



Minutes of the Board meeting – 16 July 2024

Present

Professor Julia Buckingham (JB) *Chair*
Professor Cathy Abbot (CA)
Professor Paul Evans (PE)
Professor Christopher George (CG)
Professor Jane Hurst (JH)
Dr Tom Matheson (TM)
Professor Cathy Merry (CM)
Professor Nick Plant (NP)
Dr Vicky Robinson (VR)
Dr Clive Roper (CR)
Dr Andrew Scott (AS)

Office members

Dr Katie Bates (KB) *item 5*
Dr Natalie Carter (NC)
Dr Nathalie Percie du Sert (NPdS) *item 4*
Ms Kayleigh Purdon (KP) *Secretariat*
Dr Cathy Vickers (CV) *Item 5*
Ms Emma Stokes

Observer

Dr Sally Thompson-Iritani

Welcome

1. JB welcomed members to the meeting, noting apologies from Ms Linda Horan and Dr Sally Robinson.
2. Colleagues from BBSRC and MRC will not be participating in Board meetings until the strategic review of the NC3Rs and its core funding bid has been completed. This is to avoid any potential conflicts of interest.
3. JB welcomed as an observer Dr Sally Thompson-Iritani, Assistant Vice Provost for Animal Care, Outreach, and 3Rs at the University of Washington and President of the 3Rs Collaborative.

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4. The minutes from the March meeting were agreed by Board members via email to be an accurate account of the discussions and published on the NC3Rs website on 9 July.

Chief Executive update

5. The Board noted the paper on business activities and the oral update from VR. This included a discussion on the external operating environment, the research funding and innovation programme, finances and staffing.

External environment

- Anthony Holmes, Director of Science and Technology has been seconded to the Office for Life Sciences to support the development of the national non-animal methods plan. With the new Government in place, it was not clear about the future status of the plan although VR noted that the Labour manifesto included a commitment to work to phase out animal testing.
- VR had presented at the MRC Townhall meeting in June and received positive feedback on the work of the NC3Rs. JB and VR also met with the MRC Executive Chair, Professor Patrick Chinnery. JB noted Professor Chinnery's support for the work of the NC3Rs.
- The joint [iCURE](#) funding call with BBSRC is now live. VR noted that due to the general election promotion of the call to date had been limited. A webinar is scheduled for 17 July for potential applicants to learn more about the competition and to hear from previous recipients of [iCURE Explore awards](#).
- The [UKRI policy on research and innovation involving animals](#) has recently been published. The new policy aligns expectations across all UKRI member organisations, including the NC3Rs. The NC3Rs input into helping write the policy had been acknowledged and the policy included multiple references to NC3Rs resources. The recommendations set out in the [Rawle report regarding](#) replacement of the use of animals were also highlighted in the associated communications for the policy.

Research funding and innovation

- The NC3Rs had received an additional £5M from DSIT to spend within this financial year, 2024/25. The Board welcomed the additional funding which had been used to establish two new funding calls one to support [infrastructure](#) for non-animal methods and the other the [validation](#) of non-animal derived products. Final funding decisions will be made in September with the NC3Rs Board assessing the applications for the infrastructure call and a specialist panel being convened to review the non-animal derived products validation grants. VR noted the exceptional additional work that KB had delivered to ensure the calls could be run in the required timeframe.
- The new Partnership and Impact scheme to accelerate the adoption of existing 3Rs models, tools and technologies into routine practice has been launched. The research funding team have worked closely with both co-funders, the British Heart Foundation (BHF) and Cancer Research UK (CRUK) to promote the scheme. The launch webinar was well-attended with 60 participants and a high volume of enquiries about the call had been received. The deadline for full applications is in

September and the total budget available for the competition is £1.075M. This includes £0.4M co-funding from BHF and £75k co-funding from CRUK.

- A total of six awards totalling £3M were made in the 2024 Project grant competition. This is the first NC3Rs competition to be run through the new UKRI funding service that has involved using the external peer review functionality. It will also be the first time that awards will be made using the service.
- A total of 111 outlines were received for the 2024 PhD studentships competition of which 99 were invited to submit a full application (this includes 17 within BHF remit). The deadline for full applications is 31 July with funding decisions to be made in October. The total budget available for the competition is £1.28M, including £0.2M co-funding from the BHF.
- The annual summer school for NC3Rs PhD Students took place in June, in Sheffield. The programme focused primarily on communication skills with each student preparing an elevator pitch to describe their project, a lay summary and a post for social media. There were also workshops on PhD management skills, communicating science to different audiences and experimental design and statistics.
- Two CRACK IT Challenges for the 2024 competition are in preparation following a review of potential topics by the CRACK IT Advisory Panel. The first is a two-phase Challenge to develop new approach methodology approaches to predict acute and chronic avian toxicity for the purposes of chemical screening and environmental risk assessment. The second Challenge is single phase and sponsored by AstraZeneca that aims to develop a shelter that is warm and easy-to-use for the post-operative care of rodents.

Finances

- VR informed the Board that due to unavoidable delays in payments for specific activities there was an underspend of approximately £150k in the financial year 2023/24. Given the NC3Rs core funding is due to end in March 2025, a six-month funding extension has been granted by the MRC, pro-rated at the current level to allow for the upcoming strategic review to be completed.

Staffing

- VR noted that the toxicology team have been successful in recruiting two Programme Managers to support the chemical safety assessment and acute toxicity projects, appointments will commence in August and November. Workloads remain high across the senior team particularly in light of the preparations for the strategic review. Findings from the 2024 People Survey are due to be published by the UKRI Culture and Engagement team in August.

NC3Rs key performance indicators update

6. The Board reviewed the data collected for the NC3Rs organisational key performance indicators for 2023. Member noted the updates provided by NPdS and discussed adjusting some of the targets and benchmarks to better track progress for some of the thematic areas and revising how to measure the level of engagement with organisations licenced under ASPA.

NC3Rs strategic review

7. VR outlined the process and terms of reference for the upcoming strategic review of the NC3Rs which would determine the future of the NC3Rs and its funding level. The review will look at the NC3Rs achievements and impacts for the period 2020 to 2024 and will consider the proposed plans and resource levels required for the next five years. The review will be led by the MRC, who will oversee the arrangements and appointment of committee members. The NC3Rs will submit its report in November with funding decisions to be made by MRC and BBSRC in April 2025.
8. Plans to evolve research funding and innovation programmes over the next five years were shared by theme leads, KB and CV. The Board were fully supportive of the proposals. This was a closed session.

Wellcome funding bid

9. The Board noted that the funding from Wellcome was due to end soon and considered potential areas that the NC3Rs may wish to seek funding for. This was a closed session.

AOB

10. There were no AOB items.