

Minutes of the Board meeting – 11 June 2021

Present:

Professor Kevin Shakesheff (KS) *Chair*
 Dr Robin Buckle (RB)
 Professor Paul Evans (PE)
 Professor Paul Garside (PG)
 Professor Christopher George (CG)
 Ms Linda Horan (LH)
 Dr David Lovell (DL)
 Dr Tom Matheson (TM)
 Professor Cathy Merry (CM)
 Dr Sally Robinson (SR)
 Dr Vicky Robinson (VR)
 Dr Clive Roper (CR)
 Dr Sadhana Sharma (SS)

Apologies

Professor Jane Hurst (JH)
 Professor Nick Plant (NP)
 Professor Jon Timmis (JT)

Office:

Dr Katie Bates (KB) *item 5*
 Ms Kayleigh Purdon (KP) *Secretariat*
 Dr Suzanne McArdle (SM) *item 4*
 Dr Cathy Vickers (CV) *item 5*

1. Welcome

1.1. KS welcomed members to the meeting and introduced Dr Robin Buckle, Chief Science Officer at the Medical Research Council (MRC). Robin will be acting as the MRC representative on the Board following Frances Rawle's retirement.

2. Board minutes 12 February 2021

2.1. The minutes from the February meeting were agreed to be an accurate account of the discussions.

3. Chief Executive update on activities

3.1. VR updated the Board on a number of core business activities, highlighting that workloads across the team remain high. This included:

External changes

Changes in the external environment with increased lobbying from animal welfare and campaign groups on the use of non-animal technologies, as well as a new change programme from the Animals in Science Regulatory Unit which could have an impact on the NC3Rs resources and communication strategy. The

Board agreed it was important to continue to monitor and respond accordingly but at the present time the NC3Rs strategy remained appropriate.

Science and technology

- A total of 104 outlines were received to the 2021 PhD studentship call with funding decisions to be made in October. Up to two joint awards are available with the British Heart Foundation (BHF) this year.
- Nine Skills and Knowledge Transfer awards, including one joint award in collaboration with Cancer Research UK, were made in April 2021.
- 22 applicants have been invited to submit a full application to the 2021 Project Grant call. Applications are currently undergoing external peer review and will be assessed by the Grant Assessment Panel in July 2021.
- Five papers have been published by the Toxicology team in the last four months. This includes articles on cardiovascular telemetry, endocrine disruption and cross-species extrapolation. There are four additional publications in the pipeline.
- A project to review the impact of funding as part of the non-animal technologies programme (specifically, the 2015 commercial feasibility awards and 2016 collaborative R&D awards) has commenced in collaboration with Innovate UK.
- A working group in collaboration with NICEATM has been established to promote the use of microphysiological system models in COVID-19 research.
- Recruitment for a Replacement Technologies Programme Manager to focus on our non-animal technologies activities is ongoing.
- 69 WHO biologicals batch release and quality control guidelines have been reviewed as part of the WHO collaboration. We are now establishing multiple sub-groups to examine the information compiled during the review and will begin developing recommendations for the implementation of 3Rs approaches more widely within these guidelines.

Policy and Outreach

- The Animal Welfare team are in the process of establishing a working group in partnership with the National Cancer Research Institute to revise the guidelines on the use and welfare of animals in cancer research. The team are also working with collaborators in the United States to promote non-invasive mouse handling.
- A total of 33 applications have been reviewed through the Peer review service between February and May. In addition, the Peer review team have produced bespoke guidance for Wellcome for

their Snakebite initiative and have also written a publication in collaboration with Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) on refinements in non-human primate use in vaccine studies.

- The Experimental Design and Reporting team have continued to improve the Experimental Design Assistant (EDA) and develop new features. The EDA now has 11,000 registered users. Work to improve the quality, design and reporting of *in vitro* research has commenced.
- The Regional Programme Managers have trialled a “soft” launch of the NC3Rs self-assessment tool with their respective universities. Feedback from the trial has been positive and a wider launch is planned for July. The Royal Veterinary College and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicines and the North West and Yorkshire consortia have renewed funding for their regional posts for a further two years.

4. Final financial accounts for 2020/21 update

4.1. SM gave an update on the NC3Rs final financial accounts for 2020/21. The position at financial year end was an underspend of £36k. The Board were provided with a summary paper detailing the total income and expenditure.

5. NC3Rs workplan 2022/23

5.1. The programme leads for Research Funding and Innovation provided the Board with a high-level summary of each programmes' planned activities for the financial year 2022/23 which include budget considerations, primary objectives and risk factors.

Research funding

- KB presented the planned activities for the Project grant, Skills and Knowledge Transfer grant and Technologies to Tools schemes, as well the proposed budget allocations for each scheme for 2022/23.
- The Board noted the continued uncertainties around securing co-funding from the charitable sector due to the ongoing impact of COVID-19. The Research Funding team are continuing to work with partners to explore future funding options and new funding routes.
- Plans to further evolve the Skills and Knowledge Transfer scheme to support the uptake of new 3Rs approaches through a network of training hubs were discussed with the Board, as well as proposals to expand the Technologies to Tools awards to include new partnerships. The need to secure co-funding to support these ventures was noted.
- The Research Funding team will be undertaking an evaluation activity of the NC3Rs Research portfolio focusing on specific areas (e.g. by discipline, technology) in addition to reviewing the response mode funding schemes. More detailed plans will be presented at a future Board meeting.

Innovation

- The Board noted the planned activities and budget commitments for financial year 2022/23, including plans to scope a second Mega-Challenge focusing on efficacy models for 2023/24 as well as running an open call for potential Challenges to ensure the NC3Rs remains agile and responsive to the latest technology developments and industry needs.
- The Board noted the continued uncertainties around securing co-funding due to the ongoing impact of COVID-19. However, the value of in-kind contributions to the success of Challenges was also recognised as being critical to the success of the programme.
- The Innovation team will continue to promote the prototypes, services and products that have come through the CRACK IT programme as part of its strategy to tackle the 3Rs valley of death and will utilise the Business Growth Scheme and Konfer Platform to encourage uptake.

Annual 3Rs Prize

- The Board discussed the annual 3Rs Prize competition which has been generously sponsored by GSK since 2005. Members were supportive of an annual award but expressed concern about the amount of internal resource required to support the competition. It was agreed that the remit of the prize should be reassessed to better align with key areas for the NC3Rs such as supporting early career researchers and team science and tackling the 3Rs valley of death.

Action: KS and VR to discuss this further with GSK and provide an update to the Board.

6. Annual review of the NC3Rs risk register

6.1. The Board reviewed the NC3Rs risk register. Members noted the risks and existing controls as appropriate. However, members were keen to explore further mitigations and implement additional planned controls to help achieve target scores. KS requested the discussions be taken offline.

Action: SM to coordinate and follow-up with KS and update the Board at its next meeting.

7. AOB

7.1. There were no AOB items.