planning in this case is striking.”

The Scientific Advisory Group in Emergencies, which was set up to
advise the Government once the emergency occurred, operated in an unnecessarily secretive way, said the report. Membership and meeting minutes were not published and the group effectively closed its doors to the wider scientific community.

During the emergency, a Dornier 228 research aircraft owned by the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) was diverted from its planned programme and used to provide ash sampling capability for the Met Office. In September 2010, NERC was owed £1.25 million by the Government and a significant portion of the debt remains outstanding. As a result, the Committee fears that trust between the research community and the Government has been damaged and there may be reluctance to make such resources available in future emergencies. The Committee urges the Department for Transport and the Met Office to resolve this situation immediately.

The Committee is concerned that the former Transport Secretary, Lord Adonis, chose to distance himself from, and pass responsibility to, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), a body for which he had ministerial oversight.

It also said the current Government needs to resolve three issues: the CAA’s contribution to the European Aviation Safety Agency’s decision-making processes; the suitability of the Met Office’s computer predictions; and the involvement of airline operators in decision-making processes.

Committee Membership
Andrew Miller (Labour, Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Chairman); Gavin Barwell (Conservative, Croydon Central); Gregg McClymont (Labour, Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East); Stephen McPartland (Conservative, Stevenage); Stephen Metcalfe (Conservative, South Basildon and East Thurrock); David Morris (Conservative, Morecambe and Lunesdale); Stephen Mosley (Conservative, City of Chester); Pamela Nash (Labour, Airdrie and Shotts); Jonathan Reynolds (Labour/Co-operative, Stalybridge and Hyde); Graham Stringer (Labour, Blackley and Broughton) and Roger Williams (Liberal Democrat, Brecon and Radnorshire)

Broadly speaking in this inquiry, the Science and Technology Committee examined how scientific advice and evidence is used in national emergencies, when the Government and scientific advisory system are put under great pressure to deal with atypical situations.
The inquiry focused towards four very different case studies in order to build up a richer picture of how science is used in emergencies. These case studies were: (i) the 2009-2010 H1N1 influenza pandemic (swine flu); (ii) the April 2010 volcanic ash disruption; (iii) space weather; and (iv) cyber attacks.