



## Minutes of the Board meeting – 19 March 2024

### Present

Professor Julia Buckingham (JB) *Chair*

Professor Cathy Abbot (CA)

Professor Paul Evans (PE)

Professor Christopher George (CG)

Ms Linda Horan (LH)

Professor Jane Hurst (JH)

Dr Tom Matheson (TM)

Professor Cathy Merry (CM)

Professor Nick Plant (NP)

Dr Sally Robinson (SR)

Dr Vicky Robinson (VR)

Dr Clive Roper (CR)

Dr Andrew Scott (AS)

Dr Sadhana Sharma (SS)

### Office members

Dr Katie Bates (KB) *item 4*

Dr Anthony Holmes (AH)

Ms Kayleigh Purdon (KP) *Secretariat*

Dr Cathy Vickers (CV) *Item 4*

### Guest

Dr Ivan Pavlov (IP)

### Welcome

1. JB welcomed members to the meeting, noting apologies from Dr Robin Buckle (RB) and that Dr Ivan Pavlov, Head of Preclinical Good Research Practice Policy was representing the MRC in RB's absence.
2. JB welcomed Dr Andrew Scott to the Board for the start of his tenure.

### Board minutes 20 November 2023

3. The minutes from the November meeting were agreed by Board members via email to be an accurate account of the discussions and published on the NC3Rs website on 29 February.

## Chief Executive update

4. The Board noted the paper on business activities and the oral update from VR. This included a discussion on the NC3Rs upcoming strategic review by its core funders, the external operating environment, finances and staff-led programmes.

### Strategic review

- VR informed the Board that preliminary discussions had been held with colleagues at the MRC on the process for the review of the NC3Rs. Further details will be shared with the Board once arrangements have been formalised. It is anticipated that the NC3Rs will submit its funding bid in November.

### External environment

- JB and VR had recently met with Andrew Griffith MP the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation ahead of the Westminster Hall debate. JB noted the Minister's support for the NC3Rs. The Board welcomed the Minister's announcement to spend an additional £10M in financial year 2024/25 to accelerate the development, validation and uptake of non-animal methods. VR reported that it was likely the NC3Rs would receive extra funding as a result of the announcement and that colleagues had been working with stakeholders to identify potential areas of investment. This included considering reinstating infrastructure awards specifically focusing on non-animal methods. JB informed the Board that the Minister had kindly agreed to sponsor a parliamentary event in June as part of the NC3Rs 20-year anniversary celebrations.
- VR highlighted a [statement](#) from the NC3Rs published in response to the Home Office's plan to effectively [phase out the use of the forced swim test](#). The Board commended the statement and encouraged VR to continue to highlight the important work undertaken by the NC3Rs in this area.
- The Board welcomed the publication of a [policy paper in collaboration with the British Toxicology Society](#) and toxicologists from industry and academia outlining a vision for world-leading chemicals safety testing in the UK that embraces new approach methodologies. VR informed the Board that the paper highlighted the actions that need to be taken by Government to deliver modern chemicals regulations, noting that it had been shared widely across the sector, including with Ministers and officials.

### Finances

- VR informed the Board that due to unavoidable delays in payments for specific activities there would be an underspend of approximately £100k in the financial year 2023/24.
- The Board welcomed the new funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to support the adoption of 3Rs approaches in biologics batch release testing.

### Staff-led programmes

- VR updated the Board on staff changes. Natalie Burden has been promoted to Head of New Approach Methodologies (NAMs) Strategy to recognise the importance of this area to the NC3Rs mission and the need to have dedicated expertise. A new appointment had been made in the experimental design team, with James Barker recruited to lead the work on improving the quality of *in vitro* research.

### **NC3Rs workplan 2024/25**

5. Theme leads for research funding (KB) and innovation (CV) updated the Board on activities and plans for 2024/25.

### Research funding

- The Board were supportive of the plans for the next 12 months which include launching the new Partnerships and Impact funding scheme to help accelerate the uptake of 3Rs approaches, transitioning all response mode competitions onto the UKRI Funding Service and the introduction of the theme-specific stakeholder networks.
- Members also noted KB's update on recent activities to support grant holders and the budgets for the 2024/25 funding competitions. KB informed the Board that the 2024 calls were well underway, with final decisions on project grants scheduled for July (total budget £3M) and PhD studentships (budget £1.28M) for October. The Board commended the excellent early career engagement awards.

### Innovation

- CV summarised the activities being undertaken by the innovation team and the priorities for 2024/25. This included the ongoing work to review the CRACK IT Challenges programme in preparation for the strategic review of the NC3Rs and engagement with new industry sponsors and funding partners.
- The Board noted the update on the 2024 CRACK IT competition. Four proposals have been received from six industry sponsor organisations. The proposals will be reviewed by the CRACK IT Advisory Panel to select those for the 2024 competition. A total budget of £2.7M is available, allowing for two Phase Challenges and one Single Phase Challenge to be awarded. As part of the development of the 2024 Challenge briefs the innovation team were continuing to seek co-funding opportunities.

### **AOB**

6. There were no AOB items.