

Strengthening AWERBs: Resource, Engagement, and Recognition

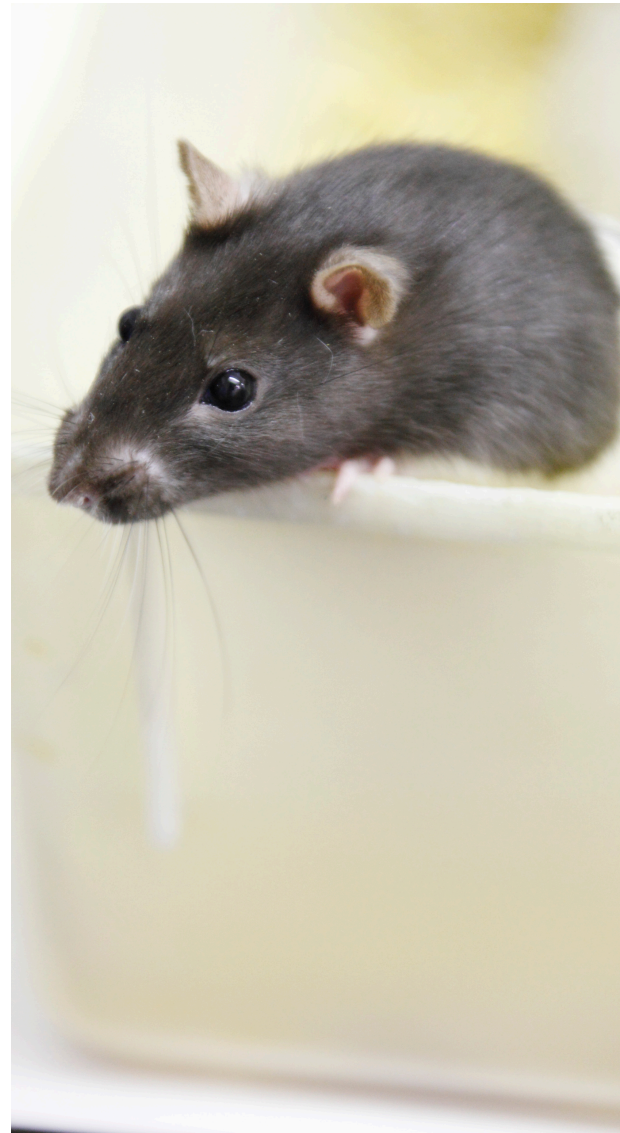


AWERB-UK 2025 Meeting Summary Report

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Introduction

On 18th June 2025, the RSPCA Animals in Science Department held the fifth AWERB-UK meeting in collaboration with the Laboratory Animals Veterinary Association (LAVA), Laboratory Animal Science Association (LASA), and the Institute of Animal Technology (IAT).

This year's meeting, attended by around 70 participants, addressed concerns about the time and resources available for Animal Welfare and Ethical Review Bodies (AWERBs). This issue has frequently been raised in various forums including previous AWERB-UK events, Lay Members' Forums¹, and the 2024 RSPCA/University of Oxford AWERB Hub meeting². The NC3Rs-commissioned Rawle Report³ also highlighted insufficient time for AWERB meetings, expertise gaps, and a lack of recognition for AWERB members. In addition, competency, training and recognition feature highly in the self-reported needs of AWERB members, yet training for AWERB members is inconsistent and may be poor. This AWERB-UK event aimed to identify ongoing issues that are hindering the effective operation of some AWERBs and preventing them from developing the Culture of Care.

The organisers defined a vision that, ideally, all AWERBs would be able to:

- Enable everyone within the establishment to be aware of the AWERB and its tasks, including two-way engagement that encourages people to be supportive
- Review how effectively all tasks are addressed, including benchmarking, a gap analysis and work plans to progress towards properly fulfilling them
- Ensure proper interaction and liaison with other internal bodies responsible for research integrity, internal and external communications etc
- Liaise effectively with other AWERBs in their region and the Animals in Science Committee (ASC)
- Provide adequate induction, training and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for all AWERB members and chairs
- Provide balanced information for the public about the AWERB and its work, e.g. around the Culture of Care
- Gain the interest, and support, of senior management
- Secure adequate funding and resources for all of the above

¹ rspca.org.uk/documents/d/rspca/what-awerb-members-need

² science.rspca.org.uk/documents/d/science/oxford-awerb-hub-meeting-report

³ [The role of review and regulatory approvals processes for animal research in supporting implementation of the 3Rs](#)

The meeting was structured to include identifying operational challenges to the effective running of the AWERB, prioritising these for action and setting out potential solutions. This report summarises the conclusions and suggests action points for different stakeholders.

The day began with an introductory presentation from the Head of the RSPCA Animals in Science Department, Dr Penny Hawkins, highlighting key challenges faced by AWERBs. These include insufficient resources, limited engagement from scientists and management, and an overemphasis on the task of 'advising the establishment licence holder whether to support project proposals', to the detriment of other functions. This is highly undesirable because AWERBs are crucial for ensuring compliance with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act (ASPA), promoting a strong Culture of Care, and fostering transparency. An ideal AWERB would be well-resourced, engaged, and have robust senior management support. Current issues appear to be primarily operational and could be improved by prioritising critical issues and assigning clear action points.

Following Penny's introduction, Will Reynolds, Head of the Animals in Science Regulation and Policy Unit (ASRPU), discussed regulatory expectations of the AWERB. He stressed that AWERBs should actively evaluate their own effectiveness and that a strong Culture of Care benefits both compliance and the community.

Finally, Dr. Sally Robinson, Chair of the Animals in Science Committee, described three new ASC commissions, including one on strengthening the functioning of AWERBs and the Named Information Officer (NIO), which is likely to begin around January 2026. This topic was chosen because, although effective functioning of AWERBs and named persons⁴ are crucial to the effective delivery of establishments' responsibilities under ASPA, there is evidence of variability in AWERB function; the NIO is not always enabled to deliver effectively; and there are no consolidated standards from the government on the operation of either AWERBs or named persons.

⁴ Named Animal Care and Welfare Officer (NACWO), NIO, Named Training and Competency Officer (NCO), Named Veterinary Surgeon (NVS).



Operational challenges for AWERBs

Participants took part in a group discussion to identify operational challenges inhibiting the AWERB from achieving overall effectiveness, with the aim of determining the most critical issues that require immediate attention. The top five operational challenges, as identified by participants, are listed below, along with their suggestions for addressing these.

The top five operational challenges for AWERBs

- 1. Lack of recognition and reward for members**
- 2. Lack of training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for members**
- 3. Insufficient time for all those directly and indirectly involved**
- 4. Need for 'professionalisation' of the AWERB (including career progression)**
- 5. Lack of liaison with Research Integrity Committees and similar bodies**

Challenge 1 - Lack of recognition and reward for members

AWERB membership can be a significant time commitment, but this is not always formally recognised in workload allocation management systems or performance appraisals. Membership by some named persons is recognised in their job descriptions, but this is not the case for other vital roles within the AWERB. This can prevent members who are establishment staff from participating fully, or may even discourage them from joining the committee at all.

If there is a lack of recognition and few incentives for other AWERB members, particularly Chairs and lay or independent members, there can be difficulties in recruiting suitable individuals. Some AWERBs pay external members (in addition to travel expenses); participants at the meeting supported this and did not believe that it compromised independence. However, even basic travel expenses are not always covered, so some individuals incur personal costs to attend meetings. These inconsistencies in formal acknowledgment and remuneration (where appropriate) hinder recruitment, attendance and retention of AWERB members.

How to address this challenge

- **Secure robust support from senior leadership, including financial support, for the AWERB and its members.**
 - Standard Condition 6 of the Establishment Licence⁵ requires the licence holder to establish, and maintain, an AWERB, which must carry out its list of tasks. Adequate resources are obviously needed to implement this effectively and in compliance with the ASPA. Gaining the support of other senior leaders, such as Vice-Chancellors in a university setting, is also essential for demonstrating the value of the AWERB to the institution. This can be achieved by senior leaders acting as champions for the AWERB and being prepared to provide adequate budgets and resources for it to operate effectively.
- **Formally acknowledge the roles and responsibilities of the AWERB and its members**
 - There should be agreed Terms of Reference (ToRs) and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to establish and maintain the AWERB and assess and monitor its impact. This should ensure that the AWERB is seen as an essential core requirement to the establishment, with all staff recognising the importance of its tasks.

⁵ [gov.uk/government/publications/establishment-licence-standard-conditions/establishment-licence-standard-conditions](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/establishment-licence-standard-conditions/establishment-licence-standard-conditions)

Other practical endorsements include providing funding opportunities for members to attend relevant external events (e.g. those held by the NC3Rs, IAT, LASA) and allowing staff to free up time to attend online events, as part of their CPD.

- **Integrate and acknowledge AWERB work within Human Resource (HR) processes**
 - The time that people spend on AWERB-related work, and the quality of their input, should be formally acknowledged, valued and integrated into HR systems at the establishment. This includes ensuring that AWERB contributions are recognised within role profiles, personal development plans and workload allocation models, and acknowledged in Performance Development Reviews (PDRs). This would help to recognise the fact that AWERB participation is a valuable part of professional development.
- **Provide tangible recognition and compensation for members**
 - Beyond formal acknowledgement, providing tangible benefits such as awards for AWERB-related achievements, funding to attend external events (as above) and equitable financial compensation for all members, especially lay members, shows that their time and expertise are genuinely valued. This is vital for both recruitment and retention.

Challenge 2: Lack of training and Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for members

Members need to have appropriate skills and confidence to participate effectively in AWERB discussions, but structured training and CPD are often lacking. There are few accessible, consistent training options, nor are there sufficient formal incentives or recognition to encourage members to engage in ongoing learning. Consequently, the quality and consistency of AWERB functions may be compromised, as members may not be equipped with up-to-date leading practices or ethical issues. The absence of a formal framework for CPD leads to a fragmented approach to professional growth, creating knowledge gaps and compromising the overall effectiveness of the AWERB.

How to address this challenge

- **Provide induction, training and CPD for all AWERB members**
 - Members who are also establishment staff should be allowed time off work for the above, and a minimum amount of CPD should be required for all members per year. This should, for example, be given equal importance to the requirements for training and CPD among NHS Research Ethics Committees⁶.
- **Establish a national syllabus:**
 - Many participants felt that a nationally formulated syllabus for AWERB-specific training is needed, allowing for flexibility based on local conditions. This would help to ensure a consistent baseline of knowledge and competencies across all AWERBs.
- **Provide accessible training:**
 - Free and accessible training courses, such as in-house courses or online modules and recorded webinars, would remove financial and logistical barriers for members and encourage participation. Formal recognition of CPD completion, potentially through accredited courses, would incentivise uptake. Bespoke training tailored to different roles (e.g. scientists, lay members) may be necessary for some topics.
- **Incorporate CPD into meetings:**
 - Integrating a CPD element directly into AWERB meetings, or dedicating specific sessions for training, would help to ensure continuous learning, while also securing members' time to participate (e.g. 15 to 20 minutes in each meeting for a focused training topic).

⁶ [Research Ethics Service and Research Ethics Committees - Health Research Authority](#)

Challenge 3: Insufficient time for all those directly and indirectly involved

Lack of time is a common issue reported by many individuals associated with the AWERB, mainly because the workload often exceeds the available capacity of members and staff. This challenge stems from a combination of factors: insufficient AWERB members, the absence of formal time allocation within job descriptions, and the amount of time it takes to review what currently can be very long licence applications. Many participants additionally found that applications could be of poor quality, possibly due to inadequate training and guidance on completing these. Discussions around licence reviews could also be hampered by scientists not understanding the role and tasks of the AWERB, and/or what the AWERB expected from them.

Whatever the cause(s), this time deficit can lead to frustration, burnout, delayed processes, and a compromised ability to give each task the necessary attention and rigour it deserves (as required by Standard Condition 6). Essentially, people are being asked to do more than they have time for, which can negatively impact the effectiveness and efficiency of AWERB functions.

How to address this challenge

- **Increase the total time allocated to AWERB meetings**
 - This could include adding additional meetings to the calendar, keeping the same schedule but adding time to each meeting, or more flexibility regarding the agenda, for example more, shorter meetings dealing with specific tasks.
- **Formalise time allocation for AWERB members who are staff at the establishment**
 - AWERB work should not be regarded as an additional, unrecognised burden on staff. This can be addressed from the top down by benchmarking required staffing levels and time spent on the 'day job', then formally designating a proportion of individuals' work time for AWERB duties within their job descriptions.
- **Enhance operational efficiency**
 - Implementing a 'triage' system for levels of review, e.g. having a fast track process for minor changes or a sub-committee for initial project review before ratification by the full AWERB can reduce the overall workload. Increasing AWERB membership can also distribute the workload more effectively.

This could also be achieved by having pools of people for key roles (e.g. a pool of scientists and/or a pool of lay members) so that the review workload can be shared and rotated among members, preventing burnout. Adequate, dedicated administrative support is also fundamental to an efficient AWERB.

- **Set realistic expectations**

- This can be facilitated by emphasising realistic time commitment expectations at the outset for new members, and being clear with line managers as to these requirements.

- **Use technology**

- The use of technology, such as AI or computer software tools, to support review processes and facilitate remote working days can further optimise time utilisation. NB security governance will be needed if AI is used to produce documents (which should always be sense checked by a human), or judge readability of Non-Technical Summaries, for example.

Challenge 4: Need for ‘professionalisation’ of the AWERB (including career progression)

‘Professionalisation’ in this context means giving the AWERB professional qualities, for example by increasing training or raising the qualifications required⁷. Being a member of an AWERB should be viewed as a valuable and aspirational professional role, however in most establishments, being an AWERB member does not form part of a professional career path. This challenge stems from several interconnected problems: the absence of clear, formal job descriptions for AWERB positions, a lack of standardised and accredited training pathways, and a failure to recognise AWERB work as a legitimate part of a professional career. This lack of a professional framework means that AWERB roles may not be seen as aspirational or valuable, and contributions are often not formally included in performance reviews or promotion criteria. As a result, it becomes difficult to attract and retain high-calibre members, hindering the overall effectiveness of the AWERB.

How to address this challenge

- **Define clear roles**
 - There should be well-defined role descriptions for AWERB positions and senior leadership should be actively invested in recruitment. This establishes AWERB membership as serious, professional positions.
- **Establish a competency based certification programme**
 - Participants suggested establishing accredited certification programmes for AWERB members, potentially leading to recognised qualifications or certificates, similar to other professional bodies. This could involve modular training, practical assessments, and periodic re-certification to ensure ongoing proficiency. A formal accreditation would be valuable for members, as it would enable them to demonstrate and further develop the high-level critical thinking, ethical reasoning and governance skills required for being an ‘effective’ AWERB member, significantly contributing to their own personal and professional development.
- **Integrate into career frameworks**
 - Increasing the visibility and profile of AWERB work within the organisation, recognising it as an aspirational role, and including AWERB contributions in performance reviews and promotion criteria would help establish a career framework for animal welfare professionals.

⁷ Taken from [Oxford Languages and Google - English](#)

Challenge 5: Lack of liaison with Research Integrity Committees and similar bodies

Lack of liaison and integration between AWERBs and other key institutional bodies, such as Research Integrity and Ethics Committees, can create a siloed approach where communication is inconsistent, roles can be unclear, and opportunities for collaboration are missed. This disconnect can lead to redundant processes, conflicting advice, or gaps in oversight, potentially compromising both research quality and ethical standards. Without a formal framework for communication, different departments may work independently, failing to share valuable insights or align on common goals, which ultimately hinders the institution's ability to ensure a comprehensive and cohesive approach to governance and ethical oversight.

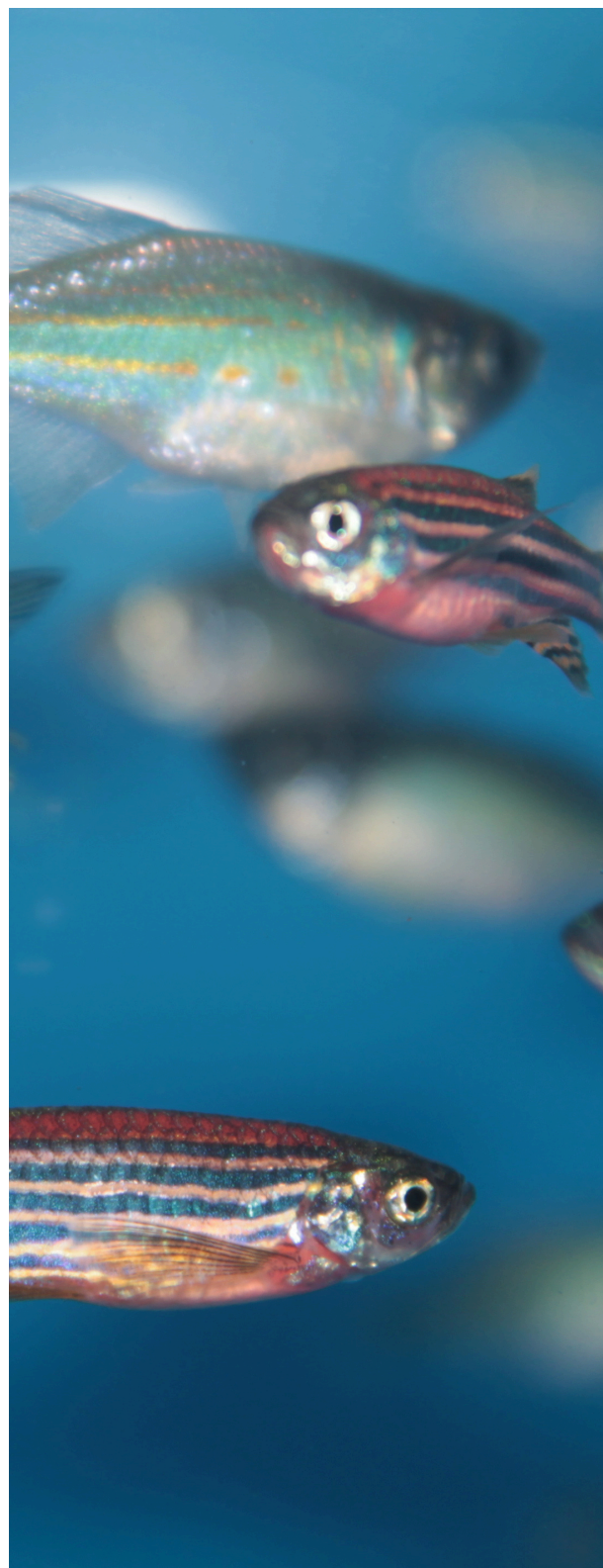
How to address this challenge

- **Ensure cross-representation**
 - There should be cross-representation of members on relevant committees (e.g. AWERB members on Research Integrity committees and vice versa). This facilitates communication, good practice and a shared understanding of overall goals for establishment culture and ethical standards.
- **Implement regular reporting**
 - Regular reporting mechanisms should be maintained for AWERBs to update other governance bodies, and any overarching bodies above these, with their activities. It is also essential to ensure that key roles and contacts within all committees are accessible to all relevant staff.
- **Foster collaboration**
 - Regular joint meetings or workshops between the AWERB and other internal bodies can facilitate shared understanding and collaborative problem-solving. This ensures a holistic approach to research oversight, also reducing risk to the establishment.

Conclusions

The AWERB is an essential process within the establishment. Its statutory duties are essential for compliance with the ASPA and it should be actively enabling 'leading practice' within a good Culture of Care. The AWERB should be viewed as a mechanism for promoting good standards of science, ethics, and animal welfare, also playing a vital role in ensuring openness and transparency, helping to develop and maintain public trust.

All AWERBs ought to have the resources, engagement and recognition to work properly. This report focuses on the most pressing operational issues that are preventing some AWERBs from achieving their potential. The table of action points below is drawn from the above text and sets out some actions for stakeholders to help give AWERBs, and their members, the status they deserve.



Action points

<p>Establishment licence holder (ELH)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruct the AWERB to do an objective self-assessment, evaluating how effectively all of their tasks are currently fulfilled, and report back with a gap analysis • Liaise with other senior leaders and budget holders within the institution to discuss whether and how the AWERB could be better supported, including more financial budget if necessary • Take advantage of opportunities for meeting and sharing experiences with people holding this role in other establishments regulated under ASPA, e.g. by attending ELH Forum meetings, and AWERB-Hub events
<p>Other senior leadership</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide additional budget for AWERBs if required to ensure it can operate effectively and perform all of its functions • Become involved in AWERB member recruitment • Require the AWERB to report to any internal bodies that have oversight of other committees within the establishment, such as Research Integrity Committees and Ethics Committees that have oversight of activities outside animal use (e.g. studies involving human subjects)
<p>AWERB members and secretariat</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read this document and discuss whether any challenges apply to you - if they do, act on them • Research and define an appropriate self-assessment process (or review any processes that are already in place) • If all the tasks are not being adequately fulfilled, document this and do a gap analysis to submit to the ELH • Consider using technology to facilitate remote meetings and assist with project review (caveats) • Ask for a budget for members to attend relevant events for CPD
<p>AWERB Chair</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that AWERB members are at least paid expenses and look into paying them for their time, if this is not already the case • Provide induction and training for all members; require them to undertake a minimum amount of CPD per year. Integrate some CPD into meetings

Action points

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Think creatively about making extra time for AWERB business, making a case for additional budget if needed • Consider a 'triage' system for different levels of project review • Review the staff time commitment needed for effective AWERB participation and be realistic with line managers • Set out clear Terms of Reference and job descriptions for AWERB members
Line managers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View contributions to the AWERB as part of staff career development • Allocate time during normal staff working time for members to undertake AWERB induction, training and CPD
Research Integrity Committees and similar bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocate a member to observe the AWERB, and include an AWERB member as an observer in your meetings • Hold joint meetings and workshops with the AWERB
HR department	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with the ELH, leadership teams and AWERB Chair to integrate AWERB work into workload allocations and personal development plans • Include AWERB contributions in performance reviews and promotion criteria
Animals in Science Regulation Unit (ASRU)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to progress work to streamline project licence application forms; provide clear guidance for applicants • Work with trainers and the ASC to develop and accredit training courses for AWERB members
Trainers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and provide more training courses for AWERB members, covering tasks other than project application review, including free courses where possible • Establish accredited certification programmes for AWERB members, as for other professional bodies
Animals in Science Committee (ASC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a national syllabus for AWERB member training, in consultation with relevant stakeholders • Use the AWERB-Hubs Network to establish and encourage AWERB member exchange programmes

Further Resources



Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
Animals in Science Department

- [RSPCA Animals in Science website](#)
- [AWERB Directory](#)



Institute of Animal Technology

- [IAT website](#)
- [IAT welfare resources](#)



Laboratory Animals Veterinary Association

- [LAVA website](#)



Laboratory Animal Science Association

- [LASA website](#)
- [LASA resources](#)